



Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (eds.), *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction, Volume 1: Theory and Concepts, Volume 2: History and Volume 3: Exemplary Autobiographical/Autofictional Texts* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2019, ISBN 9783110279719)

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At the University of Münster, where Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, the editor of the *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* (2019) has her professorial chair and where she cofounded with Lut Missine and Katja Sarkowsky the Forum for Life Writing Research, this handbook project has been referred to in a somewhat ironic and self-critical way as “the final nail in the coffin”—it is a project which has stretched all those involved almost to their limits. Thankfully, all has ended well, and the field of autobiography research can happily welcome the publication of an extensive and important treasury of academic expertise: three weighty volumes of more than 2,100 pages in total, comprised of 150 articles to which more than 70 academics have contributed.

Before using the handbook, it is definitely worth reading the preface written by the editor. There one learns that the project was in fact proposed by Manuela Gerlof, Vice President of Publishing (Humanities) at De Gruyter, specifically with a view to publishing the handbook for the international market. After some initial hesitation, Wagner-Egelhaaf found “the idea of thinking about autobiography in a global and hence transcultural perspective” (XV) fascinating. Then the search began for a publishing strategy which would enable the project’s realisation. The end result is an encyclopaedic undertaking which provides a comprehensive overview that is nevertheless particularly diverse. This was partly the intention, and this aspect is specifically addressed by the editor in the respective introductions to each of the three individual volumes of the handbook. On the other hand, this leads to inconsistencies arising among the individual articles, which is not surprising given the large number of contributors to the handbook. However, such disparities could

be regarded as impairing the conceptual objective of providing a global, transcultural perspective.

Taking a global perspective plays an important and appropriate role within literary studies today, but it requires a carefully developed approach, not least due to the traditional characteristic of literary production being tied to a specific language and its respective national context. The editor repeatedly refers to her own academic background within German studies in Germany, and notes that the contributors to the handbook were encouraged to reflect on their own (Eurocentric) focus. If we take this at face value, and look at the institutional background of the contributors, then it becomes clear that the handbook is a project which pertains mainly to research within Germany, even if the editor has specifically highlighted the significance of the IABA as a global network for the study of autobiography. The affiliations and biographies of the contributors indicate a clear link to German academia, and this can also be seen in some of the conceptual approaches within the articles, albeit not in all of them. This observation is not intended as a criticism, but rather points to a fact which one should be aware of, and indeed also reflect upon, when using the handbook. Moreover, this shows how difficult it is to take a global, transnational perspective within a specific institutionalised context. This problem is notably apparent in volume 2, in which global perspectives on autobiography and autofiction are presented within the framework of historical developments. Of course, literary studies has always been characterised by a particular engagement with universal experiences which transcend historical circumstances. On the other hand, as an academic subject, it is firmly related to the tradition of literary criticism as developed in the different national cultures. However, the question of the particular historical circumstances is linked to an interest in the differentiation of the production of meaning, which of course ought to go beyond any national framework. "Global" also means a strong focus on minority, multicultural and postcolonial studies. This perspective also appears in the handbook in places, but is not consistently represented. However, this does not take away from the fact that the handbook strives to take an interdisciplinary approach to autobiography and autofiction, an approach which is, of course, common in handbooks today. Nevertheless, in its origins, the handbook is a project underpinned by linguistics, literature, and philosophy, with literature being the main focus.

With the publication of this handbook, Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf affirms her position as the expert in autobiography studies in an international context. Her work on autobiography is based on a hermeneutic understanding of biography, as characterised in the German-speaking

world by the philosopher and historian Georg Misch (1878–1965) in his monumental but incomplete *Geschichte der Autobiographie* [*History of Autobiography*], which built upon the work of Wilhelm Dilthey (1839–1911). Accordingly, in a seminal article published in 2010 in the journal *BIOS* (23/2: 188–200), Wagner-Egelhaaf speaks of “posthermeneutic questions and theoretical perspectives” (188) when referring to the central themes of contemporary autobiography research. Of the aspects which are then listed, the last one, autofiction, is a key concern which has been used in the title of the handbook. The other two aspects, the relationship between autobiography and memory, and the role of space and place in autobiography, appear as categories in the first volume of the handbook.

The first volume deals with theory and concepts of autobiography research: 22 different theoretical approaches are covered, the relevant categories are dealt with in 33 articles, and then 30 different “Autobiographical Forms and Genres” (chapter 3) are presented. It goes without saying that such a mass of information can only be touched upon here by way of a few examples. The literary scholar and Slavist, Erik Martin, presents “Structuralism” (chapter 1.21) as the first theoretical approach which was “pre-eminently against the idea of an autonomous ‘I’” (191). Instead of an essential core which finds its appropriate form through language, the subject is “rather an effect of language, than its transcendent creator” (191). Martin proceeds to explain the development of structuralism throughout the twentieth century, and we are given useful insights into Ferdinand Saussure and his influence on the Russian linguists in Moscow and St Petersburg at the start of that century, and insights into the critical engagement of French intellectuals such as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes in the 1960s. However, Martin fails to highlight what is actually revolutionary with respect to the global perspective which this handbook seeks to achieve: namely that meaning is produced through difference, through the interplay of binary oppositions. After all, structuralism and the critique Jacques Derrida levelled against it, led to the central role which is today attributed to difference in the analysis of cultural signifiers.

To take another example, the exposition of “Postcolonialism” (chapter 1.14) as a theoretical approach is likewise presented. This contribution by Mita Banerjee, an American Studies scholar at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, is more similar to a literary history which explores the relationship between postcolonial and national historiography. Thereby, the explosive impact of a theoretical approach, which makes the discourses of power of the marginalised positions of minority, alterity, hybridity and diasporic identity, productive for the study of autobiography, is, in fact, diffused. Here, in my opinion, we can see the aforementioned orientation

of literary studies to universal human experiences—for instance, in the reading of Salman Rushdie’s memoir *Joseph Anton* (2012) as an example of “exposing the fundamentalisms of our time” (133). This is right, and at the same time also very far from the historical circumstances which it actually ought to focus on. The chapter relating to “Cultural Studies” (chapter 1.3) by Michaela Holdenried, Germanist and literary scholar at the University of Freiburg, becomes briefly exciting when “cultural semiotics” is focused on as the “decisive keyword for a forced beginning of self-reflection in respect of the political culture of the West and its traditions” (31), as established by Raymond Williams at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. However, before we learn any more about this Marxist-leaning school, one of whose most prominent exponents was Stuart Hall, Holdenried makes the necessary distinction between Anglophone Cultural Studies and German “*Kulturwissenschaften*”, and in doing so also provides an example of how the institutional framework from which the handbook has arisen is clear from the content of the article. As already mentioned, this is not in any way meant as a criticism, but simply as an important consideration when using the handbook.

Among the categories presented in the first volume are “life writing” (chapter 2.19), and “autofiction” (chapter 2.6), while autobiography is dealt with in terms of its relationship to the nation in “autobiography and the nation” (chapter 2.4). This raises questions with regard to the title of the handbook, above all the use of the forward slash between autobiography and autofiction: as a punctuation mark, the forward slash is used to express relationships or connections. It connects, but leaves it open as to how the connection is to be understood: autobiography *and* autofiction, autobiography *or* autofiction, autobiography *or rather* autofiction. In other words, what is the relationship here between autobiography and autofiction, and in addition, how is “life writing” to be interpreted in this context? It is an expression which comes from the Anglophone world, and which Mita Banerjee here refers to as a wider continuum of all “ego-documents written and composed in various media” (336). If one looks at the third section of the first volume entitled “autobiographical forms and genres”, then it increasingly appears that the handbook is indirectly seeking a convergence between “life writing” and “autobiography”. In addition to traditional genres such as memoirs and confessions, this section also touches on architecture, film, theatre, letters, emails, SMS and oral autobiographical forms.

The second volume of the handbook is dedicated to “the historical development of the autobiographical genre” (XVI). Here, it can clearly be seen how, by dealing with each individual continent, the literary

studies approach seeks to do justice to the handbook's aim to provide a global perspective. From the introduction to the volume, it is evident that the editor is fully aware of the difficulties inherent within a literary-historical approach. However, she defends such an approach with reference to the fact that users of the handbook will search for information in the "form of historical narrative" (683). This in no way implies a "monolithic grand narrative", but rather that "the heterogeneity of cultures, writing traditions, and concepts of time and history" (684) would itself lead to a diversity of representations. Nevertheless, the defence of this conception is rather half-hearted, and this fact is also conceded by the editor, since diversity in itself does not result in a harmonious mosaic, and the orientation towards a global literary history does not leave much room for the truly fascinating questions within autobiography research relating to the individual epochs, cultures and genres. Thus, the article on the "Middle Ages" (chapter 1.2) limits itself to referring to the much more schematic "medieval self-expressions": it is a well-founded observation, but one which surely also demands a greater sense of nuance if one, for example, thinks of authors such as the lyrical poet and composer Oswald von Wolkenstein (1376–1445), who left quite some autobiographical traces in his courtly love ("Minnesang") and religious songs. In the article on "Modernity" (chapter 1.4) within the chapter on "The European Tradition" (chapter 1), the focus is almost exclusively on the development of German literature, which is rather annoying as it does not remotely take account of readers who do not share this cultural background. The fact that the article is a translation from German into English may play a role, even if the issue of the original language cannot excuse everything. In contrast, and in almost exemplary fashion, in her article on "Postmodernity" in the European tradition (chapter 1.5), Anna Thiemann, British Studies scholar at the University of Münster, shows how one can do justice to the task at hand. The chapter starts with a reflection on the term "postmodernity", followed by an explanation of her (historical) approach to it within the chapter. This short introduction enables the reader to follow her argumentation more easily. Notable, too, is her selection of examples from a broader range of European literatures and the way, how she relates them to the relevant theoretical framework. In doing so, she even can provide useful insights into more specific discussions like, for example, the way Polish literary scholars, literary critics and writers deal with "auto-fiction" (cf. 799, esp. her remarks on the work of Robert Kusek). The second volume ends with an article on "Autobiography in the Globalized World" (chapter 7), which closely considers the term "globalisation". In a handbook which aims to engage with literary history on a "worldwide, global scale" (684), this is a more than necessary clarification, and one

which is clearly and concisely presented by Gabriele Rippl from the University of Bern.

The third volume aims to take a closer look at individual autobiographical texts, without the intention of creating a canon of autobiographical texts. Rather, the focus is much more on the “uniqueness of the text, its literary artfulness, and intriguing quality of relating truth as well as writer’s commitments” (1281). However, the question of a canon is only partly sidelined, and in many ways still hangs in the air, as it were. For why else would one select literary texts for a handbook on the basis of their “special importance” (1281) with regard to aesthetic and ethical criteria? Indeed, the handbook presents 57 texts, several of which clearly belong to the canon of world literature. However, this is by no means the case for all the examples, and thus this part of the handbook will make readers curious about the intertextual and unquestionably transcultural network of relationships which are revealed here, and which readers can expand upon and put to the test in their own academic practice, should they so wish. The articles are all written in the form of an essay, and as per the guidelines given, each essay provides information about the author, the historical origins of the text, and a summary of the content. Furthermore, the articles also demonstrate an alignment with the concepts, categories and genres covered in volume 1, and the historical and cultural contexts covered in volume 2. However, according to the editor in the introduction to this volume, diversity was the “favored principle in the concept of this handbook” (1283). It would go beyond the limits of a review to discuss some of the example texts. Instead, only one will be commented on here, because it relates to the title of the handbook. If one searches for Serge Doubrovsky, who coined the term “autofiction”, one will not find an account to his novel *Fils*, published in 1977. In that novel he used the term for the first time and as follows: “Fiction of strictly real events or facts, if we want, autofiction, of having entrusted the adventure of language with the language of an adventure, outside the wisdom of the traditional or new model.” However, there is Claudia Gronemann’s piece on *Le livre brisé* (1989), a much more influential and controversial novel, written by Doubrovsky. With this example, the essay again raises the question as to what importance is attached to “autofiction” in the handbook. There is no definitive answer, albeit that it is clear that the term “autofiction” has since emancipated itself from its inventor.

In conclusion, within the context of German autobiography research, the handbook is without doubt a true monument, and from a global perspective at least, it is a powerful manifestation of research within the German academic context, which, by means of the English language, has been made accessible to a larger international community. So, the

handbook is to be welcomed, not least because the overview which it provides in terms of its interdisciplinarity and scope is certainly worth the enormous effort involved, and for all those who work with autobiographical texts, the handbook will indeed be a valuable resource.

NOTE

- 1 I would like to thank Sigrid and Julian Newman for their help in translating and editing this review.