Biography and Postmodernism: A Dialogue

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In the fall of 1994, Elizabeth Townsend (ET) and Elizabeth Covington (EC) had both advanced to candidacy in European History at the University of California, Los Angeles. Both had chosen biography as the form for their respective dissertation projects. The following dialogue is an edited transcription of weekly discussions which took place over a period of three months. We hope this may offer suggestions to other historians struggling with similar questions concerning subject, form, and content.

Both Covington and Townsend were in search of answers to very different questions. ET was in the midst of writing a generational biography of World War One memoirist Vera Brittain (1893-1970). One of the structural goals of the project was to present Brittain within the context of other voices of her generation. Too often her memoir, Testament of Youth (1933), had stood as the representative voice for all women's experiences during the war. This work would place her writings and experiences within the context of others—other women, other war writers—and in so doing build a portrait of her generation. Perhaps certain structural techniques used in postmodernism might be useful for this multi-voiced project. She decided to speak with EC, a peer deeply immersed in postmodernism.

EC, recently returned from a research trip to France, found that her project on gender and the literary genre in fin-de-siècle Paris, which had been heavily influenced by broad readings in postmodernism, needed a more secure focal point. EC had chosen the career of the French woman novelist Rachilde (1860-1953) as her subject. Surprised that her work had suddenly become biographical in form, she turned to ET, who had specialized in biography as one of her fields of graduate study. They decided to meet weekly in order to discuss the
nature of historical biography and its possible relationship to postmodernism.

EC: Could you begin by giving a definition of biography?

ET: Biography is a form. The *Webster Ninth New College Dictionary* defines biography as "written history of a person's life, an account of the life of something (as in an animal, a coin, or a building)." The biographer tells the stories of a life (or collective lives) within a narrative framework. The structure of biography, whether it is political, psychological, literary, or cultural, is dictated by its subject. The emphasis fits the life; the structure and scholarship are tools for understanding. Thus biographers debate the merits of different emplotments, structures, and sources for telling a life story. Some biographers believe they should proceed in a strictly chronological manner, that the biography should follow the path of the life. Other biographers find that the aspects of their subject's lives they wish to discuss do not conform to a linear or chronological structure. A more creative means of formulating life events may be necessary.

Biographers in general agree that the style, structure, and focus of the biography must be dictated by the subject, that the content should illuminate the life. The writing of biography, like history in general, is a creative act of choosing, organizing, describing, structuring, and narrating primary material. It is the art of storytelling, no matter how complex or analytical the author may become.

EC: Speaking of complex analysis, I remember that you first became interested in postmodernism by reading Giuliana Bruno's "postmodern" biography of the Italian silent film director Elvira Notari. Bruno's "biography" (because I think the term can only be used loosely here) ties one forgotten founder of silent film to the greater history of an epoch, in this case Neapolitan regionalism at the turn of the century. What does Bruno's work suggest for your purposes?

ET: Well, first of all, I don't think Bruno intended her work to be a biography as such. The full title of Bruno's book is *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*. Her work was an attempt to use theory as a way of uncovering something nearly lost, namely the turn of the century films of Notari. Bruno, in having to reconstruct Notari's life from minimal archival sources, showed many interesting ways of approaching the material that is part of one life. Bruno's approach to the life of her subject suggested that an individual's life is more than just a biographical narrative, and has as much to do with the city that subject lived in, the cultural milieu, the others who worked in the subject's field, and the political climate in which the work was received.
EC: The postmodernist par excellence, Michel Foucault, would have been rather skeptical of the intentions of historians or literary critics who write biographies. Does the biographer often choose his or her subject because something very meaningful, be it a power system or a cultural system of ethics, can be found within that individual's life? Does the biographer somehow elevate the biographical subject beyond what their own personal agency was and what they did?

ET: That depends on the biographer, as it would be true of any scholar. But isn't it also true of anything that historians study and write about, whether peasant life, political movements, or gender? Isn't that part of the nature of writing? Here biography conforms to what Foucault wrote about truth as not being fixed knowns, but rather perceptions, choices, and goals that change in a society with its view of the present and past. This is a means of understanding the changing nature of biography, as a mechanism for understanding a culture and moment in time rather than offering absolute truths.

EC: Can you give some specific examples of the uses and viewpoints of historical biography throughout the ages?

ET: Plutarch sought to present the public lives of great Greek and Roman men as guides to moral and immoral behavior for politicians and leaders. This made biography a form of ethics. He had no interest in the “self” but instead sought to describe aspects of his culture, including politics, war, and government. Most classical biographies conform to this structure by focusing on the success of political figures.3

Biography in the Middle Ages consisted primarily of moral tales of the saints written by the clergy for the Church. Utilizing the Old and New Testaments as models, biography had a spiritual rather than an ethical or political focus. There was also a new Christian concentration on self, an idea beginning to flower in Western thought. These works were eventually deemed “impure” as reasoning, reporting, and scholarship became motives held in higher esteem than propaganda. For these hagiographers, truth did not reside in footnotes but in producing moral exemplars for spiritual life.

Working within a positivist world-view, Victorian biographers thought they were creating admirable memorials of respectable, heroic men. The Victorians found truth in exhaustive documentation. By compiling all evidence, the subject’s life would be represented. Interpretation was suspect.

In 1918, with the publication of Lytton Strachey's _Eminent Victorians_, modern biography revolted against the heroic Victorian biography. Influenced by
Freud and the changing nature of the modern world, biographers sought to criticize and analyze the subject’s life, exposing frailties rather than protecting an image. The biographer became an interpreter for the elite, not merely a disinterested compiler of life remnants. Twentieth-century biographers realized that to present their biographical subjects as “human” was a hard task indeed. One biographer, Arnold Rampersad, believed there is no way to get to the truth of a character because even the subject himself never knows the truth of his own person. There can be no flawless portrait. Modern truth is filled with fragilities and inconsistencies; the Victorian self-confidence about the world is gone. Modern biography focuses on more than the subject’s life events. Some biographers attempt to illuminate a common humanity on a greater level, what Paul Nagel describes as “the universals implicit in every life.”

EC: Foucault deconstructed the notion of the universal. The search for universals is a very modern, as opposed to a postmodern, project. This modern approach can be seen in the work of the structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, one theorist Foucault admired but eventually rejected.

Like the structural anthropologist in search of commonalities amongst the peoples of the world, the biographer you have just described believes that human experiences can be encapsulated within a notion like common humanity. The biographer wishes to capture the “essence” of the subject’s life. A postmodernist would object to the use of the word “essence” for the most part. The postmodern skeptic would say that concepts like essence, truth, and reality are very illusory. They are constructions. One cannot truly recreate the essence of someone’s life, nor do essential human universals exist.

ET: Contemporary biographers would agree with you. That what’s makes the biographer’s job so challenging. Leon Edel’s writings are particularly helpful in struggling with these notions.

EC: But more radical currents of postmodernist thought would deem biography a misguided form of historical inquiry. From an extreme postmodernist stance, biography is a suspect endeavor, the epitome of the creation of the “modern subject.” Michel Foucault critiqued this process of individualization in modern notions of “authorship.”

ET: What exactly do you mean by the creation of the “modern subject”? 

EC: Postmodernism suggests that a great deal of the actions attributed to one particular individual are not as important as the cultural legacy made of those actions. The implication is that one individual’s actions and beliefs may be fig-
ments of a collective cultural imagination, a sort of broadscale myth-making.

ET: Again, most biographers would agree with this. The goal today of biography is the attempt to understand rather than finding absolute truth. Many biographers compare their work with that of a portrait painter. Paul Nagel wrote “I feel strong that in biography the author, like a painter, should lead the reader or viewer into a life, and at certain points leave the reader to reflect about what the story means.”

EC: Interestingly enough, Nagel’s opinion can be assimilated to one important postmodernist stance, that texts should be “writerly,” that is, they should require the active participation of their reader. Modern historical documents are often “readerly,” giving closure and a lesson of sorts to readers, purporting to have achieved a final rendition of reality.

Nagel’s description conforms to a shift in interest experienced by both philosophers and social scientists in the last two decades. Epistemology (determining the foundations of knowledge, and thus truth), the longtime focus of historical writing, has declined in favor of hermeneutics (determining the criteria of understanding within specific contexts). The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur asserted that hermeneutics, interpretation in more simple terms, could be applied to the social sciences as well as the humanities. The inference here is that “Truth” with a capital “T,” the counterpart of epistemology, is being replaced by interpretation. If Nagel argued for the latter, his description places biography on the edge of the postmodern brink.

ET: Isn’t that true of all scholarship in the late twentieth century?

EC: This is part of the waning of a more positivist outlook toward objective reality and certainty. A linguist and philosopher like Ricoeur can suggest how exactly textual remnants are influenced by the compilers and thus can never be taken at face value. The compiler has already begun the act of interpretation by choosing to think about a particular topic or person.

ET: Of course. Our culture and sense of truth are always changing, which influences how history and biography are written. For example, in the late twentieth century, there seems to be an obsession with hero-killing. Exposure has been taken to a different level, seen in “kiss-and-tell” and journalistic expose biographies. The media are more concerned with exposing small personal indiscretions—and thereby proving that the subject at hand is not the hero we thought that person to be—than in providing more substantial issues or information. This may be disconcerting to some, but it remains a reflection of the world in
which we live. Contemporary biography reflects this. That's what sells. These types of biographies exploit the very quality of being human that most modern biographers seek to understand.

EC: A postmodernist response to “hero-killing” as an activity would be that it follows the usual dualistic or dichotomous nature of modern reality—the perpetuation of simplistic binary oppositions such as good and evil.

ET: The world has become more complicated. Biographers understand this. Biography, like all scholarly fields, been influenced by Hayden White’s (and others) notions of history and fiction over the past twenty years, bringing a new self-conscious awareness to the process of creation.

EC: Now we’ve come to the pivotal difference between biography and postmodernism as approaches to the production of meaning. White noted that the correspondence of “real” persons to “accurate” stories written about them is illusory. White suggests that the historian's focus on making ironclad links between historical events and the persons who precipitated those events is a remnant of a high Modern approach to history. It is this “how it really was” approach that has come under intense scrutiny in postmodernist writings.

White contests the very form in which history is written, namely the putatively objective formula of historical storytelling called the “ironic” narrative. He calls for more flexibility in historical reporting. If the biographical genre is more flexible than history “proper,” White might agree with many things you’ve said about biography.

ET: What do you mean by history “proper”? Didn't Foucault and other poststructuralists bring to the forefront the changing nature of structure as well as content? Any scholarship from the 1910s will look vastly different in the 1990s. Truth changes with time, and what we consider interesting changes with time. I think biography as a genre has achieved this flexibility. Another misconception about biography needs to be discussed. It's not a laundry list of the events of someone’s life, but an illumination of something about the person or the condition of being human in that particular time, place, and culture. Biographers give meaning to the archival material left from a life. How does a postmodernist write history?

EC: The question itself lets me clarify one very prevalent misconception about the intellectual current known as postmodernism. Like biography, there is no coherent unified group which meets under the banner of postmodernism. Postmodernists do not write history. Historians write history utilizing some of
the ideas they have co-opted from the intellectual trend known as postmodernism.

This situation is problematic for the historian. As you just mentioned above, the biographer, and the historian, often see the search for meaning as their primary goal. The postmodernist Jean-François Lyotard has suggested that the search for meaning is the most pointless endeavor within society, a futile means of self-justification. Lyotard extends this criticism to technology, psychoanalysis, and virtually any variant of social theory. Having rejected the Christian god during the Enlightenment, Westerners seek out an alternative deity and have named it “Science.” Activities are now merely undertaken in the name of “progress” or Western democracy.

This rather rash opinion can be applied to an individual’s life as well. What is the point of the search for meaning in one individual life? What purpose does this activity serve? Do we need to emulate that person’s activities or actions? Are we trying to valorize a particular time in our past? Is there a utility value for the present within one person’s past life? Radical postmodernism, the type associated with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, invalidates the search for meaning in one particular individual’s life.

ET: So a postmodern approach precludes the search for any meaning whatsoever?

EC: No, postmodernist approaches suggest that numerous meanings can be extracted from any one document or text. The point is to demonstrate how the supposedly fixed realities of our world can be shown to be tautological, or circular, from a philosophical standpoint.

ET: Then why do you research or pursue the project that you choose to do?

EC: A good question, and one for which I have no answer. Personal predilection, I suppose. Critics of postmodernism claim that this absence of meaning betrays nihilism and relativism. If you follow some of the implications of their arguments to an extreme, then there can be a void where meaning once existed. There is no reason to search for “Reason.”

I suppose it’s time that I provide a name to go with the “epithet” postmodernist, as the term often seems to be one utilized by critics rather than espoused by those who are labelled. Lyotard enraged a generation of social scientists by claiming very succinctly that the secret of theory is that “Truth” does not exist. As a result, detractors claim his work is nihilistic, pointless, and even absurd.8
ET: What did Foucault see as the point or meaning of his work? Why did he write? Why did he choose the subjects that he did? And Lyotard? Derrida?

EC: As for Lyotard and Derrida, I couldn’t begin to say. Foucault was a political activist, but he eventually broke away from established party politics and focused on those particular issues he considered of interest. In terms of his work, I think Foucault believed he was uncovering the subtle yet insidious social mechanisms which affect all of us in Western society. His three volumes on the history of sexuality deal with the subjection of the individual to control through labelling. He concluded that one of the primary facets of individuality in Western culture is sexuality. The term “sexuality” became more than a biological nomenclature. Foucault claimed sexuality was not natural, but constructed and made. The individual is defined by what, how, when, why, and where its body functions in that realm.

ET: In short, the individual is a product of the culture.

EC: Yes, but more pessimistically, there is no means of escaping this primary definition. Even in elucidating that process of being created by sexuality you cannot escape it. Foucault did not see understanding how sexuality constructs individuality as a means of achieving liberation or freedom. He felt “emancipation” from the labels of sexuality to be impossible. This opinion has troubled many a critic, leading them to accuse Foucault of nihilism.

ET: This type of perspective would be a perfect biographical topic, tracing these ideas through seventy years or so to see how one life is reflected by these ideas—biography as a form and not an ideology. In terms of being a product of culture, biography often gives one that sense. For example, Ronald Hayman’s biography of Friedrich Nietzsche works with how philosophers are influenced by their eras. Nietzsche was clearly a product of his teachers, the schooling of his day, of classicism, of Schopenhauer, Wagner, and his religious training. I got a sense of the cultural influences on his life and how they affected his development. Hayman contextualizes the philosophy of Nietzsche firmly within the era.

EC: It’s funny you should mention Nietzsche, one of Foucault’s most formative influences. But I think Foucault cared very little about the man and his life. Nietzsche’s ideas were what influenced Foucault. Foucault obstinately claimed that philosophical innovations are entirely divorced from the individual, a sort of free-floating conceptual net. Interestingly enough, Foucault loved to baffle interviewers with the comment “I am not interesting.” But what he meant to underline was that his personal life experience had very little to do with idea production.
ET: This seems in direct conflict with the notion of an individual being a part of a culture. How can we know those influences without exploring them? To understand that life, even for a postmodernist these issues need to be explored, even if they are not presented in terms of the individual. Details matter. Hayden White seemed to emphasize the importance of paying attention to the minute and small detail. Is a careful, close analysis an important aspect of postmodernism?

EC: Certainly, but with a different end in mind. While Marxist historians would attempt to study one particular group of individuals (laborers, let's say, who are on strike) and then draw large-scale conclusions about how the capitalist system functions within a given context, I don't think that a postmodernist perspective would search for such universal conclusions. A Marxist may focus on the small picture, in order to find how it blossoms out into the large picture. Maybe a postmodernists would focus on one small picture to demonstrate that the supposed big picture is a figment of our imagination. They would study something minute or detailed—with no pretensions of drawing larger, and perhaps even grandiose, conclusions about the essence of labor or the cosmos of a particular social group reflected within the testimony of one individual.

We have been discussing what the critics of postmodernism see as its most disturbing element. Discussions of the “Death of the Subject” began with Nietzsche and were further formulated by the structuralist Roland Barthes among others. Poststructuralists, such as Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard have also attacked the Western world’s love affair with the notion of “Progress.” Postmodernist thought has contested three major tenets of Western society: the subject, science, and the belief in progress. Since we’re discussing biography, it might be wise to avoid all three of these targets of postmodernist criticism. Our tapes, and our lives, aren't long enough!

ET: All right, but an individual moves through life chronologically, so naturally there is progression in personal and intellectual development.

EC: No one can disagree that change takes place. Perhaps the postmodernist philosopher would agree that change occurs, but might add the coda (and excuse the slang here), “but they ain’t necessarily getting better.” Foucault emphasized this concept numerous times in some of his studies of discipline in western civilization, the medicalization of sexuality, criminal behavior, and mental “aberration.” Our scientific framework and mindsets have created categories of abnormality. That is not progress, but a means of controlling humans down to the most minute details of their behavior on a daily basis. Foucault wondered if this process of control and individualization should be considered an ameliora-
tion of existence. Would the biographer search for the Nietzschean unfamiliar, and thus heroic, in his or her choice of a subject to investigate?

ET: Not necessarily. Biographers have just as many varied reasons for choosing their subject as historians do. You chose your subject [Rachilde] to gain access to constructions of masculinity and femininity at a specific time. Again, the biographer works within the framework of the life. I think my subject [Vera Brittain] actively strove to help make the world safer from war, but that does not mean she succeeded. My work will reflect these aspirations but my goal in writing the biography is to understand how the catastrophe of war transformed her life and made her view herself as part of a generation that would never be the same again.

Now, would a postmodernist deny the actions of a life, be they climbing a tree, signing a treaty, serving in war, writing a book, or giving birth to children?

EC: These questions lead to an example of treatment of an individual by a postmodernist. In this case, Jacques Derrida—who knows, of course, that individuals take physical actions such as the signing of a political treatise—has suggested that Thomas Jefferson signed his name to the Declaration of Independence as nothing more than a secretary. Rather than a “heroic” person who envisioned the political system of this country or its liberation by creating that document, Jefferson was merely the voice through whom ideas dominant in collective thought took textual form. Derrida’s approach diminishes Jefferson’s individual role and responsibility in the document’s creation.¹⁰

ET: But doesn’t that deny his role? How can a postmodernist diminish an important role? This statement seems arbitrary and contrary to history.

EC: Derrida suggests we choose specific individuals from our past, not necessarily because of their greatness during their era, but because of what they mean to us now in the present. The life activities of Thomas Jefferson have been invested with the freedom and liberty of our political system. Rather than the mere draughtsman of the “Declaration of Independence,” his existence has been invested with meaning. Deconstruction minimizes the importance of these individuals.

ET: I think we have to be careful. The biographer John C. Miller sees Thomas Jefferson very differently. Miller’s Wolf By the Ears looks at Jefferson’s life in the context of his view on slavery.¹¹ He does not elevate the man, but shows his strengths and weaknesses. In fact, his thesis is that Jefferson, despite his ideals, could never escape being a product of the South.
But a biographer would not necessarily discount Jefferson's intentions about the future merely because he was a product of his culture. Rather, the biographer would look to see what his intentions were, how he reflected his culture, how in the case of a political or intellectual biography his ideas differed, and what his contribution actually was. The biographer is not denying that the subject lived within and was a product of a particular culture. This is what makes a biography rich.

So a postmodernist would say that biography elevates a person more than they should be elevated? That even an extraordinary person, such as Thomas Jefferson, is really average? But aren't some people in our society elevated above the others?

EC: Yes, but “average” is perhaps not the best word. The implication may be that Jefferson is no better than the common individual.

ET: But he was more than a common man. He accomplished extraordinary things that still shape our lives today. Biography, in fact, takes a look at the average and extraordinary and gives a behind-the-scenes look at a life, showing the average, the human side of success and failure.

If the postmodern project seeks to deconstruct preconceived notions, has it just replaced one set of notions with another? For example, the theoretical attitude of deconstruction? Postmodernism often intimidates people. And there seems to be no neutral stance when it comes to whether you like it or not. How do “postmodernism” and “theory” go together? Explain the relationship of the two ideas. Are they one and the same?

EC: I’ve already mentioned that Jean-François Lyotard believes that theory can only reveal that the search for “Truth” is a fiction. Theory, from this viewpoint, is a continuous process of selfjustification. So, one radical variant of postmodernism claims that theory should not exist.

Is deconstruction, of the Derridean variant, a form of theory? Derrida believes that the search for epistemology, for the foundations of knowledge, is a pointless endeavor. He espouses a radical hermeneutic approach. And a radical hermeneutic, rather than a theory, is a very personal interpretation of anything you choose to study.

ET: So how does that get translated into his work?

EC: For example, in the fascinating article “Declarations of Independence,” he “deconstructs” the signing of the most hallowed political document in American history. He talks about how Jefferson wrote in the name of a people that did
not exist until Jefferson conjured them up. This fictitious body of nationals came into existence as Jefferson signed in their name. He also pulls apart the circular logic of the document’s wording “We hold these truths to be self-evident. . .” By infamously deconstructing those famous words, Derrida contests their logic. But Derrida does not project what he does in the article as a form of theory. I think he considers deconstruction to be the method which enables him to achieve radical interpretations.

ET: So the postmodernist Derrida is not a theoretician? Are Derrida’s disciples claiming to be theorists? What about their language? There is an elitist sense to their work.

EC: I agree that a great deal of the language utilized by Derrida and Foucault, among others, is pithy and difficult, an incomprehensible jargon to some. But access to the production of philosophers has always been a problem. The works of Hegel and Marx were probably no easier for the first generation of their readers. And I think that is part and parcel of their entire— I can’t use the words “project” or “endeavor,” because they don’t believe in those kinds of words. They don’t want anything to be simple and comprehensible instantaneously. A simple theorem such as “x + y = fill-in-the-blank” is not their strategy.

ET: It seems like they’ve made their ideas inaccessible, too. Their choice in writing style is very unfriendly, very closed.

EC: Very anti-democratic. I agree with you wholeheartedly when it comes to Jacques Derrida. But not with Foucault. I think he did try to make his thought accessible to a large number of people.

ET: That’s why he has become so popular. Even the topics he chose were very interesting, popular things that many people can access such as prisons and sexuality. Now what about the people who use these materials as part of their work? That was one of the things you were critical of with Giuliana Bruno. She uses the ideas developed by the postmodernists without explaining the concepts as part of a language, a dialogue. Isn’t that making their ideas into theory?

EC: What I objected to in Bruno’s work was the haziness with which she presented the explicit details of her subject’s life. I wasn’t sure I had learned much about the woman named Elvira Notari after I’d read the book. I think people use postmodernist thought as a suggestive means by which to formulate questions rather than as a model for the study of a particular issue.

ET: But that’s the brilliance of her work. She took someone who had little
surviving archival material, and who would not normally have been a biographical subject, and through techniques such as mapping the city, giving a history of early cinema, and comparing her achievements with other women in cinema at her time, she was able—even though hazy as you say—to give us a picture of this film creator. That is what I admire in her work, and what inspired me to find other ways of pursuing, trying to get at my subject. Unlike Bruno, I don't have the problem of a shortage of archival material—quite the contrary. But by following her lead, I have expanded my project to include a number of innovative techniques to get at different aspects of Vera Brittain and her generation that I might not have thought of before reading Bruno's work. It opened new doors of creativity for me.

EC: Primarily, postmodernist approaches suggest the formulation of entirely different questions, and this is a form of creativity.

ET: How does the postmodernist, say Foucault or Derrida, ask a question?

EC: Here we can return to Derrida's article on Jefferson and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Derrida queried, "Why do we need to ascribe the creation of a political system to a particular person?" Foucault also asked "What does it matter who is speaking?"

ET: The "why" of the world. Robert Dallek, biographer of Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson, stresses the importance of analysis in biography. Biographies must ask the "why" about their material. And that's what makes the difference in biography. Did the biographer, after gathering the information, go one step further and ask "why did the subject do that and what does that tell us? What does that mean?"

EC: That sounds religious or mystical or soulful in terms of the question that a typical modern historian reject.

ET: Not at all. Scholars analyze as well as compile in a postmodern age. Working with the remnants of life, biographers are that much more aware of the constraints of the documents they use. And yet, biographers realize that they are working towards an impossible goal. In 1929 André Maurois questioned how much the documents and materials available really tell about the man, and worried about how they distorted moments of life. He saw all of the moments lost to a biographer that were so important to understanding that life. Is that similar with the postmodernists? Do they think they can really find the answers to the questions they pose?
EC: Postmodernists believe that there are no definitive answers. As for soul, the postmodernist might say that only infinite and multiplicitous versions of meaning and soul can be delineated, even in one individual's life experience. Thus we shouldn't meander off in search of Vera Brittain or Rachilde and expect to find, respectively, the soul of a First World War writer or a decadent novelist.

ET: What do we find?

EC: The contradictory and disparate voices contained within these individuals, often at odds with themselves, or their society at large, or their backgrounds, or their peers, or their own sexuality...The list is endless.

ET: Again, biographers would agree. This may be of comfort to the biographer trying to deal with the contradictions of life. Here perhaps postmodernism can give models to the biographer on how to incorporate the many voices of life into a narrative. How can postmodernism help a biographer who does not necessarily subscribe to the entire postmodernist agenda?

EC: Once again, political parties have agendas, but postmodernism, as a vaguely defined intellectual current, has none. The current deconstructs anything that is hegemonic or overtly unifying. It's against making things look terribly consistent. The literary biographer of Mary Shelley, Anne Mellor, utilized the dialogic, a literary concept she took from the Russian formalist literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin to achieve this end. Within any individual's life you're going to have many conflictual tendencies and trends that the Victorian biography would have eliminated. Postmodernists revel in the inconsistencies. Conflicts exist within any one individual's attitude towards any given topic.

ET: So how do you include that? Structurally, how does a postmodernist deal with all these many faces? How do they deal with the messiness?

EC: A concrete example? Foucault chose to eliminate any form of editorial in his studies of a parricide and a "hermaphrodite." He collected and published the documents concerning these two individuals, which is in and of itself a way of influencing and interpreting the material. The historian there is not a mediator, with the exception of placing the documents together as an act of intervention from the start.

ET: That sounds Victorian, almost, or at least a reaction against asking, analyzing, and criticizing. Do you think this could have been a reaction to the modernists' reaction to the Victorians? Funny, it really does sound like what Victorian biography did. They gathered all of the materials they could and presented immense two-volume biographies. Suspicious of interpretation, they presented
the “life as it was,” although they edited out anything that would prevent the portrait from being heroic.

EC: I sincerely doubt Foucault had heroism in mind when he chose to tell the story of a man who murdered his entire family. My sarcasm aside, I think Foucault presented two exceedingly important topics in having this story published and showing that the historian always intercedes by compiling information. First, Foucault questioned the notion of objectivity. Second, he elaborated upon the topic which concerned him, namely that “deviance” is a cultural construct.

ET: So does Foucault’s biography deal with multiple voices by having multiple accounts side by side?

EC: Yes, but in a contorted and curious manner. His objective in presenting the mass murderer’s story was to highlight the criminal and medical disciplinary techniques of late nineteenth-century France. But in a more general way, I think Foucault would have preferred an endless succession of conflictual voices to any supposedly hegemonic interpretation.

ET: So are you saying that the interpretations of an action stand side by side, that the historian gives the many possibilities of meaning? Is it structurally possible to put voices together which are at odds with one another? Stylistically how do you include all of those voices?

EC: I don’t know. We can let each other know when our dissertations are completed.

ET: After our discussion, it seems odd for you to choose biography as the form of your dissertation. Do you consider your work a postmodernist project?

EC: Yes, if I can divide postmodernism into a radical variant and a more moderate variant, and adopt the latter. Radical postmodernism doesn’t allow for the notion of the subject. How can you be a biographer if you don’t believe in the subject? The more moderate variants leave room for individuals and their actions. I’ve found a great deal of aid with these issues in Seyla Benhabib’s discussion of the problem with postmodernism and feminism.14

ET: And that’s the focus of your study of Rachilde, to see her as a product of her environment, how she reflects her times?

EC: Right, but with a huge exception. If Rachilde had been a mere object, that is an obedient, domestic bourgeois woman, she never would have thrown herself into a pond to avert a prearranged marriage. Nor would she have written
letters to Victor Hugo on the sly. Nor would she have escaped to Paris to be a novelist at the age of twenty. A more moderate variant of postmodernism allows me to incorporate broader questions about gender and the literary genre with some of Rachilde's truly interesting life activities, as well as some very curious and inconsistent personal beliefs on her part, feminist or not. Because right there we can take a particular theory, a particular perspective in history (gender studies and history of women), and talk about what postmodernism can do to it.

ET: You see your subject as a feminist?

EC: No, but I find it interesting that her stance against formal feminism became part and parcel of her identity. The word “feminism” was not current in the French language until my subject was thirty-five.

ET: Do you want to prove that she is a feminist? Is that important to you?

EC: No, absolutely not. Postmodernist reformulation of questions allows me to query how and why did the growth of the feminist movement proper affected her sense of identity and literary individuality. What Rachilde did with her novels was very suggestive for liberation for women in the end. She was not a feminist. But she only overtly disassociated herself from feminism at fifty-eight years of age. My subject is marginal or peripheral in the way she approaches women and their actions in the world.

ET: Why did you choose biography as a form for your project?

EC: Because the thematic perspective from which I was approaching artistic individuality and constructions of gender had neither shape nor form without a focus on one particular writer. I looked at the shift from the naturalist to the Symbolist literary aesthetic, and amidst a discursive paranoia about femininity and masculinity I lost sight of people, men and women. Rachilde allowed me to focus on all the broader issues and how they affected specific lives and written forms. I found the reassertion of the individual into my project very insidious, but telling.

ET: That comes back to my point: that history is always about people, that biography is the basic form we use.

EC: Yes. I set out to find a somewhat illusory “discourse” and what I found is a person through whom it spoke, but in the most fascinating ways which I can only attribute to her personality and sense of identity.
ET: Yet you still see a lot of value in postmodernist ideas and approaches to writing and the world?

EC: I find a great deal of suggestive ideas which can only be useful and meaningful to us without being destructive of our endeavor. We don’t have to subscribe to nihilistic, pessimistic perspectives. The vast majority of deconstructivist techniques can only help us in the long run.

ET: You can’t live in this world without feeling the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis. It’s just part of who we are now. Perhaps that will be true of postmodernism.

EC: And perhaps it will be subsumed in the next twenty years by a new wave of historical and philosophical thought. When taken to its extreme, postmodernism denies meaning to what we do by denying that meaning exists. Perhaps one hundred years from now some young historian will explain how the waning twentieth century produced a generation of skeptical, nihilistic philosophers. And soon some young historian will begin to contextualize the intellectual current known as postmodernism. Perhaps this can be described as a more conservative stance. We cannot let go of certain elements of cause and effect in our biographical studies of these women. This focus on contextualizing and understanding our respective biographical subjects makes us “Modern” rather than postmodern. I think that postmodernism can only suggest interesting ways of exploring, and eventually contextualizing, our subjects.

ET: Absolutely. Bruno’s work is but one example. It is the practical structural examples of multiple voices that most interest me. Scholars working within a postmodern theoretical framework have devised interesting possibilities. It will be interesting to further explore these in the future. It’s always fun to find new ways towards insight into one’s subject. Our dialogue on biography and postmodernism has been very helpful.

EC: I agree. It has brought up interesting questions. We have to construct our own answers.

EC and ET: For both of us, these last months have been a process of discovery, frustration, enlightenment (without the capital “E”) of a very personal kind, which has given us both a better sense of where our projects and thoughts are headed. But we have taken away very different things from our discussion. We came to this paper from two paths that met on a road that will now again branch off into two different directions.
Notes
7-15.