THE GENRE OF NAMES: BIOFICTION IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH LITERATURE[1]

Alexandre Gefen[2], University Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3, France

https://doi.org/10.46687/UXHW8543

"In the chamber where images are formed, a star appears every time a name extinguishes"

(G. Macé, "Le Singe et le miroir"[3])

Abstract: *This article looks at the genre of biofiction, or "imaginary life" as it is more commonly known in French, reflecting on its origins and considering its cultural meanings through examples drawn from French literary production in the early 21st century. It tries to highlight how biofiction redefines the boundaries of biography and fiction, creating a genre that emphasizes individuality, memory, and cultural reflection. Focusing on the genre's rise as a preferred mode of storytelling in recent decades, the article traces its roots to a broader cultural and aesthetic shift emphasizing subjective narratives and the interplay of memory, identity, and imagination. Drawing from notable works by authors such as Pascal Quignard and Pierre Michon, biofiction is examined as a transformative space where the boundaries between biography, autobiography, and fiction dissolve.*

Through its reconfiguration of narrative structures, biofiction challenges the dichotomy between fiction and referential truth, creating hybrid texts that engage readers in reflective and empathetic encounters. The article discusses key characteristics of biofiction, including its reliance on fragmented storytelling, the manipulation of historical and fictional discourse, and its potential as a medium for emotional and intellectual engagement. Ultimately, biofiction is positioned as a vital literary form that responds to modernity's fragmented identity and reclaims the narrative power of individual lives, underscoring the enduring interplay between literature, memory, and the self. It appears as a key element in the literary landscape of postmodernity.

Key words: *biofiction, contemporary French literature, imaginary life, identity, memory, cultural reflection*

1 This article is accessible in French in HAL Open Science, HAL Id: hal-01624197, https://hal.science/hal-01624197v1

2 Alexandre Gefen, Directeur de Recherche (Full Research Professor) at the CNRS Theory and History of Modern Art and Literature Laboratory (UMR7172, THALIM, CNRS / University Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3- Ecole Normale Supérieure), is a historian of ideas and literature. He is the author of numerous articles and essays on culture, contemporary literature and literary theory. Email: alexandre.gefen@cnrs.fr

Article history: Received: 12 March 2025; Reviewed: 30 April 2025; Revised: 9 May 2025; Accepted: 12 May 2025; Published: 5 August 2025

3 "Le singe et le miroir", *Bois dormant et autres poèmes en prose*, Gallimard, collection "Poésie", 2002, p. 183.

The production of "biofictions[4]", i.e. literary fictions in biographical form (the life of an imaginary character or the imaginary life of a real character), is a significant phenomenon in literary and cultural history[5]. From C. Garcin's *Vidas* to P. Mertens's *Éblouissements* and Pascal Quignard's *Petits Traités*, these biofictions seem to have become the preferred literary expression of a culture tormented by the contradictory impulses of thinking about difference and the duty to remember, and are symptomatic of the major trends in literary aesthetics at the end of the 20th century: a "return of the subject[6]", but a subject that would only give itself a narrative identity, a new intimacy based on the outside observation of everyday life of culturally different entities, a "postmodern" taste for the manipulation of knowledge and ontological games.

These biofictions are explicitly perceived by the writers as a strong generic postulation, which implies both a reconfiguration of the territory of the modern novel and a revision of literary history: "this book is part of a tradition, an extension of a literary genre that has already given us parallel, imaginary, brief and even minuscule lives", G. Macé forcefully claimed in 1991 in connection with his *Vies antérieures*[7]

> This very old genre [life] has secretly survived its secularization as a novel, narrative or short story. For modern writers have also written about lives, clearly announcing this intention in their titles, sometimes in a traditional way (the Vie de Rancé), but more often nostalgic or parodic, or in any case, referential: Schwob's *Vies Imaginaires*, Ramuz's *Vie de Samuel Belet*, G. Stein's *Trois vies, or even Une vie*[8];

continues P. Michon, delineating an area of literary history never studied as such, but clearly organized by the heuristic attraction and poetic specificity of the major genre of biography. The rapid editorial institutionalization of the genre and its trivialization as a simple generic label accentuate this visibility in cultural history to the point of caricature: the "L'un et l'autre" collection published by Gallimard offers "lives, but as memory invents them, as the imagination recreates them", while the term *life* (preferably in the plural), which was still archaic twenty years ago, is now used to cover a wide range of "biographoid"[9] forms, from pure autofiction to conventional biography, including the historical novel[10].

4 The expression is by A. Buisine (see "Biofictions" (*Revue des Sciences Humaines*, "Le Biographique", no. 224, 1991, pp. 7-13).

5 See in particular D. Viart (*Le Roman français au XXe siècle,* Hachette supérieur, "Les fondamentaux", 1999) and D. Rabaté (*Le roman français depuis 1900*, PUF, "Que sais-je" series, 1998).

6 This is the explanation proposed by C. Arnaud ("Le retour de la biographie: d'un tabou l'autre", *Le Débat*, no. 54, March-April 1989, pp. 40-47).

7 Back cover of *Vies antérieures* (Gallimard, 1991); G. Macé has confirmed that he is the author of this text.

8 Interview with C. Hordé, *Le Français aujourd'hui*, no. 87, September 1989, p. 75.

9 The term comes from D. Madelénat ("Biographie et roman, je t'aime, je te hais" (*RSH*, no. 224, 1991-4, "Le biographique", p. 244).

10 One example among a hundred: a recent biography of Leni Riefenstahl is entitled *Five Lives of Leni Riefenstah*l and offers five approaches to the personality of the film director, scuba diver, etc. (I. Walk, Taschen, 2000). Funnily enough, the book includes a chapter entitled "biography" (which is in fact an extended chronology), as if the five lives were not enough or belonged to another type of discourse.

If biofiction fills an empty slot in the generic checkerboard, situated at the crossroads of the two hyper-genres or meta-genres of fiction and biographical narrative, and is easily described in terms of reference theory[11] (as a biography free from all liabilities), the question of the precise status of texts absent, at least until Marcel Schwob's *Vies Imaginaires* (1895), from all generic architectures remains problematic, and, in my view, inseparable from a reflection on the very notion of genre and the extension to be given to the fictional field. In order to resist the temptation of a typological renunciation[12] and a nominalistic retreat according to B. Croce, who sees contemporary biofiction as nothing more than idiosyncratic forms symptomatic of the splintering of narrative literary genres in the contemporary field (and in particular of the irremediable blurring in "biography" and the enunciative distinction between autobiography and biography), a double cartography: an external mapping of the genre, at the crossroads of fiction and historical discourse, and an overview of its internal polarities, i.e. its poetics and possible meanings.

Biography, autobiography, biofiction: a referred genre

As an anthropomorphic form of narrative, based on the fundamental units of the temporality of human life and the individual, biography is intuitively perceived as an *a priori* category of discursive knowledge. This functionalist vision explains the theoretical casualness[13] with which its place in the spectrum of symbolic productions was considered: the genre of life is not – or is no longer, or is not yet – immediately literary, but functions in relation to an autonomous and external epistemological system, which is, at least in the 19th and 20th centuries, perceived primarily as belonging to the human sciences and not to the aesthetic sphere.

The genre of life writing is thus an inseparable micro-system opposing the "serious" biography and fictional biography, dividing up reciprocal and sometimes contradictory attributions (D. Madelénat speaks of a conflict between fiction and referential narrative): as such, it varies with the history of our conceptions of fiction)[14]. If there is continuity, it lies in the use of the biographical, in a long tradition of employing the biographical genre or the label

11 See D. Cohn's analysis in *Le Propre de la fiction* (Seuil, coll. "Poétique", 2001), which I attempt to comment on in "Le chat jaune de l'Abbé Séguin ou la question du statut épistémologique de la biographie" in *Frontières de la fiction, actes du colloque* "Fabula", prefaced by T. Pavel and presented by A. Gefen and René Audet, November 2001, *Modernités,* no. 17, co-publication "Nota Bene"/ Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux.

12 D. Viart speaks of "taxonomic impotence" ("Dis-moi *qui* te hante", *Revues des Sciences Humaines*, "Paradoxe du biographique", no. 263, 2002, p. 25).

13 Perceived as an instrument for transmitting collective memory rather than as an aesthetic object, and defined infinitely more simply than, say, a tragedy or a sonnet, biography is thus dispensed with the need for fussy codification. As J.-M. Schaeffer points out, recalling Hegel's assertion that only literature possesses genres, the rigorous division of textual species is inseparable from thinking about the specificity of the literary (*Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire?*, Seuil, collection "Poétique", 1989, p. 8-9) within other semiotic systems, artistic and non-artistic.

14 A. Fowler uses the term "metastable" (*Kinds of Literature, an Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 47).

"life" by writers – from *Vie inestimable du Grant Gargantua, père de Pantagruel* by Rabelais to *La Princesse de Clèves*, from medieval saints' lives – whose later forms were, incidentally, at the origin of the short story genre in the Renaissance – to the romantic hagiographies (let us remember that Balzac's *Louis Lambert* and Chateaubriand's *Vie de Rancé* are both "lives"): the combinations of memorial, legendary, metaphysical with what would later be called aesthetic are numerous.

If, before the 19th century, *imaginary lives* were perceived as foreign to the distinction between historiography and Belles Lettres, and were not thought of in terms of reference, they gradually took on the role of counter-power during the positivist century, sometimes gratingly opposing the ambitions of historical biography[15]. While the paradigm of scholarly biography was firmly established in the 19th century, in the 20th the boundaries began to blur, with emergence in modern times of biographies by "diction" (G. Genette), or, the "second-degree" (D. Combe) texts *read* as fictional biographies, no matter how they came into existence, in an intellectual climate where critical reflexivity leads to the denunciation of the literary features of serious historiography. The fictional echoes of these weighty epistemological questions can be found in novels staging the instability of the biographical pact (such as Nabokov's masterpiece *Pale Fire* or, in the French domain, the marvelous fiction works of J.-B. Puech) or decoys such as W. Hidelsheimer's *Marbot*, which aims to imitate a real biography through a "formal mimesis" (according to the term proposed by Michał Głowiński) rendering the text undecidable to those who cannot rely on external criteria to point out the perfectly imaginary identity of the character depicted.

This crisis specific to modernity still has aesthetic repercussions in the contemporary field, but with fiction once again tending to be perceived as a legitimate mode of discourse about the world, a form of productive knowledge, the opposition with the referential or at least verifiable discourses of history is diminishing. The dichotomy between biofiction and biography thus eases to the point of seeming to dissolve into a vast generic fragmentation and total formal eclecticism, the causes and consequences of which have often been studied[16]. The individualism characteristic of our times seems to influence our perception of generic classifications, as the opposition between referential and fictional discourse, biography and autobiography, biographical fragment and biological integrity, narrative and discourse changes. This new mobility leads to the rereading and retrospective regrouping of imaginary lives (such as, for example, the republication of Racan's *Vie de Malherbe*, a masterpiece that seemed to have fallen into an unfathomable abyss), and to the re-evaluation of the reputations of their authors (we know of the recent resurrection of Marcel Schwob as a major writer).

15 I develop this idea in "Vie imaginaire et poétique du roman au XIXe sicle: La notice biographique de Louis Lambert", *Littérature,* no. 128, December 2002.

16 See in particular *L'éclatement des genres au XXe siècle*, proceedings of the Paris III Sorbonne-Nouvelle symposium, texts compiled by M. Dambre and M. Gosselin-Noat, Presses Universitaires de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, April 2001.

D. Viard has well noted[17] the extremely pervasive use of the term "life" in narratives that have nothing specifically biographical about them, where they play a role in modulating assertive discourse: generic labels are obviously manipulated from the outside and used as fictional operators. But the reactivation of the biographical implies in the most interesting authors (P. Quignard, P. Mertens, G. Macé, P. Michon in particular) a much stronger generic activity than a simple play on the category of names: the third-person, chronological account of the life of a single character is a particularly restrictive formal constraint – and therefore terribly attractive by its very specificity – Fortuny's mantle of modern narration. Biofiction cannot therefore be confused with the free, inorganic writing of the individual (as proposed, for example, by Roland Barthes's *La Chambre Claire*), nor with the traditional biographical novel, which freely adopts the form of a chronological narrative about a single character, without adhering to the austerity of register and theme proper to the biographical genre. The mere fact of narrating, in literature, an existence for its own sake, also implies taking into account a heavy intertextual heritage: even if it does not entail stable and prescriptive formal or enunciative traits, it implements, directly or indirectly through the means of intertext, generic effects, i.e., procedures specific to the narrative rhetoric of biography, indissolubly linked by an attraction-repulsion effect[18] with the counter-model and counter-genre[19] constituted by the historiographical genre of serious biography within the system.

The point is that biography is not merely, I believe, a generic commonplace, but also, like the essay[20], a refuge for the novel. N. Frye has proposed that literary genres are represented as an "imaginary stock exchange", i.e. a repertoire, a restricted stock of active genres, to the extent that the organization of genres can be described according to a hydrostatic model: the total substance is constant, but the arrangement varies. In terms of aesthetic choices, the decline of the realist novel is to some extent compensated for by the popularity of fictional biography. According to A. Fowler, a genre theorist from whom I borrow these analyses at least in part: the unavailability of the tragic led Montaigne to explore the subject of human individuality using minor, "extra-canonical" forms (it had led Th. Carlyle to a mixture of treatise, biography and epic). Here, it is the traditional novelistic form – due to the discrediting of the traditional rhetoric of narrative, understood since Barthes as fascism – that has led to the exploratory use of biography as a substitute for the traditional novel.

So it is not a "biography without biography", to use the title of an article by F. Gaillard[21], nor capturing the material which determines the choice of reading horizon, but rather a "biography without the biographical", playing on the reader's

17 „Dis-moi qui te hante", *art. cit.* passim.

18 See D. Madelénat: "Biographie et roman, je t'aime, je te hais", *R.S.H.*, no. 224, pp. 235-247).

19 On the hypothesis, derived from Russian formalism, of the binomial functioning of generic micro-structures, see A. Fowler, *Kinds of literature, op. cit.*, chp. 6.

20 See M. Macé, "Barthes romanesque" in *Barthes, au lieu du roman*, texts collected and presented by M. Macé and A. Gefen, Nota Bene-Desjonquères, 2002.

21 "Barthes, le biographique sans la biographie", *R.S.H.*, no. 224, 4th quarter 1991.

cultural knowledge, capable of filling in the silences of a fragmented narrative and restoring a complete discursive trace, is what contemporary biofiction offers us: seemingly anomic, biofiction inevitably reinscribes itself in a precise horizon of generic expectation. Triggered by a title or an explicit reading contract entered into by the narrator, by the reactivation of *topoi* of biographical narrative (the heralding childhood, the pivotal event, etc.), or simply by a particular attention to the details of lived experience combined with the narrative's focus on a single object, biofiction invites us to take the measure of a destiny based on a few "biographems".

The very brief life of Quignard, taken from *Petits traités*[22] will be my example. As we shall see, the biographical reading is triggered by the linear organization of the chronology, the emphasis on the classical *topos* of death as a meaningful moment[23] and, correspondingly within the moralist tradition, the dying man's last words:

> Mr Hamon knitted on his donkey to keep his hands busy. This was when he visited his patients in the countryside. He was Racine's teacher. He wrote twelve little treatises, including one on solitude, in which he compares the century to the shade cast by chestnut trees on earth, and solitude to sunlight in August.
>
> He ate nothing but dog's bread, chewing upright and moistening his big lips with little water. He died on February 22, 1687, aged sixty-nine, whispering in agony:
>
> "Silence, Jesus Maria, silence! Sponsus et sponsa! Silence! Silence!"
>
> Then he chanted only the word silence.
>
> Then it engulfed him.

Unlike scattered biographemes, which constitute certain forms of testimony, the biographical narrative implements a hypertrophied version of what V. Jouve has called the character-effect[24] and what we might call the biography-effect (which is how I define the difference between biography and biographical and not what Mireille Calle-Gruber calls the biography-effect[25]): the constitution of a nominal fictional universe, an autonomous and portable personal world, set at a distance from the narrator, shaped by the mere power of a proper name and organizing the narrative from both a narratological and semiotic point of view.

This example can be used as a starting point for a number of remarks aimed at identifying the common generic features of biofiction:

- What modern *imaginary lives* have in common is that they unfold in a paratactic mode, rejecting any teleological causality. In the article "Vies" in *Le Propre du langage, voyage au pays des noms communs*, J.-C. Bailly evokes narratives "free from any edifying will [...] Each organized according to its territory or its flight, according to its cadence and its step [...] The game at once sovereign and

22 Pascal Quignard, XIX^{e} Traité: "Traité de M. Hamon", *Petits Traités*, tome V, Maeght Editeur, 1986, pp. 107-108.
23 Montaigne, for example, saw discourse as the "commented register of various deaths" (*Essais*, I, p. 20).
24 Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1997, p. 221.
25 Ibid.

disoriented, a disjunction without conflict". This kind of writing is authorized by the highly constrained way in which the narrative is organized, since it is chronological and bounded, at least at the end: biography plays the role of a frame (J.C. Bailly speaks of the "contour formed by the finite succession [of] moments") which, by its very rigidity, allows for the amplification of details.

- An egalitarian genre, seemingly indifferent to its subjects and descriptive content, *life* nonetheless continues to draw on a vast thematic heritage, which it rearranges as it sees appropriate. Quignard deliberately chooses to paint a minor character and plays with the juxtaposition of insignificant *realia* and major historical facts. A broader overview would certainly demonstrate that imaginary lives fit into canonical groupings and pre-constructed categories: M. Foucault's innovative "vies de hommes infâmes" (lives of infamous men) refer to the old tradition of the lives of criminals, while the lives of authors supposedly invented by the collaboration of J.-B. Puech under his pseudonym B. Jordanne, belong to an immemorial genre marked by many lives of Homer[26] and biographies of imaginary troubadours[27]. Like P. Michon, who chose to write about the postman Roulin rather than Van Gogh, Mr. Hamon's life takes the place of the impossible life of Racine, a kind of counter-life or escort-life.

- The question of the biographer's and narrator's subjective involvement in the narrative calls for another remark: however modern it may seem in its reflexivity, the staging of this figure is as old as the genre of biography itself. There are numerous instances of blurring between a memoir, a biography and an autobiography, providing the contemporary novel with infinite possibilities for changing voices (characters taking the floor, fictional memoirs[28], etc.). Those that speak as much of the devouring of the other as much as of the revenge of the prey: "A thousand dead lives, which were either ancient or fictitious, have been substituted for his life"[29] writes Quignard of the biographer. By portraying a complex identity and a troubled mimetic process, contemporary literature makes explicit the issue of the exhibition – or concealment – of the enunciative voice in the narrative, as well as that of the reciprocal construction of narrator, author and their subjects, which reflects this especially through metaphors of palingenesis (rebirth) and metempsychosis (soul transmigration). The most notable example is Macé's *Vies antérieures*, which, following in the footsteps of T. de Quincey, G. de Nerval and C. Baudelaire, defines the poet as one who can slip into the body of another[30], a sort of Bovarysm and it could be perceived as "alienating oneself from oneself"[31].

26 See *Fictions d'auteur, Le discours biographique sur l'auteur de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, collected by Sandrine Dubel and Sophie Rabau, Paris, H. Champion, 2001.

27 See J.-C. Huchet, "Le réalisme biographique dans les *Vidas* et les *Razos* occitanes" in *Roman, réalité, réalismes*, P.U.F., 1989.

28 See Pauline A. H. Hörmann, *La Biographie Comme Genre Littéraire: Mémoires d'Hadrien de Marguerite Yourcenar* Mémoires d'Hadrien (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996). For the author, the work is a didactic fresco à la Plutarch, but above all a projection of the self in a *persona*: "It is not through blood that the true human continuity is established" (Marguerite Yourcenar, cited p. 126).

29 P. Quignard, *Le Lecteur*, Gallimard, 1976, p. 11.

30 See "Dis-moi qui te hante"

31 To borrow a phrase from M. Schwob ("La Terreur et la pitié", preface to *Cœur double*, reprinted *in Spicilège* (Œuvres de Marcel Schwob, collected and edited by A. Gefen, Les Belles Lettres, 2001, p. 1110).

Nevertheless, I don't think it is appropriate to put all the forms of memoir writing under the category autofiction, and to speak of auto-heterobiography or allo-autobiography to depict the rather banal phenomenon of the narrator's autobiographical projection in his or her narrative. Often mixed with autofiction (as in Pierre Michon's masterpiece *Vies minuscules*, where an autobiographical frame orders and comments on the various memorial vignettes visited one by one), biofiction is nonetheless a device for releasing otherness. The dream of transfer and coincidence (in other words, the productivity of the other in the work of self-definition by the enunciator), and the "post-modern" vision of personal identity as open, composite, intersubjective (even intertextual), nonetheless alter what is the fundamental ethos of biography: to give an account of a boundary separating self-consciousness from the body of the other, to tell the incomparable story of a perishable life captured in what is *different* about it: in this sense, biography is always an exceptional and external narrative ("extime" if you like), explained by Schwob's definition: "Art is the opposite of general ideas, describes only the individual, desires only the unique. It does not classify; it downgrades[32]".

- The evocative power of the narrative is indifferent – and sometimes inversely proportional – to the textual volume of life. Hence the lapidary power of brief lives (where the textual material, in its stripped-down, fragmented form, is intended, by a kind of homothety, to mirror the image of tiny beings or the scattered traces of great men, and seeks, through brevity, to express transience). Hence also the frequent narrative structures that place lives in parallel, intending to constitute a sort of community of the dead, through an analogy between the form of the collection and the totality of a given human community (familial, spiritual, etc.): lives are expressed as necessarily plural units (whether the plural is internal or external) and easily arranged into series. They are "lives, as many as you want, as many as they were and as many as they will be, each with its own weight to place on the scales, where in the end a heavier weight will always be opposed to the lighter one, ejecting it: all these narratives about suffering and bad omen that the plural *lives* give rise to", as D. Oster brillianttly puts it[33].

- Even if a biography is able, by playing with the order of the narrative, to take into account the context of "a post-Newtonian evolution of the spatio-temporal categories" (I quote D. Oster[34]), what these biographies have in common is that they propose what might be called an emotion of temporality, which is another name for Schwobian "pity", and more precisely, a temporality that would have the two aspectual characteristics of the *passé simple*: to be radically cut off from the present (unlike the *passé composé*), since the "perfect is like a severe edge that slices through the succession of a biographical *haiku*" (I quote D. Oster again about Schwob's *Vies Imaginaires*), and propose (unlike

32 "L'Art de la Biographie", preface to *Vies imaginaires* (1896), reprinted in *Spicilège* (Œuvres de Marcel Schwob, *op. cit.*, p. 1210).

33 D. Oster, *L'Individu littéraire*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1997, p. 123.

34 Preface to *La Lampe de Psychée*, P.O.L, 1992, p. 18.

the *imparfait*) a global aspect, i.e., to give a punctual vision of an action. This tends to transform the analysis of duration as a transformation and learning (which is what traditional biography was before the modern controversies), into a constellation, or a network of rhizomes, whose metaphor is the monad, or, in Barthes's work, the Lucretian metaphor of the atom which constitutes the biographeme, or in another recurring metaphor from G. Macé's work, the stitches of a fabric.

Poetics and functions of biofiction

If this privileged form of contemporary literature known as the imaginary life cannot be defined by a simple generic paradigm, "the world-effect it produces is constituted by strong generic features (distance, otherness, unity). We know that since J.-M. Schaeffer and A. Fowler, the formal and thematic characterization of genres is easily combined with pragmatic determinations: if we want to map the genre internally, it seems to me more interesting to construct a generic system or a system of "generic modulation[35]" by means of the functional question – where aesthetic issues would be only one dimension among others, since literature in biography rediscovers its transitivity, than to take up referential criteria (such as those proposed by Mireille Calle-Gruber, who, as D. Viart reminds us distinguishes between the "supposed life narrative," the "narrative supposedly about a life," and the "narrative of a supposed life").[36]

- Biography as a novel and theater

The first temptation of *imaginary lives* was to intensify the poetic potential of biography and its emotional effectiveness, to use it, following Barthes's concept of it being a "counter-ideology of form[37]", an open, mosaic text, overturning the classical hermeneutics of the *lives of great men*[38], in favor of the ostension, subjectivity and the chance of parallels, which brings us to the possibility of a diversity of meaning and its further transmission. Let us think of the two short *lives* of Sade and Fourier[39] written by Barthes, put at the end of the eponymous volume, fragmented into twenty-two and twelve "biographèmes" respectively, which are well representative of the creative decentering of biographical *topoi* proposed by the author of *Degré zéro de l'écriture*:

35 The term comes from J.-M. Schaeffer, who distinguishes between hard constitutive or regulative genericities and hypertextual or analogical genericities.

36 M. Calle-Gruber, "Quand le nouveau roman prend les risques du romanesque", in *Autobiographie et biographie*, Nizet, 1989, p. 188.

37 *Œuvres complètes de Roland Barthes*, édition établie et présentée par Éric Marty, Paris, Seuil, 1993-95 (three volumes), tome III, 1995, p. 318. I attempt to analyze the poetics of the Barthesian biographem in See M. Macé, "Le Jardin d'hiver" *in Barthes, au lieu du roman*, *op. cit*.

38 On the decline of the genre, see M. Fumaroli's article, "Des 'Vies' à la biographie: le crépuscule du Parnasse", *Diogène*, no. 139, Oct. 1987.

39 Barthes decided not to give a life of Loyola "in accordance with the principles of *biography* alluded to in the preface; I would have lacked the meaningful material" (*ibid.,* p. 1048, Barthes's emphasis).

9° His knowledge: mathematics, experimental sciences, geography, astronomy.

10° His old age: he surrounds himself with cats and flowers.

11° His concierge found him dead, in a frock coat, kneeling among the flowerpots.

12° Fourier had read Sade[40].

Inserting common expressions in everyday biographies, the disclosure of personal facts , is described by M. Sheringham as the "the details taking over the structure", it aims to create a kind of theater of memory (the expression comes from J. Roudaud in his beautiful essay on G. Macé[41]), which is not a fixation technique but an art of mobility, a dream of creating a memory that is "light, tactical, mobile", "a memory that sheds light on life" (M. de Certeau) aimed at making the perishable material of that life available to others, through a mechanism of affective transfer, which evokes the fragments of memory and, of course, R. Barthes's famous programme:

> If I were a writer and dead, how I'd love my life-story to be reduced, by a friendly and casual biographer, to a few details, a few tastes, a few inflections, let's say "biographémes" whose distinction and mobility could travel beyond all destiny and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body, which is to be scattered to the four corners of the earth; a "perforated" life, in short[42].

Hence poetics that is struck by disorder and availability, based on local effects of the sublime or global effects of the pathetic (since the biographical chronotope has death as its sole horizon), hence a genre that functions as an aesthetic language for certain against all the suspicions that one might have about the levelling up of the narrative and lyricism since the post-war period, since it exploits nothing other than "the tragic potential of the footnote[43]", hence a biofiction that plays ontheatricality, hyperrealism (think of the works by Yann Gaillard[44]), or a fascination (Quignard) beyond the representation of the writing about the other, becoming a form of anti-mimetic writing.

- Biography as anthropology and inquiry

In this battle of opposites, where the literature uses the biographical for what it is not (to rob it of the novelistic and the tragic), literature recovers functions – ministries – that are archaic to biographical discourse, but which have become foreign to literature defined as a simple aesthetic project: the narrative demonstration of difference, awareness of the epistemological and

40 *Ibid*. p. 1173. Note the presence of the cat, often associated in Barthes's work with the theme of time and a privileged index of fictionality: see, of course, Abbé Séguins yellow cat ("La Voyageuse de nuit", preface to Chateaubriand's *Vie de Rancé*, text reprinted in *Nouveaux Essais critiques*, *O. C.*, tome II, pp. 1365-1367).

41 "Un matin de mémoire", afterword to *Bois dormant et autres poèmes en prose*, Gallimard, collection "Poésie", 2002, p. 204.

42 Sade, Fourier, *Loyola*, Œuvres *complètes de Roland Barthes*, op. cit. p. 1045.

43 In the words of A. Grafton ("Les Origines tragiques de l'érudition : une histoire de la note en bas de page", Seuil, 1998).

44 *Choix des morts illustres*, Paris, U.G.E., 1987 (includes "Vies des morts illustres", "Mémoires des morts illustres", "Gloire des morts illustres", "Chronique des morts illustres").

cognitive stakes of biography. A double metaphor for the biographer: as an ethnologist and detective.

The ethnological biographer aims to reintroduce otherness into the common. Reactivated by M. Foucault and his dream of building a counter-history of the world, of redeeming the *minores*, rehabilitating the casualties of history, servants, Judases and models, the project is an old one. Thomas Carlyle (who proposed registers of an "innumerable number of obscure lives[45]"), J. Aubrey or even Sainte-Beuve, proposing to erect statues "to the great men who did not shine, to the lovers who did not love[46]", only preceded the way in which contemporary writers came to take an interest in the past (P. Quignard's Rome, P. Michon's barbarians, etc.). They play with an effect of defamiliarization by exploiting the strangeness that seemingly ordinary History can provide when laid bare by erudition, philology, and archaeology, disciplines that A. Nadaud and G. Macé have taught us to see as forms of fiction.

This anthropological biographer is combined with the investigative biographer, a figure no doubt better known for the countless stagings of the I-mediator or I-witness in contemporary literature, and which I won't dwell on[47] but will simply note that its horizon is not necessarily the autobiography. This speculative or exploratory biography can take the form of humorous parody or cognitive games on the fragile boundaries of individuality and referential reality, staging less a psychological relationship than a judicial inquiry (I am thinking in particular of the neo-Oulipian biography such as *Vie de L'abominable tisonnier de John McTaggart Ellis Mc Taggart* by Jacques Roubaud): '[Certain contemporary authors] invest abstract procedures of knowledge with a novelistic charge [...] Scholarly knowledge, critical reflection, the amateur essay all become forms of intellectual fiction in which the writer stages the adventures of knowledge,' writes B. Blanckeman[48].

- Biography as mysticism

The coexistence of the profane immortality of signs and sacred eternity of the Word, the collusion of scriptural burial and spiritual survival, goes back to the origins of history and literature. It leads the *imaginary lives* that recover the genre of the proper memoir, which leads the biographical genre to assume a profane or sacred memorial function: haunted by the figure of Lazarus, the biographer is the one who relies on the power of signs and quickly becomes

45 Th. Carlyle, *Biography, in English and other critical essays*, London and Toronto, 1925, p. 65. Quoted by L. Koch ("Esemplari, parrallele, inimitabili, immaginarie", *Strumenti critici*, May 1986, I, 2, p. 249).
46 *Volupté*, Garnier-Flammarion, 1969, p. 163. Quoted by L. Koch ("Esemplari, parrallele, inimitabili, immaginarie". *Strumenti critici*, May 1986, I, 2, p. 249).
47 On novels of biographical inquiry, see in particular D. Madelénat, "Un roman de la biographie: Les Hommes de Papier de William Golding", *La Licorne*, "Le Travail du biographique", 1988, no. 4.
48 *Les fictions singulières, étude sur le roman français contemporain*, Prétexte, 2002, pp. 148-149.

demiurge (according to a metaphor present in M. Schwob[49]), enchanter (G. Macé), or redeemer (P. Michon). The nominalism of biography, a genre of names, becomes resurrectionist when the despair inherent in an intrinsically tragic narrative becomes a suggestion of meaning. Through the grace of an assumed mysticism in Michon's work, through a poetic "resurrection of the flesh in the light of dreams[50]" in G. Macé's, through the performative violence of the bare word in P. Quignard's, to repeat a life, to "double the realistic illusion" as Michon puts it, beyond any practical purpose, in the aesthetic field, is to radically banish its contingency. And the more life is altered and reduced, and the more minuscule and mediocre the existence, the more the simple naming of the one who has existed will make apparent the irreducible presence of an almost-nothing that engages the biographer's whole being. The poet must, according to an expression borrowed from *Moby Dick*[51], "draw God into the book":

> In lives, [...] the old belief in the arts perhaps takes the place once occupied by God in hagiographies. [...] Roland Barthes noted that anthropology rests on the postulate that "it is profoundly unjust that a man should be born and die without having been spoken of"; anthropology tries to repair this injustice, but literature is not forbidden to do so either. [...] To write about lives is to invent the existence of people who actually existed, who had a civil status, it's to double the illusion of realism [...] And, if in this troubling operation one manages to capture a little truth, perhaps one briefly brings back to life, for the space of two sentences or two words, those vanished existences[52].

One thinks of the prodigious exchange that closes *Vies minuscules*:

> In search of them [the dead], in their conversation which is not silence, I found joy, and perhaps it was theirs too; I nearly came into being many times through their aborted rebirth, and always died with them; I would have liked to write from the height of that vertiginous moment, the terror, to write as a speechless child dies, melting into summer: a very great emotion that can hardly be described. No power will decide that I didn't succeed at all. No power will decide that my emotion in no way broke out in their hearts. [...] May a child always be born in Marsac. May Dufourneau's death be less definitive because Élise remembered or made it up; and may Élises death be lightened by these lines. In my fictional summers, let their winter hesitate. In the ruins of what might have been, in the winged conclave, a house of Cards, they may be[53].

The "I" grants itself the power to make the night "hesitate": narrative instances mingle and link up, fiction brings to light the materiality of characters who are given to us as if they existed, as having been close to the author, like the cousins from the provinces or these "wordless" children quickly forgotten by the city, these anonymous people as we all know them and of which we will

49 A "Vie de Morphiel, démiruge" should have preceded the series of *Vies imaginaires* (see *Œuvres de Marcel Schwob*, *op. cit.*, p. 1110).

50 *Vies antérieures*, Gallimard, coll. "Cahiers du Chemin", 1991, p. 125.

51 Interview with Pierre , *Le Même et l'Autre*, n° 3, May 1992, p. 54.

52 Interview with Tristan Hordé, *Le Français aujourd'hui*, n°87, September 1989, p. 78.

53 *Vies minuscules*, Gallimard, 1984, p. 207.

undoubtedly be a part, but whose names, as George Steiner points out, only the telephone book will preserve forever. The power of redemption is alternately withdrawn from the supreme instance ("no one will decide"), a vivid text that the author is striving for, achieved through the power of the Word, through the liturgy of imperatives. Death is birth and birth is death, the Narrator is God and God is a Narrator, since he has the power to command the verb "to be".

> In this repair of the split lies perhaps the supreme, metaphysical function of a biographical book. It restores the fabric of Being torn into separate monads, orders and soothes the inflation of the existent (that injustice for the many spoken of by Plato), offers other selves between the self and the not-self, fascinating territories, breaks for a moment the spatio-temporal limits that confine us. Fences become porous between here and elsewhere, between the present and a past redeemed by the narrative.

explains D. Madelénat[54]: the "intercessor" biographer redeems the human being, "granting burial to the dead by remembering their names"[55].

A wager on language

Returning to literary history, contemporary biofiction shares many of the defining traits of "post-modernity", as defined by B. Mc Hale[56]: eclecticism or fragmentation of styles, blurring of enunciative and referential levels, reversal or manipulation of established value systems, indeterminacy and openness of the text to manipulation by the reader, instrumentalization of the discourse of knowledge, history, in particular, history within "metafictions". Stirred by a dialectic of dispersion and obsession with splintering, but haunted by a dream of reunion and palingenesis, biofiction tends to reject the traditional function of literary representation through *mimesis*, modeling and exemplification, and no longer aims directly to provide knowledge about the world, of the general order, the discourse, or even simply an emotion, but to make "the precious essence of the individual" appear again. According to R. Barthes's concept "a science for every object": the contemporary novel makes the particular not an object of collective knowledge, shared exemplification, but a singularity that exists through the ontological powers of fictional naming. This trend goes beyond the failure of structuralism and aims for a new *Cratylism*: since it is accepted that there is no such thing as non-discursive knowledge, no such thing as non-narrative identity, since the word operates at the very level of ontological processes, language can have these powers to create fictional worlds, which lose their value when put in comparison to the inherently unstable referential worlds.

Representation is then to be rethought in terms of emotional reassignment, empathy and the local, free and unpredictable manipulation of fragments: a dual

54 *La Biographie*, P.U.F., 1984, p. 191.
55 *Vies antérieures*, op. cit. p. 22.
56 See *Postmodernist fiction*, Routledge, London and New-York, 1987 or L. Hutcheon, *A Poetic of Postmodernism, history, theory, fiction*, Routledge, London and New-York, 1988.

movement of individuation and emotional transfer, of dispersal of the individual and sharing through the text, is at play in contemporary "singular fictions[57]". Whereas the moment of modernity denied all performative efficacy and heuristic power to the narrative, biofictions take up the challenge of language once again, and recast constitutive duration and collective knowledge in the fiction of the unique: fictional lives – possible lives – offer what J. Roudaut calls, in relation to the works of G. Macé: "a device of resurrection and emancipation[58]", a mode of survival through writing that is both derisory and sublime: literature.

References

Barthes, R. (1993–1995). *Œuvres complètes de Roland Barthes* (Vols. I-III, É. Marty, Ed.). Paris: Seuil.

Blanckeman, B. (2002). *Les fictions singulières: Étude sur le roman français contemporain*. Paris: Prétexte.

Carlyle, T. (1925). *Biography, in English and other critical essays*. London & Toronto: Dent.

Cohn, D. (2001). *Le propre de la fiction*. Paris: Seuil, coll. Poétique.

Dambre, M., & Gosselin-Noat, M. (Eds.). (2001). *L'éclatement des genres au XXe siècle*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de la Sorbonne Nouvelle.

Dubel, S., & Rabau, S. (Eds.). (2001). *Fictions d'auteur: Le discours biographique sur l'auteur de l'Antiquité à nos jours*. Paris: Honoré Champion.

Fowler, A. (1982). *Kinds of literature: An introduction to the theory of genres and modes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fumaroli, M. (1987). Des "Vies" à la biographie: le crépuscule du Parnasse. *Diogène*, (139), Oct.

Gefen, A., & Macé, M. (Eds.). (2002). *Barthes, au lieu du roman*. Paris: Nota Bene-Desjonquères.

Hörmann, P. A. H. (1996). *La Biographique comme genre littéraire: Mémoires d'Hadrien de Marguerite Yourcenar*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A Poetic of Postmodernism, history, theory, fiction*. London and New-York: Routledge. Huchet, J.-C. (1989). Le réalisme biographique dans les *Vidas* et les *Razos* occitanes. In Bessiére, J. (Ed.). *Roman, réalité, réalismes*. Paris: P.U.F.

Koch, L. (1986). Esemplari, parrallele, inimitabili, immaginarie. *Strumenti critici*, I(2), 249.

Madelénat, D. (1984). *La biographie*. Paris: P.U.F.

57 Use B. Blanckeman's expression (*Les Fictions singulières*, op. cit.), which attempts to propose alternative classifications to traditional categorizations of the novel.

58 "Un matin de mémoire", afterword to *Bois dormant et autres poèmes en prose*, Gallimard, coll. "Poésie, 2002, p. 204.

Madelénat, D. (1988). Un roman de la biographie: *Les Hommes de Papier* de William Golding. *La Licorne*, (4), "Le Travail du biographique".

Madelénat, D. (1991). Biographie et roman, je t'aime, je te hais. *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, (224), 235-247.

Macé, M. (2002). Le Jardin d'hiver. In A. Gefen & M. Macé (Eds.), *Barthes, au lieu du roman*. Paris: Nota Bene-Desjonquères.

Macé, G. (1991). *Vies antérieures*. Paris: Gallimard, coll. Cahiers du Chemin.

Macé, G. (2002). *Bois dormant et autres poèmes en prose*. Paris: Gallimard, coll. Poésie.

Mc Hale, B. (1987). *Postmodernist fiction*. London & New York: Routledge.

Michon, P. (1984). *Vies minuscules*. Paris: Gallimard.

Oster, D. (1997). *L'individu littéraire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Quignard, P. (1976). *Le lecteur*. Paris: Gallimard.

Quignard, P. (1986). *Petits traités*, Tome V. Saint-Paul-de-Vence: Maeght Editeur.

Rabaté, D. (1998). *Le roman français depuis 1900*. Paris: P.U.F., coll. Que sais-je?

Schaeffer, J.-M. (1989). *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire?* Paris: Seuil, coll. Poétique.

Schaeffer, J.-M. (1991). Barthes, le biographique sans la biographie. *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, (224).

Schwob, M. (2001). *Spicilège: Œuvres de Marcel Schwob* (A. Gefen, Ed.). Paris: Les Belles Lettres.

Viart, D. (1999). *Le roman français au XXe siècle*. Paris: Hachette Supérieur, coll. Les fondamentaux.

Viart, D. (2002). Dis-moi *qui* te hantes. *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, (263), 25.

Walk, I. (2000). *Five Lives of Leni Riefenstahl*. Köln: Taschen.