

Nineteenth-Century French Studies

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Mombert, Sarah and Michèle Rosellini, eds. *Usages des vies. Le biographique hier et aujourd'hui (XVII^e-XXI^e siècle)*. Cribles, XVI^e-XVIII^e: Essais de littérature. Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2012. Pp. 383. ISBN: 978-2-8107-0206-0

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This collection of essays identifies its premise in an apparent flourishing of a “genre” or “form” (*la biographie*) from the early-modern period to the present day and proposes an inclusive, albeit fragmentary, survey of the fortunes of the genre/form’s adjectival counterpart (*le biographique*) over the same extended timeframe. In emphasizing the need to recognize “l’historicité de [la] construction” (12) of what is presented to contemporary readers as an object “comme détaché et quasi autonome” within the field of literary production, Michèle Rosellini’s introductory essay appropriates for the “biographical” a suggestively mobile and contested space between orthodox textual stances.

This space exhibits both historical and literary properties (albeit without wholly satisfying the territorial demands of either the historian or the literary writer): it is both documentary in its ambitions and colonized by ideas of exemplarity. It also uncomfortably transgresses received dichotomies of science and art. Within this evolving space can be discerned the figure of the individual, understood as a field of conflicting social demands and categories of meaning, and the “biographical” duly emerges as a window on the status of the individual as ideological figure within a succession of historical regimes (both political and aesthetic). Quite as much as a prehistory of a present-day “biography” genre, the thirteen essays collected here outline and interrogate the development and maintenance of the individual through a variety of biographically focused textual forms. The key term “usage,” which identifies the overall project as one historically and pragmatically concerned, allows for a structuring of the volume other than in purely chronological terms and, however fragmentarily, enables what Rosellini describes with some justification as the rapprochement “en un dialogue éclairant, [of] différentes époques et divers lieux d’apparition de l’écriture et de la lecture biographiques” (20).

It is thus interesting, from the dix-neuviémiste perspective of the present review, to note the distribution of the four studies directly concerned with nineteenth-century themes—authors, biographical subjects, theoretical problematics—within the architecture of the volume. The first, most panoramic of its three parts (“La vie d’un genre: histoire et méthodes”), surveys all of the centuries covered, of which the nineteenth century is that most directly specified and isolated, in Alexandre Gefen’s “La biographie et ses marges au XIX^e siècle.” Part two of the volume (“Les grands hommes: fonctions sociales et politiques du biographique”) is home to the other three essays treating nineteenth-century subjects, with studies by Hélène Spengler on Stendhal’s first *Vie de Napoléon*, by Élodie Saliceto on Chateaubriand’s *Vie de Rancé*, and by joint editor Sarah Mombert on Lamartine’s pioneering career in popular biography as a “biographe de gare.” The third and final part (“La vie et l’œuvre: usages littéraires du biographique”) offers four essays with a dominantly early modern focus, although two of these also have contemporary theoretical or literary-political dimensions. Beyond the practical limitations of any collective volume, the above distribution suggests a particular acuteness to the social and political dimensions of “biographical” practices in the nineteenth century, in particular as regards the imaginary construction of the great (male) individual figure and its uses within the ideological flux of the period.

Intriguingly, then, Gefen's theoretical discussion of the stakes of nineteenth-century biography identifies it as a critical site in the increasingly polarized tensions between science and art over the course of the century, tensions originating in the post-Enlightenment emergence "d'une science située hors de portée de l'écriture littéraire" (80). Mirroring developments in the theory of historiography, whose growing claims to scientific status as the century proceeds are charted here, biography as the study of the personal reality of an individual life is argued to have undergone a century-long onslaught, "à la fois viciée par les philosophies de l'Histoire [. . .] et par l'exigence de construction d'une mémoire collective, officielle et monumentale" (92). Apart from the biographical dictionaries of Michaud and Hoefer, the two main strands of French biographical production in these conditions are "[soit] de grandes biographies [. . .] qui sont toutes des entreprises abstraites, réfractant l'histoire de France ou de l'humanité dans des personnages conceptuels, soit des biographies essayistes à la Sainte-Beuve, où les aléas de l'existence se trouvent incessamment requalifiés par l'œuvre et où la chair du vécu est comme dévorée par le désir d'élaboration de savoirs supra-individuels, soit encore des figures symboliques [. . .]" (93). Echoing earlier work by Daniel Madelénat (1978), Gefen's essay concludes with the idea of a century of biographical writing endangered by its ambivalence towards the individual as an object of knowledge.

With respect to these tensions, each of the nineteenth-century projects discussed in the second part of the volume exhibits different kinds of fruitful impurity. The fascinating insights into Lamartine's biographical productions for Louis Hachette's editorial powerhouse show biographical writing at the center of a new industrialization and democratization of writing and reading, in which a logic of exemplarity finds ready purchase but where rhythms of production seem of almost equal significance to any imminent philosophy of the work. Chateaubriand's penitential reinvention of Rancé has as much to do with the specific individuality of its author as with that of its subject, thus emphasizing the constantly shifting *différend* between biography and fiction in the period, whereas Stendhal appears determined to attain insights of a general or transferable political and psychological *utilité* through the exercise of strict attention to his living albeit colossus-like individual subject. Spengler identifies in a letter to his sister Pauline (February 1811) what she sees as the statement of this "scientific" method: La vraie science, en tout depuis l'art de faire couver une poule d'Inde jusqu'à celui de faire le tableau d'*Atala* de Girodet, consiste à *examiner* avec la plus grande exactitude possible les *circonstances des faits*. Voilà toute la *Logique* de Tracy, à quoi j'ajouterai: 'Ne croire jamais personne sur parole'" (178).