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Transgressive (Auto)Biography as Genre and Method

An Introduction

This special issue of *Brno Studies in English* is occasioned by a round-table discussion that will be held at the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University on 28 October 2010, with the present collection serving as the object of discussion during that round table. The participants, all of whom are either practitioners or scholars involved in life-writing, were asked to contribute an essay on some aspect of transgressive (auto)biography, with the hope that these essays would serve to delineate ways in which life-writing, particularly in the last century, has blurred the distinction between genres, whether that is stylistic or a merger of the factual and fictional.

Ever since the biographies of Virginia Woolf (who challenged her father Leslie Stephen's rules for the *Dictionary of National Biography* by, among other things, penning a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker-spaniel Flush) and A. J. A. Symons (who crafted the first metabiography, *The Quest for Corvo*, establishing the biographer as a character within the exploration of the subject's life), both biography and autobiography have frequently diverged from the "family background – birth – schooldays – university – early accomplishments – marriage – children – mature career – death – lasting impact" timeline that had dominated the three-volume *Lives* of the preceding periods. Whether infused with a Modernist, Postmodernist, or even Post-Postmodernist sensibility, life-writing and its study have sometimes become highly transgressive – in both subject and genre treatment – and the present collection will consider those trends and developments.

In "Real Deep Surprises," Rebekah Bloyd presents a humorously reflective memoir based on a week spent in California, in April 1985, with the Czech immunologist and world-renowned poet, Miroslav Holub, then in the later part of his life. Theirs was a friendship that had developed over a much longer period of time. Among the subjects and objects they discuss and encounter are the rela-

tion of science and poetry to the world, the problem of an apologetically flatulent dog who is a cohabitant of Holub's at the time, how to bring up your children so as not to be afraid of life, the "ins and outs" of creative writing classes, as well as the various connections between Kafka and understanding the nature of lymphocytes.

In "Remember This: Transgression in Memoirs: *The Perfection of the Morning* and *The Girl in Saskatoon*," Sharon Butala considers how her two, very different memoirs – one primarily autobiographical, the other more investigative – proved to be transgressive in equally surprising ways. In regard to the first work, she reflects on her decision to leave academic life in order to become the wife of a rancher, and the attitude, expressed to her in letters from a considerable number of readers, that "I had written words that they felt most emphatically should never be said, much less written for public consumption." In regard to the second work, her own investigation into the murder of a woman who had been her school-mate, she finds herself facing an even stiffer negative response, from authorities and various vested interests. One of the conclusions she reaches is: "A memoir is the story of how one has negotiated life; it is about consciousness in the world, and the absolute accuracy of 'facts' is definitely secondary to such an endeavour."

In "Disturbers of the Peace," Donna Coates compares two memoirs related to the Vietnam War: Lynda Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning* and W. D. Ehrhart's *Passing Time*. The first is the memoir of a nurse, the second of a soldier, both of whom were volunteers, both of whom were deeply traumatized by their experiences in the war. Coates enlists the work of trauma analysts such as Judith Lewis Herman and Kali Tal to examine aspects of the trauma experienced by these very different individuals. These aspects include how they negotiated their suffering, their changes of perception, and the nature of what they had been exposed to. Also considered is how this led them actively to express, in written and, more immediately, in practical and sometimes political forms, their subsequent reaction to what they and others had undergone during the war.

In "Imagining a Geometry of the Soul," Amanda Hale relates her own experiences and writings to "[t]he dynamic between fact and fiction, biography and autobiography," drawing on a wide range of comparisons with the experiences and works of other writers, such as Franz Kafka, Primo Levi, and W. G. Sebald. Substantial threads in her story involve her perception of her father, "a faithful member of the British Union of Fascists"; her childhood memories of being told to stay where she was on a visit to Kendall's department store in Manchester; and her subsequent travels, adventures, and pilgrimages in Canada, Mexico, Guatemala, and elsewhere. Addressing such contemplations she asks: "Do we find within a transgressive structure, a paradoxical, time-dependent truth?"

In "*Quercus virginiana:* Degrees of Separation," Theresa Kishkan investigates the life of Charles Newcombe, "a doctor, field ethnologist, and naturalist" who became British Columbia's first psychiatrist. She revisited the house in which he lived: in the process of making this pilgrimage, she discovered another house that was "an authentic replica of a Kwakiutl house of the nineteenth century," and also

learned that a tree she had always thought of as a kind of eucalyptus was in fact a type of oak. As she observes towards the end of her essay: "A house is more than those who live in it, its secrets are encoded in its architecture and domestic history long after its residents depart from this earth."

In "Masculinity in the Margins: Hidden Narratives of the Self in T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*," Raili Marling considers questions of gender and the body as represented by the way in which, for Lawrence, "the very denial of the body makes the body present throughout the text, as a narrative trope and a moral presence." Marling focuses on the Deraa incident as depicted in Lawrence's account, where he relates or intimates how he was captured on a reconnaissance mission behind enemy lines, tortured, and possibly even raped. Enlisting the assistance of subsequent scholarship, Marling points out that "Lawrence was probably 100 miles from Deraa at the time of the incident." What is interesting for Marling is not, however, the veracity of Lawrence's account, but rather, "the language Lawrence used in different tellings of the episode to arrive at a sense of his work on a desired self at the time."

In "Writing It Up, Writing It Down," Thomas McConnell evaluates two options – whether to write things up as fiction; or, whether to write them down as a memoir in the context of another problem (introduced by way of an essay by Milan Kundera), which is whether everyone, or anyone, has ever really earned the right to write. McConnell moves to considerations of the relation of art – particularly writing and the teaching of writing – to questions of life, especially its unavoidable destination, death. In light of these thoughts, he presents and reflects upon aspects of his own writing.

In "Reluctance, Protest, and Hybridity," Richard Pickard looks at the relationship between nature writing and memoir. He contemplates the way in which, while the former has tended to concentrate on the external environment, the latter has traditionally dealt with the inner world of the individual self. Focusing on the work of Tim Bowling, Brian Fawcett, and Harold Rhenisch (each of whom is from British Columbia), as well as in reference to more established environmental writers (such as Barry Lopez), Pickard considers not the way in which nature writing has recourse to memoir, but how memoir can open itself up further to the earth. He views these writers from the perspective of their writing in a hybrid genre, assessing the potential value of the "generic reluctance" of such writing.

In "Footprint: In Lieu of Life Story," Randall Roorda, who provides a slightly more facetious essay, includes arguments for the claim that "autobiography is ipso facto transgressive." Weaving into his discussion Augustine, Erving Goffman, and above all Henry David Thoreau, Roorda ponders the ways our selves are woven, warped, directed, and distracted by various techniques, ranging from traditional forms of narrative to more recent technical devices, concluding with a reflective riff on the relationship between self and travel.

In "Learning to Live Between the Lines," Christopher Stuart challenges the status of transgressive autobiography by highlighting how and why Tobias Wolff, a distinguished writer and experienced academic, would choose, in his book *This*

Boy's Life, to write an apparently "conventional," "old-fashioned" memoir that imagines the self as "stable, unitary, and essential." Stuart prefaces his analysis with the observations that "only the heartfelt autobiographical account can satisfy any writer's autobiographical impulse" and that "confession and faith – if not necessarily a faith in God – remain the existential imperatives that have motivated autobiography since Augustine and doubtless before."

In "Running [From] the Family Toward Story," Aritha van Herk counterpoints elements of Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* with her attempt to remember, perceive, and articulate aspects of her own family and its life, particularly that of her Dutch Calvinist father. On her relationship to him, as a daughter, observer, and writer, she comments: "It is too late for me to trace him down. I cannot 'get him right' but regard him in those incomplete fragments that recur when I wake at night." Of Ondaatje's ambivalent relationship to the notion of "home," and of her own ambivalent relationship to biography, autobiography, and her father, van Herk writes: "Ambivalence must be the space in which every self invades the story of self, regards it cautiously as a Canadian coyote."

As a group, these essays deal primarily with the ways in which the environment and the self mutually reflect upon one another, the aspects of the writing of biography and autobiography that prove complementary or contrasting, and the various challenges and methods employed in articulating or capturing a life. Divergent in tone, subject, and treatment, these essays should provide apt material for thought and discussion on transgressive biography.

Stephen Hardy, Martina Horáková, Michael M. Kaylor, and Kateřina Prajznerová