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The Deep-Rooted Fear of Theory among Biographers

Hans Renders

Theory in relation to biography is a hot issue, to which you would rather not burn your fingers. Instead, biographers increasingly prefer to be novelists, although that love is not reciprocal. They sometimes confuse the difference between narrative non-fiction and invented non-narrative. This *volume* wants to show the value of theory for the biographer. That is not a plea to write unreadable academically formulated biographies – on the contrary! – but a double call to raise awareness among biographers. Everything to make it clear to the reader of this volume that a theoretic framework, like an invisible scaffold, gives the biography a stronger presence. Anyone who is willing to read a full-length book about a person will surely want to know how the author of that story proceeded, what his starting points and intentions are. A theoretical embedding does not have to stand in the way of a beautifully written biography.

We asked several biographers and researchers to reconstruct the theory behind their books. How does the backside of a biography look like, the side one cannot see? How does the invisible hand look like? Some biographies are exclusively inventorying, others are based on a theoretical notion, a research method, for example by comparing human lives to find out how representative a person is, by using the microhistorical method or by using psychology? Which disciplines do we use?

We are proud to present the result of this call here. Scholars from Australia, Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Iceland, the Netherlands and the United States show in their contributions how the genre (biography) can win by demonstrating in different ways that a biography needs a solid foundation.¹ So what does theory mean for the biographer?²

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- 1 Nigel Hamilton and Hans Renders, *The ABC of Modern Biography* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2018) and Hans Renders and Nigel Hamilton, *Het ABC van de Biografie* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2018). I use a few passages in this contribution from the Dutch edition that are not in the English edition.
 - 2 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, 'The Life Is Never Over: Biography as a Microhistorical Approach', *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 42–52; Hans Renders, 'Did Pearl Harbor Change Everything?: The Deadly Sins of Biographers', in: *Journal of His-*

Often you read in prefaces of biographies or in interviews with biographers that they consulted ‘the theory’ before writing their biography. From these remarks about ‘consulting theory’ appears the naive view that all literature on biography can be combined into a practical manual for writing a biography.

This misunderstanding is understandable, because the term ‘theory’ is often confused with the opposite, namely the ‘practice’, the instruction. *The* theory of biography, which takes the biographer by the hand and makes him write the ideal biography, is an utopia. Theories ‘unify a range of apparently disparate, unconnected phenomena by postulating an underlying principle that these phenomena have put into common and that can explain their nature or behavior. Second, the common underlying principle, postulated by the theory – whether it takes the form of an entity, process, force, concept, or something else – is at least hidden from view,’ according to Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey in their introduction of Ludwig Wittgenstein.³ They almost gave a definition of what Wittgenstein understood as ‘theory’. To put it simply: ‘the kind of understanding that consists in seeing connections’. No theory can be definitively proven, according to Karl Popper, you can always keep searching for reliable observations and as long as they do not contradict a certain theory, agreement can be reached about the correctness of an assertion.

Nigel Hamilton in his contribution to this volume leaves no misunderstanding about the necessity of theory in his article ‘The Missing Key: Theorizing Modern Historical Biography’: ‘Scholars of biography all agree: modern biography is still woefully under-theorized. Moreover most agree that – given its two thousand-year history and its continuing popularity in western cultures, as well as its central concern to discover, to share and to update the truth about the real lives of real individuals, past and present – this is deplorable.’

Theory problematizes in the confidence that a higher consciousness leads to better results, while instruction gives instant solutions such as a manual for a DIY kit from Ikea. How-to-do books for biographers are abundant, unfortunately theoretical awareness the less. Probably because theoretical awareness

torical Biography 1(2008)3, p. 98–123; Hans Renders and Binne de Haan, ‘Introduction: The Challenges of Biography Studies’, in: *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2014), p. 1–8.

3 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 3rd printing, 1967, original 1953), p. 27 (section 109); Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey, ed., *Wittgenstein, Theory, and the Arts* (London: Routledge, 2001); cited by Ray Monk, ‘Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding’, in: *Poetics Today* 28(2007)3, p. 528–570.

that is useful to the biography is useful for almost all research. It is not specifically labeled as 'useful for biographers' and therefore an untrodden path for most of them.

Although there is no biographical theory, there are methods which the biographer can use to collect material and to put it in a context in order to make a certain proposition plausible. We can be short about these methods here: they are the same as those of a historian. With the understanding that there is no single theory for historians as well. Indeed, the field of interest of historians is unlimited. Kerstin Maria Pahl shows in her contribution 'Biography and emotional Practice' which implications the history of emotions can have to biographical research. She has two interrelated aims, one historical and one methodological. By mapping out the importance of feelings in the history of biographical theory, she subsequently enquires into approaches to emotions in biographical research. Jeffrey Tyssens shows in this volume how theoretical insights have led to discussions within both national and scholarly traditions. With his classical essay *The Resistance to Theory* (1979), literary theorist and deconstructionist 'guru' Paul de Man referred to the resistance of 'the material' against theorizing. Academic fashion ('French radical chic'), self-promotion by dint of esoteric jargon, defending one's turf against the others, they all had a part in the 'theory wars', so much so that one could ask what was actually at stake.

There is, however, a common code: collecting material from a reasoned proposition, questioning it and eventually making a story of it. Carl Rollyson shows us how biographers can learn from previous biographers of the same person. In his case William Faulkner. What are the theoretical implications of an outline for a biography? 'Consequently, the biographer, like one of Faulkner's own characters, has to, at some points, speculate in order to complete the story of that character, William Faulkner. With Faulkner, one detects, surmises, infers, imagines, and ratiocinates.'

One of the theoretical approaches to historiography is microhistory. The important common feature of the new microhistory of Carlo Ginzburg and his Italian colleague historian Giovanni Levi is the 'method of clues'. By this they mean starting an investigation from something that does not quite fit, something that needs to be explained. This peculiar event or phenomenon is regarded as a sign of a larger, but hidden or unknown structure. A strange detail is made to represent a wider totality. Microhistory also serves to re-examine the big story on the basis of one person and possibly to put it in perspective, to reinterpret or even correct it. As showed in a wonderful contribution by David Veltman. He shows the principle of 'normal exception' by applying microhistory to the 1920s environment of the Belgian 'constructivist'

avant-garde artist Felix De Boeck. He argues that the avant-garde group where De Boeck belonged to can be seen as a normative group, which influenced the mentality of its members in a profound way.

Another example is the concept of pillarization (*verzuijing* in Dutch). In Dutch historiography the influence of pillarization is heavily overstated, without institutions at regional or local level being investigated. Approaching history at microlevel tells us that the macrohistory of pillarization should be revalued. In diaries and letters indications can be found that the typical pillarized writer aspired to escape from the pillar he or she originally belonged to. Writers of the Catholic or Protestant pillar, even authors who are known as their advocates, made continuous efforts to become part of the liberal pillar. We can consider the case of the prominent Catholic writer Paul Haimon, who was, thanks to his administrative and social positions, the undisputed patron of the arts in the Dutch province of Limburg. Biographical research and interpretation of his life leads to the conclusion that Haimon tried to enter the liberal pillar through the neutral publishing house Nijgh & Van Ditmar.

What new insights would emerge if Haimon would be investigated from the agency-perspective instead of the representativeness of his life? In other words: what results would be possible if Haimon was interpreted from the perspective of the Catholic pillar? And especially his ambition to change his environment is meaningful. Eric Palmen contributes in this volume a beautiful example of how to interpret pillarization in his research to the catholic movie critic Janus van Domburg.

'Social change' in history is always a powerful force for change in any sense whatsoever. Biographers therefore more often should act as a microhistorian and deliberately ask themselves where the Turning Points can be found. They should try to interpret facts of life as a deviating instead of a socially valid confirmation of life experiences. The misunderstanding behind almost every biography is that a theoretical basic assumption would not be necessary for a biographer, that the sources and facts should be presented by invisible, institutionalized hands.

Integrating the microhistorical approach *within* biographies, by focusing on various or alternative decisive episodes in a life, could be the next step. This step could add a new dimension to the concept of the critical 'interpretative biography'. By presenting an unexpected key period in a life as a point of departure, as a Turning Point, one is able to interpret Grand Narratives in a different way. The interpretation of a person then specifically serves to improve the understanding of a history beyond this life. In this case biography does not function merely as an illustration of a well-known history, but as a multiplier of interpretations of historical events and structures. See for an example

the research plan, in this issue, which forms the basis for the biography of the artist, theorist and founder of the magazine *De Stijl* Theo van Doesburg.

But other applications of interpretation are also possible, where the self-awareness of the biographer and her biographee is concerned, as Emma McEwin demonstrates in her contribution on Virginia Woolf. 'There's no trifling with words – can't be done, not when they're to stand 'forever', wrote Virginia Woolf while in the throes of trying to 'dispatch' *Flush*, her biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Cocker Spaniel. As a novelist and biographer, as an essayist, diarist, and critic, she was constantly exploring and experimenting with what makes a literary work to resonate and endure. Her primary quest, in both fiction and biography, was to capture, in writing, the essence of human character, which she alternately referred to as personality, reality, 'the spirit we live by, life itself'.

But what are Turning Points? In the life of Adolf Hitler, his election as Reichs Kanzler in January 1933 was a Turning Point, or his decision to start a world war on the first of September 1939. For Archimedes it was the day in 212 BC when he took a bath and during a brainwave understood that the upward buoyant force exerted on a body immersed in a fluid is equal to the weight of the fluid the body displaces. For Marcel Proust the decisive day was the day he ate a madeleine and he got inspired to write *À la recherche du temps perdu*. It seems simple, nevertheless we have mentioned three different categories of Turning Points by now. The Turning Points of Hitler's public life are marked by historians, while very different decisive moments perhaps can be indicated in his personal life. His rejection at the art academy in Vienna, for example. Was this the source of his lifelong dislike of modern art? That is quite plausible, because when he sat for an entrance exam in 1907 the school of cubist painting emerged. The bathroom experience of Archimedes is personal, but in another sense it is completely not. A lot of human beings regularly take a bath, only for natural sciences this was a Turning Point.

'The importance of biography is to make possible a description of the norms and their effective operation which is no longer presented only as the result of a discrepancy between rules and practice but also as that of structural and unavoidable incoherence among the norms themselves, incoherence which permits the multiplication and diversification of practices,' Giovanni Levi stated.⁴

4 Giovanni Levi, 'The Uses of Biography', in: Hans Renders and Binne de Haan, eds., *Theoretical Discussions of Biography. Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2014), p. 61–74.

1 Microhistory: A Debate without an End

In microhistory – the name indicates it – historians originally look at the smallest actors in history in relation to the big stories or the famous leaders. We do research in small villages, not *on* small villages, according to microhistorians like Levi. Microhistory is a method. Ginzburg's most famous work is a reconstruction of the worldview and the religious views of a sixteenth-century miller. The premise is that by zooming in to the smallest components of the historical course, it is possible to think critically about the sustainability of the larger stories. For the microhistorian, the most important key lies in the context: a relevant study must give an impression of a historical framework, and can show how individuals were formed or influenced by their environment.

At the same time, it must be said that the influence of that context can never be considered absolute. According to Levi, the possible choices of an individual are determined by their environment, but a person always has a certain freedom, or 'agency'. He therefore states that twists and turns in history not only originate from the larger structures, but can also be brought about by individual people. Micro and macro are therefore at odds with each other: none of the two has a clear preponderance, and it is up to the micro-historian to find out how the relations really are.

Biography was considered for a long period with great skepticism by the academic world. After the genre became extremely popular worldwide a quarter of a century ago, scholars became more interested in how a personal background can give an important twist to history telling. The time of structures seemed to be over. Something strange has happened in the meantime. It seems as if the great interest in a genre that has been made respectable by non-academics – the biography – is embraced by the academic world to stifle the genre. Like Aretha Franklin sang: 'Killing me softly'. Everywhere in the world you see university institutions that focus on Life Writing. Although the personal is the subject of study, the acquired knowledge is mainly used to identify sociological structures and patterns.

This volume is not only for believers. The eminent connoisseur of microhistory Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon is gradually starting to question the supposed relationship between a person and his context. 'I maintain that the ideology of general history, which is grounded primarily in the predetermined pattern of the grand narrative, has lost its way. For a long time I had hope that microhistory, as it developed in Italy and other countries, might provide an answer to this obligation which appears to be placed on historians' shoulders – to have their minds constantly on the structure of the society and larger entities. In its early days, microhistory certainly made a promising start in that direction;

and it has opened up a view of reality which was unexpected, and had not been explored before.'

What makes biography a kind of historiography? Biography and historiography are broad concepts. Just as publications by historians can take all sorts of forms, depending on the theme, period and of course the writing talent of the historian concerned, the scholarly biography also exists in many shapes and sizes. But the similarity between these variants of books that present themselves as biographies is the belief that research on an individual can be tested with the aid of the same standards as a study of the Second World War or American foreign policy between 1950 and 1965. An important criterion is the controllability of the sources. And always the question of the representativeness of the research results will have to be raised. Is a certain part of the foreign policy of Harry S. Truman or Dwight D. Eisenhower representative of the whole policy or do we encounter a more or less unique phenomenon? David Roth's contribution to this issue is a exciting example of biographical research, thanks to the microhistorical method. On the basis of medical data, he manages to position patients of a nineteenth- and early twentieth century asylum in their own social background, in Sydney. The term 'normal exception' clearly applies to the patients discussed in Roth's submission. These seemingly unusual and exceptional cases in the asylum reveal, upon further investigation, a hidden reality or routine practices that can be considered questionable according to the standards of that period.

In the seventies and eighties of the last century, microhistorians have called attention to the vicissitudes of subaltern people in historiography, to the individual that until then has not been represented by historians. And then it was not just people, such as criminals and other outcasts of society, but also marginal forms such as the signature of a painting, in order to reach wider conclusions about the world. Subsequently, several authors, such as the Finnish historian Matti Peltonen, have, as it were, brought the phenomenon of microhistory into a new phase by applying the representativeness question to the marginalities of society, the 'normal exceptions', instead of to familiar groups and persons. In this way it became possible to highlight the representativeness of groups of individuals that were previously not recognized as a community. Peltonen argues for zooming in on events and situations in such a way that the reduction in scale no longer only brings people into the picture as politicians or artists, but also as inhabitants of a village or as members of a family clan.

The famous book *Montaillou* by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie was for a long time presented as groundbreaking because, through a microhistory of a fourteenth-century village in the Pyrenees, the story of the late Middle Ages would be told, like the grain of sand that basically contains all the properties

of the whole beach. Microhistory would be representative of the big story. But you can also turn that around. Microhistory is not only about a small history (a village, a painting or a wanderer) in which a forgotten part of history is represented. Also it is not only about the 'exceptional normal' or the 'normal exception', but rather microhistory brings in the small story to put the great history story into perspective, and perhaps even to change it a little bit. The example of microhistory, as we now have to conclude, has turned out to be a dead end. It is about unique events that give a new meaning to the grand narrative. The umpteenth description of a life in the concentration camp can be poignant, but only adds something about the history of the Second World War if it is *not* exemplary, not another confirmation of what we already know.

To understand the whole, we have to understand the parts, but to understand these, we have to understand the whole. There is reciprocal dependence between these two operations, one feeds the other, however, 'understanding of the particular depends on knowledge of the general,' according to the nineteenth-century German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey.⁵ By means of biographical research into a person microhistorians investigate to what extent the current story on a particular culture is correct. The biographer is not the lawyer of that individual in this process, but the lawyer of history, a micro-lawyer, but a lawyer.

Journalism honors a number of principles that are also important for microhistorians and biographers alike. One of them is that the representation question should always be asked. In valuable journalism, the report will always search for a context that makes it clear to the reader whether the unicity or representativeness is confirmed in a news story. Media theories about hypes are a good example of this. During a hype about nightlife violence, every problem in the nightlife will be placed in that context. An interview with a welfare recipient is only fascinating if the reader understands that this person is representative of the social system in some respect or not. 'Journalism is the destroyer of literature,' wrote the American critic and novelist Julian Hawthorne.⁶ Whether that is true remains the question, but literature is all too often the destroyer of biography, at least where the literary form is used to camouflage a lack of proper research.

5 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (1910), in Bernard Groethuysen, ed., *Wilhelm Dilthey. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VII (Stuttgart and Göttingen: Teubner and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1927).

6 Julian Hawthorne, 'Journalism the Destroyer of Literature', in: *The Critic* 48(1906) february, p. 166–177.

Theories are like building scaffolding. You need them to put the roof on a house, but you would be surprised if the contractor produces a house without removing those scaffolding. You save them for your acknowledgements chapter, because readers who sacrifice a few days of their lives to read a biography really want to know how the biographer has been working.

It is therefore better to speak of a 'scholarly sound biography' instead of a 'scholarly biography'. As long as a biographer adopts an academic research attitude, and in doing so properly deals with his sources, his work can be academically justified. That qualification, incidentally, says little about the quality of the biography itself: although the method can be correctly applied, it requires something else to have analytical insight, and writing skills. In her comprehensive contribution 'The Great Individual in History: Historicising Historians' Biographical Practice' Melanie Nolan has stressed 'that the biographical turn is an interdisciplinary wave but it overlooks the extent to which biography has been at centre of most historians' writing since Carlyle. In this regard, it is useful to consider historians separately from wider biographical developments. British, American and other historians writing in English continued to write biography throughout the twentieth century before 'the biographical turn'. Significant lives in history continue to be examined by historians and biographers contemporarily.' The scope of her article is illustrated by the fact that she begins with Robert Caro, the famous biographer of Lyndon B. Johnson, who wrote his autobiography under the title of *Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing*. The chapters about the New York real estate developer Robert Moses can be considered as a long ode to investigative journalism. He urges the biographer to 'Turn Every Page'. The historiography of biography has broad fundamentals, Nolan shows.

It is quite possible to think about biography in a theoretical way. A biography does not only have to be regarded as a purely literary or journalistic text: it is also a historical source, which can be used to say something about a historical moment, and about the life of an individual in a certain context. Researching biographies brings us to a separate research area, with its own method: *Biography Studies*.

For a large amount of context and reflections on the relationship between the individual and the structural you are at the right address in the world of biography. The biographer is the person par excellence who puts his hero in a larger historical picture, and explains how the biographee is shaped by it, what was the influence of a certain person on history. In this perspective the biographer works on two levels at the same time: he writes a life story, but also a small (cultural) history. Like an actor on a stage where the decor remains

most of the time in the background, sometimes it is accentuated or is moving forwards to bring the story of the actor better into the limelight.

The biography can be regarded as a corrective: by approaching a certain period from the consciousness and daily life of one person, it sometimes appears that historical reality was more complex than originally thought.⁷

All these considerations only become relevant when a biography is actually completed. All analyses are preceded by the writing process itself, which often has a much less rigorous course. In practice, as mentioned, there is ultimately a lot of freedom for the biographer himself – in addition to a scholarly project, biography is also a creative product. When studying a single life, there are countless perspectives to consider, and often there are widely divergent explanations for behavior and life choices. It is therefore up to the author to organize his research in such a way that the most interesting questions can be answered: the biographer can then use theoretical handles or insights to formulate those questions as sharply as possible, and to come up with innovative answers. As long as a biographer remains aware of the theoretical foundations of his work, all sorts of other approaches can be tried to arrive at the most interesting possible construction.

Fear of Theory closes with a discussion file, as it should be. In the 'Dossier on Microhistory' some competing views on microhistory are presented, that find their origin in a theoretical perspective on historiography. A lot has been written about microhistory, but a satisfying conclusion about its significance apparently cannot be made. It is striking that Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szigjártó published together a book about microhistory, although it now appears that they did not agree at all about this subject. The editors of *Fear of Theory* decided not only to publish the polemic between these two scholars, but also wanted to bring the discussion a little bit further, we hope, with 'The representativeness of a reputation' and 'Exceptions that prove the Rule. Biography, Microhistory and Marginals'.

⁷ Nigel Hamilton, 'Biography as corrective', in: Hans Renders, Binne de Haan and Jonne Harmsma, eds., *The Biographical Turn* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 15–30.