

Kelly on Ferret and Mercier-Faivre, eds. (2014)

Ferret, Olivier, and Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre, eds. *Biographie et politique: vie publique, vie privée, de l'Ancien Régime à la Restauration*. Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2014. Coll. Littérature et idéologies. Pp. 290. ISBN: 978-2-7297-0878-8

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The focus in this collection of fifteen essays is on the relations between the written representation of individual lives—including (and, in some cases, especially) the domain of “private” life, or the *sphère intime*—and the dual political context of those representations: both that of the individual past recounted and that in which the biographical (including autobiographical) writing occurs. The volume is divided into four sections, each accompanied by its own succinct presentational text (by Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre), and bearing a key verb naming what can be understood as a biographical action: *Agir, Édifier, Justifier, Interpréter*. The majority of the work presented across these sections does not directly involve the nineteenth century. Olivier Ferret, in his introductory presentation, sees the studied works’ common trait as “la mise en avant, dans l’espace public, de personnages situés dans un contexte socio-politique d’Ancien Régime, en évolution et révolution, qui connaît de profonds bouleversements ainsi qu’une ‘restauration’ également très complexe” (13). While the slightly detached distinctiveness of the *Restauration* is already apparent here, the historical scheme deployed is, at its most basic, threefold—with the volume’s center of gravity, both in this scheme and in the book’s execution, clearly being the French Revolution and its manifold implications.

Running from the *Vies* of Cromwell which first appeared in the 1690s (Myrtille Méricam-Bourdet), we observe the gradual realization in the following century of a discursive space or set of spaces in which political themes and judgements, sometimes strongly critical, could be embroidered onto the figure of an eminent or prominent individual, and thereby become public. Biographical forms in this period thus evolve, to a variable extent, as proxies for discussions on questions of the public and political good. If (at the risk of anachronism) the critical personalization involved here anticipates the great revolutionary othering of the *Ancien Régime* in the executed body of the monarch, its implications for a history of the figure of the individual per se are also potent. Ferret is incisive on this point: “Il convient [...] de s’interroger [...] sur la place accordée aux nouveaux acteurs du champ politique, en particulier à la figure du citoyen, à corrélérer avec l’émergence problématique de l’individu, envisagé y compris en son ‘privé,’ dans l’espace politique et social né de la Révolution, en tension avec les représentations d’une collectivité plus ou moins influente, sinon déterminante” (13). While these kinds of figures remain largely implicit in the volume overall, they constitute nevertheless the theoretical horizon of the processes mapped out here.

Autobiographical writing under the *Restauration* was a complex exercise, as Francesco Dendena observes, displaying “la prise de conscience que la Révolution française a ouvert un espace nouveau: celui d’une politique fondée sur le consensus, où l’écriture du passé et même la rédaction des souvenirs personnels sont mobilisés pour justifier l’ambition d’intervenir dans l’espace public” (196). Fadi el Hage, in his reading of lives of Napoleon as political interventions during the *Restauration*, recalls the controversies around the Frenchness of Napoleon with an attendant geo-cultural determinism that associates “foreignness” and social and political transition. The idea of biography as politically symptomatic site is to the fore here, and Napoleon’s is the one that has the most generalized and profound effect over much of the rest of the nineteenth century, though he is not the only such figure of note in the period. Thus, Simone Messina’s chapter on Albert Laponneraye’s *Mémoires de Charlotte Robespierre* (1834) recovers a key moment in the renewal of public interest through the 1830s and beyond in the figure of the ostensible subject’s brother Maximilien. Perhaps some of the interest value in such cases is in their illustration of the biographer as witness and hence validator of the life of their subject(s)—the elderly Charlotte’s response to the politicized interest of Laponneraye suggesting she well understood the potential stakes both for herself and her sibling, still then crossing his desert. The flexibility of the “biographical” as a richly symptomatic strategic resource emerges differently in the discussion by Marie-France Piguet of the *Mémoires* of the Comte de Montlosier, published four years earlier—a work which moves from the personal formation of an independent thinker in the late eighteenth century (what Piguet terms the *récit de soi*) to the self-justifications of a robustly political memoir.

The latest corpus of work studied in this collection is in Eric Gatefin’s discussion of C. A. Sainte-Beuve’s readings of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *mémoires*. Here the distinction of public and private is, following J.-J. Rousseau, the object of the later writer’s suspicion—and revised according to a primary truth-value of the private. From the act of self-construction of the critic as one with a privileged personal access to the personalities of the past emerges a version of biographical knowledge as appropriation. Here, in a sense, for better and for worse, we feel the approach of more recent biographical trends and obsessions. Gatefin is measured, and ultimately positive, in his view of Sainte-Beuve in this regard: “reconnaissons-lui la

qualité de son défaut, qui consiste à nous projeter et à se projeter auprès de ce qui semble inaccessible [...]” (276).

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