



**Katja Herges and Elisabeth Krimmer (eds.), *Contested Selves: Life Writing and German Culture* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2021, ISBN 9781650141056).**

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In Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774), a piece of life writing constitutes one of the founding documents of modern German literature. The tragic story of the young bohemian Werther and his beloved Charlotte is partly based on the life and suicide of Goethe's friend Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem, but is also infused with passages from Goethe's own letters and inspired by his unrequited love for Charlotte Buff. Validating Paul De Man's assertion that autobiography is not necessarily a genre or a type of writing, but rather a way of approaching and interpreting literature, Goethe's *Werther* can equally be read as biography, autobiography or as a work of fiction. Despite the fact that the novel sets the scene for the intricate interplay of life and literature that became a distinguishing mark of European Romanticism, the particular significance of life writing for German literature and thought is obvious if one considers the role of biography for German Historism in the tradition of Leopold Ranke and Gustav Droysen, of autobiographical writing from Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811-1833) to Ruth Klüger's *Weiter leben* (1992), or of auto/biographical tropes in fictional genres like the *Bildungsroman*. This makes it all the more surprising that no comprehensive study has yet been devoted to the role of life writing within the German context. Even the term 'life writing,' bridging the gap between different genres and media, has only recently and somewhat reluctantly been adopted in German-language scholarship. A recent collection of essays, edited by Katja Herges and Elisabeth Krimmer, entitled

*Contested Selves: Life Writing and German Culture* has set itself to remedy this shortcoming.

The volume's sweeping introduction connects contemporary trends in the German book market with global tendencies in publishing, e.g. the commercial success of memoir over fiction, but also with larger cultural questions, like the accessibility of life writing to readers who are less familiar with the literary discourse. In three subchapters, the editors provide a compact overview of recent research on central genres of historical and contemporary life writing: the memoir, the diary and the letter. While the section on letters refers to Jörg Schuster's and Jochen Strobel's important contribution to the cultural history of the letter, and Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf's introduction to autobiography is mentioned, the introduction lacks a more thorough engagement with recent German-language scholarship on diaries and memoirs. Alongside Paul John Eakin, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, one would have perhaps expected a reference to the works of Michaela Holdenried or Christian Moser – and what about the critical response to Philippe Lejeune by Arno Dusini in his *Tagebuch: Möglichkeiten einer Gattung* [Diary: Possibilities of a Genre]? While the introduction does not fully succeed in bringing the German and the international discourses on life writing into a fruitful dialogue, it nevertheless provides a helpful overview of central theoretical positions, especially for readers who are new to the field.

Consistent with the introduction, the focus of the collection's twelve essays is on life writing in German rather than on German life writing scholarship. The contributions are arranged in four groups: 'Female Subjectivity and Agency,' 'Modern Life Writing and Aesthetics,' 'Trauma and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*' [coming to terms with the past], and finally 'Transnational and Transgenerational Life Writing in Contemporary Germany'. While this arrangement reflects some historical and contemporary constellations between lived experience and life narratives that are specific to German culture, it also helps to connect the volume's analyses with larger debates in and around gender, memory or life writing and fiction. The essays are particularly illuminating when those categories overlap, for example in Erika Quinn's and Kathryn Sedeberg's readings of letters and diaries by German women in the context of National Socialism, the Shoa and the Second World War.

In their respective chapters, Quinn and Sederberg explore the written expression of conflicting subjectivities. Quinn does so by examining letter diaries of Vera Conrad, a German Nazi supporter who chronicles events between 1939 to 1948, initially intended for her new-born son and later for her husband, a soldier who had

gone missing on the eastern front in 1943. Her letters present the reader with two distinct selves: the hero and the mourner, 'each characterized by distinctive narrative strategies and behaviors to help her address needs that arose, pressingly, in [her husband's] absence' (146). Both selves are relational. While the heroic side of the writer mirrors the regime's expectation of Germans to face the hardships of war bravely and stoically, her mourning side is a more private self that can only be expressed in intimate conversation with her husband, despite the fact that her letters remained unanswered and that it became increasingly clear that he was never to return.

Many of the examples in Kathryn Sederberg's essay exhibit similar dissociations, as they are concerned with paratextual attempts to frame or reframe diaries that were originally written during the war. This temporal dimension demonstrates how life writing can illuminate the changeability of its subjects, rather than confirm their alleged consistency. Most strikingly, this is the case in Lore Walb's diary *Ich, die Alte – ich, die Junge* [I, the old – I, the young] that was published by the author herself in 1997 under the impression of racist violence in newly reunited Germany. The diary presents its reader with two distinct voices: one is the author as teenager and young woman during the reign of the Nazis, and the other is the author's self at the time of publication, rereading her past diaries with the help of a therapist. Sederberg's analysis of Walb's diary compellingly reveals how every telling of events is only one subjective part of a wider, complex, and often contradictory truth. This becomes most apparent where Walb decided to complement her original diary with accounts about the persecution of Jews. Walb enters into a powerful dialogue with her younger self, adding and correcting facts 'that [she] could not have known back then, wanted to disregard, or would not have believed' (157).

While in Walb's case, the knowledge and the historical distance of the diarist determines what is said and what is omitted, Julie Shoult's essay on East-German *Interviewliteratur* shows how it is often the genre itself, and its socio-cultural conditions, that determine what can and what cannot be said about lived experience. In contrast to more conventional literary formats that were subject to harsh censorship, interview literature allowed for the publication of personal accounts that ran somewhat counter to the state-sanctioned image of life in the GDR. Shoult explores two examples, collected and published by the East-German authors Sarah Kirsch and Maxie Wanders, with a particular focus on female lives. Shoult provides the reader with a detailed description of how these interview collections came about and the strategies employed by the editors to preserve as much of the accounts'

authenticity as possible, while at the same time conforming as much as was necessary with the restrictions imposed by the regime.

In a similar way to which interview literature was able to give voice to the lived experience of women that would otherwise not have been remembered, Laura Deiulio illustrates how letters permit the German-Jewish writer and salonnière Rahel Levin Varnhagen, living in Berlin around the turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, a form of self-expression that has since become an essential part of Germany's cultural memory. Reading Levin Varnhagen's epistolary writing as a form of autobiography allows Deiulio to acknowledge the letters' literary qualities independent from their historical and utilitarian purpose. Following the German Romanticist Friedrich Schlegel's remarks on fragments, Levin Varnhagen's letters can serve as 'flashes of insight, as inspiration to think further, as tiny nuggets of meaning that change based on the context in which they are placed' (48). Thus the letters are not, as they have sometimes been described, early precursors to a more mature and more public form of writing, namely the novel, but works of art in their own right.

The contrast between the novel and the various genres of life writing also concern Matthias Müller's essay on Alfred Döblin, the author of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), one of the prime examples of German modernist literature. On a number of occasions, Döblin expressed his discontent with traditional autobiography, and yet he himself has published several autobiographical accounts throughout his lifetime. Against the backdrop of this apparent contradiction, Müller discusses Döblin's *Schicksalsreise* (1949, *Destiny's Journey*) in which the author relates the story of his escape to the United States in 1940 and his return to Germany after the end of the Second World War. Müller attempts to demonstrate how in Döblin's writing, fiction and autobiography complement each other: '[T]ogether, they penetrate the surface of reality and generate a deeper understanding of the forces that govern life' (109). Regrettably, the scarce examples from Döblin's autobiographical writing are not able to sufficiently support Müller's point. The multilayered approach of Müller's essay, exploring Döblin's modernist poetics alongside his life and his work while at the same time trying to contrast Döblin's position with those of contemporary German critics, might be slightly too ambitious for a relatively short piece. In fact, the topic would probably justify a monograph of its own. Nevertheless, Müller must be given credit for recognising the wider debate around life writing in interwar Germany, in particular Siegfried Kracauer's essay *Die Biographie als Neubürgerliche Kunstform* (1930) [The Biography as an Art Form of the New Bourgeoisie], in which Kracauer argues that biography is a response to the crisis of the individual in the modern world. In

contrast to the conservative genre of biography, Kracauer calls for the development of new literary and historiographical formats that are able to reflect modernity's disruptive impact on the idea of the self-reliant and autonomous individual.

These five examples from Herges' and Krimmer's volume hopefully illustrate the book's breath and its manifold qualities. The essays manage to apply the methodologies of life writing research to specifically German contexts, such as memory and memorialisation in totalitarian regimes, the historical struggles of German Jews, or the significance of autobiography in providing accounts of exile and forced migration. In doing so, the volume provides important impulses for German literary and cultural studies, in particular when it comes to texts and genres that are still underrepresented in English-language scholarship on German culture. What the book does not do is to provide a thorough reflection on the theoretical and methodological approaches to life writing that have developed in German-language scholarship in recent years. This is regretful as it would have been a chance to recognise some of the inspiring work outside the English language. However, both the editors and the authors of the volume make a strong case for culture- and language-specific studies in life writing and their approach will hopefully find many successors.