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## The content and form of ‘conventional’ historical biography

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Biography is one of the most challenging, fruitful and also most criticized genres within the realm of history writing. A ‘dark legend’ was built up by Marxists and structuralists to undermine biography’s epistemological potential. With the revival of narrative as a privileged medium for historical writing, the genre re-entered the core of the historical field. However, it did so through different approaches, which reveal different intentions stemming from rather antagonistic epistemological stances. While ‘conventional’ or ‘reconstructionist’ historians reassert the genre as an example of a ‘proper’ historical study, postmodern ‘deconstructionist’ historians theorize it as a useful and experimental means for ‘unconventional’ historical writing. The aim of this article is to present an approach not only to the problems and challenges that any practitioner of historical biography encounters but also what its ‘conventional’ content and form might include as an instrument of knowledge.

**Keywords:** biography; narrative; content, form, reconstructionism; post-modernism; conventional and unconventional historiography

### 1. Introduction: a case for biography

Richard Holmes, one of the many authors enabling a full discovery of the intellectual pleasure and utility of writing and reading biographies, affirmed some years ago that biography ‘raises some rather interesting issues about the *value*, as well as the nature, of the form’ (Holmes 2002, 7, italicized in the original). It was a statement that echoed, in turn, Hayden White’s work *The Content of the Form* on the virtues of narrative as a special medium for presenting historical knowledge (White 1990). Following in the ‘footsteps’ of Holmes, to quote another of his titles (Holmes [1985] 1996), the aim of this text is to present a theoretical approach to the problems that any practitioner of the craft or art (as opposed to ‘science’) of biography encounters, the choices and the challenges to be met in building up an analysis of what historical biography can and should be, what intellectual *démarche* this genre calls for, what problems its content and nature raises, and what purposes and value it allows as an instrument of knowledge.

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For those recognizing the genre's epistemological richness, reassessing this obviously sets them apart from others, for whom historical biography represents a minor, imperfect, deceitful, superficial and rather impossible (and the adjectives could go on and on...) type of writing (see Backscheider 2001; Ellis 2002). Additionally, any reflection on historical biography also addresses the different conceptions that 'conventional' (or reconstructionist) historians, on the one hand, and postmodernist (or deconstructionist) historians, on the other hand, hold about the field. Both may agree that it is an important form of historical narrative, but they diverge on various issues (from the epistemological to content and goals) inherent to biography writing. With this article, my intention is to call into question the overall intellectual and academic relevance of the genre – one that Richard Holmes defines as a 'humanist discipline', indeed nothing less than 'the proper study of mankind' (Holmes 2002, 7) – while making the case for the virtues of the 'conventional' and reconstructionist approach to historical biography.

## 2. De-humanizing mankind: biography and its critics

Life writing has always had its critics and is still regarded as an inferior form of history by many, among the general public and academics alike, for a wide range of reasons (see Lee 2009, 93–100). The anti-biography prejudice is as old as Marxism and went mainstream with the dominance exerted by the second generation of the French *annaliste* school, between the 1950s and the 1970s. John Vincent recalls briefly everything the *Annales* rejected during that period: 'the narrative history of states, of politics and events; the biographies of monarchs; the "drums and trumpets" of battles, and the skilled drudgery of diplomatic history. Instead, it sought the history of society, of all of society, total history' (Vincent 1995, 112). That is why Fernand Braudel (as the leading figure of that *Annales* generation) talked about political narrative and biography as 'deceitful fallacies' that intoxicated true scientific knowledge with an all too vague 'novelistic approach' (White 1990, 32). At the beginning of the 1960s, Edward Carr, seeking to place the individual within the anonymous framework of the group (social class) and to highlight the power of social forces in determining individual behavior, emphasized this lowly status by saying that 'good biography makes bad history' (Munslow 2006, 45).

Since old habits die hard, scientific and collective socio-economic history outlasted communism and reached the 1990s, coexisting with the theoretical approaches of the third *Annales* generation and gathered around the *histoire des mentalités*. In 1993, Jacques Le Goff critically commented on the 'return of biography' with some bitterness: good biographies did exist – he conceded – but, for the large part, they belonged to the non-historical realm of novel or essay, showing 'a naïve conception of a great character' and a 'faulty psychology, full of anachronism and superficiality' and thus unable to produce sound and scientific knowledge on the past (Le Goff 1995, 161–2). Le Goff's words were perhaps

more an epistemological warning than a blatant rejection of the genre *per se*. Although his remarks echoed many years of historical Marxism-cum-structuralism, in that same decade he personally authored two outstanding biographies, *Saint Louis* (1996), on King Louis IX of France, and *Saint Francis of Assisi* (1999), greatly paving the way for the re-emergence of the genre and proving that not all *annaliste* militants were anti-biographical historians. Indeed, Lucien Febvre (founder and co-leader, with Marc Bloch, of its first generation) had written *Martin Luther: A Destiny* (1929), and Georges Duby *William Marshall: The Flower of Chivalry* (1984). Set aside by decades, these were books that proved the exact opposite of some of the *Annales* orthodoxy: that the study of a single representative life or event could cast light on society, economy, political structures and long lived cultural values. By doing so, they actually undermined two rules flourishing under the structuralist, quantitative and social *annaliste* agenda; – specifically the study of history ‘with the politics left out’ and preferably seen ‘from below’ (which was in itself a *political* statement), i.e. focusing on the anonymous, the excluded, the silenced and the forgotten minorities.

Ever since the scientific ambitions of Marxist or structuralist history were challenged in the academy, where paradigms have been both shattered and rebuilt over the last two or three decades – with historiography witnessing both the return of the individual and of events, as well as the revival of political narrative – biography re-entered the core of historical research. It was then placed center stage by all those for whom history is not an aseptic science but rather a humanist study about mankind, about *real* people and their actions, about all their diversity, freedom, richness and unpredictable accidents<sup>1</sup>. Abandoning the interdisciplinary scientific utopia by defending the necessity to re-enact history as a fact-based narrative brought new materials and insights, or else at least reinstated them: the empirical reality of the past, made out of rediscovered facts, ideas, principles, perceptions and opinions; in sum, the very sense the past actually made to those who lived it.

The new goal became the recovery of as much as possible from that multifarious human reality and not the theorization of the past through concepts sometimes a-critically imported from other present-based subjects. This should not be confounded with any naïve empiricism and certainly not with any nostalgic revival of nineteenth-century positivism, in the sense of aspiring to ‘a fixed, total or absolute truth about the past’ (Himmelfarb 1994, 133). It meant only that the facts of the past should be the prime raw material of history’s content. As Gordon Wood states, ‘the facts of the past should be allowed to speak for themselves’ (Wood 2009, 63) as a way to recognize and guarantee the ‘differentness’ or the ‘pastness’ of the past (2009, 8, 107). The revival of narrative and the related boom in biographies were eagerly welcomed by younger historians as well as by their older anti-Marxist or post-Marxist peers, some of them greeting this shift as almost liberation, closely linked to a weariness with anonymous structures and a-temporal theories.

### 3. The episteme quarrel: biography between postmodernism and modernism

The dominance of Marxism in university corridors began fading just as the corresponding political ideology crumbled and was quickly outpaced by a new *Weltanschauung* that has come to define and influence almost every aspect of the human condition and consciousness in our days: the postmodernist episteme and 'life-style'. The failure of Marxism reinforced the end of all traditional 'modernist' grand narratives and the coming of a general attitude, or mindset, that pluralizes and particularizes knowledge in a fragmented micro-narrative way, redefining life itself as a multicultural experience with hybrid patterns and relativist values in a 'liquid' and 'fluid' approach (see Bauman 2007). Succeeding from various stages of traditional modernity, post-modernity became the new label for the existential essence of the consumer-based societies of the close of the twentieth-century and the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Postmodernism (soon nicknamed '*pomo*') entered the historian's field through the so-called 'cultural turn' or 'linguistic turn' that prevailed in the 1970s and 1980s, causing what some have termed an intellectual 'war': the conflict between traditionalists and modernists, or defenders of the 'conventional' *status quo* and postmodernists<sup>2</sup>. In part, that 'war' signified different ways of conceiving the possibilities of knowledge, and that general debate naturally produced consequences for the overall state of the field of history and, within its scope, for the particular genre of historical biography. Some postmodernists maintained, even if in new terms, the old mistrust about life writing, while others came to perceive the genre as a significant and promising avenue of approach, indeed as a new 'unconventional' and 'experimental' scenario for transforming the very nature of historical writing and knowledge.

Postmodernism means post-empiricism, if not anti-empiricism, upholding a characteristic epistemological skepticism and subjectivism. Based on a deconstructionist episteme, it disputes 'the possibility of correspondence between the word and the world' (Munslow 2006, 9–10). Pushed too far, this implies affirming the non-existence of any factual reality beyond the observer, claiming everything is but a 'text' and that human knowledge stems from the authoring (and 'deconstruction') of self-centered and personally-based texts. It followed that history, as with all other fields of human knowledge, was transformed by postmodernists into a 'written cultural practice', where in the end there would be no objective 'knowable and readily translatable material world outside language' (Munslow 2006, IX, 114), with the latter being just another way of producing ideology or unveiling unequal relations of power.

Among others, Alun Munslow sums up and endorses the postmodernist and multi-skeptical understanding of history. Spurning the distinction of 'knower' and 'known' as a 'modernist inconsistency', history becomes not an act of 'discovering' the past as it happened somewhere back in time and space, but rather a 'representation', a 'creation', where 'rules of evidence' are a 'choice' not

a 'given' and the old creed that one can reach the true meaning of the past through documentary evidence just 'modernist wreckage' (Munslow 2006, IX, 1–2, 15, 20). Postmodernists reject that 'the narrative of the historian (form) reflects the narrative of the past (content)', history equaling a 'literary performance' in the shape of a truth-making (and not a truth-finding) narrative that encompasses whatever 'we feel justified in believing that once happened' (Munslow 2006, 11, 16, 20)<sup>3</sup>. Differing from reconstructionist or traditionalist historians, empirically-based specialists who believe that narrative is but an 'interpretative vehicle' bringing the past to life, postmodernist or deconstructionist historians see narrative discourse primarily as an 'invention', with only some residual factualism and insufficient as a means 'to represent the past at all' (Munslow 2006, 116). The overall goal of history consequently changed with postmodernism. History – Munslow adds – 'is primarily about the uses of power and ideology [and] is filled with the meanings and definitions we want' (Munslow 2006, 13). It no longer serves the purpose of re-presenting the past, instead displaying a presentist attitude of empowerment through emplotment, because 'the stories we impose on the past are imposed for reasons that are contemporary', revealing a wish 'to establish and promote a variety of intellectual, gender, ethical, cultural, economic or social programs' (Munslow 2006, 18)<sup>4</sup>.

Biography only partially fits the postmodern episteme. Thus, Alun Munslow recalls that historical life writing has been under dual attack, both from all those who thought 'that biography is, at best, a history-lite, because it tends to concentrate too much on human agency alone' (as was seen above), and also 'from a postmodernist insistence that no life is anything other than a literary construction with invented beginnings, middles and ends, imposed emplotments and the unavoidable "ficticity" of all historical writing' (Munslow 2006, 46). Since postmodernism tends to consider external realities impalpable and untouchable for the observer, thus implying that a past life does not exist factually in the documents that record it but only as an extension of one's own life, many postmodernists consider historical biographies merely as impossible missions. Given it states the impossibility of knowing 'what really happened', postmodernism denies the possibility of either crossing time and reconstructing a given slice of the past through historical writing or being able to understand other (i.e. past) human behaviours, actions and choices (Hespanha 2009, 219, 2002, 16).

As two authors recall, postmodern theories 'insist on the complex and fragmented nature of the self', which is, of course, very different from that 'coherent individuality which much traditional biography aim[s] to uncover' (France and St Clair 2002, 2). Hence the distaste towards historical biography: linked, as the genre inherently has to be, to the rediscovery of a single past life, built on the same trans-temporal categories we ourselves live by (will, action, luck, ambition, accident, success, failure and so on), the genre cannot be accepted by all those who think – and echoing Jean Jacques Rousseau's *dictum* that 'no

one can write a man's life but himself' – that 'those who claim to know human nature really only know themselves' (France and St Clair 2002, 1). In the end, for radical postmodernists then, more than deceitful or naïve, historical biography is an impossible epistemological task, a mere soliloquy or a simple diary; picking up one life leaves millions of other lives in the shadow. Consequently, the biography of a 'great man' only reveals, if indeed it reveals anything, how that 'great man' fails to be a suitable portrait of other collective aspects of his time (Hespanha 2002, 17)<sup>5</sup>.

The consequences of the deconstruction of all external (past) reality to the very feasibility of historical biography were the main topic of a letter Sigmund Freud wrote to Lytton Strachey in 1928, in which the Austrian psychoanalyst commented on the leading British biographer's work *Elizabeth and Essex*:

You are aware of what other historians so easily overlook; that it is impossible to understand the past with certainty, because we cannot divine man's motives and the essence of their minds and so cannot interpret their actions. With regard to the people of past time we are in the same position as with dreams to which we have been given no association.

Thus far, Freud might easily have been the father of postmodernism. But was he really? The letter continues:

With reservations such as these, you have approached one of the most remarkable figures in your country's history [Queen Elizabeth I], you have known how to trace back her character [...] you have touched upon her most hidden motives with equal boldness and discretion, and it is very possible that you have succeeded in making a correct reconstruction of what actually occurred (Marcus 2002, 216).

Freud was essentially ambivalent towards biography (he himself wrote *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* in 1910), having once told Carl Jung that it was time for the psychoanalytic movement to 'take hold of biography' (Marcus 2002, 217), and people cannot take hold of an impossibility... In fact, one may even tend to agree not with Freud but rather with the romantic Irish poet W. B. Yeats, who once wrote 'all knowledge is biography', because in the end 'nothing exists but a stream of souls' (France and St Clair 2002, 3).

Yeats might actually serve as the indirect inspiration to other postmodernists who praise the value of biography precisely as a kind of experimental or 'unconventional' field, a 'significant historical genre' that can 'extend the nature of the historical project' (Munslow 2003, 1). Dealing with life writing and authored by a living soul that behaves as 'an impositionalist and presentist historian', biography is thus viewed as nothing shy of a deluxe stage for a self-reflexive and self-conscious approach wishing to achieve 'less a resemblance to, than a narrative substitution of, the past' (Munslow 2003, 2). Through the use of an imposed *form* made out of 'figurative language, emplotment decisions, entailments, arguments, cultural positioning, perception, ideology, gender, race and so on' (Munslow 2003, 2), this kind of postmodernist biography creates a *content* very much imagined, paving the way to mingling biography with experimental autobiography. This is a risky stance that sharply contrasts with the



'conventional' episteme: 'old' biographies re-present a past life as a story waiting to be told, through evidence gathering and ordering (this not precluding, evidently, the historian's literary ability to offer a narrative or indeed a literary discourse to his/her reader); in contrast, the 'unconventional' episteme 'muse and ponder over the stories' (Wood 2009, 215), which, in the end, are mere mirrors of the author's projection and not of the past.

Postmodern biographers praise the genre as a 'highly performative' mode (as opposed to the reconstructed/explicative mode), as 'a natural arena for the unification of subject and object', with the historian (auto)biographer considered a 'participant' that almost performs the history he/she writes (Aurell 2006, 435, 442, 448). Hence, biography is able to make a case for historians to be 'more prominent in the texts they produce' (Hollow 2009, 43), because it is precisely the genre most akin to revealing the postmodernist avowal that 'every history refers to its author as much as its sources', in the way that historical discourse (and in this particular case life writing) is but the 'creation-of-past-as-history-in-the-here-and-now' (Munslow 2003, 4)<sup>6</sup>.

There are many critics of postmodernism and defenders of a reconstructionist-type of biography (or of history in general) who agree with the objections they put forward. In broad epistemological terms, those critics identify with what Gordon Wood termed 'contextual relativism', which is to accept 'the reality of the past and our ability to say something true, however partial, about the past', as opposed to 'radical relativism', which is the postmodernist view that 'calls into question everything that makes historical reconstruction possible' (Wood 2009, 133–4). Wood does not say that postmodernism is not able to write history books. What he denounces is that postmodernism produces 'unhistorical historians', 'present-minded historians' that 'undermine the integrity and the pastness of the past' (Wood 2009, 8–9). By refusing to accept that there once *was* a past, regardless of our self-perception of it, a past that we can recount with some degree of accuracy, discovering a partial truth as an acceptable glimpse of what it really was, postmodernists subvert 'conventional history writing' (Wood 2009, 10, 60, 135). He backs the case for 'traditional epistemology', a modernist approach that still believes we can relate to a real past without anachronistic distortion<sup>7</sup> by means of a storytelling record filled with narrative devices (fact displaying, sequential plotting, interpretative synthesis, even imaginative argument) that do not open up the content to fiction and do not tell us 'more about the historian than [about] the events he/she is presumably recounting' (Wood 2009, 11, 52–3, 226). Gordon Wood states, very critically, that 'if historians began doubting that there was an objective past reality that they were trying to recover and began thinking that what they did was simply make up the past', they would be 'undermining the ground for any historical reconstruction at all' (Wood 2009, 5)<sup>8</sup>.

All such criticism follows Gertrude Himmelfarb's (and others) conservative pathway, with this latter author a staunch and vocal defender of what Beverly Southgate has termed 'pomophobia', the fear of postmodernism (Southgate 2003, 3ff).



Himmelfarb is a very 'conventional' historian who sticks to all the traditional ideas of 'objective evidence, reasoning, coherence, consistency and factuality' (Himmelfarb 1994, 158). The past out there, and back then, evidently existed and, through hard evidence and research, data ordering and the historian's ability to empathically comprehend his/her materials, one can achieve 'a modest, contingent, tentative, incremental, proximate truth' (Himmelfarb 2004, 21). 'Conventional' history, thus, is not positivist since it accepts an inevitable relativism 'rooted in reality' (Himmelfarb 1994, 133). Nevertheless, the historian's narrative cannot be placed 'beyond rationality, objectivity and truth', as a 'social' and 'esthetic' 'construct', a 'standing invitation to *creatio ex-nihilo*', like 'the model of a pointilliste painting composed entirely of unconnected dots' (Himmelfarb 1994, 151, 2004, 15, 18, 21–2). Himmelfarb denounces the perils of postmodernism given both 'the absolute disjunction between the past and the work about the past' it entices and 'the self-referential character of words and their dissociation from any presumed reality' it is presented in (Himmelfarb 2004, 16, 20). Instead of a 'fictionalized history', or a 'dehistorized history', she rather seeks only a 'history-as-record' (Himmelfarb 2004, 17, 23), a reconstruction of the past that does not preclude the use of intuition and skills of imagination but tamed by reason and empirical sources. 'Conventional' historians are narrativists as much as postmodernists, even while their narrative is 'traditionally' grounded, aiming at 'verisimilitude' in *content* and taking the *form* of an 'orderly structure of discourse that is presumed to correspond, at least in some measure, to the reality of the past, and thus communicates, again in some measure, a truth about the past' (Himmelfarb 2004, 19; 1994, 139).

This is how historical biography should be considered and practiced by historians. The present article does not aim to widen the gap between 'conventional' or 'reconstructionist' historians and their 'unconventional' or postmodern peers. However, I certainly do follow the 'conventional' mode, calling for the affiliation of historical biography in a 'reconstructionist' based epistemology, such as has been sketched out above. Controversy between the two epistemologies is a given and, if anything, should invite historians to think more attentively about just what kind of work each offers his/her peers and the public in general. Some bridges of reconciliation may prove possible as both sides of the divide agree that narrative plays a pivotal role in showcasing historical discourse, and both agree biography is now far from the derogatory status it once held. However, decisive differences do still set them apart: simply put, 'conventional', modernist or traditionalist historians prioritize content over form – 'no evidence; no history', in the terms of John Vincent (1995, 1) – producing books 'heavily footnoted and based on intensive archival research' (Wood 2009, 97), while postmodernists prioritize form (and a very author-printed, free and performative approach) over content, in a sort of a McLuhan-like understanding that 'the method is the message' (Himmelfarb 2004, 15).

The case for biography laid out in this article clearly inscribes itself into the first of the two ideological positions as sketched by Alun Munslow:

The modernist claim [the conventional] is that ‘proper’ history’s boundaries are those of the limits of its procedures for objectively understanding the evidence and creating truthful interpretations, and the postmodern counter-claim is that the frontiers of history can be expanded by moving beyond the empirical to fully explore the argument that it is the culturally situated historian who, in his/her composition of the history text, is producing an invented narrative form of knowledge (Munslow 2006, 2).

For a ‘conventional’ historian, such as myself, postmodernism risks emptying every historical biography of the past life it is supposed to present by freely creating a life that may or may not mirror the one dead figure selected as a case study. It is neither the narrative nor the literary *form* that is at stake, but the fact that, as all ‘pomo’ critics recall, there is no past in the *content* of that (pseudo) history.

#### 4. From ‘granite’ fact to ‘rainbow’ imagination: the content and form of ‘conventional’ biography

Regardless of any argument against biography, its widespread acceptance and general popularity among writers and readers would nowadays seem undeniable. Embedded, as it should be, in an epistemology that (re)considers history as a fact-based path of knowledge through humanity and the writing of history as a narrative-shaped discourse that talks about real people, their ideas and actions, ‘conventional’ historical biography is a heterogeneous catch-all genre, one whose content, form, nature and value never cease to challenge the abilities of historians.

How do we write – how should we write – a past life? Somerset Maugham used to answer this by playfully saying that ‘there are three rules to write biographies, but fortunately no one knows what they are’ (Holmes 2002, 7)<sup>9</sup>. It cannot be – and the *Annales* were right about this – a simple chronicle of facts, devoid of dramatic depth and interpretation, merely resembling old hagiographies or formal obituaries. The value and utility of the genre derive from an understanding of its content and form that lead every practitioner of biography back to rediscovering such classic authors as Lytton Strachey or Virginia Woolf, and their various disciples over the course of time through to the contemporary era.

In 1918, writing *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey defined biography as ‘the most delicate and human form of all the branches of the art of writing’ (Strachey [1918] 1981, 10). This very famous definition implied that the construction of any biography was two-fold: through hard empirical research and source reading, basic materials would be gathered and ordered; then, the narrative talent of the biographer would come in to endow a good working structure and an excellence of style akin to literary art. A biographer should combine the facts of the past reality through a comprehensively empathic and humane understanding, and tell the reader a readable story, containing as many narrative literary devices as

deployed in novels and romances, even though such serve – and this is crucial – different purposes.

Virginia Woolf theorized this problem, starting from the initial claim that biographies were different from simple ‘effigies’, ‘that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin’ (Woolf [1939] 1942, 121). For her, writing past lives was a sort of ultimate test for all historians, both depending on true, empirical facts and striving to resurrect and portray a personality:

On the one hand there is truth; on the other, there is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like tangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one (Woolf [1927] 1976, 207).

Thus, on the one hand, there is ‘the substance of fact’, the fixed and unchangeable reality of the past, and on the other, ‘the freedom of fiction’ (Woolf [1927] 1976, 213), a motto the historian can make his/her own only when reading it as the opportunity to express whatever literary talent he or she can muster to combine materials into a persuasive narrative. The ‘art’, the ‘fancy’ of the biographer resides in the ability to combine and render coherence to ‘granite’ and ‘rainbow’, to be a scholar and a storyteller, a harsh judge and a tender friend, bearing in mind that ‘meaning is the poetry of history, evidence the prose’ (Vincent 1995, 21).

Biography should be understood and accepted by ‘conventional’ historians as an elaborate combination of history and (some) literature, of fact and controlled ‘fiction’. The key is to understand the exact meaning of the latter. Every historical narrative carries a certain dose of imagination, intuition and empathic comprehension; but as literary and readable as it should be, this does not allow for the blurring of fact and pure fiction. Historians may never use ‘fiction’ as a green light for falsehood, but only as a device for filling in the blanks; it is not a question of freely inventing but of thickening the story to be told, while guaranteeing that the accuracy, factuality and reasonability of it is neither tainted nor destroyed. The validity of this ‘regulative fiction’, as Gordon Wood defines it (2009, 59), never frees itself from fidelity to the past as we can reach it through our sources and as it unfolds in its own time and own place. Virginia Woolf had already envisaged the dividing line ‘in the very stuff in which they are made’: one, history, ‘with the help of facts’, the other, fiction, romance, novel, literature, ‘without any restrictions save those that the artist, for reasons that seem good to him, chooses to obey’ (Woolf [1939] 1942, 120). That is precisely why Hayden White could define the resemblances existing between artistic history (biography included) and fiction with an irreplaceable distinction still remaining, based ‘first and foremost’ on ‘their content, rather than their form’:

The content of historical stories is real events, events that really happened, rather than imaginary events, events invented by the narrator [...] The story told in the narrative [say, in the biography] is a mimesis of the story lived in some region of historical reality, and in so far as it is an accurate imitation, it is to be considered a truthful account thereof (White 1990, 27)<sup>10</sup>.

It is a tough equilibrium indeed<sup>11</sup> and in its carefully calibrated maintenance, after all, resides the successful nature of good historical biographies: a mixture of hard empiricism and icy appraisal of materials with a warm human understanding of the whole, finally presented in a comprehensive and empathic literary form, as a non-fiction narrative or a true romance, where the author can prove the facts he/she writes and plausibly explain that deduced to compose the full living (and ideally cinematic) picture of his/her hero<sup>12</sup>.

The best biography ought to be solid in research, judicious but imaginative in interpretation, artistic in the way it presents – *revealing* and not endorsing any ‘creative license’ to *invent* (Himmerfarb 2004, 24) – a rich plot before the readers’ eyes, and literary in its final narrative form. It represents a worthy academic work aimed at the greater public, a resurrection of one individual life and also a gateway to a larger understanding of one given frame of time and space with its prevailing social, cultural, moral, political, institutional and economic realities. ‘Anchored in the truth of fact, though seeking the truth of interpretation’, is how Paul Murray Kendall sums up such endeavors (Kendall 1993, 194). This may not prove the hardest form of history but it surely results in one that calls for a wide set of hermeneutic skills, exercised only after lengthy empirical research, and all this breathing life into the content and a form that stands out as one of the richest means of studying and learning about the past.

## 5. A ‘room’ with a view: the uses and value of ‘conventional’ historical biography

When Thomas Carlyle wrote, in the nineteenth century, that ‘history is the essence of innumerable biographies’ (Partington 1997, 90), all the while Ralph Waldo Emerson was proclaiming that ‘there is properly no history, only biography’ (Partington 1997, 136), both were anticipating the idea that historical biography might prove one of the most humane, comprehensive, natural and immediate records of past times. Should one accept that the historical process is the sum of human actions, the best way to understand them is precisely by studying the actors behind those actions.

Hence, we arrive at the value and utility of biography as a privileged instrument for observing the unfolding of human action in the past. Should history no longer be an abstract social science, should it be ‘past politics’ and human-centered, should its natural form of writing be a narrative, biography should be posited as one of the most complete and complex exercises within the scope of the historian’s craft. Every figure selected for study becomes a sort of a singular-made-universal, thus meaning that many of the different aspects and shades of its respective time can be perceived and apprehended through the approach made. This represents one of biography’s core advantages: a single life becomes a focal point, an open window, a bird’s eye view platform to fully observe a past time, space and society. One might even say the empirical work is thus simplified by allowing the historian seeking a global picture of a particular

past to obtain the key pieces to the 'puzzle' through the eyes, the actions, the ideas, the successes and misfortunes of the one life he/she chose to focus on (Paulin 2002, 105). For the biographer, this object of study provides the lenses, the mirror, the mediator, and the guiding thread, connected to the politics, society, culture, morality and the economy of some past time.

It is indeed thus so. Régine Pernoud, the world's leading biographer of Joan of Arc, once explained that her heroine had always been the gateway – and a very special one – to reconstructing the world of events and ideas that shaped medieval politics, society and culture. Only when 'humanised' through Joan of Arc had the Middle Ages become fully understandable to the twentieth-century reader's worldview (Pernoud and Tulard 1997, 47)<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, given everyone in France (and elsewhere) knows of Joan of Arc, the added value of biography is that it proves the perfect genre for historical diffusion precisely because it escapes free of hermetic scientific language and allows for a colorful narrative, close to our own common sense and perceptions, and hence widely understandable even to those who are not professional historians (Pernoud and Tulard 1997, 58)<sup>14</sup>.

What 'conventional' biography thus provides – and something only biography can do as it re-presents us with almost all aspects of a past society – is a truth-based global vision of a slice of time and space. This is exactly what any reader of, say, Jean Tulard's *Napoleon* or Alfred Duff Cooper's *Talleyrand* gets on revolutionary France, the reader of Robert Blakes' *Disraeli* or A. J. P. Taylor's *Bismarck* on the politics, society and diplomacy of Victorian England and the II Reich, or a reader of Ian Kershaw's *Hitler* or Simon Montefiore's *Stalin* on life in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. This proves so much the case as, in addition, we build this account on the foundations of a seal of authenticity, as our respective medium to that past is an individual who actually lived it and directly witnessed what we now recall as a direct maker of the history unfurling over the course of his/her single life (Bonifácio 2007, 245). By inserting (i.e. setting in context) a past life within the framework of the respective prevailing values, cultural categories and socio-political structures, we enhance our capacity to perceive and grasp his or her world. For those who consider that the very purpose of history is obtaining this global, thick and richly-informed vision of a past world, what better way to do it than through the stories of those actually *there*, especially those in commanding positions? Hence the reason Hannah Arendt thought biography, 'English-styled, is one of the most admirable genres of historiography [...] it tells us, in a livelier way, more about a historical period than any other history book, except a few notable ones'. Why? Because 'the colorless light of historical time' is 'refracted' by the 'great character' (the hero) with his/her evidence-based traces being the medium for our access to the past, in a way that in 'the resulting spectrum, we achieve a perfect unity of life and world' (Bonifácio 2007, 242)<sup>15</sup>.

From this perspective, we may trace a second beneficial dimension to biography. Back in 1750, Samuel Johnson wrote passionately about the genre's worthiness when claiming

there is such an uniformity in the state of man [...] that] we are all [i.e. past and present, the object of biography and the biographer] prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure (Holmes 2002, 10–11).

What this means is that, aside from its various intrinsic merits, biography may even open up insights into just what is actually common in human nature and in human behavior. 'Common' does not mean immutable and does not imply anachronism as many critics suppose. It means that the same human emotions and reactions we face in our temporal context, others, in the past, faced in their own temporal contexts. Whilst the historical reference framework is different, the emotions, reactions or behaviours are not, and that is what, as we have seen, makes the very stuff providing historical biography with the surplus of art without which the form falls short of the content it seeks to resurrect. As Richard Holmes interprets Samuel Johnson, biography, for writers and readers alike, 'may never teach us how to behave, how to self-help, how to find role models. But it might teach us simply how to understand other people better. And hence, through the others, ourselves. This, too, is part of the potential humanist discipline' (Holmes 2002, 17)<sup>16</sup>.

There is still a third use that can be extracted from historical biography. When the Classical authors believed history to be *magistra vitae*, they were referring to the various teachings that could be obtained from the pages of any history book in order to be a better citizen of the *Polis*, a free and conscious member. Since, in a non-Marxist view, individuals do act and choose according to their own will (despite, of course, some collective pre-conditioning that always exists) and their own responsibility, the recording of individuals and their actions through biography leverages a lesson on the ability of men to create and live their freedom, be it social, political, intellectual or artistic. By refusing any teleological determinism, life-writing is always entangled with an ethical discourse, offering the biographer a chance to produce a sort of moral judgment parallel to that offered by novels or any other form of fiction writing (Bonifácio 2007, 246)<sup>17</sup>.

This is a very delicate topic that deserves clarification. There is no such thing as an aseptic, absolute objective and scientific history. 'Conventional' historians have long since departed from absolutist positivism, though they naturally refute the extreme opposite of total subjectivity. All history must be placed halfway as it is made out of 'fallible evidence as interpreted by fallible people' (Vincent 1995, 1). However, all history, given it talks about mankind, calls for ethical appreciation, and a good biographer cannot and will not avoid that. After sound empirical research, after exercising rational comprehension and empathic imagination on all the material, the biographer has earned the right and the obligation to convey to the reader a moral view on the object of biography and his/her own world, thus

contributing to the ‘humanization of morale’ (Martins 2004, 400). It correspondingly follows that, in doing so, the biographer is also issuing an informed opinion about the world he/she lives in; hence, history books carry some mark of their authors’ personality (Bonifácio 2007, 246). Then again, in a case for ‘conventional’ biographies, this ‘some mark’ means the past motivates evaluations about the present, not that the historian’s present concerns and agendas are to be imposed on the narrative, thereby creating, through *form*, a fictitious *content*.

Skeptics might ask how we can judge without anachronism, since our present day moral values are not necessarily equal to those of times past. The biographer’s moral judgment is valid because it is based on something both past and present, regardless of particular spaces or temporal frameworks; the all too human distinction between good and evil. The definition of it may have varied in practical expression but the difference has been a constant since Classical times (Martins 2004, 407). Therefore, this establishes the continuous moral ‘law’ through which we can judge in history, even, or especially, when tackling its darker episodes (Nazi Germany, for example), when that distinction temporarily disappeared. Lucy Davidowitz, a Holocaust historian, used to denounce structuralism for eliminating ‘the exercise of free will in human society’, as this ‘deprived men and women of their capacity to choose between good and evil’ (Himmelfarb 1994, 44). Biography is thus an excellent way of overcoming this default, producing a kind of history that contextualizes past moral choices (or the lack of them) in their own timeframe and not by an anachronistic present-dated pre-judgment, avoiding a muted history that too often seems to ‘mitigate evil and belittle greatness’ (Himmelfarb 1994, 18). As Richard Holmes defends, while celebrating ‘a common human nature’, biography’s ‘profound humanist ambition’ ends up ‘insisting on common humanity’, that is, ‘the universal possibilities of good or ill, wherever they are to be found’ (Holmes 2002, 10–11).

What purpose does this serve nowadays? In a postmodern world where moral relativism carries the risk of shattering collective social bonds and engendering civic anomie in many people, history, and particularly historical biography, generates a kind of long, truth-anchored and human-lively narrative, able to foster the reader’s awareness of the social and political life, debating his/her *Polis*, choosing, acting, discerning between right and wrong, exercising freedom and civic action just as others, in the past, did in their own lives. ‘Our times are cynical’, David Ellis considers, ‘yet biographies can sometimes offer an inspiring example of how life ought to be lived’ (2002, 1). Within the all too fragmented and liquid present day societies and intellectual structures, the writing of past lives becomes a sort of necessary connecting thread, providing human sense and moral lights to map regular lives and model inspirations to inform future options. This explains why Drew Faust wrote that historical biographies convey ‘a sense of how people are shaped and constrained by the world into which they are born, of how their choices are limited by the “taken for grantedness” of their social universe’ (Wood 2009, 11). Recognizing that the past did condition our



collective, if not personal, evolution does not wash away everyone's present-day responsibility; if anything, this reinforces it.

Western civilization has always been very biographical. Every historical period, political regime, literary and artistic culture, scientific or technological breakthrough had its authors and heroes. Individual lives, mutually interconnected, taming nature, leading political and economic structures, pushing forward culture, art, science and thought, acting and choosing out of more or less freedom, were the true power engines of history. And biography, as handed down from Greek and Roman authors, as the written narrative of those endeavors, has played a key role in the very shaping of Western memory. Despite attacks and periodical condemnations, the genre has fed European self-identity from Classical times onwards. For all the aforementioned reasons, built on a 'conventional' or 'reconstructionist' episteme that values any important past life as a human experience worth being rediscovered and re-presented (through the gathering of empirical data and the historian's capacity to render it in literary narrative), there is every reason to go on thinking it will continue to do so in the coming future.

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### Notes

1. According to Isaiah Berlin, what is specific to the Humanities – in contrast to the realm of the Natural Sciences – is the particular study of 'motivations, goals, hopes, fears, loves and hates, envies, ambitions, perspectives and visions of reality', that is, everything that once drove our ancestors in past eras (Berlin [1979] 1999, 116). Picking up this difference, Hayden White states that history studies 'the world of human actions', a world which is 'both mysterious and real, that is, is mysteriously real (which is not the same thing as saying it is a real mystery)' (White 1990, 54).
2. On postmodernist history, see for example Himmelfarb (1994, 131–161; 2004, 15–30), for a critical opposition, and Southgate 2003 for a defense of it.
3. Alun Munslow echoes the strong influence Hayden White (1990) exerted on postmodernism through the 'linguistic turn' expression. For White, history should be 'a literary endeavor', with 'emplotment, argument and ideology' as the *content* of the (narrative) *form*, and the latter prioritized over the former (Munslow 2006, 115). In the phrasing of another author, Hayden White, closely followed by Gabrielle Spiegel (1997), exhorted practitioners to understand 'historical texts as literary artifacts', stressing 'the form rather than the content, after centuries of domination of the second' (Aurell 2006, 434, 441).
4. See also Hollow (2009, 48–50): all postmodern history books – he says – tend to be 'motivated expressions of empowerment for the self or other oppressed groups', thus resembling 'autobiographical performances' destined to 'do' something rather than just to 'be' something.
5. On postmodernism and biography see, for example, Rhiel and Suchoff (1996, 175–209).

6. In his rethinking of biography, Alun Munslow even concludes that new postmodern approaches can revolutionize the historical landscape 'by throwing a plateful of discourse if not a pot full of post-structuralist theory into the face of the realist establishment' (Munslow 2003, 4).
7. Gordon Wood correctly concedes that 'some degree of anachronism is inevitable in all history writing. But any good historian needs constantly to worry about the problem of injecting his or her contemporary consciousness back into the past' (Wood 2009, 39).
8. Gordon Wood even adds that 'historians who cut loose from this faith do so at the peril of their discipline' (2009, 60). Other critics of postmodernism would say that without empiricist content, implying the recognition of an external past, 'no history book could ever be written' (Bonifácio 2007, 248); not because the past *is* history but because the *content* of the past has to be the inner substance of all *forms* of history writing. See, on the perils of postmodernism to the very existence of a historical discipline as seen from a 'conventional' point of view, Himmelfarb (1994, 160–1; 2004, 16–17).
9. See also, on the inexistence of any such rules, Orioux (1986) or more recently Lee (2009, 122–140).
10. In the phrasing of Leon Edel, 'in the writing of biography the material is predetermined: the imagination functions only as it plays over this material and shapes it. The art lies in the telling [...] the fancy of the biographer – we repeat – resides in the *art* of narration, not in the *substance* of the story. The substance exists *before* the narration begins' (my italics). Hence, the exercise of imagination is always an *ex post factum* (or a *posteriori*) mental operation and this does not allow for any 'imagining' of the materials (Edel 1984, 5, 15; 32–3).
11. 'The biographer needs imagination, I understand him to say, but may only exercise it within tight, self-imposed, limits which have to be honestly constructed [...] from a critical appreciation of the nature of the evidence' (St Clair 2002, 234).
12. Documented facts and literary devices are the two intertwined levels that all historical biography must have, for the reason John Vincent claims: 'history is about evidence. It is also about other things: hunches, imagination, interpretation, guesswork. First and foremost, though, comes evidence' (Vincent 1995, 1).
13. Régine Pernoud adds: 'Biography is, for me, the most passionate and meaningful record historical research can offer. History talks about people, even more than about events. When I study events, I think of the people who experienced them [...] What I consider most interesting in a biography, in a man or a woman's destiny, is the relation between their free choice and the circumstances around them [...] Mankind's important moments were those when a big character took hold of the circumstances [...] Biography offers a set of pictures through which history allows us to grasp something of life's mystery, of freedom and of choice' (Pernoud and Tulard 1997, 141–2).
14. David Ellis stresses that 'at a time when the triumph of "Theory" in the universities has widened the gap between the academic world and the rest of society, biographies remain one of the few remaining points of interaction' (Ellis 2002, 1).
15. Hannah Arendt stated this in 1966, while writing about Rosa Luxemburg. However, Virginia Woolf had already written something similar, when advocating how biography enlarged one's scope for understanding the past 'by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners', and bringing out, from all the 'diversity' gathered, 'not a riot of confusion but a richer unity' (Woolf [1939] 1942, 125).
16. The author adds: 'And this in turn could reflect on the way that we are all, continuously, reinterpreting our own lives with story-based notions such as "success", "failure", "chance", "opportunity" and "achievement". So biography

could have a moral role'. In another of his works, Holmes considers that 'biography is a human exchange', simply 'a handshake across time' (Holmes 2001, 198).

17. As John Vincent has written, 'indeed, the omission of moral comment would in itself be a distortion [...] Thus one must – not can but must – make interesting moral comments about past people, *evidence permitting*' (Vincent 1995, 29, my italics).

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