

EDITORIAL

Jenny Bourne Taylor and Cora Kaplan

Life writing now holds a ubiquitous place in contemporary culture rivalling, overlapping and problematising distinctions between the factual records of life history and its fictional counterparts. This special issue responds to the rise and rise of biography, autobiography and memoir in recent decades, a popular explosion which has extended across every segment of a thriving market from 'respectable' biography of the good, bad and great to ghost written celebrity bios and misery memoirs with all the controversy they bring. The essays here address some but by no means all of the subgenres of life writing and their attendant issues of memory, identity and representation. Our focus is on the diverse practice of life writing – and the fiction which offer them up in another form – as they encompass the multi-layered processes of personal and collective memory that shape both shared and individual recollection.

Five broad categories frame the issue: the process of recalling and writing the past; the relationship between autobiography and fiction; the ways in which representation negotiates trauma; how to write the autobiography of political movements, and finally the way in which biography as a non theoretical form sets a paradigm for understanding of its own.

The essays by Alison Light, Carolyn Steedman and Margaretta Jolly all meditate on the palimpsest of materials, oral and written, available to the biographer. Light's memoir of her Portsmouth childhood highlights the staging of stories within a familial setting and the alternative chronologies through which both children and adults remembered the past. Carolyn Steedman's discussion is two-pronged. She questions the way in which historians generally suppress the affective nature of their own engagement with their subjects. She links this to the challenges posed by her own biographical subject. Frances Hamilton was an eighteenth century woman, property holder and intellectual whose wide-ranging reading, in particular about slavery, offers Steedman a way of reconstructing the materiality of mental life and its political implications. Margaretta Jolly takes the letters of second wave feminism, to explore the levels of negotiation and compromise between editor, publisher, archivist and reader. Stressing the power of letters as material objects, she considers how they work within systems of exchange, both as a synecdoche for the body and as a site of absence and presence.

In their analyses of John McGahern and James Baldwin, Martin Ryle and Claudine Raynaud discuss the generic and political relationship between autobiography, fiction and the essay, querying the line between the genres and exploring the affective and aesthetic work that they accomplish. Ryle

reads McGahern's autobiographically charged fiction as a contribution to collective memory – more than making the personal public, McGahern gives the psychic and social, political and physical landscape a kind of subjectivity – representing a synthesis of rural Ireland. Exploring McGahern's 'autobiographical naturalism' in his mature novels, Ryle comments on the paradoxically detached narrative voice through which remembered experience, itself laden with affect, is expressed. James Baldwin's essays, notes, addresses, speeches as well as his fiction are, as Claudine Raynaud says, 'almost all developed around an autobiographical core' so insistently that the modality of such writing asks for further analysis. Her essay explores the insistence and function of autobiography in Baldwin, and the way in which he frames both privacy and intimacy by looking at how particular incidents are written and rewritten throughout his work.

Writing and visual art as the means of recalling and negotiating that which resists comprehension or is beyond immediate recall expanded exponentially during the 1990s, and has been intimately bound up with both the idea of writing as therapeutic activity and the theorisation of the concept of trauma. Griselda Pollock, Lyndsey Stonebridge and Roger Luckhurst's essays critically take to pieces the trauma memoir, and the often unreflective relationship between the real and the represented self on which it can rely. Griselda Pollock reads painter Charlotte Salomon's *Life? or Theatre?* (1941-2), created shortly before her death in Auschwitz, as a form of *allothanatography* – a writing of the *deaths* of others – and probes its visual and textual weave of invented memories for a traumatic core in maternal loss. Lyndsey Stonebridge discusses the interpretative questions raised by *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Hannah Arendt's irreverent account of the 1961 Eichmann trial. Arendt's mordant humour and refusal of pathos was seen by many as inappropriately out of tune with an emerging politics of memory and testimony; Stonebridge places her 'refusal to inhabit a rhetoric of trauma' within Arendt's larger concern with ways to think about judgement and responsibility during the 1960s and 1970s. In particular she targets Arendt's 'apparent repudiation of the transformative power of the testimonies of surviving witnesses' – an issue at the centre of post-Holocaust ethics. Roger Luckhurst considers Joan Didion's memoir of bereavement *The Year of Magical Thinking* within the context of the contemporary boom in trauma memoir, and traces the 'secret history of cognitions' that Didion's account references, in which extreme mental states are associated with the magical and numinous, back to the beginnings of dynamic psychiatry in the early nineteenth century, as the underside of rationalist modernity.

The writing of collective histories, in which the memories of subordinated groups has been so important, has been a project for and weapon of radical politics since the 1930s. These projects, in turn, have raised their own problems of representation, mediation, and audience. The essays by Geoffrey Wall, Alan Sinfield and Lynne Segal consider some of the issues raised by writing the history of the Trotskyist left, the history of lesbian, gay and bisexual

subcultures and British feminism in the 1960s. These projects are often, of necessity, local rather than national – Wall focuses on SWP activists in York, Manchester and London, Sinfield interviews Ourstory in Brighton, and Segal draws much of her material from London based feminists. Geoff Wall’s essay contrasts the ‘literary’ biography (the focus of his earlier work) and the messier and more inconclusive process of collective political memory of living activists. Sinfield surveys a range of books of gay and lesbian testimonies focusing on their framing in archival and published form – an analysis which reveals some ‘dilemmas and achievements’ which highlight the fault lines of the genre. Looking back on her own experiment with collective memoir, *Making Trouble*, Lynne Segal traces the ‘shifting contexts of self-narration’ between the re-emergence of feminism at the end of the 1960s and the present. How is our connection with those past times, and their progressive hopes, altered by the grim global landscape of this new century?

Like the novel, life writing in recent years has generated a set of theoretical agendas. In a provocative piece in *Poetics Today*,¹ biographer and philosopher Ray Monk argued ‘that biography offered, or should offer if done properly, a paradigm example of Wittgenstein’s notion of “the understanding that consists in seeing connections”’. In the final essay in our issue, Monk extends his discussion of the definition of ‘theory’ and questions its usefulness in relation to the understanding and practice of biography.

1. ‘Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding’, *Poetics Today*, 28, 3 (Fall 2007): 527-570.