



# Autobiography and the Autobiographical Mode as Narrative Resistances An Interdisciplinary Perspective

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## Abstract

If every human gesture is autobiographical, then autobiographical genres and modes are being enriched day by day by contemporary and emerging disciplines and fields which do not necessarily belong to life writing. When it comes to trauma and war studies, the autobiographical imposes itself in a variety of thematic and structural ways in order to express the subjectivity of the oppressed, not without difficulties. This international and inter-disciplinary cluster of articles proposes to explore autobiography through the filiation narrative, autofiction, the anecdote, the body, the rewriting of the Grand Historical narratives, namely World War Two and the Franco-Algerian conflict, and the deconstruction of such binary oppositions as War Vs Peace and Lived Trauma Vs Narrated Trauma. The present introduction to the cluster will first introduce the genre of life writing in general, and autobiography in particular, by tracing its evolution towards a postmodern, more metabiographical stance. It will then summarize and comment on each article in the cluster so as to highlight their shared thematic patterns and the various findings which are pertinent to the fields of autobiography, trauma and war studies. The final section of the introduction will provide a new perspective on Freudian studies through the lens of auto/biography and metabiography.

*Keywords:* autobiography, metabiography, war narratives, memory, selfhood, identity, trauma

## المخلص

إذا كانت كل إيماء بشرية هي سيرة ذاتية ، فعندئذ يتم إثراء أنواع وأنماط السيرة الذاتية يوماً بعد يوم من خلال التخصصات والمجالات المعاصرة والناشئة التي لا تنتمي بالضرورة إلى كتابة الحياة. عندما يتعلق الأمر بدراسات الصدمة والحرب ، تفرض السيرة الذاتية نفسها في مجموعة متنوعة من الطرق الموضوعية والهيكلية للتعبير عن ذاتية المظلوم ، وليس بدون صعوبات

تخيل ، تقترح هذه المجموعة الدولية والمتعددة التخصصات من المقالات استكشاف السيرة الذاتية من خلال سرد البنية كتابة الروايات التاريخية الكبرى ، أي الحرب العالمية الثانية والصراع الفرنسي والحكاية ، والجسد ، وإعادة ذاتي الجزائري ، وتفكيك مثل هذه التعارضات

السلام والصدمة الحية مقابل الصدمة المروية. ستقدم المقدمة الحالية للمجموعة أولاً نوع و الثنائية مثل الحرب كتابة الحياة بشكل عام ، والسيرة الذاتية على

وجه الخصوص ، من خلال تتبع تطورها نحو موقف ما بعد الحداثة ، و الميتابيوغرافيا. ثم تلخص كل مقالة في المجموعة وتعلق عليها لتسليط

الضوء على الأنماط المواضيعية المشتركة والنتائج المختلفة ذات الصلة بمجالات السيرة الذاتية ودراسات الصدمات والحرب

سيوفر القسم الأخير من المقدمة منظوراً جديداً للدراسات الفرويدية من خلال عدسة السيرة الذاتية و الميتابيوغرافيا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السيرة الذاتية ، الميتابيوغرافيا ، روايات الحرب ، الذاكرة ، الذات ، الهوية ، الصدمة

## General Introduction

In such times of pandemic, conflict, wars and mind-twisting loops of political fate, when 'crisis' seems to be the watchword, telling one's and other people's life stories is becoming more and more crucial. Life writings such as biography, autobiography, memoirs and letters have always been at once tied by and free from specific theories and rules. In fact, the most interesting aspect of life writings is the extent to which they enrich and can be enriched by a plethora of different fields of study: structuralism and post-structuralism, narratology, gender studies and trauma studies, among others.

The aim of this international and inter-disciplinary collection of essays is to explore the ways different cultures express their subjectivity, memory, body and history

through various types of autobiographical works. The guiding principle behind this book is how trauma can thematically and structurally challenge the ways in which a life story or a community's history is written and transmitted to the next generations. In fact, the very act of editing this volume is in itself an autobiographical act, an issue which is elicited by Michel-Guy Gouverneur's chapter on Paul Auster's editing of a collection of other people's anecdotes. Anecdotes also belong to the autobiographical genre and my own chapter on Joe Pieri's anecdotal life stories traces the evolution and potentialities of this sub-genre.

The earliest manifestations of this wide-ranging field are Saint Augustine's and Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* as well as Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*, all of them autobiographical, non-fictional works in which author, narrator and protagonist are one and the same person. This fits with Philippe Lejeune's notion of 'contractual' autobiography which defines it as 'a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality' (qtd. in Saunders 140). This definition implies that the triad of author/narrator/protagonist is to be one and the same person.

Lejeune's theory is discussed by a number of chapters in this volume but what is of most interest is what Max Saunders considers as 'the quintessential postmodern genre', (3) and the main aspects which allow this categorisation such as the growing interest in autobiography since the eighties, despite (even because of) the uncertainty and possible fictionality of the knowledge it offers. What is also important to know about the origins of autobiography is its simultaneousness with the emergence of Romanticism and the increasingly blurred boundaries between autobiography, biography and fiction. Most importantly, autobiography has been following the fluctuations of definitions and conceptions of self and subjectivity, a concept which has been on the wane since the end of the nineteenth century and the emergence of psychoanalysis and secularism.

It can be either a genre in itself or a mode which may be applied to different other genres. This volume extends Saunders' aim to add more recent and more varied perspectives on the analysis of autobiography and the autobiographical mode, especially in relation to expressing different types of subaltern, voiceless subjectivities in order to rectify and nuance dominant narratives and make them more inclusive, and thus more complete. It also aims to complete the main findings of my research on metabiography<sup>1</sup> and its developments throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries.

The following cluster of essays develops the following themes:

- The voices of Harkis' female descendants who try to write the auto/biography of their ancestors (Raitses)
- the body as a sexual/textual site of experimental self-representation and trauma healing through a liberated female sexuality and a deconstructed image of female hysteria (Roussel)
- the rewriting of the history of French, Algerian, and other wars and the exposure of the resulting internment and ill-treatment of Algerian or Scots-Italian migrants (Raitses and Zekri Masson)
- A deconstructive approach to the meanings of peace and war through works in the autobiographical mode (Zahafi)
- The difficulty for trauma survivors to verbally reconstruct their life stories (Demuijnck)
- The reconstruction of personal or collective histories through anecdotes (Gouverneur and Zekri Masson)

### Overview of articles

The first article by Rebecca Raitses: 'A Harki History Lesson: Dalila Kerchouche's Filiation Narrative *Mon père, ce harki*' focuses on the role played by the structural and thematic combination of the hybrid form of memoir, autobiography and biography, what the author identifies as 'filiation narrative', in the portrayal of personal and collective war memories. This type of narrative appeared mainly in French literature, fiction more specifically, since the eighties and well into the nineties, and was initially studied as a literary form by Dominique Viart who coined the term '*récit de filiation*' and defines the genre as focusing on

des questions familiales, plus précisément généalogiques, explorant des figures paternelles ou maternelles, parfois une ascendance plus lointaine, mais toujours selon une approche singulière, plus archéologique que chronologique. Loin de raconter des biographies linéaires, les narrateurs et narratrices entreprenaient de les restituer à l'aide d'une enquête mémorielle dont ils livraient le récit et les éléments dispersés [...] le texte demeure fragmentaire. Il est traversé de supputations et d'hypothèses présentées comme telles dans le corps même du livre [...] ce sont des récits archéologiques en prose [...], souvent fragmentaires, dans lesquels une personne réelle restitue par l'enquête, l'hypothèse, le recueil d'informations ou de documents, l'existence d'un parent ou d'un aïeul, lorsque, avec une conscience métalittéraire marquée de son entreprise, elle met l'accent sur

la vie individuelle de cette personne aux prises avec les contraintes familiales, sociales et historiques. (10-11, 14, 18)<sup>2</sup>

This metabiographical genre was influenced by the recent field of ‘psycho-genealogy’ which uses genealogy to uncover ‘family secrets’ to study their inherited influences on the evolution of the self and refuses to fictionalize its narrative/narration (Viart 11-12). The filiation narrative thus reflects a (renewed) move away in literature from formalism and the traditional ‘autobiographical pact’ back to the subject/self who, in spite of using first-person narration, is not at the center of the narrative but only standing at the periphery trying to decipher another (unknowable) subject/self/biographe’s life: the recently deceased parent. This new type of relational autobiography (See Eakin) is not linear, rejects fictionalization and moves backwards as it elucidates the past from the perspective of the present (Viart 20).

More particularly, Dalila Kerchouche’s *Mon père, ce harki* informs a specific aspect of the Algerian war in the 1960s and post-war France through the marginalisation and internment of ‘Harkis’ by the French government. Through an investigative approach and an entitlement to possess and recapture her own family history, Kerchouche uses Auto/biography (father/daughter) in which the daughter tries to ‘reinscribe herself’ in her family and country history in a way as to reflect the importance of personal testimony in rectifying dominant Western (French in this case) narratives and filling in the blanks left by the voicelessness of Harkis. This ‘archeological’ novel works as a filiation narrative variant in its focus on what is not known. It also adopts an investigative method which is incorporated in the narrative and reflects aspects of metabiography, thus providing narratological insights into the filiation narrative in the context of Franco-Algerian history. ‘That’s what’s waiting for Harkis: death and being forgotten, if we, their children, don’t testify, if we let them pass without listening to them, without speaking to them, without trying to understand them’ (53). In this article, there is an interesting similarity with the internment justified by the accusation of treason of Scots-Italians and the same involvement in the war of two countries entangled with issues of immigration. Last but not least, a closer relationship between author and reader is generated because of the real-time investigative approach, a sort of equality created by the fact that they are discovering elements of history at the same time.

The second article by Flora Roussel: ‘Story Telling: Writing the Body to Recall Life in Kanehara Hitomi’s *Autofiction* and Charlotte Roche’s *Wrecked*’ focuses on ‘autofiction’ as a narrative response to deal with and heal trauma through sexualised and textualised bodies in the auto-fictional works of Kanehara Hitomi, *Autofiction*, and

Charlotte Roche, *Wrecked*. In fact, the body continues to materialise as language and text through sexuality, hysteria and narrative experimentation in the quest for self and identity. Fragmentation and blurriness thus reinitialise a renewed vision of identity which is no longer fooled by illusions of unity and stability. What is also important in this article is the cultural and gender nuances which will enlighten and enrich the definition of this postmodern genre of life writing.

The third article by Hadas Zahavi: 'Toward a literary genre of "neither peace nor war"' insightfully redefines the contours of the contemporary political situation in the world as a no-man's-land of ubiquitous insecurity denoted by the expression 'neither peace nor war' which leads to the deconstruction and complexification of this binary opposition and its conventional meanings of armed conflict and absence of violence. The author resorts to Serge Sur's phrase 'Mosaic of fragments in a perpetual recompositing' to denote the current situation of a shattered world, torn to shreds. The main contention in this article is that the fact of not witnessing the fragmented war by a unified self can be used as a resistance tool to counter the neglected but persistent interference of Western countries in conflict-ridden zones. Through the works of two generations of French authors, Zahafi traces the evolution of the fragmented self and of the deconstruction of the significations of war and peace within various genres belonging to the autobiographical mode.

The fourth article by Deborah Demuijnck: 'Trauma Memories: Objectivity and Subjectivity in Life Writing' analyses one of the most important aspects of life writing in general, and autobiography in particular, that is turning real life experience into a story, a narrative, or turning life into words in an attempt to reorganise and understand one's life. The perspective which guides Demuijnck's analysis follows the consequences of trauma in narratological terms i.e. the difficulties to tell (about) one's story by trauma survivors. Through a detailed explanation of synaptic reactions and their role in the comprehension and processing of human experiences, this article sheds a scientific light on the difficulty of the subjective re-construction of a traumatic event or experience due to the destructive effects of trauma on memory processes.

An interesting link is also established between the physiological/mental effects of trauma and creativity on the human brain, thus rendering autobiography as therapeutic. The link between narrative and psychology that this article establishes is pertinent, especially when it comes to Sigmund Freud's 'metabiography'. In fact, many theoretical and critical studies of life writing, especially of biography and autobiography, have pointed out the centrality and great influence of Freudian Psychoanalysis on the genre's main thematic and structural areas of study. There is a constant correlation between psychoanalytical 'case histories' and the writing of

biography, especially in relation to the problematic mixture of fact and fiction and the narrative challenges of their composition. Freud himself wrote biographies (Leonardo da Vinci's for instance) and linked life writing to psychoanalysis as 'he believed that certain psychoanalytical concepts were applicable to life writing about creative beings [...] the "unconscious" [...] provided an entire new province for biographical research' (*Norton Anthology*). Freud also comments on other aspects of the genre such as the importance of childhood to the understanding of the subject's adult character and motivations in Lytton Strachey's biography of Queen Victoria (Marcus 128). He also expresses his views on 'the problem of "hero-worship" inherent in the [life writing] genre, with its concomitant but suppressed desire to devalue greatness, to find the feet of clay and the rattling skeleton in the cupboard' (Holmes 18). In other words, Freud explains that some biographers' admiring focus on subjects with great achievements conceals in reality an unconscious desire to demean and debase the latter. In addition, he is taken as a reference in relation to life writing by theorists and practitioners such as Leon Edel whose imagery and terminology in *Writing Lives* is steeped in psychoanalysis like the concept of 'transference' or what he terms 'literary biography' as a tool to the understanding and portrayal of the biographical subject.

Psychoanalysis being concerned with retrospection, an 'inward journey' (Marcus 79), and the inescapably linguistic interpretation of the past, Freud's case histories are, in Linda Anderson's words, 'experiments in life writing', while Freud himself is described as 'a short story writer' (*Autobiography* 59). In fact, both analyst and patient at once provide facts and create fictions based on 'memory and narration' (Borch-Jacobsen 60) so there are inevitably two versions: the life as remembered/told by the patient versus the analyst's 'plot of an analysis' (Marcus 810), his/her own version of the patient's narrative/story-telling (Eakin's 'the story of the story').

A case in point is the history of Bertha Pappenheim, commonly known as 'Anna O.', who was diagnosed and treated for hysteria by Joseph Breuer between 1880 and 1882. In the 1895 case history, Breuer describes how the patient gradually regained mental and physical health over her two-year therapy thanks to what she termed the 'talking cure' (*Studies on Hysteria*). What is at stake in this and other psychoanalytical case histories is the relationship between scientific and private knowledge, past and present, narrative and subject, patient's and analyst's stories. Although the case was co-authored in *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud had never treated the patient himself but only obtained second-hand information from his fiancée and Breuer who had been meeting the patient regularly during her treatment. In the light of the additional biographical information gathered about the case since 1953, it has turned out that Freud knew Breuer had failed to treat Bertha but still encouraged him to publish her

case history on which he projected his own theory and understanding of hysteria. Both Breuer and Freud had relied on Bertha's case for their construction of the myth of origin of psychoanalysis.

However, 'one always returned to Freud, for after all, he had invented a therapeutic method which explored the *narrative* that a life might be – identity as autobiography' (Elizabeth Wilson in Marcus 213). Identity as narrative implies linguistic and structural organization, that is fictionality and thus untruth. 'By pursuing a narratological problem into non-literary realms, we discover to what extent the case-history [...] is ultimately allied to the fictional [...] [this] indicates a problem in the theory of fiction: when you leave fiction you discover fictions' (Culler 203). As a result, the patient narrates his/her life (his)story, his/her autobiography, which is re-interpreted and re-written by the analyst, who becomes in turn his/her biographer. By fictionalizing the patient's autobiography and commenting on it in the process, Freud takes on the role of a metabiographer. His remark in one of his letters may be linked to that role: 'Anyone who writes a biography is committed to lies, concealments, hypocrisy, flattery and even to hiding his/[her] own lack of understanding, for biographical truth does not exist, and if it did we could not use it' (*The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig* 127). It is in this sense ironic that while acknowledging the impossibility to attain biographical truth, Freud himself has encouraged Breuer to mystify the case-history of 'Anna O.' and re-appropriate it by manipulating psychoanalytic history and chronology and position himself and Breuer as pioneers of the theory on hysteria. It goes without saying that patients themselves may falsify their own narratives/identities. In relation to that, Marcus remarks on

the complexity of autobiographical 'truth' in psychoanalysis [...] Freud's discovery (or assumption) that patients 'lie' is turned to advantage. The fictions which patients manufacture are perceived as enabling the truth of the therapeutic effect and the operation of the unconscious is only seen in the fictions which we invent in order to represent the unconscious. (201)

However, Freud's metabiography serves only to create/construct myths within 'the unreal, derealized universe of psychoanalysis, where interpretation passes for reality and fiction is taken for truth' (Borch-Jacobsen 47). In that regard, Freud may also be considered as a mythologizer.

The fifth article by Michel-Guy Gouverneur: 'Auster In, Auster Out : Life Writing As A Game ?' addresses, through Ludwig Wittengstein's theory, one of the most crucial aspects of life writing which is the complex relationship between life and



language, or life and narrative. It tackles Paul Auster's editorial authorship of a collection of anecdotes titled *True Tales of American Life*. This article is relevant to the question of the 'narrativisation' of life and the condensation of human 'real' experience in one meaningful incident (called 'metaphorisation' in the article) that is the anecdote. My own article on Joe Pieri's editing of anecdotes is connected to Gouverneur's but, unlike Auster, it is his own life that Pieri is considering, thus performing an interesting move from the biographical to the autobiographical anecdote as editing has an autobiographical quality through selection and, in Strachey's terms, 'design'.

My own article titled 'Autobiography through Anecdotes in Joe Pieri's *Isle Of The Displaced*' concludes this cluster and develops the analysis of the anecdotal genre by linking it yet again to the war narrative and to traumatic experiences underwent by immigrant minorities. It attempts to annex the anecdote to the autobiographical mode while documenting an important aspect of British, Canadian and Italian history. In times of renewed wars, war life narratives are still silenced and manipulated by government and social institutions so the autobiographical mode in war life narratives should effect change in social views of armed conflicts and their influence on History and histories.

There is no fixed self and thus no fixed life narrative as issues of truthfulness and reliability are always at stake in autobiographical writing. There is no essence of an autobiographical self which precedes its narration as the act of self-writing is performative thus implying the constructedness of the self and of the past. When it comes to trauma, life narratives have to be relational in that they should not only relate a personal story but also a collective one in their attempt to be integrated into history. They are also an integral part of culture as they both reflect and construct it.

On other hand, there are therapeutic effects to storytelling thanks to the reorganizing effects of narrative on life experience, but could anecdotal narratives be more representative of traumatic events/selves by being spiral-like rather than linear narratives to better represent traumatic events?

Trauma studies try to challenge prejudiced definitions of trauma and traumatic memories by emphasising the multiplicity of life narratives as they are intertwined with a multiplicity of selves due to their connections to personality developments and changes. It is this very multiplicity that this cluster of articles has tried to address and highlight through its multi-disciplinary perspectives.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Zekri Masson, Souhir 2019.

<sup>2</sup> 'family issues, more specifically genealogical, exploring paternal or maternal figures, sometimes a remoter ancestry, but always following a distinctive approach, more archeological than chronological. Far from telling linear biographies, male and female narrators committed themselves to reconstitute/re-store them through a memorial investigation whose narrative and dispersed elements they supplied [...] the text [...] is traversed by speculations and suppositions presented as such in the very body of

the text [...] they are archeological prose narratives [...], often fragmented, in which a real person restitutes/restores through investigation, conjecture, collection of information or documents, the life of a parent or ancestor, when, through a heightened meta-literary consciousness of one's enterprise (this person S.Z.) highlights (an S.Z.) individual life entangled in familial, social and historical constraints.' (my translation, S.Z. 10-11, 14, 18).