



**Joanny Moulin.** *On Biography: Critical Essays*. Ferney-Voltaire: Honoré Champion, 2021. 350 pp. EUR 65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-2-7453-5584-3.

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### Wright on Moulin, 'On Biography: Critical Essays'

“What is biography?” is a deceptively simple question. After all, biographies come in a variety of formats, from the academic monograph to the salacious tell-all, and in a variety of genres, from the historical to the literary, the factual to the post-factual, and the conventional to the experimental. Biographers too come in all shapes and sizes. Historians, including social historians, literary scholars, journalists, novelists, and medical doctors have written biographies of both great and everyday men and women. Prime ministers, generals, novelists, playwrights, and scientists, as well as enslaved people, laborers, beekeepers, and sex workers, have been subjected to the biographer’s gaze. Meanwhile, object biographies tell the life history of rare objects housed in museums and mundane objects found in kitchen drawers. American writer Mark Kurlansky famously wrote the biography of a fish.[1] “What isn’t biography?” may be a better question.

Thinking about biography is a bit like nailing jelly to a wall, meaning it is messy and difficult. But unlike nailing jelly to a wall, which can lead only to a sticky smear, thinking about biography can lead to a book, in this case a collection of critical essays. As a professor of literature and as a biographer, Joanny Moulin wanted “to clarify the

specific problems posed by biography as a form of writing” (p. 19), especially the problems of narrative, omniscience, and imagination, but also the problems of empathy, judgement, and repulsion, that every biographer must wrestle with. To this end, he selected five British biographers—Ruth Scurr, Peter Ackroyd, Hermione Lee, Claire Tomalin, and Ian Kershaw—who have pushed biography as a genre in interesting directions. At its most basic, Moulin writes, biography is an investigative genre, or a form of critique, making *On Biography* less a “comprehensive theory of biography” (p. 24) and more “a critique of a critique” (p. 16).

Moulin’s critique of a critique begins with Ruth Scurr, a Cambridge University historian and literary critic, and her much-talked-about biography of John Aubrey, a seventeenth-century gentleman, scholar, and antiquarian. Written in the first person, it represents a “radically innovative” attempt to write a factual biography as a fictional memoir (p. 41). “Biography,” Scurr insists, “is an art form open to constant experiment” (p. 25). Her earlier biography of Robespierre may have been more conventional, but it raised a question that all biographers must confront, that of empathy. After all, our subjects are not always sympathetic figures. About Robespierre, she writes, “I have tried

to be his friend and to see things from his point of view. But friends, as he always suspected, can be treacherous; they have opportunities for betrayal that enemies only dream of” (p. 32). Cleary, Scurr is both clever and thoughtful, a point Moulin concedes, concluding that she has shown that “biography is a genre open to innovation, in which there is also an avant-garde” (p. 62).

After the avant-garde Ruth Scurr, Moulin considers the prolific Peter Ackroyd, best known for his biographies of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, William Blake, and Shakespeare. Ackroyd also wrote a book about London, calling it a biography. To some, it stretched the term to its breaking point. To others, including Moulin, it was perfectly acceptable. “Thematically, Ackroyd’s choice to call his *London* a biography is justified by the fact that the city is indeed perceived as an entity, perhaps a being, that would have a life of its own” (p. 64). Besides, Ackroyd has made a living stretching the definition of biography. “There has never been a distinction between ‘fiction’ and ‘fact,’” he wrote in “The Fine Art of Biography,” making the novel and the biography “aspects of the same creative process” (p. 71). True enough, but biographies are not novels and novels are not biographies because if imagination and conjecture are one thing, fabrication and lying are quite another.

At one point, Moulin comments on Ackroyd’s most recent biographies and what he calls “the overall vapidness” of their style (p. 97). Coming from someone who pretentiously peppers his sentences with words like alethic, pudenda, clinamen, propaedeutic, prolegomenon, asymptotically, hapax legomena, and noological metempsychosis—by the way, not even Google could find a definition for “noological metempsychosis”—a comment on the apparent vapidness of Ackroyd’s style is a case of the Wi-Fi calling the narrator unreliable. But I suspect that Moulin couldn’t help himself. A French intellectual, he retains an instinctive and condescending disdain for Ackroyd, whom he derides as a British “popular writer” with a “discern-

able streak of John Bull’s anti-intellectualism” (p. 93) and “a cockney dislike of overdressing, or a way of making sure one drops enough h’s, lest one seem posh” (p. 97).

For my money, Moulin’s best essay is the one on Hermione Lee, the author of, among other books, *Willa Cather: Double Lives* (2017), *Virginia Woolf* (1997), *Edith Wharton* (2008), and *Penelope Fitzgerald: A Life* (2014). If critical, it is not gratuitous. In fact, it is respectful, even deferential. “Professor Hermione Lee is as monumental as her subjects,” Moulin writes (p. 99). Indeed, he acknowledges that, as a male critic, he cannot do to Lee, a feminist biographer, what he did to Ackroyd, a popular biographer. The end result is a thoughtful, insightful essay, or a critique of a critique. Consider this insight: “The preconception that fiction is necessarily a form of life-writing, and therefore that the works of a novelist document the life of the author, is a given in Lee’s writing from beginning to end” (p. 106). And this one: “when Lee insists that ‘biography is not neutral ground,’ there is an implied ‘but’: *but* this would be her ideal” (p. 125). And finally, this one: referring to the relative lack of drama in Lee’s writing, Moulin observes a “British self-control” at work, “with a particular vengeance in all the moments of the related life when emotion might raise its ugly head” (pp. 126-127).

At one point, however, Moulin rebukes Lee for the aversion to biographical theory in her *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (2009). Its bias, he writes, is in its title: “‘very short’ is a token that the author favours a low-theory diet” (p. 125). Lee may or may not favor a low-theory diet, whatever that is, but the title is not a token, sign, or evidence of anything. There are now some seven hundred books in Oxford University Press’s Very Short Introduction (VSI) series, all with “very short” in their title. (Full disclosure, I wrote the VSI to Canada.)[2] Moreover, if Lee suffers from *Theoriesistenz*—a German word meaning resistance to theory, and one which Moulin has weaponized—

then Moulin suffers from *Theorieresistenz-resistenz* (resistance to resistance to theory) or *Theoriegehorsam* (obedience to theory), conditions peculiar to French literary critics.

Like Hermione Lee, Claire Tomalin is a much-respected figure in the world of British biography for her biographies of, among others, Mary Wollstonecraft, Katherine Mansfield, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and Ellen (Nelly) Ternan, Dickens's mistress. "Biography has become my province," she once said, "and I have never attempted fiction, although I have come to think the gap between biography and fiction is not so great" (p. 145). But at the end of the day, she knows that there is a gap. She also knows that hagiography is not biography. "She cannot be suspected of hero worship," Moulin reports, "or even of being partial to her subjects in any way. Quite on the contrary, Tomalin is a particularly abrasive biographer" (p. 192). She could be hard on Dickens, who kept his wife chain-pregnant, but she could be equally hard on Wollstonecraft, who was prone to self-pity. All biography, or at least all good biography, is a delicate blend of empathy and judgement because if no one wants to read a puff piece, no one wants to read a hatchet job, either.

What about Hitler, though? How does one write the biography of him? Not easily. But Ian Kershaw—who was trained as a social historian of medieval Britain and whose first book examined the economic history of Bolton Priory, an Augustinian monastery in Yorkshire—did a masterful job, according to Moulin. For his part, Kershaw never intended to write a biography, once describing himself as an accidental biographer: "If anything, I was somewhat critically disposed towards the genre" (p. 197). But as Walter Benjamin observed nearly a century ago, "all great works of literature either establish a genre or dissolve one."<sup>[3]</sup> At nearly two thousand pages, *Hitler* (1999-2000) is a great work of literature. In short, it is an un-biography of an un-person. And if the problem of biography is the problem of empathy,

the problem of un-biography is the problem of "comprehensive repulsion" (p. 199). Yet Kershaw successfully navigates that problem, Moulin believes, making his un-biography "one of the most innovative achievements in modern biography" (p. 283).

Unfortunately, innovative is not a word that can be used to describe *On Biography*, marred as it is by name dropping, incomprehensible jargon, run-on sentences, paragraphs that stretch across three pages, a chapter that runs close to ninety pages, and a long list of five-dollar words where five-cent words would have done the trick. It's too bad, because Moulin is a smart guy with interesting things to say about some of the problems he identified in biography as a form of writing.

Because life is writing, Moulin concludes, the word biography—from the Greek *bios* (life) and *graphia* (writing)—is a pleonasm, which is to say that it is redundant, or that it uses more words than are necessary to convey meaning. So too does *On Biography*.

#### Notes

[1]. Mark Kurlansky, *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1998).

[2]. Donald Wright, *Canada: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[3]. Walter Benjamin, "On the Image of Proust," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingston et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, vol. 2, part 1 (Boston: Belknap Press, 1999), 237.

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