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Autobiography as Unconventional History: Constructing the Author

Jaume Aurell

The experience of historians as autobiographers has led them to reconsider the nature of historical knowledge and the function of the historian as an intermediary between the past and present. In the new theoretical context of the social sciences and historiography, we can take this proposal further and consider autobiography as a valid form of history—or, at least, as ‘unconventional history’, understood as negotiations with history that transcend or subvert traditional chronological monographs, posit the ‘subjective’ as a useful form of knowledge, and engage the constructed nature of the text. Taking this hypothesis as a starting point, this article reads historians’ autobiographical texts to explore if we can/should continue to defend the classic distinction between subject and object, historian scientist and historian author. In this article I compare the work of several historian autobiographers that permit us to identify different methodologies in approaching the story of the self that also reflects different theoretical conceptions of history. I argue that historians that may be considered ‘constructionist’, such as Fernand Braudel, Annie Kriegel, George Duby, and Eric Hobsbawm, design their autobiographies in the same way they articulate their historical texts: by foregrounding objectivity and establishing critical distance between the subject—the historian who narrates the story—and the object—one’s own life. Unconventional or experimental approaches, such as those espoused by Robert Rosenstone, Dominick LaCapra, or Clifford Geertz, result in more self-conscious autobiographies, which are, paradoxically, often more realistic and more revealing of the epistemological nature of life writing.

Keywords: Historians’ Autobiography; Unconventional History; Constructionism; Author; Experimentalism; Postmodernism

Contemporary criticism increasingly recognises the constructed nature of narratives of self. For this reason, as historians engage autobiography, they are conscious of a dialogue with the ideas that Hayden V. White or Gabrielle M. Spiegel posit regarding historical texts as a literary artefact (White 1978; Spiegel 1997). The experience of historians as autobiographers has led them to reconsider the nature of historical knowledge and the function of the historian as an intermediary between the past and present. Critical literature has recently analysed autobiography as a hybrid genre between history and literature, as Jeremy D. Popkin's *History, Historians & Autobiography* postulates (Popkin 2005). Yet, in the new theoretical context of the social sciences and historiography, we can take his proposal further and consider autobiography as a valid form of history or, at least, as 'unconventional history'. This concept may be understood as a negotiation with history that transcends or subverts traditional chronological monographs, posits the 'subjective' as an effective form of knowledge, and engages the constructed nature of the text. Taking this hypothesis as a starting point, this article reads historians' autobiographical texts to explore if we can/should continue to defend the classic distinction between subject and object, historian scientist and historian author. This also leads us to question to what extent historians can be located 'out' of the story that they recount—the assumption of the historical tradition after the emergence of 19th century German historicism—and to reconsider the idea of empathy as a natural methodological context in historical writing.

In this article I compare the work of several historian autobiographers that permit us to identify different methodologies in approaching the story of the self that also reflects different theoretical conceptions of history. I argue that historians who may be considered 'constructionists', such as Fernand Braudel, Annie Kriegel, George Duby, and Eric Hobsbawm, design their autobiographies in the same way they articulate their historical texts: by foregrounding objectivity and establishing critical distance between the subject—the historian who narrates the story—and the object—one's own life. Postmodern or experimental approaches, such as those espoused by Robert Rosenstone, Dominick LaCapra, or Clifford Geertz, result in more self-conscious autobiographies, which are, paradoxically, often more revealing of the epistemological nature of life writing, historiographical tendencies, and of the very nature of authorial intervention itself.

I posit that constructionist autobiographies tend towards an explicative mode, while the experimental autobiographies are highly performative, where *saying* something involves *doing* something. This distinction between constructionist and experimental autobiography reflects the changing nature of the theoretical landscape of the historical discipline in the last 30

years. This new critical approach to the historians' autobiographical texts provides us with the clues to not only to locate and understand epistemological transformations in historical practice after the seventies—from modernism to postmodernism, from constructionism to innovationism, from objective to subject–object history—but also to focus on the positive effects that these transformations offer the discipline and the concept of historical writing itself.

Constructionist Autobiographers: Objectivising Life Writing

Historians find themselves at a crossroads when they write their autobiography, an exercise in traversing the space between history and literature. But the number of autobiographical texts by historians in the last 35 years reveals two general tendencies in this self-representation: a constructionist/conventional pattern and an experimental/unconventional approach. Constructionists tend to establish a critical distance from their own lives to present it objectively, often in an empirical-analytical language that gives their narratives a monographic air. Experimental autobiographers are less concerned with their identity as academics/historians, and narrate within an epistemologically sceptical frame which is paradoxically more lucrative from the point of the theoretical debate.

I apply the concept 'constructionist' to historians who maintain a single scientific method, the systematic application of which leads us to the historical 'truth'. The term communicates the belief that history results from a conceptual dialogue between the historian and the past. In theory, then, the result of historical research will be more or less accurate, depending on the objectivity of the procedures. That is why constructionist historians (the subject) attempt to establish the greatest critical distance possible from historical research (the object). When they write autobiography they endeavour to follow this scientific law. Empiricism and positivism nuance constructionists' concepts of history, because these methodologies provide them with a platform from which to read and write the past with ostensible objectivity. Constructionism has been challenged by postmodernism for its naïve empiricism, which claims that historical interpretations can be based 'on observable evidence alone, with the historian standing outside history, outside ideology, outside pre-existing cultural narratives, and outside organising concepts' (Munslow 2000, p. 54).

Because of their convictions regarding the objective priority of history, constructionist historians need to justify a decision that can damage one's academic reputation and often state clear caveats before beginning their life

writing exercise, adhering themselves to a pattern of collective remembrance and developing tradition. Fernand Braudel concludes his personal testimony by passing on his legacy to young historians, ‘thanks to them, the old dwelling has become a house of youth once more’ (Braudel 1972, p. 467). Georges Duby locates his life in a collective generation of historians and persuades himself and his readers that his intellectual autobiography ‘is not mine alone. It is that of the French historical school over the past half-century’ (Duby 1994, p. xvi). Eric Hobsbawm considers himself part of world history and is convinced that his autobiography is ‘the flip side’ of his 20th century history (Hobsbawm 2002, p. xiii). All of these view their autobiographies as stories that contribute to a larger general history, or at least to the history of historiography.

Another interesting note in the constructionists’ autobiographies approach is the fears they demonstrate when writing their autobiographies. They seem unable to overcome the apprehension regarding ‘loss of objectivity’ that has always affected them. In fact, constructionist autobiographies systematically open with a plea for the reader’s pardon for having what might seem to be insolence or audacity in writing a personal testimony. Though this might be considered politeness, I read it as the anxiety over ‘objectivity’ that has always blinkered empirical and analytical history. The formulas for justification are similar and generally located at the beginning of the text. Braudel begins his personal testimony with a series of reservations, rejecting the proposal that would ‘compel me to look at myself in an unaccustomed way, to consider myself in some fashion as an object of history, and to embark upon confidences which must at first glance seem signs of self-satisfaction and of vanity. [...] I confess to having doubts as to whether this account, all too personal and of questionable interest to the reader, really gets to the heart of the matter’ (Braudel 1972, p. 448). His doubts centre not only on the questionable interest of his reflections—Eric Hobsbawm would suffer the same scruples thirty years later, when autobiography was comfortably validated among historians (Hobsbawm 2002, pp. xi–xii)—but on the professional risks triggered by his enterprise. Like Braudel, Duby, Hobsbawm and most other historian autobiographers before and after her, Annie Kriegel also hesitated before writing her memoir. She actually declined the invitation to participate in Nora’s *egohistoire* project but eventually produced a volume of nearly 800 dense pages, which she begins by admitting that she deferred publication until the last minute, and then waited even longer (Kriegel 1991, p. 11).

Yet it is not only concern about the loss of objectivity that troubles historians who write autobiographies. Constructionist historians also fear

the blatant exposure of their ideological tendencies, religious beliefs, or political opinions. They run the risk of revealing the links between those preferences and their historical texts—an exposé that might carry as many advantages as disadvantages. Quite a few historians have been accused of manipulating their texts when, for example, their links with the Communist Party have come to light or when a *presentist* reading of the past has been recognised in their work. As Georges Duby points out, the historian is obliged to defend himself from the charge of excess empathy with the past, persuaded that ‘every age creates its own vision of the world, that styles of feeling and thought vary with time, and that the historian must therefore overcome his own ingrained styles or risk understanding nothing’ (Duby 1994, pp. 71–72). Natalie Z. Davis was accused of projecting some of the postulates of 20th century feminism onto the peasant woman protagonist of her account of life in a peaceful village in the French Pyrenees in the 16th century (Davis 1982, 1988; Finlay 1988). The British historians of the Communist Party (Edward P. Thompson, Eric J. Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Raymond Williams, Maurice Dobb, Vere Gordon Childe, Perry Anderson, George Rudé) were only able to elude criticism for their excessive ideological combativeness by the excellence of their work, which accredited them in the academic community.

However, the passage of time has revealed that those texts were in fact conditioned by ideological tendencies, an understanding which has, nonetheless, not managed to devalue the importance of their writing. Indeed, autobiographical traces found in historical writing need not invalidate an academic’s years of work. I do not contend that a particular childhood experience, academic formation, or ideological position necessarily leads to less profound scholarship. Our knowledge of the historians’ past through his or her own personal narrative gives us multilayered insight into the processes and perspectives that governed the writing of that text. These autobiographical imprints in scholarly texts serve an important historiographical purpose. A concurrent reading of historical and autobiographical production articulates the postmodern paradigm in important ways: by stressing the importance of the *act* of writing, we understand how even professedly unbiased accounts are subject to the rules of narrative and the experiential positions of writers.

These fears could explain the tendency of constructionists to write their autobiography at the end of their lives. Their autobiographical texts are articulated as a justification of their historiographical itinerary, made towards the end of a life and considered the last step of their academic strategy, a valedictory for an academic career, while the unconventional autobiographies do not respond to a uniform academic strategy, and can be

written in the middle of an academic itinerary or, more interestingly, in stages, as Jill Ker Conway has done (Conway 1989, 1994, 2001).

Constructionist historians' autobiographical style is empirical and analytical, applying in their autobiographies the same methodology used in their monographs. Kriegel and Hobsbawm, for instance, are very concerned with maintaining a chronological sequence of their self-narration, and they need periodically to confront the accuracy of their memory with documents. Footnotes appear with naturality in a (supposedly) literary exercise. Kriegel, for example, narrates her intense life in calculated, neutral, and dispassionate prose as though to prove that her dramatic experiences contaminated neither her academic itinerary nor autobiographical objectivity. The result is a scientific language that gives these autobiographies a solid structure and often a larger number of the pages. In Kriegel's and Hobsbawm's autobiographies we really are before 'an introduction to the most extraordinary century in the world's history'—as the British historian declares in the Preface (Hobsbawm 2002, p. xiv)—because both texts are systematic accounts of long and intense lives, a integration between personal experiences and historical facts. It is interesting to compare the table of contents of one of Hobsbawm's first monographs about British economy, *Industry and Empire* (Hobsbawm 1968), with his autobiography (2002). Although 34 years separate the writing of these texts, and the genres are diverse, they are structured the same way with a combination of chronological with thematic chapters: the classical organisation of a historical monograph. Similarly, contrasting Kriegel's first monograph, *Aux origines du communisme français*, about the origins of the French communism (Kriegel 1964) with her autobiography, written after 27 years (1991), illustrates an identification between the styles and structures chosen for two texts which are, in theory, so different. Her chapter titles, tellingly, are called: 'Du repli à l'exode, 1939–1940', 'Dans Paris occupé, 1940–1942', 'Grenoble, 1942', etc., stressing the historical weight each carries. Similarly, Hobsbawm titles the chapters of his autobiography 'A child in Vienna', 'Hard times', 'Berlin: Weimar dies', 'Berlin: brown and red', 'Cambridge', etc., foregrounding always the perspective of a professional historian. This contrasts radically with Clifford Geertz's intellectual testimony, *After the Fact* (1995), which is organised in sections given thematic and more innovative titles, 'Towns', 'Countries', 'Cultures', 'Hegemonies', 'Disciplines' and 'Modernities', which allow him to use a more discursive and narrative language. In the end, we note constructionists' reservations on embarking on autobiography and, if they do write them, they gravitate towards a more scientific (read: objective or dispassionate) style that gives their life writing exercise a peculiar form as

they attempt to combine the objectivity of historical inquiry with the subjectivity proper to self-representation.

Experimentalists' Testimonies: Performing Autobiography

These notes of constructionists' autobiographies—the need to justify their life writing exercise, the fear of revealing too much about a personal life, the use of analytical language, and the search for objectivity—highlight the 'de-problematised' dimension of the experimentalist historians' autobiographies. These historians appear to simply enjoy writing their lives, as evidenced by their freer narrative and linguistic forms. They eschew epistemological traumas when they tell their stories, and unaffectedly perform their role as readers and writers of their own lives. Jill Ker Conway has three outstanding autobiographies that do not need justification in the prologues; she starts the second of them narrating in the foreword her exciting flight to New York in September 1960, in a description that deviates from the solemn academic prefaces of the continental historian autobiographers like Braudel, Kriegel or Duby (Conway 1994). The book was defined by the *Washington Post* as 'wonderful', an adjective that would probably give constructionist autobiographers nightmares. Indeed, the autobiographies of historians who are themselves engaged with theoretical issues, such as Rosenstone, Geertz and LaCapra, probably are more interesting from the epistemological point of view that we are dealing with here.

We cannot underestimate the discursive potential of these texts, considering the increased complexity of the autobiographical act, particularly by writers who make identification with specific intellectual itineraries and history a subtext of their personal narratives. Janet Varner Gunn explains that autobiography has shifted from being conceived as 'the private act of self-writing' to become 'the cultural act of the self reading' (Gunn 1982, p. 8), implying that autobiographical discourse negotiates more than merely the notion of an authentic 'I', to engage the subject's location in the world through an active interpretation of experiences in particular 'worldly' contexts. The strategy involves an intentional and creative positioning of oneself in history, geography, and culture. Ien Ang takes this point further when she posits autobiography as 'a more or less deliberate, rhetorical construction of a "self" for *public*, not private purposes: the displayed self is a strategically fabricated performance, one which stages a *useful* identity, an identity which can be put to work' (Ang 1993, p. 3). Working within specific epistemic contexts, these experimental historian autobiographers consciously negotiate the

boundaries between history and literature, a vital subtext in their autobiographical performances.

Robert A. Rosenstone was invited to write his personal testimony for *Rethinking History* in 2004, in a move reminiscent of Braudel's text of 1972 or the French historians who participated in Pierre Nora's project in 1987. Yet he declares from the beginning that he is free of the conventionality of a classical exercise of ego-histoire, opening with the assertion that he 'never wanted to be a historian' (Rosenstone 2004, p. 149). He only started to think of history as a possible profession after his failure as a journalist. And still then, he attempted to work like a writer from the Academia, which allowed him to 'take time to write books on topics that would let you travel to the sites of social and political upheavals in far-off countries' (Rosenstone 2004, p. 150). His irony contrasts radically with the French historians of the *Essais d'ego histoire* project, who had generally been chosen for history from where they were children and who designed their autobiographical accounts as a realistic rather than ironic trope. Unlike Braudel, Hobsbawm or Duby, Rosenstone does not position himself as a link in a chain of a nation, school or historical tradition, and this freedom prepared him to be open to the deconstructive and decentring spirit of postmodernism when it arrived. Because he speaks as a postmodernist, the multilayered nature of postmodernism grants him an even stronger liberatory stimulus. Interestingly, his text is entitled 'Confessions of a postmodern (?) historian', which seems to communicate his ambivalence towards postmodernism, itself a postmodern gesture. His love for literature provided him with new ways to consider the operations of history: not only to explain and understand the past but also to care about what happened in the past. In one word, *empathise* with the past, in a move that appears to appropriate and renew Collingwood's notion of *re-enactment* and project it towards the scenario of postmodernism (Collingwood 1946; Dray 1995), Rosenstone casts himself in the triple role of autobiographer, historian, and historiographer, ironically performing as a postmodernist and personifying this historiographical trend. This strategy differs radically from Hobsbawm's or Kriegel's, who need to establish a clear distance between their political commitments and historiographical choices—the subject–object division again.

One can conclude, paradoxically, that Rosenstone's autobiographical account is *more* 'history' than 'ego' because he has dealt with academic projects rather than personal experiences. Thus, a critical reading of his autobiography reveals the theoretical potential of the postmodernist autobiographer. Rosenstone has recast the story of his own life as an author rather than the fair minded, distanced and objective vision of the

constructionist—an orientation that has been recently recovered by C. Behan McCullagh who has put postmodernism ‘in perspective’, which seems to be a juggling act if we take into account the palimpsestic nature of postmodernism (McCullagh 2004). In the end, the result of Rosenstone’s autobiographical experiment is a historiographical artefact that provides a new voice for history: a historian who performs as an author of his own life and reflects on *his* history which is for him *the* history. The text therefore functions both as autobiography and as historiographical artefact.

Cliffort Geertz published his testimony in 1995, with no preface, prologue, or any other recourse that explains the motivations for the writing of his autobiography. The product alone, he seems to imply, justifies its writing. His style challenges the traditional causality of constructionist writing and privileges a metaliterary performance of the changes in the articulation of anthropological studies. Geertz seeks to locate himself inside his own history, giving voice to his subjectivity because he considers it the best way to narrate and understand his own life, refraining from empirical language:

To form my accounts of change, in my towns, my profession, my world, and myself, calls thus not for plotted narrative, measurement, reminiscence, or structural progression, and certainly not for graphs; though these have their uses (as do models and theorizings) in setting frames and defining issues. It calls for showing how particular events and unique occasions, an encounter here, a development there, can be woven together with a variety of facts and a battery of interpretations to produce a sense of how things go, have been going, and are likely to go.

(Geertz 1995, p. 3)

With this epistemological orientation of this autobiography, Geertz also contests any accusations of ‘presentism’: ‘Myth, it has been said, I think by Northrop Frye, describes not what happened but what happens’ (Geertz 1995, p. 3). The anthropologist recognises that he is narratively constructing his life as a myth, which he considers the more subjective–objective form of telling a story.

The narrative form used by Geertz is compatible with the use of footnotes in the text, which initially disturbs the reader. Geertz’s text identifies formally as a scientific artefact (an anthropologic treatise) and as a narrative account in content (an anthropologist’s autobiography). Yet we could say also that we identify a narrative account in the form and a scientific artefact in the content. Hayden White inspired historians to stress the form rather than the content, after centuries of domination of the second (White 1987). After reading Geertz’s testimony, learning the effectiveness of his method of explanation and understanding most of the

epistemological transformations in the social sciences in the last decades juxtaposed with the narrative of his life, it becomes difficult to sustain a radical separation between content and form or, at least, to deny the possibility of historical knowledge through the performance of the social scientist as author.

At several moments in his account, Geertz deals with the relationship between the subject and the object in social sciences. Taking experience from his own life, he concludes that this distinction has become invalid:

Since the decline, in most quarters, of belief in a single and sovereign scientific method and the associated notion that truth is to be had by radically objectivizing the procedures of inquiry, it has become harder and harder to separate what comes into science from the side of the investigator from what comes into it from the side of the investigated. In anthropology, in any case, and in my case anyway, assuming either has anything to do with science, the indivisible experience of trying to find my feet in all sorts of places and of the places themselves pressing themselves upon me seems to have produced whatever has appeared under my professional signature. Indeed, it has produced that signature itself.

(Geertz 1995, p. 135)

In this way, Geertz adheres to the flexibility of the genre of autobiography and its potential as a valid form of history, within the new epistemological bent of the social sciences, a natural arena for the unification of subject and object. As a result, autobiography functions both as a historical and a historiographical artefact.

Another interesting case of experimental autobiography is that of Dominick LaCapra, written, like Rosenstone's was, upon the request of the *Rethinking History* editors. In fact, his exercise is defined as a 'semi-autobiographical essay' in the editorial of the issue where it was published. We do not learn of LaCapra's personal experiences until halfway through the text, when he reveals his 'founding trauma' after having theorised at length about the social, religious and cultural dimension of this concept. Again, this pivotal moment in his life and text resounds as metaliterature: when his father asked him what he intended to study, he replied, 'intellectual history', to which his father cuttingly remarked: 'What's the alternative, dumb history?' (LaCapra 2004, p. 510). This exchange already sets the stage for the kind of intellectual inquiry LaCapra will negotiate in his career and, one understands, in his self-representation. One of LaCapra's most telling stories concerns the influence of language. After one of his periodical sacramental confessions when he was a child, he went to the altar rail to say his penance and spent six or seven hours there

kneeling, repeating over and over again the first words of a prayer. This act suspended time for him, and the boy arrived home having missed dinner. Years later, reflecting on this memory of his 'deconversion', he concludes: 'that experience itself took a linguistic turn', highlighting how language and other 'signifying practices' in his life replaced religion (LaCapra 2004, p. 509). He is convinced that he displaced the intensity and insistence of his early religious experience with the academic and intellectual activity to which he has committed himself with seriousness and conviction, indeed to 'a joking relation to my academic and intellectual commitments and a propensity to crack jokes during serious (at times overly serious) discussions' (p. 510).

LaCapra tells transcendent and (apparently) intranscendent stories in his account, giving them the same epistemological value, leading us to reexamine the criteria that governs the validity and value of stories. Indeed, he appears to ask: who judges which stories are more important for history? What can be considered more 'objective'? Can we distinguish the subject of the object? He notes: 'I have also insisted on the tense interaction between more constative dimensions of historical discourse (related to accurate reconstruction) and performative dimensions (related to our implication in or transferential relations to the past)' (p. 510). His intellectual testimony itself is an excellent representation of this performative dimension of the historian, which leads him to empathise with the past and combine—more or less consciously—personal 'subjective' experiences with 'objective' knowledge of the scientific method for historical inquiry.

After reading LaCapra's intellectual autobiography one begins to question the true nature of his text: is it the itinerary of a historian devoted to intellectual history or an academic article about the evolution of intellectual history in the last 30 years? Ultimately, it is probably less important to unravel the specific genre of the text than to attend to its revisioning of ways of writing history. In fact, experimental historians' autobiographies like LaCapra's function as singular ways to access the theory and the practice of historiography in the more theoretical sense of the word. Constructionist historians' autobiographies like those of Braudel and Duby provide us with excellent information about the history of historiography (itineraries of historians, theoretical trends that have dominated the discipline, historical schools) but the new performative autobiographies help us to better understand historiography itself. Indeed, more illuminative discussions than those in LaCapra's and Geertz's accounts of the evolution of intellectual history and anthropology are hard to find in genres other than the autobiography. If someone claims that these are simply 'subjective' narrations, we should reconsider the whole

issue of historical and historiographical authority and nature and the very definitions of 'subjective' and 'objective'.

The Historian Autobiographer as Author

Experimental autobiographers such as Rosenstone, Geertz or LaCapra approach autobiography after rejecting the objective stance of the constructionist autobiographers. They consider the distinction between a 'historian scientist professional of history' and 'historian writer autobiographer' artificial, and acknowledge their role as author in writing both academic history and literary autobiography. For that reason, their texts are liberatory enactments of personal stories that they formulate as legitimate history—certainly unconventional from the point of view of traditional history, but valid nonetheless.

From this perspective, historians' autobiography might be seen as a new representation of the past, a new exploration of this meaning in renewed language and in forms that subvert historiography's prevailing structures. Yet this new language can be more appropriate not only in the context of the new historiographical trends but with regard to autobiography as a genre. In fact, the rise in the theory and practice of autobiography in the last decades among historians proves—like other new languages, genres, and subjects that increasingly prevalent in the discipline—that historical writing cannot be restricted to the classical genre of the monograph or biography written in academic-scientific and empirical-analytical language. Autobiography is experiencing transformations analogous to that of the monograph and biography because it is discovering the power of intersubjective plurality over the claim of objectivity (Passerini 2000). Rosenstone had shown the way, first through his triple biography in one volume (Rosenstone 1988) and after that through his multivoiced autobiography—where he speaks simultaneously as a historian, historiographer and novelist. The decentralisation and multiplication of the experimental autobiographies' voices, reflected in the testimonies of Rosenstone, Geertz and LaCapra, is one of the most significant manifestations of contemporary historiographical evolution from modernism to postmodernism.

The role that the historians assume as authors of their own lives challenged the norms of objectivity that rule their profession, and provide them—if they are engaged with the epistemological issues—a privileged platform for renewing and revitalising their conception of history. This is particularly demonstrable in the context of *ego-histoire*, and becomes a historiographical source when a historical author works within the

epistemologically sceptical frame. The section of 'Invitation to Historians' in this journal indicates how historians' autobiographies have developed from the first timid essays in the 1970s (like Braudel's exercise, which seemed preoccupied with removing all signs of self-satisfaction or vanity) to the new autobiographical experiments of historians like Rosenstone or LaCapra, who perform naturally as authors of their own lives, enjoying themselves in the process.

In reading historians' life writing we tended to focus on the circumstances of their lives, ignoring perhaps that they are *also writers*, and that their historical production is as much a literary artefact—with its engagement with narrative structure, style, and metaphor—as the writing of a novelist. By reading experimental historians' autobiographies, we are given privileged access to the processes that build their narrative. There is also the issue of historians' ideological commitments or specific fields of research, which generally assigns a preference for a particular kind of emplotment or series of metaphors in order to give particular meaning to a set of personal or historical events in the past. As such, there is a connection between the object of one's research and the forms the articulation of that research takes. Notably, critics like White or LaCapra have reminded us of the literary properties of historical texts, urging us to reconceptualise the act of historical writing in the context of narrative conventions and strategies (LaCapra 1982; White 1999). Indeed, consciousness of the historian's function as 'narrator', rather than merely 'scientist', has grown significantly, heightening the analogies between historical and literary texts. Thus we have learnt to find in historians' autobiographies not only testimony of their lives or data that explains their historical projects, but also information about the changing nature of history and their epistemological trends. This is how we ought to read the 'new' autobiographers, who are often engaged with the postulates of post-modernism, although they ironically deny this commitment, as Rosenstone does with the almost playful parenthetical question mark in the title of his testimony. Precisely for this reason, I read him as a postmodern, experimental or unconventional historian.

This perspective obliges us to reconsider the function of historians' autobiography as a form of unconventional history. Brian Fay, in the presentation of the issue of the *History and Theory* devoted to the concept of 'unconventional history' (2002), defines the term in opposition to 'academic history'—the traditional discursive history produced by professional academic historians. Autobiography can be considered unconventional history only when the historian autobiographer consciously casts him or herself as an author, rather than primarily a historian. As I have

attempted to show in this article, classical constructionist historians do not perform as authors of literary artefacts, because their intentions involve writing historical narrations using what is for them a suspect genre, without modifying the configuration of their earlier theoretical foundations. They are not autobiographers in the traditional sense of the word; they are historians that write a story of the self using the classic methodological tools of history. Experimental autobiographers, in turn, are more aware of the performative dimension of the autobiography: they enjoy casting themselves as writers of their own stories, heightening agency through their role as authors, and reframing the traditional division between the subject and object. Historian autobiographers are more and more persuaded of the autobiography's potential as a historical artefact and they use it not only to explain the world they have lived but also to *practise* history.

This is not a value judgement, but a critical approach. With this article, I do not pit the conventional and unconventional autobiographers against each other: old versus new, constructionists versus experimentalists, explicatives versus performance, and, finally, modernists against post-modernists. I prefer an attempt at reconciliation, because I am convinced that both can learn a lot from each other and that doing so might result in a more satisfactory conception of history, as Beverley Southgate has shown in his book (Southgate 2003). I hold that we have to take more advantage of the new languages, genres and subjects that have come into the historical discipline as valid forms of engagement during the last 20 years—autobiography among them. Perhaps these new ways of exploring history have a more performative and fictive load. Yet this leads us to reconsider the discipline's theoretical foundations and incorporate these new historical artefacts, as is shown in practice in the volume *Experiments in Rethinking History* (Munslow and Rosenstone 2004). Experimental autobiographical writing appropriates the epistemological richness of life writing in interdisciplinary contexts, where the boundaries between literature and history are blurred but which offer enlightened perspectives on both.

Ultimately, this discussion leads to an examination of the existential position of history as a literary form. This approach contributes to the debate of history as literature: by highlighting the rhetorical or narrative characteristics of historical writing, and by noting the structural connections between monographs and autobiographies, we participate in the historians' own reevaluation of their scholarly production. As they engage diverse genres, eliding the uncritically established boundaries between one form of articulation of the 'real' and another, they allow us to reexamine the porous nature of those boundaries. As we read these texts,

we receive a heightened sense of history as a narrative creation, as a wilful engagement with the structures of language, style, and metaphor. Constructionist and empirical history have maintained the idea that reality of the content of the past determines the form of history in the shape of the historical narrative. Yet the autobiographical artefacts analysed in this article lead us to reconsider the relationships between form and content. The examples of post-constructionist autobiographies show that history can be no longer be imprisoned in the rigid content–form division. The autobiographies by LaCapra, Rosenstone or Geertz are, in fact, experiments with an authorial and interventionist position that denies a structural connection between the design of the historical text (form), and the exterior real-world events to which reference is made (content)—because the text itself, in experimental autobiographies, is the content of the history narrated.

This leads to the central issue of this article: the authorial function of the historian. As Alun Munslow explains, ‘the inevitable subjectivity that accompanies authorship is not a problem for the modernist historians because it can be overcome through the strict application of empirical method, which makes for truthful interpretations’ (Munslow 2000, pp. 24–25). In fact, constructionists cannot be considered strictly conventional *authors* of their historical texts, because they attempt to distance themselves as far away from them as possible. Yet post-constructionists have illustrated the capacity of historians as authors of historical texts that allow them not only write history but also perform it. This leads us to wonder if we can continue to defend the established rules of evidence, based on the assumption of the empiricism as a procedure and a division of the subject and the object. Post-constructionist (or post-empirical) autobiographers prove that those ‘rules of evidence’ (empirical research, objective inquiry, analytical language, critical distance between the historian and the story being told) could or could not be assumed as a prerequisite for historical writing. Thus, we can better understand Jacques Derrida’s famous assertion that: ‘*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*’, which does not mean that ‘there is nothing outside the text’ (as detractors of postmodernism have misunderstood) but ‘there is no outside-the-text’ (that is to say: we are never outside the universe of discourse). The author who controls the historical text simultaneously heightens his or her agency. The more control the historian exerts on the narrative, the more his or her *authority*, paradoxically, augments. Herein lies the irony of this perspective: as constructionists emphasise their authority by stressing objectivity, experimental autobiographers claim authority precisely through the power of subjectivity.

I posit that the experimental autobiographical accounts are a privileged mode for the new concept of the historian as author (identification with the object of study) that illuminates recent historiographical understanding of the shift from the modern historian-as-observer to the postmodern historian-as-participant. In this context, it is highly significant that outstanding historians like LaCapra, Geertz or Rosenstone have chosen *this* genre not only to tell their lives but also, and more significantly, to expose their epistemological beliefs and commitments—in intellectual history for LaCapra, symbolic anthropology for Geertz, and unconventional history for Rosenstone. Thus, these personal testimonies become not only conventional autobiographies but also ‘valid’ history, as the historical artefacts (defined also as ‘intellectual history’) they really are. By choosing autobiography as a way to practice intellectual history, experimental historians illustrate the power of the new decentred voices that are emerging in historical writing—dominated by an authorial and interventionist history—and predict an increasing presence of other innovative forms of genre, particularly those that highlight the performative element: oral narrative, cinema, media, or virtual constructions. These are forms and genres that today are known as unconventional forms of history. Yet, for how long can we still consider them ‘unconventional’?

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