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Introduction: Life Writing Matters in Europe

Since the end of the Cold War the Western world has witnessed a sharp increase in auto/biographical writings. A rough analysis of the *World Catalogue Database* indicates that the number of life narratives published in the early 1990s transcended the production during the previous decades (Gilmore 1). A similar development can be perceived in different European languages. The Dutch national bibliography, for example, shows a clear rise in the number of biographies: from 50 published in 1988 to 109 in 1989, 247 in 1999 and 364 in 2009. Among books that are labelled as autobiographies and memoirs, the picture is even more spectacular: from 19 in 1988 to 46 in 1989, 189 in 1999 and 280 in 2009, an increase of almost 1400 (!) percent.[1] Due to these figures, the last decade of the twentieth century has been characterized as the time of memoirs (Schaffer and Smith 1), and this age appears to continue on in the present time.

The current wave of auto/biographical narratives has been explained through several factors ranging from an increase of prosperity and longer life expectations of people in the West, a recognition of trauma and the figure of the witness, an intensification of celebrity culture and reality tv, identity politics and the formation of counter-histories by groups of people who do not recognize themselves in dominant historical narratives, and global transformations such as the end of the Cold War and 9/11. Due to the disintegration of ideological "grand narratives" connected with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, individual life stories have gained more acclaim, historian Barbara Caine contends (2; 124). David Nasaw even proclaims biography to become the twenty-first-century historiographical form *par excellence* because it offers possibilities to reappraise the notion of human agency and enables researchers to show that individual people are not determined by political, cultural or economic structures (577). Regarding the "memory boom" at the turn of the twenty-first century, historian Jay Winter proposes that the appeal of memoirs is ultimately grounded in the fact that the concept of "memory" can serve as a metaphor for a "broader movement of uncertainty about how to frame the past" (65).

[1] Figures based on the digital Dutch National Bibliography, *Brinkman's Cumulatieve Catalogus*. September 2010.

From a historical perspective, both the experience that old frames have lost their function to make sense of life and the trend towards life writing are not new phenomena. Major historical changes tend to generate auto/biographical narratives. After the Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), for instance, life writing served as a crucial instrument to come to terms with the Communist past and to (re)construct individual and collective identities in Eastern European countries. Likewise, the French Revolution (1789) provoked a memoir boom in and beyond France (Caine 68; Fritzsche; Baggerman). Moreover, the breakdown of the *Ancien Régime* gave rise to both the genre of autobiography and biography in its modern forms. It took more than a century, however, before scholars became interested in these genres. It was not until 1907 that the pioneering German philosopher and historian Georg Misch took autobiography as his primary topic and embarked on a life-long project which resulted in the multi-volume masterpiece *Die Geschichte der Autobiographie* (1907-1969).

Generally acclaimed for his path-breaking effort to bring autobiography to the fore as a scholarly object, Misch's work is nowadays deemed to represent an early and dated stage in autobiography criticism (Smith and Watson 113-119). After all, his positioning of the concept of autobiography to mean the texts of "great" men who were supposed to be "representatives" of their times and cultures laid the foundation of a humanist autobiography criticism which excluded writings by many people who did not pass the Eurocentric and male-biased test of being a great man. From the 1970s, auto/biography criticism has taken a different course and developed gradually into a field devoted to questions of how the self is communicated in different times and contexts by different sorts of people in different types of narratives from autobiography, biography, and diary, to other kinds of personal stories. Since the days of Misch, therefore, the academic field of life writing has changed profoundly.

One particular change appears to be a shift in disciplinary focus from history to literary theory. Misch was a philosopher and a historian who considered autobiographical narratives to be useful historical source materials for the study of cultural history and the history of ideas. In the first half of the twentieth century, however, ever more doubts were raised about the usefulness of these sources. While historians distanced themselves from autobiographical texts (Dekker), literary critics grew more interested and began recognizing autobiography as a literary genre. Once autobiography was studied as a literary text, a geographical change also took place. While the established autobiographical canon, ranging from St. Augustine to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and contemporary writers such as Michel Leiris, was deconstructed as a reflection of Eurocentric and patriarchal conceptions of the genre, the scholarly debate gravitated towards the Anglo-

American world. Scholars such as James Olney (1972) and Paul John Eakin (1985) took autobiography criticism to a new level by emphasizing the role of language and rhetoric in autobiographical writings.

In France, in the meantime, Philippe Lejeune claimed that autobiographical texts had to be studied as part of their historical context, both in literary and social terms.[2] Although his holding on to a referential link between autobiographical texts and their contexts was problematic in the poststructuralist and linguistic Anglo-American trajectory of autobiography criticism, a referential approach was further explored in Europe. In Poland, for instance, scholarly interest in autobiographical narratives is traditionally related to developments in the field of sociology (see Rodak in this volume); in the Netherlands, the study of so-called "egodocuments" is mostly undertaken by historians who use autobiographical documents to study the lives, thoughts and practices of writing of people from different strands of society (Dekker). From the late 1980s American scholars such as Felicity A. Nussbaum also argued that rhetorical discourses on subjectivity and self are fundamentally grounded in the historical world in which they are uttered. More recently, Thomas Couser has argued that the clash between referential and poststructuralist approaches can be overcome by a dialogical perspective that focuses on cultural negotiations**.**

The move towards a dialogical conception of auto/biographical narratives has intensified relations between literary scholars and researchers from other disciplines, and it may also provide a good starting point to reunite scholars from different parts of the world. Whereas Anglo-American scholars tend to be based in the field of literary studies, a relatively large number of European life writing scholars are rooted in other disciplines, especially history and the social sciences. The conference "Life Writing in Europe", which was held in October 2009 at VU University Amsterdam (Huisman) showed, furthermore, that European scholarship has moved far beyond the dated type of autobiography criticism that is associated with Misch. At the same time, a humanist perspective toward life writing appears to be less suspicious at present. Indeed, a new humanist turn can be witnessed in both the humanities at large and international life writing scholarship. Starting with Paul John Eakin, who, in 2001, posited that "ethics is the deep subject of autobiographical discourse" (123), life writing scholarship shows a strong tendency towards ethical topics such as (the imagination of) equality, solidarity, and human rights. Kay Schaffer, Sidonie Smith, and Gillian Whitlock have all pointed to the relevance of auto/biographical narratives for the advancement of

[2] A selection of Lejeune's French-language contributions on autobiography from the 1970s and early 1980s was published in English in 1989.

human rights and cross-cultural dialogue because these texts are particularly apt to "personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard" (Whitlock 3). This links perfectly with contemporary practices in Eastern European countries such as Estonia, where life writing is instrumental in making visible stories and people that were not heard or listened to before the rise to independence in the early 1990s.

The new humanist turn, as well as the move towards interdisciplinary cooperation in the field of life writing may be good starting points to further international collaboration within the International Auto/Biography Association (IABA). Founded in 1999, IABA aims to discuss representations of the self in different cultural and social contexts across the globe. Only a small number of participants from outside the Anglo-American world, however, have participated in the biennial conferences organised by IABA. During the Sixth Biennial IABA Conference (2008) in Hawai'i, Alfred Hornung (Germany) and Monica Soeting (the Netherlands) came up with the idea to foster the participation of European scholars by means of the conference "Life Writing in Europe", which would also be the starting point of a European chapter within the IABA. The appeal of this initiative can be measured by the large number of scholars that came to Amsterdam to share their work in the field of life writing, and by the number of European scholars that consequently visited the Seventh Biennial IABA Conference (2010) in Brighton (UK). Since November 2010, the European chapter of IABA has been formalised in a network (www.iaba-europe.eu) and a second conference on "Trajectories of (Be)longing: Europe in Life Writing" took place in Tallinn (Estonia) in May 2011.

The conference "Life Writing in Europe" aimed to take stock of the work European scholars undertake in the field of life writing and to promote their engagement with the International Auto/Biography Association (IABA), without giving a clear-cut definition of "Europe". This provided room for a wide range of topics and participants from Iceland to Spain, and from France to Russia and the Baltic states, and even participants from beyond the geographical space of Europe. The question, however, of what Europe stands for prevailed throughout the conference and remained unresolved. Some participants associated Europe with the political-economic body of the European Union and its restrictive migration policy, captured in Charles de Gaulle's phrase "Fort Europe". Others, such as keynote speaker Philippe Lejeune, questioned whether Europe exists as a cultural identity because of the lack of a common language. All the same, more than a hundred scholars felt inclined to participate

in this conference on “Life Writing in Europe” and supported the foundation of a European chapter within the International Auto/Biography Association.

As Leena Kurvet-Kaösaar proposes in her contribution to this volume, the idea of Europe may not be first and foremost a matter of identity – but of identification. But then the question still remains as to what exactly is being identified with. According to historian John Steinberg “‘Europe’ stands for both the geographical area and the culture or civilization which has evolved in that space and which has, for good or ill, spread its ways via conversion, colonialism and capitalism to much, if not all, of the world” (36). Notwithstanding this broad definition, Steinberg does not answer the question as to where this geographical area begins or ends, and what, in fact, the common denominator is. Ultimately, Steinberg finds “the secret of Europe” in a persistent “tension between universal and particular, between the empire and the estates, between the princes and their towns, between universalist religious claims and sectarian practice, between universal values and particular rights” (48). This statement aligns itself with Kurvet-Kaösaar’s position who, quoting Luisa Passerini, proposes a “new investment in Europeanness” that is based on recognition of what is shared and what is specific.

In a sense, the concept of “Europe” is as flexible as the notion of “life writing”. Encompassing all kinds of personal narratives, the study of life writing can be pursued with a wide range of questions and methods as well. Consequently, the field of auto/biographical scholarship may be compared to the loose patchwork that stands for the geographical and/or cultural, economic and political entity which is known as “Europe”. Simply by virtue of Europeans’ familiarity with the crossing of linguistic, cultural and other borders, it may be a perfect starting point for comparative research into auto/biographical writing. This volume, which offers a selection of the revised papers presented at the conference “Life Writing in Europe”, thus aims to investigate cross-cultural understandings of self and identity. Highlighting auto/biographical practices in different – old and new or future – parts of Europe, and studying these practices from a wide range of perspectives and disciplines, the volume aspires to contribute to the overall aim of the International Auto/Biography Association: to discuss representations of the self in different cultural and social contexts across the globe. From a regional perspective, the various contributions will discuss interactions between auto/biographical cultures in different language zones and the construction of individual, cultural or political selves and identities within the changing geographical and political landscape of Europe.

Our tour across the borders of the geographical and cultural entity called Europe begins in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when French was the common language of the literate elite. *Catherine Viollet* draws attention to the many French-language diaries that were written by authors of non-native French origin during the period 1750-1850, particularly in Russia. She proposes to make an all-European inventory of French-language life writings in order to study topics such as multilingualism and the cross-European influence of literary models on autobiographical texts. *Elena Gretchanaia* takes up this idea and argues that the French language enabled Russian life writers to evade traditional Russian discourses. Tapping into French and English cultural traditions such as the sentimental novel and the model of gallantry by means of the French language, Russian life writers found new ways to express themselves beyond the conventional religious and historical forms of their native tongue. Further exploring the theme of international transmission of autobiographical models, *Marijke Huisman* studies the translation politics of Dutch publishers to identify the horizon of expectation with which autobiographers had to deal in the Netherlands between 1850 and 1918.

Pawel Rodak picks up the theme of the autobiographical archive, which was introduced by Catherine Viollet. Reporting from Poland, Rodak highlights the work of sociologists who, in the early twentieth century, developed a "biographical method" for their discipline. Using the means of autobiographical contests, they also generated vast collections of life reports by emigrants, farmers, workers and members of other social groups. Although autobiographical competitions were used for ideological and political purposes by the People's Republic of Poland (1948-1989), the institutional framework that was set up in the 1960s enabled the formation of the vastest autobiographical archive in Europe. On a more theoretical level, *Christian Moser* explores the notion of collecting in relation to the historical development of autobiographical memory as exemplified by the canonical texts of Saint Augustine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Walter Benjamin. Reading Daniel Paul Schreber's *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken* (1903), in which the border between mediation and media breaks down under the compulsion to recollect everything, *Sabine Kim* draws attention to the making of meaning through voice and inscription.

Moving to the geographical and cultural outskirts of Europe, *Nataliya Rodigina & Tatiana Saburova* study how nineteenth-century intellectuals' identity formations relate to the modernization of Russian society in this era. *Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir* and *Esra Almas* explore the meaning of place in relation to autobiobiographical writing. Gudmundsdottir's reading of autobiographical writings by two Icelandic avant-garde writers highlights the group

as a necessary vehicle to construct an artist's identity in a marginal literary culture. Esra Almas, on the other hand, focuses on Turkey. In a close-reading of Orhan Pamuk's memoirs, she traces his identification of the self with the city of Istanbul against the background of this city's position at the crossroads of East and West. Notions of space, place, and belonging are further explored by *Anna Izabela Cichoń*, who reads the autobiographical works of V.S. Naipaul from the perspective of displaced subjects' search for meaningful identities. She traces the way in which Naipaul, as an uprooted colonial subject in a post-colonial world, has made writing into the locus of his identity project.

The theme of writing as a means to construct and maintain identities is continued by *Barbara Henkes*. She analyses the private correspondence between a Dutch-German woman and her German relatives before and during the Second World War and shows what possibilities private letters offer to explore interactions between family and nation as agencies of identification. In her article on the mutual contribution of individual and cultural identities, *Eva Rovers* argues that the outbreak of the First World War led the German-Dutch art collector Helene Kröller-Müller to present herself as German, and to use her collection to add German flavour to the cultural heritage of the Netherlands by means of the Kröller-Müller Museum she donated to the Dutch state. *Lisbeth Larsson* explores the uses of biography in the construction of communal identities in Sweden and discusses how the historical development of the biographical form reflects changing ideas about what defines a Swedish subject and, more generally, a human being.

Because of its strong relation with normative definitions of a human being, feminist scholars from across the globe have had problems with the biographical genre for a long time. According to Larsson, it lasted until the 1990s before Swedish feminist scholars started to use the biographical form for their own research into the lives of female authors and other noteworthy women. From a historiographical perspective, *Mineke Bosch* takes the tension between the biographical genre and the writing of women's lives to another level. Starting from Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's famous quote – "Well-behaved women seldom make history" – Bosch explores the gendered plots underlying women's biographies in different media. Unless gender is accounted for in historical and biographical research, women will somehow emerge as deviant or even freaks, so Bosch claims. Using the method of comparative biographical research, however, *Anneke Ribberink* shows the lives of two exceptional women who made their mark in history, prime ministers Gro Harlem Brundtland (Norway) and Margaret Thatcher (UK).

The last section of this volume is dedicated to the repercussions of the recent watershed in contemporary European history: the dismantling of the Iron Curtain and the rise to independence of the former satellite states of the Soviet Union. As part of a collective effort to revise Communist history, individuals as well as institutions have undertaken intensive memory work to (re-)establish individual and cultural identities through life writing since the early 1990s. *Martins Kaprans* highlights an autobiographical corpus which is hardly known in the West. Regarding the vast amount of autobiographies published in Latvia since the nation regained its independence in 1991, Kaprans explores to what extent the newly constructed cultural memory of the Communist era is affected by the generational identities autobiographers have created for themselves. Reporting from Estonia, *Leena Kurvet-Käosaar* also sketches the development of post-Soviet life writing in reconstructing national histories and identities. Highlighting the autobiographical work of novelist Jaan Kross, she further demonstrates that contemporary pieces of life writing start to move beyond the nation and contribute to a new configuration of the idea of Europe. *Ioana Luca* focuses on post-Ccommunist life writing by three writers of Eastern European descent whose autobiographical endeavours were written in English in order to play a role in translating and recuperating Eastern European history and culture to a broader audience. Her contribution also shows to what extent the linguistic balance has shifted since the late eighteenth century. While French used to be the *lingua franca* in the fields of politics and culture, today English is the dominant tongue. Using that language in this volume on life writing in Europe, the editors wish to thank Christine Korte for her editorial assistance in dealing with the linguistic practicalities of crossing borders.

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