



Lucia Boldrini and Julia Novak (Eds.), *Experiments in Life-Writing: Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2017, 298 pp., ISBN 978-3319554136)

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Experiments in Life-Writing is a collection of essays about the 'recent explosion of experimentation in life-writing', as Julia Novak calls it in her introductory essay. With the explosion has come a flood of new genre terms: 'meta-autobiography,' 'autotopography,' 'creative non-fiction,' 'false novel,' 'autofiction,' 'biofiction,' 'auto/biografiction,' 'autobiographical non-fiction novel,' 'auto/biographic metafiction,' or 'heterobiography,' are among the foremost. 'What all of these forms share,' Novak emphasises, 'and which is, according to the editors of the *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, a defining mark of literary experiments in general, is a 'commitment to raising fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself'—questions which mainstream literature 'at all periods...is dedicated to repressing.'" (3)

As B.S. Johnson pointed out, the word 'experimental' is often a euphemism for 'failure'. Nonetheless, it is also a useful umbrella term for this kind of collection: it handily marks out an unruly and diverse group of texts from more conventional forms of life-writing in a loose 'family resemblance' way. *Experiments in Life-Writing* includes work on British writers including Ford Madox Ford (by Max Saunders), B.S. Johnson (by Andy Wimbush), Christine Brooke-Rose (by Eveline Killian), and Jackie Kay (by Pietra Palazzolo). Looking beyond the UK, there are essays on Jordi Soler's *La guerra perdida* (by Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir), Peter Handke's *Storm Still* (by Vanessa Hanneschläger), Lalla Romano's *Romanzo di figure* (by Antonio Lunardi), and Javier Marías's *Dark Back of Time* (by María Alhambra Díaz). There are also, to conclude the volume, essays on biography by practitioners Will Slocombe and Ursula Hurley, and an interview with the biographical novelist Janice Galloway.

In her quotation from the *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, Novak positions experimental texts as permanently embattled, raising

questions about the nature of ‘verbal art’ that the mainstream is ‘dedicated to repressing’. Within the scholarship on life-writing the mainstream originates with Philippe Lejeune’s repression of the literary, when he attempted to define genuine autobiography, as opposed to fiction, around a basically positivist conception of subject-centred knowledge. The critical naivety of this position was quickly exposed, but in an effort to save the baby of subject-centred knowledge from being thrown out with the bathwater of Lejeune’s positivism, Paul John Eakin argued that we can hold onto the notion that autobiography is a distinct genre, as long as autobiographical truth is reconceived in a pragmatist way as a usable self-interpretation. Experimental life-writing is important within this longstanding and indeed foundational discussion because such texts tend to unrepress the literary, and in doing so they challenge more conventional ideas about what counts as self-knowledge. Several of the texts discussed in this collection foreground questions about how distinctively literary forms of knowledge might co-exist or conflict with other more normative kinds of self-interpretation, and how they thereby test the ‘limits of autobiography’, to borrow the title of Leigh Gilmore’s 2001 study of trauma memoirs.

While Novak does not present the book in precisely these terms, in her introduction she usefully foregrounds a range of important points about the limitations of earlier approaches to the literariness of life-writing. She rightly challenges Dorrit Cohen’s conception of ‘absolute difference between factual and fictional modes,’ pointing out that ‘the proliferation of experiments in the vast field of life-writing has created particular challenges for developing any reliable criteria for an absolute distinction between factual and fictional narrative’. She resists Michael Lackey’s over-schematic categorisation of biography and biofiction as fundamentally distinct enterprises [in *The American Biographical Novel* (2016)], pointing out that this distinction is questioned not only by work in ‘cultural memory studies,’ but also by ‘public responses to biofictional texts’, which have often held such texts accountable to the most literal standards of biographical truth. Most broadly, Novak draws attention to the way Lejeune’s notion of an ‘autobiographical pact’ is challenged by a series of modern texts (more examples from earlier periods could also have been adduced), which ‘playfully undermine such secure labelling or dispense with ‘keys’ to their reception altogether’. As two of the essays (Kilian on Brooke-Rose, and Gundmundsdottir on Jordi Soller) demonstrate, the crucial point here, as Novak astutely observes, is that ‘it is not necessarily the author who provides the ‘key’ for reading an experimental text as factual or fictional...but that the label chosen may depend on publishers’ profiles and marketing agendas’.

Notwithstanding these important points, there is a sense in which some of the assumptions that Novak contests have nonetheless continued

to exert undue influence on how this collection is framed. Following the clear-minded discussion of how experimental texts contest the categories of genre-theory, ‘unsettling labels and pacts,’ it is a surprise to encounter those same experiments being enumerated into categories and types. Certain texts, we are told, experiment with an ‘unusual subject’—and the list here ranges from Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and *Flush*, through Peter Ackroyd’s *London: A Biography*, to Roland Barthes’s autobiography. There are also texts which experiment with ‘generic composites’; ‘style’; ‘structure’; ‘intertextuality and metalepsis’; ‘play with names and pronouns’; and ‘media’. While some useful points are made beneath each heading, here the desire to categorise draws attention away from larger questions about the different kinds of knowledge that are at stake in more experimental forms of self-representation, and the complex join (or disjunction) between them.

I also wondered about Novak’s opening distinction between the two forms of experimentation that she understands the book to include. On the one hand, she claims, there is a form of ‘postmodern scepticism and irony in a branch of life-writing experiments that negates the possibility of auto/biographical representation’. On the other there are those ‘departures from generic conventions that extend, rather than deny, the parameters of auto/biography—be it by choosing a mode of writing that more accurately reflects the condition of the modern subject, a style that is felt to do justice to, and therefore to more faithfully represent, a particular person, or a form that activates additional levels of auto/biographical communication.’ I’m unsure about the value of this kind of distinction: scepticism and irony (however ‘postmodern’ they may be) are rarely used merely to negate the possibility of self-representation; they are essential to texts that aim at less conventional forms of self-knowledge, precisely by testing ‘the parameters of auto/biography’ (whatever those might be).

Leaving these reservations about its framing to one side, several of the essays in this collection succeed in generating a subtle and insightful reflection upon the complex and layered nature of self-knowledge.

Max Saunders’s chapter on Ford Madox Ford’s *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (1924) explores the role of ‘inaccuracy and uncertainty’ in this text in relation to Ford’s fidelity to ‘the ‘truth of the impression’’. This form of knowledge, Saunders argues, should not be denigrated as ‘subjectivism’ because it is properly ‘intersubjectivism: the attempt to get at how one person reveals himself to another,’ and more precisely to convey ‘what that process of knowing feels like’. While further questions might be posed about the different kinds of truth at stake (should the truth of literary impressionism be understood as superior to a more normative

‘verifiable factual accuracy,’ or just different?), Saunders offers a carefully-argued account of how the metafictional structure of Ford’s memoir generates a form of knowledge that is ‘built up out of fragmentary and disjunct impressions,’ at once vaguer and richer (‘shimmering,’ is Ford’s word) than one that operates in a more positivist way.

B.S. Johnson’s response to Beckett, which is the subject of Andy Wimbush’s essay, exemplifies the tension between more conventional forms of self-interpretation and Beckett’s radical distrust of subject-centred knowledge. Johnson used Beckett’s fiction as a way of justifying his own more directly confessional approach, disengaging from the Irish writer’s exploration of the relationship between writing and alterity, while at the same time borrowing many of his tropes. Wimbush claims that Beckett’s literary techniques were not ‘up to the task of narrating traumatic memoir’ and that they ‘buckle as soon as they are removed from the world-less logorrhoea and meta-textual concerns of the Beckett trilogy’. This is an over-pejorative way of describing Beckett, and it is not clear why Johnson’s efforts should be defined as ‘deeper’ in this context, rather than just more sentimental. This reservation aside, Wimbush’s essay makes an important point that has broader ramifications: Johnson’s sense of a felt divergence between the impersonality of Beckett’s anti-expressivist fiction and the forms of pathos germane to autobiographical knowledge has very interesting parallels, not least with Nabokov’s ironisation of Proustian methods in *Speak, Memory* (1967). It also resonates with Eveline Kilian’s discussion (chapter 4) of the challenges that faced Christine Brooke-Rose in her efforts to transpose techniques from the *nouveau roman* into her autobiography *Remake* (1996).

As in any collection of this nature it is not always easy to navigate between the different essays: clearly the notion of ‘experimental’ writing is very capacious if it can include both Christine Brooke-Rose’s avant-gardism and Jackie Kay’s popular self-discovery narrative, *Red Dust Road* (2010). However Pietra Palazzolo’s finely-observed chapter on Kay draws attention to the way her less overtly mould-breaking forms of writing nonetheless abjure the formation of a ‘completed puzzle,’ in favour of a series of stories that offer ‘ever-changing nuances’ across the discourses of ‘race, politics, identity, law’. Palazzolo argues that Kay conceives of self-knowledge less as a graspable possession, than as an ‘ensemble of tunes’: pushing this very insightful remark one step further, there is a resonance here with Roland Barthes’ interest in musical metaphors for self-knowledge in his own experimental autobiography, which can be traced back to romantic ideas about ‘symphilosophy’ as an alternative to subject-centred notions of truth.

In some of the other essays exactly what is at stake in the kind of experimentalism being described a little submerged, and there could at times

have been a sharper probing of the precise questions about self-knowledge that are at stake. This is particularly the case with essays devoted to texts on historical subjects, in which the claims of personal or familial memory rub up against historiography. However in the final section of the book Will Slocombe's discussion of the conditions for failure in biographical writing, and his reservations about the concept of 'comprehensive' knowledge, as entailing an etymology of 'seizing' or 'grasping', and the 'implication of a violent act against the subject', go to the heart of a long tradition of experimentation, taking us again (albeit indirectly) back to Barthes. In presenting his own experiments with biographical poetry, Slocombe makes the important point that mixing genres cannot always be said to be an experimental act, if by 'experimental' is meant some challenge to normative configurations of knowledge. There are after all, he points out, biographical novels that generate an account of a life that is every bit as neatly narrativised as the blandest forms of conventional biography. Both Slocombe and Ursula Hurley consider the effects of transference in biography, with Hurley arguing—via Michael Holquist, and Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage* (1997)—that the recounting of authorial desire can help not simply to manage transference, but act as an invitation to share that desire, to render the biographical subject compelling. In doing so she takes questions about knowledge in another direction, into the complex relationship between truth and desire, and the affects that shape any act of understanding.

As this glance across the diverse range of essays presented in *Experiments in Life-Writing* must suggest, Lucia Boldrini and Julia Novak have assembled a thought-provoking collection that succeeds in making those 'questions about the very nature and being of verbal art' every bit as fundamental to life-writing as to other kinds of literature.