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REVIEW

Stephen Hardy, Martina Horáková, Michael Matthew Kaylor and Kateřina Prajznerová: *Alternatives in Biography: Writing Lives in Diverse English-Language Contexts*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2011, ISBN 978-80-210-5757-9. DOI: 10.5817/CZ.MUNI.M210-5757-2011, 300 pp.

Alternatives in Biography: Writing Lives in Diverse English-Language Contexts by Stephen Hardy, Martina Horáková, Michael Matthew Kaylor and Kateřina Prajznerová is the product of a very successful collaboration on a project which resulted in the publication of two special issues of the journal *Brno Studies in English* (vol.36 (2), from 2010 and vol. 37 (2) from 2011), an anthology of Czech translations *Literární biografie jako křižovatka žánrů* [Literary Biography as a Crossroad of Genres] in 2011, as well as this study of alternatives in auto/biography. The authors of *Alternatives in Biography* are not only scholars specializing in very diverse fields – those of Indigenous writing, environmentalism, philosophical approach to literature and gay studies – but also scholars belonging to different English-speaking studies, such as the American studies, Australian studies, Canadian studies, British and Irish studies. And yet, despite their varied fields of interest, these authors share a common field of specialization, that of biography. This is where the value of their different approaches and joint focus lies. In their study the authors concentrate on “alternatives in biography”, the phrase they use to direct attention to those texts that reflect the changes which occurred in auto/biographical writing as consequences both of specific Modernist and Post-modernist tendencies, and of other contemporary economic and socio-political contexts and pressures. Through their examination of the proliferation of different forms and discourses that alternative auto/biographical writing can take, the authors Hardy, Horáková, Kaylor and Prajznerová have substantially enriched life writing studies.

The book contributes significantly to the study of life writing precisely because of these different perspectives and scholarly backgrounds which the authors use to enhance their analytical methods: their analyses reveal an array of factual and fictional literary and documentary traits and forms that the alternative auto/biographies appropriate. The authors initially proposed to make their book a two-stage process – the first stage consisting of the analyses of alternatives in auto/biography in various geographical locations and in different literary forms, while the second stage was to consist of a deduction of the common traits of these apparently multifarious forms of life writing. Soon they realized, however, that any such attempt would only be an oversimplification of the literary output in auto/biography and, moreover, an omission of the relevant idiosyncrasies to which each of the locations, due to their different social, political, historical, and cultural developments, gave birth. Instead, by choosing to stop at the first stage of analysis, to uphold the auto/biographical diversity of forms in each of these locales of Western civilization (with one exception of indigenous civilization), the authors made the right decision. Their book proves to be a more valuable addition to the life writing study than any attempt of a generalizing and classifying kind would have managed to produce. Testifying to this are concepts such as: pastoral biography (Hardy), Indigenous dual voice

biography (Horáková), pederast and “fictionate” autobiography (Kaylor), and bioregional biography (Prajznerová), which are only some of the concepts that make up the variety of auto/biographical writing described and examined in this book.

Each chapter of *Alternatives in Biography* represents an in-depth study of a particular geographical location and literary area. In the first chapter, “Versions of Pastoral Biography: Ackroyd, Carter, Berger”, Stephen Hardy undertakes to show the instances and combining elements of the broad generic categorizations of biography and pastoral in the works of three English-born writers, Peter Ackroyd, Paul Carter and John Berger. Hardy chooses these writers because each approaches pastoral and biography – both broad categories within the canon of Western literature – with different contextual considerations: Ackroyd’s preoccupations engage pastoral in a more religious or theological sense, while also interrogating the boundaries between fact and fiction – an issue all three writers share. Carter, by intertwining pastoral and biography, focuses on the relations between colonialism, environment and a poetics of movement. Berger is concerned with a more directly political reading, focusing on the rural communities which are often negatively implicated in a developing metropolitan context. Thus, by choosing three writers who approach the concepts of pastoral and biography in ways that “might be viewed as creatively, even transgressively, divergent from conventional norms” (88), Hardy shows one of the possible readings of the interconnection between pastoral and biography.

In the second chapter, “Indigenous Collaborative Life Writing: Narrative Transgression in *Auntie Rita* and *Kayang & Me*”, Martina Horáková focuses on two life-writing narratives produced collaboratively: one by Rita and Jackie Huggins, and the other by Kim Scott and Hazel Brown. The two pairs of Indigenous storytellers/writers are taken to be representative of many such writers who “use the genre of life writing to re-create their stolen identities while exposing and ‘writing back’ to the (post)colonial narratives of the settler nation” because they “shape the body of Indigenous life writing by textualizing and exploring such indeterminacies and uncertainties in a productive, self-reflective way” (93). Horáková here focuses on a specific kind of inter-generational collaborative life writing in which the authors integrate their own subjectivities into the text and thus inscribe their own autobiographic acts into the life they are narrating. More specifically, in *Auntie Rita* and *Kayang & Me* Horáková analyzes the conscious exposure of a dialogic self-reflective and introspective mode of writing that deliberately draws attention to its own textual construction and framing devices.

In the third chapter “Uranian Autobiography: Newman’s *Rondeaux of Boyhood* and Reid’s *Apostate*” Michael Matthew Kaylor analyses two alternative, representative and innovative autobiographies bound by, or perhaps written in defiance of, socio-political, religious and other barriers to the pederasty of their authors. Existing on the societal margin, between the lines of the official discourse, Uranians – a group of Victorian and Edwardian pederasts (the term Kaylor uses deliberately) – published their autobiographies in the same way, as embedded within their poetry and prose works. In other words, they covered their own auto/biographies with texts which had other subjects as the main focus. While cataloguing and explaining alternative strategies in autobiography and their alterity with regard to traditional life writing, Kaylor simultaneously provides a survey of Uranian autobiographical writing in general as well as a particular analysis of Newman’s and Reid’s autobiographies. Kaylor concludes that Reid’s *Apostate* is so unique in form – and not only among Uranian alternative autobiographies – that he finds it necessary to coin a new label for it: “fictionate autobiography”, a subclass of the broader concept of autobiografiction, which he defines as “autobiography made fictional in character” (214).

In the fourth chapter, “Bioregional Biography: The Landscapes of the Lives of Emily Carr and Emma Bell Miles”, Kateřina Prajznerová concentrates on two North American authors, Canadian Emily Carr belonging to the Cascadian region, and the other, American Emma Bell Miles, belonging to the Appalachian region. Prajznerová focuses on the bioregional aspects of their writing, choosing this term to highlight both the ecological substructure of Carr’s and Bell Miles’s art (both women were visual artists as well as writers), as well as the dynamic processes of their writing their places and themselves into being. By bringing into the foreground the interplay of the self, place

and narrative in these two alternative autobiographies, Prajznerová shows in what ways these two writers reveal that the lives of the self and the place can become a single story. Prajznerová starts the chapter by calling Carr and Bell Miles “pioneering cartographers”, pioneering in the sense of their breaking new ground in the genre of biography, and cartographers in the sense that each of these women devoted her life to writing about a place she knew, as well as about herself (233). Furthermore, Prajznerová analyses strategies by which Carr and Bell Miles inscribed their selves onto the geographical map and vice versa. They created a map of their inner landscapes while also providing a map of the geographical location they knew so well.

In conclusion, *Alternatives in Biography: Writing Lives in Diverse English-Language Contexts* represents a valuable contribution to the study of life writing because it offers an insight into the alternative forms of life writing. It consists of four in-depth micro-studies into different English-language contexts which meticulously analyse a range of writers who concern themselves with pastoral, Indigeneity, pederasty and bioregionalism in relation to life writing. The special scholarly merit of this book also lies in its conclusion: the authors have managed to show and to highlight that each of the life writing texts examined in this book represents a socially and culturally, historically and geographically specific text which reveals its own idiosyncrasies, its own precedents and influences. Though very diverse and distinct, each has as its subject the discourse on the self. A dimension that perhaps could have been slightly more emphasized, and to which the texts in this book testify, is the eventual blurriness between fact and fiction of the self-reflexive narrative which comes from the intersections of memory and history since, unavoidably, through auto/biography the narrator self “more or less [construes] (desired) narratives of the self” (Marling 101).

Furthermore, as the authors show, these alternative auto/biographies are not a consequence of an intentional breach with the traditional Western canon of life writing, but stem almost organically, spontaneously, as a consequence of the life writers’ attempts to find the form and discourse that will enable them to best convey their own thoughts on the self and society. Thus it could be said that they exist parallel to, independently of the Western canon of life writing. This is even the more so if one takes into account that a chapter in this study is dedicated to the indigenous life writing which stems from a separate tradition. Life writing is a field which allows the marginalized and hitherto suppressed voices to speak out and offer their views of the dominant discourse, and the approaches that the authors propose show that in its multifarious forms life writing adapts and flourishes, always providing an outlet for the preservation and survival of the individual self. These minor comments aside, this book is a rare collection of studies of diverse texts coming from different geographic locations and social and political contexts while belonging to life writing.

References

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