



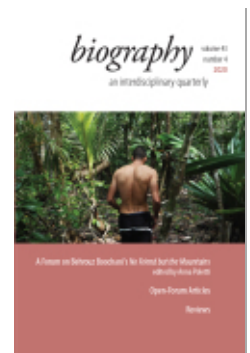
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Biography in Theory: Key Texts with Commentaries ed. by
Wilhelm Hemecker and Edward Saunders (review)

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Biography in Theory: Key Texts with Commentaries

Wilhelm Hemecker and Edward Saunders, editors

De Gruyter, 2017, viii + 288 pp. ISBN 9783110501612, \$34.95 paperback.

This book is an English edition, revised and augmented, of *Theorie der Biographie: Grundlagentexte und Kommentar* edited by Wilhelm Hemecker and Bernhard Fetz (De Gruyter, 2011). Out of the forty-one articles it contains, twenty-six (63%) were in the first anthology in German, of which thirteen have been discarded, while nineteen new texts (46%) have been added in. The principle of composition consists in offering an abundant selection of essential contributions to the theory of biography since the eighteenth century, predominantly issued from the European tradition, with each text coupled with an article by one or several researchers of the Ludwig Boltzman Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Biographie (Ludwig Boltzman Institute for the History and Theory of Biography), founded in Vienna in 2005. The rationale for the game of musical chairs that has eliminated such authors as André Maurois, Emil Ludwig, Michel Foucault, Leo Löwenthal, Wolfgang Hildssheimer, and Anne-Kathrin Reulecke, to usher in Marcel Proust, Boris Tomashevsky, Roland Barthes, James Clifford, Carolyn Steedman, and Gillian Beer is not self-evident, but may simply be explained by circumstantial necessities. Be it as it may, it is regrettable the decision was not made to keep them all on board, even at the cost of reducing the length of the commentaries if such was the diktat of the law of the market, for the whole collection is so interesting and well-made that making it longer would have been better.

The work is intended as a textbook for students of biography properly speaking—that is to say considered as a distinct genre, no longer subsuming it under the umbrella of life writing, which also includes autobiography and memoir in all their forms. In this respect, this book does an immense service to the slowly emerging research field of biography studies, for at least three excellent reasons. First, by focusing on biography in the strict sense as a specific object of research, it liberates it from the epistemological quicksand in which it has too long remained stilted. Second, it provides us with a robust tool for the teaching of biography studies that

will do much to ensure the development of its academic institutionalization. Third, it is all the more efficient for being written in English—and incidentally, Johann Gottfried Herder's "Fifth Letter on the Furtherance of Humanity" (1793) and Stefan Zweig's "History as a Poetess" (1943) appear here in English translation for the first time—and therefore it may easily become an international course book. But furthermore, it reinforces the worldwide dissemination of the achievements of the researchers of the Viennese institute, of which it does more than adumbrate a sample state of the art. It also raises the hope that their two major contributions to the field, *Die Biographie: Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte* by Wilhelm Hemecker and *Die Biographie: Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie* by Bernhard Fetz, will soon be translated into English as well.

In his introduction, Edward Saunders explains that the title *Biography in Theory*, rather than "Theory of Biography" (*Theorie der Biographie*), is meant to "invite a more open, and altogether more sceptical, discussion" (1). This is a rhetorical precaution against a biting northwesterly anti-theory wind that has for some time chilled the literary zeitgeist. He pays lip service to writers like Ray Monk, the peremptory author of "Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding," who prefers "to see biography as an exemplar of Wittgenstein's notion of the 'understanding that consists in seeing connections'" (258), but paradoxically speaks as if such a statement was not a very insightful contribution to the *theory of biography*. For there is in fact a misunderstanding of what we understand by "theory," because of a very transitory historical phenomenon by which, in the middle decades of the twentieth century, "Theory" exerted a temporary hegemony over literary science, of which it must nevertheless be an indispensable component, as long as it remains on a synergetic par with literary history and literary criticism. The Viennese researchers can be praised for being wary of all polemic, yet they should be proud of their laudable heuristic objective, expressed in the very title of *Die Biographie: Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie*: "Biography: Towards the Foundation of its Theory." Moreover, this book, which aims "to historicize the development of the theoretical discussion of biography" (7), demonstrates that the theory of biography is no spring chicken, but that it has been going on in many ways for quite a few centuries already. Saunders rightly says that

Biography in Theory does not seek to provide a uniform theory of biography, or even the kind of typology attempted by Christian Klein, in his useful German-language volume *Handbuch Biographie* (2009). The chronological presentation of programmatic texts from the genre's dedicated 'history of thought', combined with commentaries, is intended to historicize and orientate.

That is exactly what it brilliantly does. As Saunders says: "Ideally, it will serve to help future students of biography develop their own vocabulary and theoretical positions on the genre of biography" (8).

And here lies the greatest usefulness of *Biography in Theory*. However, if we focus more particularly on the new texts that were not in the 2011 *Theorie der Biographie*, it appears that *Biography in Theory* is informed by a recognizable outlook. A convenient starting point may be found in Marie Kolkenbrock's comment on Pierre Bourdieu's "The Biographical Illusion" (1986), which replaces Hannes Schweiger's in the first German edition. What Bourdieu takes issue with, Kolkenbrock says, is the narrative construction of life as a whole, the "myth of personal coherence" (Clifford qtd. in Kolkenbrock 225), or the notion of a subject with an "ontological pit" (Engler qtd. in Kolkenbrock 216), considering, in brief, that the subject is rather a social construct, an "effect," as Esther Marian underlines in her commentary on Anne-Kathrin Reulecke, "Das Subjekt als Effekt von Sprache." Hence the tropism of some modern biographers away from the set form of biographies "from the cradle to the grave," focusing instead on significant periods or events, and tending to eschew the chronological narrative. A case in point here can be found in one of the other texts provided with a new commentary: David E. Nye's "Post-Thomas Edison (Recalling an Anti-Biography)" (2003). In "From 'Anti-Biography' to Online Biography?" Katharina Prager and Vanessa Hannessschläger show how Nye practiced a "deconstruction of the historical narrative" (257), resolutely turning away from chronological order, towards "architectures of historical documents" (Matl qtd. in Prager and Hannessschläger 258) through which the individual is viewed as a "bundle of potentialities" (Nye 249). As Nye says in *The Invented Self: An Anti-Biography of Thomas A. Edison* (1983), "The individual ceases to exist as a unitary object and becomes only a series of meeting points, a pattern of possibilities [. . .] a set of relationships" (12–13). However, as Prager and Hannessschläger recognize, "The question remains as to what extent Nye's 'anti-biography' really is such a thing" (260). Even though they never say so in so many words, Nye's project remains steeped in (post)structuralist conceptions that were a dominant academic discourse in his own time, and which have also been one of the main ideological obstacles to the development of biography studies and theory. In his introduction to *Die Biographie: Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie*, Bernhard Fetz spoke of a "Theoriesistenz" of biography (5), but what we have been witnessing for all these years is more exactly the resistance of "Theory" to biography.

Another reason it is regrettable that Michel Foucault's "Des Leben der Infamen Menschen [1977]" and Hannes Schweiger's commentary on Foucault's *Vie des hommes infâmes*, "Die Macht der Archive," have not been maintained in *Biography in Theory* is that it would have shown, be it only in filigree, that in the later phases of their careers several of the great voices of "French Theory," or what is called "post-structuralism" outside France, were in fact changing tack and turning towards the practice, the study, and the theory of biography. This omission is partly compensated for by the addition of "Roland Barthes: *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* [Extract] (1971)," and its commentary by David Österle, "A Life in Memory Fragments: Roland Barthes's 'Biographemes.'" Besides the welcome expounding of the well-known concept of "biographeme," Österle underlines that Barthes was here revisiting the

genre of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* with a series of three biographical essays, but Österle also incidentally foregrounds another potentially fruitful concept, that of "biographical nebulae"—"la nébuleuse biographique" (Barthes 381)—which Barthes envisioned as a congeries of biographical sources, but which also obviously resonates with Mattl's "architectures of historical documents" (1042), as well as Bourdieu's image of the underground network and Monk's "connections." In texts like these, *Biography in Theory* seems to sketch out a possible evolution of biography theory towards some form of actor-network theory. This could provide a more innovative revisiting of Clifford's "Ethnobiographical Prospect" than any approach tending to fall back on the worn-out modernist notion of the so-called "de-centering of the self" that often seems to loom large in a not-so-distant background.

The texts by Carolyn Steedman, "Landscape for a Good Woman [Extract] (1986)," and Gillian Beer, "Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past [Extract] (1989)," and their commentaries by Caitríona Ní Dhúill and Katharina Prager, are perhaps just a little less thoroughgoing than the articles in part II, "Biographie und Geschlecht" (Biography and Genre) of *Die Biographie: Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie*, as they could probably have gone further to establish the crucial philosophical relevance of women's studies for biography theory. The most promising point is no doubt Ní Dhúill's remark that "over a decade before the term 'intersectionality' enters circulation, Steedman offers a determinedly intersectional analysis, in which class must always be thought in its entanglements with gender and vice versa" (208). However, these articles have the merit to instantiate that biography studies is an academic field that is still in the process of emerging, and that, as Saunders puts it in his introduction, "it is certainly also a specific interdisciplinary sub-field of literary history and the social sciences" (7). As always in such cases, the perspectives of advancement are most likely to arise in the liminal zones of contact with coterminous fields. That is demonstrated again in Saunders's concluding essay, "Biography and Celebrity Studies," exploring the frontier between biography and this branch of media and cultural studies that appears as one of the "growth industries" of the humanities. Saunders's slightly defensive tone may be read as a sign of realization that here lies a potentially strong vector, perhaps a little too strong to be entirely safe, for the future rise of biography studies in academia.

Among the many assets of *Biography in Theory*, last but not least come a "List of Sources" and a profuse "Select Bibliography" that provide a most welcome additional toolbox for students of biography, as well as a "List of Contributors" that deservedly publicizes the identity of the thirteen apostles of the Viennese institute who have co-authored this remarkable anthology. They must be wholeheartedly thanked for having produced this excellent textbook, which will serve as an inestimable basis on which to ground the further development of teaching and research programs in biography studies in many master's degrees and doctoral schools.

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Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing

Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall

Fordham University Press, 2019, 146 pp. ISBN 9780823285488, \$95.00 hardcover, \$25.00 paperback.

In the years since the #MeToo movement gained widespread media attention, critics have speculated that we are witnessing a sea change in public responses to stories about trauma. In their new book *Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing*, Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall offer a different view, suggesting that rather than provoking a transformation, #MeToo has instead illuminated life writing’s long investment in stories about childhood and trauma. Outlining their approach, Gilmore and Marshall write that “*Witnessing Girlhood* offers a genealogy of the child’s centrality to struggles for justice, especially antiracist, feminist, labor, and human rights movements, and the significance within these movements of life writing as a means to spur activism through the representation of childhood” (5). As they describe this genealogy, they deliberately center writing by women of color, emphasizing how claims about childhood innocence elide early experiences of racial and sexual injustice.

Gilmore and Marshall open *Witnessing Girlhood* with a discussion of Rachael Denhollander’s testimony against former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar. When Denhollander and others testified, they relied on their authority as adults to seek justice for their victimized childhood selves, creating “a collective forum of witness” (2). Describing this example, Gilmore and Marshall introduce a key