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## ON WHAT REMAINS OF A LIFE *Of Biography Writing and Its Significance*

### Abstract

Biography writing seems a response to a central question of philosophical anthropology: What does people do when they are unable to escape their finitude? They speak of their life or the life of others, trying to linger in human memory. Speaking of a life is joined to a question of identity and self-recognition. Biography writing covers a vast territory, stretching across literature, film, and scholarly studies, mainly historical and social. It has undergone historical shifts, gaining a new status in the modern world. These deliberations orbit around two questions: the ties between literature and biography writing and the history and ways of presenting a human life. A person, who will always be more what happens to them than what they do, remains a *homo absconditus* in biography writing. Yet tales of human fates allow us to better understand the human condition.

**Keywords:** Autobiography; Biography; Identity; Literature; Narrative

The following article looks at the ties between literature, biography writing, and philosophical anthropology. Alongside the objectivist, biological accounts of human life grow biographical approaches, from the same trunk, as countless as leaves. Grounded in history, depending on the conventions of the epoch, they can express provisional truths or describe a concept of life and its meanderings. Together they create a core of culture and identity. Biography writing is modelled on literature, myth, and historical chronicles, constructing stories and giving meaning to life, which otherwise, without the intermediary of narrative, would be unnamed. Delving into individual and cultural memory, fictionalization, constructivism, attempts to salvage and immortalize lives are also an example of substitute actions, without which precious little remains of a person. A person can *do* something instead of something else, as Hans Blumenberg wrote in *Anthropologische Annäherung an die Aktualität der Rhetorik*, thus bringing about the substitution and metaphorization of what occurs.

I would ask any thinking person to show me what remains of life, Charles Baudelaire provocatively said. This put the Horatian hope of *non omnis moriar* to a modern test. Little remains of conscious and physical life, Propertius noted in turn, observing: the dismal gates of death will not open at anyone's behest, people have long sought substitute lives. The distillates of life, obtained from striving for posthumous fame, eternal life, immortality in portraits, photographs, in films, and above all, through stories, are endlessly popular. The hope etched into Joseph Brodsky's gravestone, hailing from Propertius' elegy, *Letum non omnia finit*, is undercut with the next line: *lurida evictos effugit umbra rogos*. «Death does not end all, pale shadows waft from the pyres' flames»<sup>1</sup>. The present remarks address those 'pale shadows' (*lurida umbra*) of biographies and autobi-

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1 Propertius, *Elegie IV*, 7.

ographies, as well as the related memoir genre and literary forms of documenting lives<sup>2</sup>. The growing collection of genres detailing the travails of life, and the modern triumph of the biography and autobiography, gives one pause for thought. Whence the universal need to speak of human fortunes? Does it come from a desire for ‘comparative studies’? Is biography writing solely concerned with determining connections, relationships, and the singularity of lives? Undoubtedly, biographies serve to learn about the past hidden in human fates, and *vice versa*. Can they have philosophical relevance?

The case of Mr. Thompson, suffering from ‘Korsakov’s psychosis’, allowed Oliver Sacks to make a diagnostic digression. This concerned narratives that create an identity, calling attention to the function of the stories we tell about ourselves. Along the way, he casts light on this issue’s anthropological foundations. The narrative roots of identity had been already described by philosophers, such as Paul Ricœur in *Soi-même comme un autre*.<sup>3</sup> Yet Sacks’s remarks point more clearly to the anthropological core of the problem. A patient suffering from this illness, writes Sacks, *nota bene* the author of an autobiography called *On the Move: A Life*, is «continually creating a world and self to replace what was continually being forgotten and lost»<sup>4</sup>. The illness manifests itself in memory disorders, a sense of emptiness that the patient fills with pseudo-events. The patient created a pseudo-world populated with pseudo-people, phantoms<sup>5</sup>, «unable to maintain a genuine narrative or continuity, unable to maintain a genuine inner world», and so he fantasised<sup>6</sup>.

In explaining the need to keep stories to salvage the inner world, and where they were missing, to produce substitute versions of himself, Sacks identified comprehending one’s own life with its telling. He was not the first to join storytelling and identity, but his observations resound with an insurmountable need to create and act in the web of history, which entangles the objective and social life from the outside, but also narratively from within<sup>7</sup>. We understand and experience ourselves through our stories, Sacks notes, as: «we have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative». Its «continuity, [its] senses, is our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives, a “narrative”, and that this narrative *is* us, our identities. [...] Each of us *is* a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, though, and in us – through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as

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2 The present article is an altered version of a piece titled: *On the Distillations of Life*. It is devoted to the philosophical significance of modern varieties of biography writing. It is part of a larger project, *Homo mentiens*, which explores the anthropological conditions of cognitive distortion.

3 P. RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by K. Blamey, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1995. The anthropological significance of the story has also been stressed by Arnold Gehlen in *Der Mensch* (1940), and more recently: A. GUALANDI, *L’occhio, la mano e la voce. Una teoria comunicativa dell’esperienza umana*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2013, pp. 179-80.

4 O. SACKS, *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, Harper & Row, New York 1987, p. 98.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 Schapp has written on webs of histories in W. SCHAPP, *In Geschichten verstrickt*, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 2012.

narratives – we are each of us unique»<sup>8</sup>. Explaining the causes behind Mr. Thompson’s ill imaginings, Sacks points to the narrative construct of human identity. As he states, «a man needs such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self»<sup>9</sup>.

This description of illness introduces the issue of the genesis of autobiography, the ties between narrative and identity. Identity appears earlier, on its own, before the story, along with the appearance of the body and emotions. Yet through and during the telling, it is strengthened, and then developed, in part, by figurative means. Manfred Sommer has called attention to the unifying function of stories that join narrating oneself and narrating something else, in which there appears something about oneself. In an extended process «in time, in which we became what we are, the “figure of the story” slowly took shape»<sup>10</sup>.

Identity is elaborated and partly managed through these stories. It comes not only from the content of what one says, but also the way «in which one narratively organises and presents what one says»<sup>11</sup>. The process of building an identity through stories becomes a ‘receptive formula’ that defines how experiences are internalised. «The more clearly the “figure of the story” takes shape, the more it sorts, forms, and structures “fresh experiences”»<sup>12</sup>. The very «chance to tell a story is something that forms our experiences in advance»<sup>13</sup>. Without self-forming stories, a kind of *Selbst-Bildung*, lending significance to the course of life, there could be no navigating metaphor to capture life *en bloc*: the road of life, the walk of life, an expedition, a journey, life conceived as a sea voyage<sup>14</sup>. An image of oneself or another person created by biographical tales is, besides its references to events, created through the imagination. It draws from the artistic schemata in language, from art and pictures that mould the imagination, as we see in the impact of cinema. It mimetically alludes to artistic, social, and historically grounded ways of seeing, to the history of how humanity is seen, with all its revolutionary transformations. From an anthropological perspective, the biography branches off in at least two directions: anthropo-aesthetics and historical anthropology<sup>15</sup>. It may be worth merging the two to chart a separate path: anthropo-biography studies.

Possessing an identity is tied to how the consciousness operates when it is aware of itself and its surroundings<sup>16</sup>. Apart from a ‘core self’, responsible for feeling a here and now, also found in other creatures, Antonio Damasio singles out an extended, or autobiographical consciousness<sup>17</sup>, corresponding to a sense of individuality and identity. The

8 SACKS, *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, cit., p. 98.

9 *Ibid.*

10 M. SOMMER, *Sammeln. Ein philosophischer Versuch*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 1999, pp. 301-2.

11 *Ivi*, p. 322 [302].

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

14 H. BLUMENBERG, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer. Paradigmen einer Daseinsmetaphor*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 1979, pp. 13-14.

15 A. STEFFENS, *Selbst-Bildung: Die Perspektive der Anthropolästhetik*, Athena, Oberhausen 2012.

16 A. DAMASIO, *Self Comes to Mind*, Random House, New York 2011.

17 *Ibid.*

autobiographical self that controls identity extends into the past and the future, incorporating content both real and imaginary<sup>18</sup>. While speech is not required for the core self, biographical knowledge is substantially based on it. In telling of himself or about himself through other subjects, William Butler Yeats claimed, «a poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy»<sup>19</sup>; this is one way of giving life significance. Biographical stories differ from autobiographical ones. Biographies tell one version of a life, there are as many interpretations as there are biographers, while autobiographies generally keep to one story. Only the story structures what was often previously provisional and accidental, it chooses, assembles, and interprets life's events. Biography writing is thus also a description of the history of knowing oneself and knowing others.

Writing guidebooks to the kingdom of the dead, or, in the autobiography, to lost time, is an important source for comprehending cultures, learning about epochs and understanding history<sup>20</sup>. We are focusing on the modern rendition of biography writing, practised since the nineteenth century. Things were different with the ancient biographies, emerging from myths, and the medieval biographies that branched off from them, often detailing the lives of rulers and saints. They followed only a few, select models, generally positive or negative. Carlo Ginzburg describes the modern process of overlap between historical chronicles, biographies and literature inspired by biographies, which led toward the modern emancipation of the genre<sup>21</sup>. Before biographies strove to wrap their kindly, reminiscing arms around a growing range of people, it was an elite form, drawing from prose and reserved for the elect. John Ruskin's famous metaphor says that «great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts: the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art»<sup>22</sup>. He continued: «not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others; but of the three, the only quite trustworthy one is the last», thus stressing, alongside the significance of art, the modern significance of autobiography. Biographical and autobiographical subjects created models that also salvaged the cultural memory of earlier epochs. Yet the modern rendition of the genre seems an expression of self-determination and self-confirmation, as we see in the autobiographical philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>23</sup>. Before that, a foundation of *Die drei Potenzen* (culture, politics and religion, to hold to Jacob Burckhardt's division) became tales of the lives of rulers, artists, and the founders and propagators of religions. After all, it was the interpretations of four canonical and numerous non-canonical biographies of Jesus of Nazareth, the biographical *Stories of the Apostles*, the autobiographical *Confessions* and stories like it that shaped a vision of Christianity. No less of a role was played by the heroic tales of Ulysses' and other epic heroes' adventures, and their reception. Similarly, reading Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Em-*

18 *Ibid.*

19 W. B. YEATS, *Preface*, in Id., *Essays and Introductions*, Macmillan, New York 1961.

20 A. BATTISTINI, *Lo specchio di Dedalo: autobiografia e biografia*, il Mulino, Bologna 1990.

21 C. GINZBURG, *Il filo e le tracce. Vero, falso, finto*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2015, pp. 97-98.

22 J. RUSKIN, *St. Mark's Rest: The History of Venice*, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken 1877.

23 F. NIETZSCHE, *Ecce Homo*, Penguin, London 2004.

inent *Philosophers*, and numerous stories of ‘famous statesmen’ (and less often, women) have created our image of the past. Characteristically, it was only in the nineteenth century that women’s biography writing developed, with the development of biography writing as such; one such breakthrough was the autobiography of George Sand<sup>24</sup>.

Among the numerous issues in biographical narrative, we ought to point out the seams, the way the stories are tied to the events. Not everything can be told; silence, madness, violence, death are only a few ‘moments of human existence’ that are hard to put into words. Sacks’s notion of the coherence between life and the tale, which falls apart during illness, seems not to hold. (Auto)biographical tales inevitably bump up against ‘narratological problems of factual narrative’<sup>25</sup>, in other words, the differences between factual and fictional narrative and the difficulties in pointing them out.

Speaking of a chosen ‘life’, the narrator can, and often does, apply a range of formal strategies. They can use innovative digressions, camouflage or stress authorship, bring in free commentaries and digressions, often not knowing how events ran their course, despite detailed studies. The biographer may deceive, may make mistakes, despite their efforts to cleave close to events, to so-called ‘facts’. Biographical tales, like autobiography, allow us to distort the course of events, to bend or transform another person’s fate, or our own. Not as with people touched by Korsakov’s psychosis, but creatively.

A portrayal of the truth about a person who resides in the reader’s memory was the aim of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s work. The beginning of his *Confessions* announces a practically anthropological approach to the study of human nature: «I am forming an undertaking which has no precedent, and the execution of which will have no imitator whatsoever. I wish to show my fellows a man in all the truth of nature; and this man will be myself. Myself alone. I feel my heart and I know men. I am not made like any of the ones I have seen; I dare to believe that I am not made like any that exist»<sup>26</sup>. In establishing a model for the modern autobiography, Rousseau was mistaken in terms of his emulators delving into the ‘truth of nature’. At any rate, he even perceived himself differently in his later writings, and changed the poetics of his autobiographical tale<sup>27</sup>. In the modern world, portraying the ‘whole truth’ and one’s dissimilarity to others has become a popular hobby, and sometimes, a profession. «I have shown myself as I was, contemptible and low when I was so, good, generous, and sublime when I was so; I have unveiled my interior as Thou hast seen it Thyself, Eternal Being»<sup>28</sup>. Rousseau’s submission to judgement – be it divine or human – was also a kind of judgement of the world and a self-adjudication. Attempts to judge oneself or the protagonists of a biography are part of the game. A rhetoric of sincerity, against Rousseau’s intentions, unmasking one-

24 M. GAMMAITONI, *Storie di vita di artiste europee*, CLEUP, Padova 2013, pp. 117-18.

25 M. FLUDERNIK, *Narratologische Probleme des faktualen Erzählens*, in M. Fludernik, N. Falkenhayner, J. Steiner (eds.), *Faktuales und fiktionales Erzählen: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, 1. Aufl, Ergon, Würzburg 2015, pp. 115-137.

26 J. J. ROUSSEAU, *Confessions*, trans. by Ch. Kelly, Dartmouth College Press, Lebanon 1956, p. 5.

27 Id., *Rousseau juge de Jean Jacques. Dialogues*, in Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, Pléiade, vol. 1, Gallimard, Paris 1964.

28 Id., *Confessions*, cit., p. 5.

self and others, has now become a popular sport in the press. Incidentally, written diaries are increasingly supplanted by ‘picture journals’. Photographs ‘posted’ on social media also serve as autobiographies. Visualised biographies have their own poetics and rhetoric. After all, self-portraits have also served as a kind of autobiography<sup>29</sup>. At present, ‘selfies’ serve to leave behind biographical traces, replacing words that distort events. As Maria Stepanova contends in her notes ‘on the impossibility of memory’: «Photography or even drawing are apprehended as reality, a living trace thereof; a text is therefore regarded as an inaccurate interpretation of events one was not around to witness»<sup>30</sup>. Her story undermines convictions of both the infallibility of memory and the testimony of photographs. A similarly ephemeral sense of pictures and photographs is found in the novels and stories of Winfried Georg Sebald, to whom we will return<sup>31</sup>.

The quadrangle that is a biological life, a physical presence in a surroundings and a historical context, telling of the life of the author, the reader, or the viewer, and, as an intermediary, the printed book, film, or photograph, creates a network of relationships with plenty of large windows. These are created through memory, ways of narrating, and the reception process, yet at the core lies the problem of the difference between words and things, language and physical life. The loose ties between the real course of life and its textual distillation is filled by imagination and narrative. Through evocative stylistic and compositional techniques we may get the impression that the story converges with the actual flow of life. After its metamorphosis into a story, it lives a different life, incorporeal, free of many limitations, it moves in the current of its reception. Life captured in a tale, released from the prison of the body, lives a separate existence. It need no longer proceed in a linear fashion; in a story, chronological planes can overlap and intersect.

A human life is not a text, yet biography, and her elder sister, autobiography, can transform it into a text to create an image of a person. Or one of many. Thus, what remains of life, its ‘pale shadows’, distilled into a story, becomes more lasting. Through this transmutation, a life takes on a new dimension, a new durability and form. This *trompe l’oeil* means that what no longer exists, the events of a life, turn into a story to be remembered and reflected upon. This perspective can give depth to a life, assess it or bestow meaning upon it, correct it, or uncover a destiny. It may cover the main events or make the heart of the tale from seemingly trivial incidents. A biography can form a person, or even create them. The condensing power of a narrative grasp of a life, written on a scroll, in a book, presented on stage or in a film, is one of the most creative ways of preserving an existence. This concerns not just human existence; there are numerous biographies of animals, gods and heroes. Curzio Malaparte’s tale of a dog named Febo is no less compelling than the life of Apollodorus of Athens or the adventures of Hercules<sup>32</sup>.

29 M. BEAUJOUR, *Autobiographie et autoportrait*, in «Poétique», 32, 1977, pp. 442-458.

30 M. STEPANOVA, *Pamięci Pamięci*, trans. by A. Sowińska, Prosyński i S-ka, Warsaw 2021, p. 141. As the English translation is altered and adumbrated, I have translated quotes from this book from the Polish translation.

31 K. BOJARSKA, *Auto-foto-biografia W.G. Sebald*, in P. Czaplinski, K. Konczal, *Znaki katastrofy, spacje ocalenia. O twórczości W.G. Sebald*, IBL PAN, Warsaw 2020, pp. 245-46.

32 C. MALAPARTE, *Febo cane metafisico*, Passigli, Firenze 2018; APOLLODORO, *Biblioteca*, a cura di G.

The biography is an omnivorous genre. Its vitality draws its strength from the polymorphous capabilities of the mixed genres. It oscillates between myth, novel, document, scholarly study, archival analysis, encyclopedia, and historical and social description. The biographical account can be written in prose, poetry, as a drama, chronicle, comic book, or photo series. The urge to look at the circumstances of a life is the narrator looking back at what is already gone. Events are recorded which the author managed to ‘see’, to imagine and select, to describe or to film, as Jonas Mekas did. Its premise is to evoke the facts of a life. Yet, as Amos Oz noted in his autobiography: «Facts have a tendency to obscure the truth»<sup>33</sup>. And not just facts, as human life is made up not only of events and facts. In setting apart periods of life, the author aims to grasp the whole of a life in a web of words, building a tale from fragments, sometimes mere crumbs, aided by the imagination. They create something like a ‘labyrinth of connections’, which brings us to a means of expression often used by the biographical genre of the novel<sup>34</sup>. The subject of biography and autobiography is one of the main building blocks of the prose of Vladimir Nabokov and Sebald. Obviously, the writers who create literary biographies by reshaping their own autobiographies could be listed at length<sup>35</sup>.

We might call attention to the power of literature, its ability to depict a person neither fictional nor authentic, such as the protagonists of Sebald’s *Austerlitz*<sup>36</sup>. The history of the novel illuminates a great deal when it comes to the nature of biographical genres, showing the essence of the life-as-text and its truth. Play between the true story, the invented story, and the story that resembles the truth occurs in many fields<sup>37</sup>. The titular character, Jacques Austerlitz, Hayden White has observed, has a secret that is a lack of biography<sup>38</sup>. *Austerlitz* can be read as a story of the search for biography and the difficulty in structuring it. The novel’s protagonist cannot contend with this, and the narrator comes to his aid, uncovering his story (for the reader as well). Travelling through post-war Europe, Jacques Austerlitz draws from a range of historical knowledge to establish his identity, to discover his origins<sup>39</sup>. In exchange, the novel’s protagonist shows the narrator, White writes, tricks the past uses to conceal its secrets from the living. Discovering these secrets of civilization built on «structures of evil, incarceration, exclusion, destruction, and [...] humiliation» is also a concern of Sebald’s<sup>40</sup>. Jacques Austerlitz’s ‘fictitious’ search for «information about his ‘fictional’ parents», according to White, illuminates some issues in historical narratives. This is because «natural languages come

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Guidorizzi, †Adelphi, Milano 1995.

33 A. OZ, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, trans. by N. de Lange, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 2004, p. 33.

34 A successful example of a free use of biography in a novel is a story devoted to Italian composer Giacomo Scelsi. A servant, Massimo, speaks of Scelsi, rendered as Mr. Pavone, depicting the aristocrat’s varied fortunes: G. JOSIPOVICI, *Infinity: The Story of a Moment*, Carcanet, Manchester 2012.

35 S. BELLOW, *Ravelstein*, Penguin, London 2000.

36 W. G. SEBALD, *Austerlitz*, trans. by J. Wood, Modern Library, New York 2011.

37 GINZBURG, *Il filo e le tracce*, cit., pp. 104-5.

38 H. WHITE, *The Practical Past*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2014.

39 *Ivi*, p. 4.

40 *Ivi*, p. 5.

laden with a cargo of connotation over which writers and speakers have no control»<sup>41</sup>. As White states, quoting Michel de Certeau: «fiction is the repressed other of history»<sup>42</sup>. The same goes for biographical narrative. Fiction, style, and plot structure play a major, even fundamental role here. Erich Auerbach's concept of the 'figure' and Hans Blumenberg's prefiguration turn out to be helpful in showing the rhetorical forms of narrative and fiction in analysing biographies<sup>43</sup>.

What is the difference between the lives of protagonists in novels and those in biographies? In a narrative context, there is none, apart from the fact that the latter are people who once were real, and the former characters. The equal narrative status of protagonists in novels and the descriptions of real people draws our attention to the means of expression. Often, the story of a novel protagonist's life incorporates the stories of the writer, merging the two biographical strands<sup>44</sup>. In the novel *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Marguerite Yourcenar presented a biography of the emperor which, characteristically, took the form of an autobiography. She strove to impose form, desired to take on someone's inner and outer world through reconstruction and invention, to cull a figure from the shadows and animate their world. This substitute life is created from the building blocks the author has. When there are few sources, the outside world gains importance, at the expense of the life's events. When sources are lacking, as in the biographies of Dante or Shakespeare, we can speak long and profitably about the events in Florence or Elizabethan London<sup>45</sup>. Moreover, speaking about oneself, as a protagonist of Yourcenar's puts it, is not simply a matter of realizing what happened. As Hadrian notes, «almost everything that we know about anyone else is second hand. If by chance a man does confess, he pleads his own cause and his apology is made in advance. If we are observing him, then he is not alone»<sup>46</sup>.

A skilfully constructed biographical story lights up a life, revealing its shape and meaning. Efforts to access 'reality' are always verbal approximations and cannot be successful for many reasons. «reality is not to be found in [books] because it is not there whole»<sup>47</sup>, writes Hadrian to his foster grandson Marcus Aurelius. He tells him of his travails at the point when he has reached the age «where life, for every man, is accepted defeat»<sup>48</sup>. You cannot put the whole of a human life in a book, not one moment of physical presence in the world. You can adeptly or ineptly depict the story of a life, generally

41 *Ivi*, p. 20.

42 *Ivi*, p. 8.

43 BLUMENBERG, *Präfiguration. Arbeit am politischen Mythos*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2014; E. AUERBACH, *Figurative Texts Illustrating Certain Passages of Dante's 'Commedia'*, in «*Speculum*», 21, 4, 1946, pp. 474-89.

44 Another novel clearly alludes to the writer's life: SEBALD, *Vertigo*, trans. by M. Hulse, New Directions, New York 2016.

45 A. BARBERO, *Dante*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2021; S. GREENBLATT, *Will in the World*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2004.

46 M. YOURCENAR, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, trans. by G. Frick, Farrar-Straus and Giroux, New York 1963, p. 16.

47 *Ibid.*

48 *Ivi*, p. 5.



creating a more enduring reality in text. Baudelaire asked thinking people to show him what remains of life. Biography and autobiography, portraits, photographs, and films make distillates, which are worth examining philosophically.

In her *In Memory of Memory*, Maria Stepanova attempted to show, based on her own family history and a few other lives, that «not a single story comes down to us in its entirety»<sup>49</sup>. This includes her own. Her method of joining events, merging them into a story, comes through the author's policy of immersion in the present. With the lack of testimonials or the fallibility of memory, we are left with crumbs, shards of the past, and this goes for our own lives as well. The exceptions are people who recall everything, like Don Chuka Talayesva of the Hopi tribe, but this seldom happens<sup>50</sup>. More or less fragmentary stories, in both biographies and autobiographies, undergo a narrative assembly, they are sometimes artistically patched together, to make a picture of a life. In his autobiography, *Speak Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov tried to salvage his childhood and youth spent in Russia by putting it in a story like in a jewel case<sup>51</sup>. This was, perhaps, to be able to carry it with him for always, happy with his past and his memories of loved ones<sup>52</sup>. «On a summer morning, in the legendary Russia of my boyhood, my first glance upon awakening was for the chink between the white inner shutters. If it disclosed a watery pallor, one had better not open them at all, and so be spared the sight of a sullen day sitting for its picture in a puddle»<sup>53</sup>. Spending time with biographies and autobiographies «the problem of their dependability keeps popping up like a cork»<sup>54</sup>. «As far back as I remember myself», writes Nabokov «I have been subject to light hallucinations»<sup>55</sup>. Despite the insightfulness and appealing detail, his biographers claim that not everything he tells the way it happened. As with historical prose, we expect biographies to depict the real course of events, and, as with historical narratives, we cannot expect things to go smoothly.

In reconstructing, trying to recreate, biographies create new depictions of a life. They relate to lives as a map does to a real landscape. The same region, with smells, moisture, colours, changing with the seasons, can be depicted on paper or a screen in various ways. Using lines and patches of colour, taken from a certain perspective. The way of drawing a map can show the borders or illuminate the topography. As in the description of people, it depends on the historical period and location in which it was made, the epochal shifts. It is lodged in history and its reception. Cartography, like knowledge of the world, is

49 STEPANOVA, *Pamięci Pamięci*, cit., p. 94.

50 D.C. TALAYEVA, *Sun Chief: The Autobiography of a Hopi Indian*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1963.

51 V. NABOKOV, *Speak, Memory*, Vintage, New York 1989.

52 «I have before me a large bedraggled scrapbook, bound in black cloth. It contains old documents, including diplomas, drafts, diaries, identity cards, penciled notes, and some printed matter, which had been in my mother's meticulous keeping in Prague until her death there, but then, between 1939 and 1961, went through various vicissitudes. With the aid of those papers and my own recollections, I have composed the following short biography of my father»; *ivi*, p. 173.

53 *Ivi*, p. 119.

54 STEPANOVA, *Pamięci Pamięci*, cit., p. 264.

55 NABOKOV, *Speak Memory*, cit., p. 33.

subject to change. From clumsy outlines of often imaginary regions, to maps rendering views of characteristic places, to the development of satellite photography<sup>56</sup>, the depictions of areas became increasingly precise, much like the biographies of our contemporaries, sometimes released in multiple volumes. Does this make them more real, given these are only depictions, stories, and not real people and places? Both biography and autobiography, seen as genres, have histories of their own, and many varieties that come from historical conditions, conventions, and opportunities. Suffice to think of a series of Rembrandt's self-portraits as a kind of autobiography or the role that biographical stories have played in establishing Judaism, Christianity or Islam. If the biographical tale is skilfully assembled, it may help us navigate someone's life as we would a new terrain with a map. Yet this will always be a kind of representation, fragments, views from afar, sometimes from a distance of a thousand years, the same reconstructions and assumptions that are the stuff of prose. Yet it would be hard to find an equally holistic look at a person and their fate. Examining the course of life from a distance, but also from within, as a biography can do. Alongside the inevitably segregating force of scholarship, of abstract concepts that expand and sometimes revolutionise our knowledge of humanity, the modern novel and biography writing seem to flow from the same source of human self-awareness, though, as Helmut Plessner believed, they shall never ultimately discover what they are.

The triumphs of biography and autobiography in the modern world allow us to assume the growing significance of recording what is temporary and unique. Biographical genres resist human lives «falling by the wayside», as Annie Ernaux grasped in her autobiography *The Years*: «everything will be erased in a second. The dictionary of words amassed between cradle and deathbed, eliminated. All there will be is silence and no words to say it. Nothing will come out of the open mouth, neither I nor me. Language will continue to put the world into words. In conversation around a holiday table, we will be nothing but a first name, increasingly faceless, until we vanish into the vast anonymity of a distant generation». The modern popularity of biographies and autobiographies seem to remedy the passing of time, as an attempt to store and reanimate the past. A person's non-existence is no obstacle in creating a biographical tale. Investigating the tribulations of Hamlet is no less vital than the life story of other princes. The biographies of Moll Flanders or Emma Bovary, or Zeno Ligre never cease to fascinate.

Contemporary biography writing is no longer restricted to the lives of famous statesmen, it also includes those who «have long since disappeared, as soundless as shadows»<sup>57</sup>. Apart from the countless biographies of tyrants, politicians, saints, artists, scientists, writers and philosophers singled out as outstanding figures, we increasingly see biographies of 'ordinary people'<sup>58</sup>. Many countries have opened centres to collect the stories of all those who want to describe their lives or those of their loved ones, entrust-

56 Cartography was revolutionised by Alexander von Humboldt, as detailed in the biography by A. WULF, *The Invention of Nature*, Vintage, New York 2016.

57 SEBALD, *The Rings of Saturn*, New Directions, New York 2013, p. 83.

58 They are connected by a recognition of historical fields that have this far lay fallow: N. SCHINDLER, *Widerspennige Leute. Studien zur Volkskultur in der frühen Neuzeit*, Fischer, Berlin 1992.

ing films or photographs to their archives<sup>59</sup>. The act of describing a life story is no longer limited to individuals through whom the *Zeitgeist* speaks, said Herder, then Hegel after him. It digs into the crannies of history, into dim and forgotten places. It presently tries to embrace people who have been unable to speak about themselves. Of fates we know little about, as these people died young, were murdered, or perished in wars. «The past runs wild, overgrown with the forest of things forgotten» writes Stepanova on Sebald's short stories<sup>60</sup>.

From the resistance to forgetting *post-memory* was born, taking on biographical forms. Post-memory is the 'attempt to bring to life', to give 'body and voice' through one's own 'experience and comprehension' to those who had no opportunity to pass on their stories. The need to hold onto memory of those who have been obliterated defiantly defends the need for recollection. Stepanova claims they stand above a posthumous justice<sup>61</sup>. Postmemory less «points to the past than changes the present; it makes presence a key to contemporary times»<sup>62</sup>. In this appeal to the present, the past, by animating the absent and voiceless, joins with the modern discovery of the historical world. Alongside self-awareness, biography writing is an attempt to focus on and fill and accommodate its vast abysses. The development of modern sciences and other fields of culture have also aided biographical genres. The capacity to reconstruct the lives of others is not only a sort of confrontation with the past and with one's own life as it is a way of multiplying one's own existence. One can also treat biography writing as a kind of comfort for biographies not taken, lost, unknown.

There are also traces of a modern upheaval, reassessing values in biography writing. Through biographies we can take stock and settle scores, changing our perspective or our evaluation of things. This is encouraged by the emergence of new and competing stories that spark further debate<sup>63</sup>. The triumph of biography writing corresponds with the nearly universal demand for the résumé. This is a bureaucratic, formalised autobiography, drawn up for the job market. It is a narratively primitive autobiography, a formalised quasi-biographical document, to help assess people's qualifications. Unlike these mass-produced and formulaic biographical documents, extended non-bureaucratic autobiographies and biographies attempt to show people's individuality and uniqueness by showing their lasting significance.

«Each of us has their own story. Only to a point, however – like one's body, or underwear, or glasses-case»<sup>64</sup>. «The dead have no rights; their name and fate can be manipulated by anyone, and however they please»<sup>65</sup>. The right to rule the destiny of the dead

59 The European Diary Archives and Collections Network (EDAC). Fondazione Archivio Diaristico Nazionale; Deutsches Tagebucharchiv; Institut für Geschichte und Biografie deutsches Gedächtnis; Great Diary Project; Association pour l'autobiographie et le Patrimoine Autobiographique.

60 STEPANOVA, *Pamięci Pamięci*, cit., p. 100.

61 *Ivi*, p. 102.

62 *Ivi*, p. 105.

63 At least three biographies of Zygmunt Bauman appeared in Polish in a short span of time.

64 STEPANOVA, *Pamięci Pamięci*, cit., p. 451.

65 *Ivi*, p. 450.

allows us to freely evaluate, select and judge. Biographies, after all, are also attempts to control others' destinies, just as an autobiography tries to control one's own destiny. In 1887, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, «We are unknown, we knowers, ourselves to ourselves: this has its own good reason». Asked: «Who are we, in point of fact?» he responded, a year later, with *Ecce homo*<sup>66</sup>. One of the most autobiographical philosophers never stopped thinking that «of necessity we remain strangers to ourselves»<sup>67</sup>. This comes from a double opacity. Of other people, whose thoughts we can never know, seeing only masks and a lack of transparency. Not awareness of oneself. I can know my own thoughts, but it turns out this is not enough for self-awareness. «We understand ourselves not», wrote Nietzsche, «in ourselves we are bound to be mistaken»<sup>68</sup>.

Human life intersects with others. Relationships create other more or less binding links that are part of the vast mechanism of life. We feel bound to use the metaphor of a mechanism, despite the ease with which links are broken. Sometimes we speak of a great organism formed by all organisms, and sometimes people along with them. It eludes total comprehension, as do its countless tiny parts. As does every human life. Despite these difficulties in understanding, or perhaps precisely because of them, lives that are turned into stories and distilled, adumbrated, and preserved in biographies create an ever-growing archive. A collection of stories sometimes arranged chronologically, spatially, by occupation or gender, and many other factors, amasses non-academic, yet essential knowledge of humanity about itself. Despite the vastness, we have limited access, telling only a few of the countless stories. Apart from satisfying curiosity, like myths and novels, biographies can create significance, as one way of giving a name to the unknown or undefined. Through commemorating lives, biographies become not only an important source for attempting to understand oneself, to find one's feet in the world, but also a surging stream of human history. Keeping to Kant's phrase from *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, «the most important object in the world [...] is the human being: because the human being is his own final end»<sup>69</sup>.

Kant, who read Rousseau, understood the difficulties in writing an autobiography. If a person should want to «study himself, he will reach a critical point, particularly as concerns his condition in affect, which normally does not allow *dissimulation*»<sup>70</sup>. The play of 'sincerity' and emotions, attempts to observe oneself 'from the outside', the opacity of a person's appearance, are a fine point of departure for an anthropological study<sup>71</sup>. In developing a new discipline of philosophy, anthropology, Kant noted that «while not

66 NIETZSCHE, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by H.B. Samuel, Boni and Liveright, New York 2003, p. 1.

67 *Ibid.*

68 *Ibid.*

69 I. KANT, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. by R.B. Louden, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 3.

70 *Ivi*, p. 5: «In all states everyone adopts a mask and a pose to appear as they wish: so we may say that the world is entirely made up of masks»; F. DE LA ROCHEFOUCAULD, *Maximes*, Le Livre de Poche, Paris 1991.

71 BLUMENBERG, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 2006, pp. 777-78.

exactly sources for anthropology, these are nevertheless aids: world history, biographies, even plays and novels»<sup>72</sup>.

Today, when biography writing has changed, and the novel conceived as *Die Weltliteratur* is among the most important descriptions of the human condition, we might modify this approach. Biographies, autobiographies and novels are a major source of anthropology, not an aid. Kant insightfully called attention to new sources that could not then have been recognised, as they had a narrower impact than in the modern world. Today, bolstered by biological and historical knowledge, philosophical anthropology uses the resources of biographical genres and their siblings to enrich «knowledge of a human being, systematically formulated»<sup>73</sup>. Biography writing allows us to look at Kant's efforts to find «what he as a free-acting human being makes of himself»<sup>74</sup>. He does in part, or perhaps mainly, what he depicts in his stories. Since to have an identity *narrare necesse est*, and also to withstand one's provisional nature, as Odo Marquard claimed, which leaves us vulnerable to the eternal return of non-identity, a person clearly must tell stories. Thus a person is their stories, says Marquard<sup>75</sup>. Philosophical anthropology conceived as the philosophy of a question: when a person is unable to escape his/her finiteness, they should look more deeply into biography writing and its mutations.

Emil Cioran wrote of a fatal limitation of philosophy: no one has found in ideas what they have lost in life (*Fenêtre sur le Rien*). In pondering biography writing, philosophical anthropology cuts the losses traditionally incurred by philosophy.

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72 KANT, *Antropology*, cit., p. 5.

73 *Ivi*, p. 3.

74 *Ibid.*

75 O. MARQUARD, *Der Mensch 'Diesseits der Utopie'*. *Bemerkungen über Geschichte und Aktualität der philosophischen Anthropologie*, in Id., *Glück im Unglück. Philosophische Überlegungen*, Wilhelm Fink, München 1996, pp. 142-156.