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Introduction

Biographical Narrative between Truth and Lies, Production and Authenticity

Bernhard Fetz¹

Truth and Lies

Paradoxically in biography, the dramatization of authenticity creates the biographical effect. The answer to the question of whether biographers lie depends on several factors: the biographer's interpretations of his/her role, the expectations of the audience, and the biographical genre, be that a eulogy, a *curriculum vitae*, an encyclopedia entry, a literary or a scholarly biography. In different disciplines, the gathering of biographical data has close ties to scholarship, such as the portrayal of the Other in ethnography, the transcription of autobiographical interviews in biographical sociology, or the interviewing of witnesses in Oral History. Daily life, too, constantly generates biographical evidence: police protocols, evaluative reports, entries in personnel files, or records of conversations between therapists and patients. Generally, we do not grant these documents much biographical power or dignity because they are "artless" and seemingly free of narrative manipulations. The claim to "biographical truth" fluctuates considerably in the production and reception of these texts. In police protocols, the apparent emphasis on cold facts can obscure the mendacious, denunciatory

1. This text was first published as Bernhard Fetz: Biographisches Erzählen zwischen Wahrheit und Lüge, Inszenierung und Authentizität, in: Handbuch Biographie. Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien. Herausgegeben von Christian Klein. S. 54 –60. © 2009 J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung und Carl Ernst Poeschel Verlag GmbH in Stuttgart. We thank Inge Fink, Department of English, University of New Orleans, for translating this text from German to English.

character of biographical portraits created in the process. Michel Foucault planned to explore this very phenomenon—the production of authenticity in the discourse of state authority—in a collection of curriculum vitae of “infamous persons,” a collection that was never realized save for an introduction describing his intent.²

The following example illustrates the tension between imaginative (literary) memory and politically motivated storage memory; the confrontation between the two creates “biographical memory,” consisting of facts, legends, lies, and the urge to tell the truth: The Hungarian writer Péter Esterházy had to write his father’s biography twice. The first time he did so voluntarily, producing an opulent, 1000-page fantasy about the history of the legendary Esterházy dynasty, whose chronicler he considered himself to be.³ He did not have a choice in writing the second biography, and he gave it the form of a report, which lacked all the literary imagination that distinguished the novel *Harmonia Caelestis*. Esterházy had stumbled upon his father’s police files, which indicated that he had been an informant for the Hungarian secret service.⁴ Many biographies had to be re-written once the Eastern European archives had been opened. The archive turned from a place of secrets and repression, a potential source of danger because it stored files on spies and those spied upon, into a place of biographical revision. The archiving of judicial, police, and medical records taught biographers—Péter Esterházy among them—that guilt cannot be wiped out through ritualistic gestures such as confessions: “Statements made in this fashion are registered, accumulated, and preserved in files and archives. The single, immediate, trackless voice making a confession, which wipes out evil because it wipes out itself, has now been replaced by many voices, which come down like a massive avalanche of documents and constitute the ceaselessly growing memory of all the evil in the world.”⁵

We cannot escape the dilemma created by truth, lies, aesthetics, and morality. This is the biographer’s dilemma *par excellence*. In the discussion of truth and lies with regard to biography, Friedrich Nietzsche supplies the crucial questions in his 1873 essay *On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense*: Why do people lie? Where does the desire to tell the truth come from? To what extent does language express this desire? Nietzsche argues from an anthropological standpoint: If we do not want to live like worms, i.e. if we

2. Michel Foucault, *Das Leben der infamen Menschen*, ed. and trans. Walter Seitter (Berlin: Merve, 2001).

3. Péter Esterházy, *Harmonia Caelestis*, trans. Terézia Mora (Berlin: Berlin-Verlag, 2001).

4. Péter Esterházy, *Verbesserte Ausgabe*, trans. Hans Skirecki (Berlin: Berlin-Verlag, 2003).

5. Foucault, *Das Leben der infamen Menschen*, 29.

want to prevail against weaker individuals in the “fight for existence,” we must question the means we employ to do so. Unlike animals, we do not have sharp horns or a predator’s teeth, which could give us direct access to truth; we have to rely on our “intellect” as a means of self-preservation. However, man has developed his “major powers through deception”: “In humans, the art of deception has reached its peak: humans dissemble, flatter, lie, deceive, talk behind each other’s backs, pretend to be more than they are, live in borrowed splendor, wear masks, hide behind social conventions, play a role for others and for themselves ... to the point where we must find it inconceivable that a honest and pure desire for truth could have sprouted up among the human race.”⁶ Man’s desire for truth depends less on his impulse to combat lies than on the consequences of telling lies. We have no problems accepting comfortable truths; we do not care about “insight without consequences,” but when truth becomes destructive, we fight against it.⁷

“So then, what is truth?” Nietzsche asks. For an answer, he writes the following momentous sentences not only into the biographers’ family register: “A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum total of human relationships, which have been poetically and rhetorically enhanced, translated, decorated, and which, after long usage, have become binding and canonical: truths are illusions, but we have forgotten that, worn metaphors deprived of any sensual power. ...”⁸ The long history of trivial biography, with its fixed stereotypes and its clichés, has provided plenty of examples since the early 19th century.

Literary scholars are not the only ones who have long rejected Rousseau’s Romantic notion of an authentic life *avant la lettre* and who have embraced the polyvalent and rhetorical nature of texts; however, the unquenchable desire for biographical evidence keeps (cultural) scholars, readers, and theoreticians active in their fields.

The Relativity of the Biographical Notion of Truth

The multi-faceted concept of biographical truth has been an ambivalent idea since Nietzsche’s destruction and deconstruction. Biographical truth has no easy definition; it is a multi-relational construct, forever materializing

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne,” in *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. 1, *Die Geburt der Tragödie; Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen I-IV; Nachgelassene Schriften 1870-1873* (Munich: dtv/de Gruyter, 1999), 875.

7. *Ibid.*, 878.

8. *Ibid.*, 880-81.

in the interactions between the biographical narrative, its subjects, and its readers. While biographical truth is an effect created by the rhetorical nature of a text, it is always on the run from a mobile army of metaphors trying to overtake it. According to Nietzsche, the struggle for truth is a struggle between the living, graphic metaphors created by first impressions and rigid conventional metaphors.⁹ Seen from this perspective, truth is subversive. It attacks outmoded ideas and dissolves them; it undercuts the foundations of one of the most powerful metaphors: the monument and the memorial. (Even Herder tries to create monuments for great men in his biographical essays, albeit living monuments, which will continue to bear witness to their lives.) We find this kind of truth predominantly in the arts, where it relies on the aristocratic “creative fact”¹⁰ and the notion that a poet’s imagination transforms fact into a higher kind of truth. The poet—and the biographer raised to the ranks of poetic nobility—frees facts from the straitjacket of their historical context and blesses them with a rebirth under new and very different conditions. Nietzsche sees truth as a linguistic convention. The “thing in itself”—we can substitute *biographical truth* here—is inconceivable even to the artist of language. . . . He only identifies the relationships between things and humans and employs the boldest metaphors in the process.”¹¹ Similarly, Ira Bruce Nadel, the American theorist of biography, insists on the fictional character of all biographical texts: “A biography is a verbal artifact of narrative discourse.”¹² However, in biography, their universal usefulness makes metaphors the mediator between a general and a specific truth “which is the recognition of universal aspects of human behavior through the particular actions of an individual life.”¹³

Péter Esterházy’s double biography of his father—one literary and the other quasi documentary-factual—is particularly instructive as it points out the two central concerns of biography: on the one hand, biography is an imaginative (narrative) construction; on the other, biography depends on facts, the search for truth, detective investigation, as well as the desire for mystery and the shock of discovery. The idea of biographical truth is tied to a changing notion of the subject, to the differentiation between public and private spheres, to the development of autobiographical self-

9. *Ibid.*, 881–82.

10. Virginia Woolf, “The Art of Biography,” in *Collected Essays*, vol. 4 (London: Hogarth Press 1967), 221–28, 228. The essay was originally published in 1939.

11. Nietzsche, “Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge,” 879.

12. Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact & Form* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984), 8.

13. *Ibid.*, 166.

confidence, and to the cultural relativity of the idea of biographical truth. We can see this phenomenon very clearly in a quotation from Samuel Johnson, who—as a theorist of biography and subject of one of the most famous biographies, James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*—found himself on both sides of the biographical discourse. Despite his reservations, Johnson regards self-knowledge as an advantage over the biographical insight of others because only the kind of self-investigation found in autobiography manages to resist the temptation of false praise and sycophantic flattery: “[M]any temptations to falsehood will occur in the disguise of passions, too specious to fear much resistance. Love of virtue will animate panegyric, and hatred of wickedness embitter censure. . . . But he that speaks of himself has no motive to falsehood or partiality except self-love, by which all have so often been betrayed, that all are on the watch against its artifices.”¹⁴

Where the function of biography is concerned, the genre has undergone big changes: biography as a normative-pedagogical form during the Enlightenment became a means of creating national identity in the portraits of *great men*. Especially in the 19th century, the expression of cultural norms and values oscillated between the desire for supranational balance and the production and propagation of national clichés.¹⁵ In the 20th century, biography more or less frees itself from these constraints; instead, it tries to explain how artistic creativity, scientific and scholarly accomplishments, or political actions play out in individuals. In the same measure in which the “false” character of trivial biography becomes the subject of historical biography criticism, the demands of modern biography oscillate between literature and scholarship. Seen from a historical standpoint, the notion of the *whole* truth about a person has shifted from a moral to an aesthetic and epistemological perspective. “[A]nd while I am telling nothing but the truth, I have reminded myself that I cannot reveal the whole truth all the time,” James Boswell writes in the dedication of his Samuel Johnson biography in 1791.¹⁶ Modern biographers are challenged by precisely these gaps in biographical accounts. They see and discuss formerly taboo issues, such as sexuality, as the motors of artistic and scholarly accomplishments. Joachim Radkau’s biography of Max Weber, which is subtitled “The Passion

14. Samuel Johnson, “The Rambler, No 69, 13. October 1750,” in *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560–1960*, ed. James Clifford (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), 40–45, 45.

15. Deborah Holmes and Hannes Schweiger, “Nationale Grenzen und ihre biographischen Überschreitungen,” in *Die Biographie: Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie*, ed. Bernhard Fetz, with the assistance of Hannes Schweiger (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2009), 385–418.

16. See James Boswell, *Das Leben Samuel Johnsons und Das Tagebuch einer Reise nach den Hebriden* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1984; orig. 1791), 6.

of Thinking” (2005), provides an excellent example.¹⁷ It shows that the driving force behind biographical production is not so much enlightenment as the thrill of biographical mysteries: “What is left out appears as a gap in the text and has to be filled with writing and thinking, but these gaps also make the text mysterious and interesting.”¹⁸

The rhetoric of autobiography is a particularly important epistemological tool in the biographer’s work. How can one do justice to public figures without analyzing the literary and genre-specific (self) dramatization and not consider it a part of biographical “truth”? The same holds true for psychological processes. According to Sigmund Freud’s late article *Konstruktionen in der Analyse* [*Constructions in Analysis*], the goal of case histories is to reach “the conviction of truth in a construction.” Freud maintains that these constructions can serve the same purpose as recaptured “authentic” memories. When it comes to one’s own biography, even a surrogate memory can be effective; whether the therapeutic success is based on an illusion or a “real” memory is ultimately irrelevant.¹⁹ This means that biographical truth can never do without a certain measure of illusion and dramatization. However, biography must reconcile a universal claim to truth with the production of truth, which is as a part of writing, and with self-dramatization, which is a part of autobiographical testimony. Artistic license in biography ends at the point where the biographer must expose biographical rhetoric, political evasion, and the attempt to hide an individual’s guilt.

Authenticity and Dramatization

Biographers can take the roles of detectives, historians, their subjects’ attorneys, prosecutors, or therapists. We see the same variety in the different types of biographical texts: they run the gamut from scholarly biographies, which document every detail in footnotes, to novels, which follow the biographical model and relish in its claim to truth. In his quasi-biographical novel *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), Julian Barnes uses this technique at the very beginning when he describes a statue of Flaubert that has seen better days. His novelistic depiction of an English author who follows Flaubert’s trail through France shows a lot of comical potential. Barnes’s novel makes

17. Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber: Die Leidenschaft des Denkens* (Munich: Hanser, 2005).

18. Harald Weinrich, *Lethé: Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens* (Munich: Beck, 2005), 17.

19. Karl Wagner, “Glanz und Elend der Biographik,” in *Spiegel und Maske: Konstruktionen biographischer Wahrheit*, eds. Bernhard Fetz and Hannes Schweiger (Vienna: Zsolnay, 2006), 58–59.

it clear that *truth* and *authenticity* are not the same thing. Statues and biographical relics such as stuffed parrots do not have to be genuine in order to appear authentic. Biographical truth relies on the suggestion of authenticity. Rousseau's notion of autobiographical truth in his *Confessions* escapes the "laws of verification": "We find ourselves no longer in the realm of *truth*, the true story, but we have crossed over into *authenticity*."²⁰ The production of authenticity requires imagination, the infusion of material and immaterial fragments of memory with emotions. In a culture of memory, "fantasy cannot be equated with fiction and forgery but with fabrication and invention, in short with the kind of construction that lies at the heart of all culture."²¹ In this regard, individual and collective memory work resembles literature. Biography provides the link between an "atmospheric" truth, which belongs to artists, and a "factual" truth, which is the realm of historians.²² In the words of Julian Barnes, "The past is an autobiographical narrative passing itself off as the minutes of a parliamentary session."²³

While authors and psychoanalysts inclined toward the literary emphasize biographical narrative with all its subplots, historians and scholars in various disciplines stress the veracity of sources that have been cleansed from all manipulations: "The historian must understand and disable the power over future memory, the power of immortalization," says Jacques Le Goff, historian and biographer.²⁴ Historians cannot turn themselves into the assistants of a politics of memory, which operates by arranging and manipulating documents in an attempt to attain everlasting interpretative authority. They must be able to distinguish between an authentic and a fabricated source, and they must recognize whether a source is part of a controlled tradition or a *factum brutum*, a remnant and random witness of some historical fact. Their work resembles that of police investigators. However, once the historical event, the crime scene of biography, is secured, literary historians and imaginative investigators make their entrance.

"In classical mystery stories, the detective *imaginatively reconstructs scenes* from newspaper notices, conversations, and messages; he uses his own *life experiences* as a hypothesis until the *scenes* form a *sequence*, a plausible drama. The inconsistencies in his life experiences inspire him to rearrange the

20. Jean Starobinski, *Rousseau: Eine Welt von Widerständen*, trans. Ulrich Raulff (Munich: Hanser, 1988), 294.

21. Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: Beck, 1999), 83.

22. *Ibid.*, 277.

23. Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Papagei* (Munich: Heyne, 1993; orig. 1984), 128.

24. Jacques Le Goff, *Geschichte und Gedächtnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1992), 229.

scenes until a plausible plot emerges.”²⁵ If, in this quote from psychoanalyst Alfred Lorenzer, we substitute the detective not with the analyst but with the biographer, the family circle widens to include a third. In his analysis of Edgar Allan Poe’s famous story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Lorenzer contrasts the police prefect’s attempts at analytical reconstruction, which is based on language and causal logic, with the detective’s “scenic perception.” This scenic perception translates the information gained from source analysis into the context of experience. Like the detective and the analyst, biographers must be able to confront “messages, i.e. ‘linguistic formulas’ with ‘life experience.’”²⁶ Approaching truth in biography, psychoanalysis, or crime requires a critical awareness of language, that is to say, the ability to critique sources, combined with empathy and imagination. We can read the following quotation as a virtual catalogue of analytical qualities required of the biographer: “As we have seen, openness toward the outrageous must complement the critical attitude toward textual discrepancies. Critical acuity must be balanced by imagination and the ability to envision abnormal or deviant lifestyles.”²⁷

For the most part, the theory of biography has taken the side of imagination; it prefers the company with writers to that of strict historians. The progress of civilization becomes visible in the combination of past memory, still present in some traces, and the memory of the present: this is the humanizing effect of biography, from Johann Gottfried Herder through Wilhelm Dilthey to Leon Edel, biographer and theorist of biography. According to Leon Edel, biographers have an ethical obligation not to manipulate sources: “[A]nd the telling must be of such a nature as to leave the material unaltered.”²⁸ His claim tallies with the demand that biography recapture (at least partially) what was once the “authentic” substance or fabric of life. The challenge consists in “[shaping] a likeness of the vanished figure.”²⁹ However, likeness means difference, means shaping, not identity, a notion that clashes with the ethical imperative not to falsify anything. The “human element” is called upon to reconcile these seemingly contradictory demands—not to falsify sources and “to shape a likeness.” In reference to Lytton Strachey, who occupies a similar position in 20th century English biography as Boswell does in the 18th century, Edel endows biography

25. Alfred Lorenzer, “Der Analytiker als Detektiv, der Detektiv als Analytiker,” *Psyche* 39, no. 1 (1985): 2.

26. *Ibid.*, 3.

27. *Ibid.*, 7.

28. Leon Edel, *Literary Biography: The Alexander Lectures 1955–56* (London: Hart-Davis, 1957), 5.

29. *Ibid.*

with a humanizing function: “Humane, because, inevitably, the biological process is a refining, a civilizing—a humanizing—process.”³⁰ Biography makes a stronger claim to “memory work” than genuine scholarly insight: “It assigns meaning, acts with partiality, and creates identity.”³¹ In their large collection of materials, *History and Obstinacy*, which, among many other things, contains bits and pieces of a theory of biography, Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt present a variation on this idea: “In the manner of Levi Strauss’s *bricolage*, we must recognize the subjective fragments, collect them, and reassemble them into an anthropocentric world.”³² However, when we re-assemble subjective fragments in this manner, we may risk supporting untruths when the ideal clashes with political reality; this Péter Esterházy found out to his chagrin.

Individuality and Type

Biography, in one possible definition, describes an individual’s deviation from a model or type. It makes a big difference whether the individual hails from classical antiquity, the Middle Ages, or modern times. In the case of medieval persons, the biographical method might consist in creating a reconstructed normative model on one hand, and then showing the individual’s deviation from this model on the other. The description of individual behavior rests on the existence of source documents that put the “truth” of the person next to social and historical “truth.” The difference between role and behavior as emanations of the self would then serve as a yardstick for individuality, as an indication for *that which is biographical* in the modern sense. Literary projects like Stefan Zweig’s biography of Marie Antoinette³³ demonstrate how a *role model*, an “average character,” turns into a tragic figure with individual features (in Zweig, a mysterious bundle of letters plays an important role in this regard), whereby the description, the plane of presentation, depends, to a smaller or larger degree, on ideological preconceptions, cultural clichés, narratives and stereotypes, or the process of transmission.

Biography at least has the potential to capture the individual in the midst of structural connections and to describe the space the individual

30. *Ibid.*, I.

31. Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*, 133.

32. Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt: *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, vol. 1, *Die Entstehung der industriellen Disziplin aus Trennung und Enteignung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), 151.

33. Stefan Zweig, *Marie Antoinette: Bildnis eines mittleren Charakters* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1932).

gains from these connections. Individual freedom—and the description thereof—is created by *how* the individual gains this space, be that through the therapeutic illusion of “authentic” memory in psychoanalysis, as the narrative construction of the (auto)biographical life story, or as a posthumous description of “correspondences” derived from a dead person’s estate (see Sigrid Weigel’s biography of Ingeborg Bachmann³⁴). Writings left behind as a part of an estate are not just an archive of mightily formative discourses; they are also the place where an individual gains a voice and a face. A person’s biographical truth can neither be fixed nor defined by any amount of exact reconstruction and research; this truth is negotiated anew in every biographical project.

Biography navigates between *truth* and biographical *evidence* and the notion that all biographical writing is nothing but an ideological or aesthetic construct. As the vehicle for expressing the truth of the body, the truth of ideas, and the truth of posterity, biography creates different definitions of truth. Biography is always concerned with truth, even in a fictional sense: the truth before God, the truth of the self, the truth before a court of law, the truth of a historical person, the truth of legend, the truth that goes beyond biographical mystifications, the truth of a certain life, lived in a certain social and cultural context. Biographical truth includes the truth of repression, i.e. a fundamental lie that governs a person’s life and actions, as well as the textual expression of testimony in certain formats and genres.

34. Sigrid Weigel, *Ingeborg Bachmann: Hinterlassenschaften unter Wahrung des Briefgeheimnisses* (Vienna: Zsolnay, 1999).

