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Boldrini, Lucia and Davies, Peter

Editors' Introduction

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

As a genre and as a critical field, autobiography has rarely been written, read and studied with as much intensity and variety of approaches as in the last quarter of a century. The critical and theoretical emphasis on changing concepts of subjectivity, the role of rhetorical strategies and narrative structures in the representation of self, memory, and history, the re-conceptualisation of the notion and centrality of the 'author' (or of its 'death'), and, not least, the reassessment of the relevance of the auto/biographical subject in the wake of the various critical fallacies exposed by New Criticism, have led to renewed interest in the forms through which subjects negotiate the desire for self-representation and the impossibility of evading the fictionalising effects of language and of all activity of self-speculation.

The essays collected in this issue of *Comparative Critical Studies* arise from contributions to the conference on *autobiografictions*, which took place at Goldsmiths College, University of London, 10–12 September 2003, under the joint aegis of Goldsmiths' Department of English and Comparative Literature and the British Comparative Literature Association. The title of the conference well reflects the dilemmas central to contemporary thought on auto/biography, indicating the status of a critical practice that, having long broken with the seemingly clear aim of sifting *Dichtung* from *Wahrheit*, now finds itself caught between two sources of unease: an awareness of 'truthfulness' in writing as contingent and contradictory, constructed in linguistic processes that are scarcely equal to the task they set themselves, and an instinctive flinch back from the disturbing consequences of this idea. Indeed, despite the radical epistemological questioning of contemporary literary theory, a feeling of unease – perhaps a *moral* unease, undeniably present but scarcely definable – clings stubbornly to the notion of auto/biography insofar as the nature of the project itself assumes the belief in some essential quality, continuity or stability of the subject

beyond its linguistic representations. No excess of deconstruction can definitely rid us of the feeling, however vague, that autobiography remains a necessarily humanistic undertaking that brings with it some form of moral obligation – to language, to history, to the reader, obligations which the reader must also respect – *despite* the distorting effects of language, memory, and individual perception, but also *thanks to* the ability of language to engender signification and self-cognition. The essays presented here demonstrate, through a variety of critical approaches and styles, the significant contribution that an avowedly comparative critical practice can make to the auto/biographical investigation and to the exploration of the tensions and dilemmas described above.

Drawing together suggestions arising from fictionalised autobiographies of historical personages (or, as she terms them, 'heterobiographies') in works by David Malouf, Antonio Tabucchi and Marguerite Yourcenar, Lucia Boldrini elicits central philosophical and ethical concerns that drive the desire for self-speculation, and discusses the tensions thematized in these novels. In Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*, and in particular in the interplay between the text of the novel and the author's Afterword, Boldrini finds a multiplicity of allusions and conflicting narratives that trace a literary history and a history of the concept of man, placing the investigation of the nature of the human at the centre of the novel's exploration of the autobiographical subject.

Nicola King analyses the structures of auto/biographical narratives in texts by Lisa Appignanesi, Dan Jacobson and W. G. Sebald that tell a story through the story of another and discusses the ethical questions raised by such interrelations. The displacement of these narratives – stories of lives disrupted or interrupted by the Holocaust – reflects a larger, more crucial historical (and also geographical, linguistic, cultural) displacement, their narrators being confronted with lineages that were, or could have been, interrupted, and therefore also with the possibility of their own non-existence. This leads to a reflection on destiny and on the interplay, central to autobiography, between the uniqueness of the individual and his or her story and their sharing in a common humanity.

The co-extensiveness between personal and literary history is brought into focus by Elizabeth Crossley's essay on Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. In the absence of memories that can be narrated, other histories (of writing, literary history, natural history) stand in for the history of the self. Ranging from Virgil to Dante to Darwin, Perec's literary references thus become a precise strategy to fulfil a

responsibility to a history that cannot and yet must be told. This is coupled with another recurrent strategy in Perec's writing, the use of formal constraints and in particular of the lipogram, whose only apparently superficial playfulness Crossley shows to be belied by a precise and profound ethical concern with the disappeared, with those whom History has made incapable of telling their story.

The personal histories of Holocaust survivors are also at the centre of Andrea Hammel's comparison the German and English translations of Ruth Klüger's *weiter leben* and Ruth David's *Ein Kind unserer Zeit*. The differences introduced in these stories through their translations for different audiences raise a number of crucial questions about the nature of truth, the shaping of memory, the orientation of historical representation through editorial policy and assumptions about the expectations of a readership. It thus behoves a responsible critical practice, Hammel argues, to internationalise the research on survivors' autobiographies and address it through a comparative approach that can untangle the historical and cultural negotiations to which they are subjected.

Margaret Topping's reading of Pierre Loti's *Mme Crysanthème* and Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* explores the use of fictionalised autobiography and autobiographised fiction to show how the texts' generic and structural differences enable varying modalities of representation of self and other. While the texts (both written by Western male authors, though, in Golden's case, fiction allows the woman to tell her own story) share the focus on the representation of the Japanese woman and the encounter between the West and the Orient, their comparison throws into relief the ambiguities of such representations and enables us to question received critical interpretations about the books, about dominant nineteenth-century colonial and twentieth-century post-colonial positions in the West, and about the West's construction of the Orient.

The comparative reading of Günter Grass's *Kopfgeburt* oder *Die Deutschen sterben aus* leads Rebecca Beard to revise, controversially, mainstream interpretations that ground the novel in its precise historical context and read it as a political statement. According to Beard, such critical stances neglect one of the novel's central concerns, the aestheticisation of authorial identity, necessary to grasp Grass's literary and philosophical (but also political) position. Orwell's dystopian view of *1984* and Camus's existentialism in *The Myth of Sisyphus* – which address the individual's assertion of his autonomy under an alienating

social environment through the construction of a separate realm that allows him to live, as if dead, on the edges of society though not quite outside it – offer Grass templates for weaving fiction and autobiography in order to escape the darkening social and political circumstances of the 1980s.

Fittingly, in the final essay of this volume Ivan Callus reflects on the highly uncomfortable, 'awkward' question of (auto)thanatography, the other of (auto)biography yet always implicated in autobiographical writing, to which it supplies both a limit and a challenge. Through a discussion of the work of Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida and Tim Parks, Callus brings into relief questions about the 'tellability' of the autobiographical, and about the impossibility of a literature that, predicated on the retrospective telling of life, cannot tell of the only experience from which the completeness of life could autobiographically and retrospectively be told. Parks's *Destiny* focuses the discussion on the relationship between death, mourning, and the apprehension and possibility of narration of death in different languages and different literary traditions, setting a challenge to comparative criticism to consider the feasibility of a comparative poetics of the (auto)thanatographical.

Another volume of essays from the conference is in preparation.

LUCIA BOLDRINI

PETER DAVIES