



## Research Article

© 2024 Ikram Aya Bentounsi and Meriem Boughachiche.  
This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

Received: 10 January 2024 / Accepted: 29 February 2024 / Published: 6 March 2024

# Porosity and Movement in Life Stories

Ikram Aya Bentounsi<sup>1</sup>

Meriem Boughachiche<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>DECLIC Laboratory, Didactics, Enunciation,  
Corpus, Linguistics, Cultural Interaction,  
University of Oum El Bouaghi,  
Algeria

<sup>2</sup>SLADD Laboratory,  
University of Constantine,  
Algeria

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/mjss-2024-0017>

## Abstract

Fueled by intellectual curiosity, literary discourse oscillates between factual and fictional narratives. Continually nourished by reality and imagination, it reflects a binary rhythm of representativeness and subjectivity. This work analyzes the biographical genre to explore the shift in rhetorical boundaries and representations in self-narratives. It examines various techniques writers use to reclaim the territory of intimate stories and lives. Infusing these narratives with meaning and unity aims to bridge the gap between the individual and the world. Awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature to feminist writer Annie Ernaux highlights the growing interest in the biographical genre. Ernaux, known for placing intimacy at the heart of her work, brings attention to this genre that often navigates through narratives marked by left-wing and 'politically correct' perspectives. Consequently, the genre emerges as a vital participant in the world's progress, establishing self-literature that withstands the test of time. A cross-study of various life stories — including intimate narratives, extremist views, self-portraits, memoirs, autobiographical novels, autofictions, and travel stories — enables us to understand the porosity and movement within this expansive genre. By presenting and juxtaposing different biographies, writers create a space for interaction, allowing the lives of others to permeate our understanding. Consequently, the biographical genre, serving as a mediating force, and the concept of otherness as mediation are reexamined within the fictional landscape of the human mind.

**Keywords:** Self-narratives, Biographical writing, Influences-Movement, Subjectivity, Personal myth

## 1. Introduction

This reflection focuses on the porous and mobile boundaries of the biographical genre, exploring the concepts of porosity and movement as they relate to gender from a discursive perspective. It delves into how gender manifests in the linguistic and cultural changes imposed by the varying contexts and circumstances surrounding self-narratives.

The biographical genre has evolved for centuries, creating significant openings and transformations. Our research reflects the fluctuations of this important literary genre, which has

increasingly asserted itself in literature from its origins through modern and post-modern times.

The discussion raises questions about how we interpret and approach these gender-related effusions. To what extent can we understand gender variations? How do we analyze the tribulations of the self, the enunciation, and the writing modalities ranging from a diarist's diary to an intellectual biography? Is "The Love Dictionary" a part of this seemingly narrow territory of self-narratives?

These questions guide our reflection on self-writing, leading to a series of hypotheses about the porous and evolving nature of the genre. This is examined through a comparative approach and cross-readings. The discussion posits that under a discursive paradigm, self-writing attempts to encompass traditional forms like canonical autobiography, diaries, portraits, and novels. This is achieved through a dual structure as an organizing principle, drawing its foundations from the mirrored construction of the writing subject. We then observe the writer confronting their autobiographical work (balancing fiction and reality) or even the biographer (juggling intellectual biography and biographical illusion).

## 2. Permanence and Metamorphosis: Social "me" and Narcissistic "me"

Evaluating the biographical genre in its discursive dimensions involves assessing it with a paradigm continuously evolving in form and appearance. Thus, it is inherently unstable, prone to collapse and disappearance, only to reemerge in new forms.

From Saint Augustine's confessions to those of Montaigne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the confession technique often accompanies a "me" or "self" in various discourses. These immense works offer explanations and justifications, where the autobiographical goal of "telling everything" is paired with an apologetic purpose. Lyrical inspiration is dominant here, portraying a reconciliation of the writer with themselves through the vibrations of their existence.

Tracing back to the famous Greek idea of "Know thyself" in the 16th century, the advent of the essay was crucial for the century's thought. Montaigne restored the genre's prestige, guiding it to new ends where literary writing serves a quest for self. He emphasizes, "If I study, I only seek the science which deals with knowledge of myself." Antoine Compagnon notes, "*The Essays capture the historical moment of transition from the classic genre of exemplary Lives to the modern genre of individual and particular biography.*" (Compagnon, 2010).

Beyond the confessional or intellectual dimension, the didactic register is prominent in life stories, as exemplified by the lives of saints or the hagiographical tales that thrived in the Middle Ages across continents in the West and East.

Expressing itself through images of instability, inconstancy, and illusion, myths and legends constantly nourish writing in self-narratives. Narcissism pervades all self-writing, whether baroque, romantic, or post-modern. This narcissistic behaviour is particularly evident in the biographical works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, André Gide, and Paul Valéry, described as "three writers of the self" by Pierre Albouy in 2004 (p.124).

In reflecting on the image, calm waters forming a mirror invite various approaches to the imagination, as Bachelard or Gilbert Durand discussed, leading to aesthetic contemplation. If the reflection resembles the thing reflected, self-awareness and the nature of representation determine the text's beauty.

Travel stories, from logbooks to diaries, portraits, or self-portraits, are all derivatives of self-writing and life stories. In these works by Western writers who travelled to the East, authors display a variety of obsessions and relationships with travel, exoticism, and fantasy. We see the wanderings of souls with a nineteenth-century spirit and dark romanticism in Gérard de Nerval's travel stories, a subtle misogyny and the myth of the femme fatale in Théophile Gautier's work, and similar themes in Jean-Cocteau's work. These are various images of the "Western self" and the "Eastern other," filled with imagination, erudition, mysticism, and aesthetics.

In these stories, the "me" does exist but often hides behind mythical expressions and the metamorphoses of an "I" in contact with the "other." This leads to blending a living self, a mythical

self, and another writing in a screen story, replacing a more realistic other in the viaticum story. As a result, we better understand the emergence of a social "we" when the self is no longer straightforward, indicating a connection to a cultural era, history, generation, or community.

Living elsewhere and creating connections in other universes by reconciling the "me" and the "self" is effectively executed in the viaticum genre, where the journey becomes total, engaging all intellectual forces and fabulous fantasies. The journey thus achieves its true meaning in its pursuit of otherness and the encounter with the other and the self.

Parallel to this historical and contextual reading and the Theory of the Symbol, we see in migrant literature, such as in Nina Bouraoui's writing, a fragmented and narcissistic "I." In "Tomboy," she writes, "I go from Yasmina to Nina. From Nina to Ahmed. From Ahmed to Brio..." This reflects a struggle with Franco-Algerian identity, meditating on the in-between and the boundaries of the real and the fictional. Bouraoui's writing is indecisive and hybrid, leading to the myth of the androgyne, where the aesthetic is asserted: "My gaze which pierces..."

The uniqueness of this "me" lies in the ambiguity of a narcissistic and androgynous "I," a personal myth expressing sexual and cultural identity.

The analysis of the "I" under the narcissistic paradigm comes from an interdisciplinary approach, offering conceptual insights into the origins of psychic life and the psyche/soma articulation, including the narcissistic contract, speech carrier, and pictogram, as well as fantasies, obsessive metaphors, and personal myths.

In another vein, Assia Djebar's biographical work is tirelessly linked to memory, from her earliest novels to "Nowhere in My Father's House," where she reflects on her childhood and adolescence in Algiers. Her writing is a tireless quest, marked by her work, to find her place at the confluence of two worlds.

Annie Ernaux, meanwhile, began her autobiographical novels feeling like an exile and an immigrant from "the inside." Her work is based on memory in search of truth, balancing writing and fiction. For Ernaux, writing is "avenging her race," with race implying social class, and her writing aims to portray the reality of women, influenced by reading Bourdieu.

### 3. From Self-Narratives to Intellectual Biography

Writing as an intellectual enterprise is part of a project of moral commitment, as highlighted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, in a way, initiated the concept of intellectual biography:

"I am embarking on an enterprise that has no precedent and will have no imitator. I aim to show my fellow men a man in the true nature of his being, and that man is myself. Unique as I am, I understand my heart and human nature. I am unlike anyone I have seen and believe, unlike anyone in existence. Whether I am better or worse, my uniqueness will be evident after reading my work. When the last trumpet sounds, I will approach the sovereign judge with my book. I will declare: this is what I did, thought, and was. I have spoken of the good and bad with equal honesty. I have neither concealed the bad nor embellished the good. If I have used any ornamentation, it was only to fill gaps in my memory. I presented myself as I was: contemptible and vile when I was so, good, generous, and sublime when I was so. Eternal being, gather my fellow humans around me, let them hear my confessions, lament my indignities, and blush for my miseries. Let each reveal their heart with the same sincerity; then let one say, if they dare, 'I was better than this man.'" (Rousseau, 1765-1770).

Contemporary variants of self-narratives are evident in Marcel Jouhandeau's notebooks and Paul Valéry's intellectual autobiography, "Monsieur Test" (1929), among others. Intellectual biography, including its applications in intellectual history, economic thought, and the arts, is experiencing a resurgence. As Malachi Hacoen, a Karl Popper specialist, noted in a special "History of Political Economy" issue devoted to biography, "Biography is back."

Connected to the social and cultural history of ideologies, intellectual biography, especially with post-modern variations, transcends the straightforward narrative and the biographical illusion critiqued by Pierre Bourdieu. It encompasses major themes in human history and the present,

drawing from the socio-history of intellectuals, transnational history, and the history of commitments and ideologies, but with a new spirit of creation and an alternative aesthetic form.

This approach is exemplified in the biographical work of Lebanese author and jurist Alexandre Najjar, who incorporates the genre into the Law and Literature movement.<sup>1</sup> His career, spanning various genres (poetry, theatre, novels, and essays), provides a unique panorama of his relationship to law and justice. Beyond law-related themes, the work addresses the challenges faced by jurists and lawyers in a complex world, including scandalous cases. The narrative and characters in his stories serve as witnesses and participants in unfolding mysteries where large corporations, powers, and institutions are scrutinized for their immoral and illegal practices. The intricacies of these stories offer a meticulous and rigorous observation point into the legal world, which is often perceived in a simplified or superficial manner.

This dimension of the work, which also exhibits a mark of literary efficiency and elements of humour and irony, deserves attention. It allows us to understand the keys to interpreting the professional world of lawyers, the role of justice, and our approach to the notion of law.

For Alexandre Najjar, literature represents the aesthetic aspect of law. In his works, the fictional discourse often integrates legal discourse, exemplifying the relationship between law and literature. This includes law as fictionalized through novelistic creation and literature in the guise of law.

As a form of social discourse, law is a prominent feature in Najjar's work. Here, he incorporates the right to fictional discourse as a fundamental component of political construction, serving as both a regulatory instrument and a means of emancipation. This leads him to critique through performative fiction, whether grand or modest, mythical or legendary, real or imagined. He reimagines the law to address contemporary challenges in a universal, not just national, context.

The thematic exploration of the legal universe in Najjar's work spans various forms, from poetry and biography to essays, theatre, and novels. This thematic focus deepens the vision of the law.<sup>2</sup>

As a literate jurist, Alexandre Najjar is part of the political and cultural elite. His mission is to

---

*'The Law and Literature movement, which appeared in the United States in the mid-1970s after the pioneering work of Benjamin Nathan Cardozo, is associated with Critical Legal Studies. Some authors have turned to the study of literary works to inform the process of making law, as John Henry Wigmore believes: "The novel – the True work – the True work of fiction – is a catalogue of the characters of life. And the jurist must know human nature", a trend within which the particularly striking work of Richard Weinberg fits. In short, the Anglo-Saxon side of studies on the relationship between law and literature questions how law looks at the literary works that look at it. Various issues and controversies will even highlight the judge's lack of culture about literature. In reaction to the trend of deculturation, we can note the sustainability of a classical culture among a certain number of judges who refer to literary quotations to support their decisions, a fact that can also serve as a criterion for evaluating the degree of literary impregnation of the judicial institution. This perspective alone opens up a field of research: literary references in court decisions or literature in law. Questions increasingly animate minds about the relationship between law and literature: can literature reveal the law? Is it capable of revealing what, in him, remains hidden?*

*Moreover, the perspectives multiply on fictionalized law, the legal novel, theatrical freedom as a question of law, legal fiction, and literary fiction. The fact remains that the Law-and-Literature movement insists on the deep kinship between literature and law. If the culturalist considers law and literature as two entities participating in a common culture and producing alternative worlds where moral and political values are expressed, the hermeneutical argument is based on literary productions' "textual" quality. Furthermore, legal postulates that texts do not have meaning in themselves but through interpretations whose framework is determined by the community to which the hermeneutic belongs. Thus, the limits of the current are displayed, which will find a strong echo in Europe, particularly the thought of François Ost, whose career as a jurist and philosopher of law makes him one of the leading researchers of current affairs in law and literature. It highlights as many convergences as divergences between these two fields and imaginations through an interdisciplinary practice. He also adds that the field of law and literature has emerged from its marginalization through the rise of quality production, university studies, journals, and conferences. However, this link established between the legal and literary fields, which already appears as a seduction, François Ost sums it up in these terms: "Law and literature dangerous connections!". Not devoid of ambivalence, it is the place where two imaginations intersect. Moreover, beyond the epistemological quarrels of the two fields, complementarity, crossing, and overlapping define this enriching relationship for human thought.*

<sup>2</sup>*Many of his works are performed in the theater and brought to the screen.*

use literary activity to build a national or religious identity, being a Maronite Christian, thus creating political literature. However, Najjar, a writer-lawyer and former advisor to the Minister of Culture, inverts this approach with his literature policy. As a prototype of the committed writer in the Sartrean sense,<sup>3</sup> he fights against all forms of injustice and censorship, transcending intercommunity conflicts.

Moreover, Najjar focuses on universal values and openness to others. He seeks to develop a collective identity that denounces attacks on freedom, inequalities, and abuses. He advocates for an ideal based on the values of emancipation and education, asserting the right to freedom of expression. His editorial work in the *Literary Orient* reflects his commitment and journalistic vocation.

In Alexandre Najjar's work, the writer is never hindered by his dual professions; on the contrary, the novel becomes the space where he exercises his roles as both a lawyer and an engaged writer. The elements of pleading, indictment, confession, and testimony form an anthology within his biographical works. Judgments, laws, and legal scenarios become, in turn, legal texts and effects, forming the basis of all writing in their textual relationships.

Legal work is evolving towards a practice of text and writing. The legal text, always dynamic, offers possibilities for renewed action and argumentation. In all stories, the argumentative effort involves searching for ideas, organizing them, and formulating them. Various argumentative strategies are implemented to demonstrate, convince, and persuade.

Furthermore, the dialogues in his characters, of an argumentative nature, polarize viewpoints and produce debates on war, power, religion, culture, and morality. Reality is also seen through the prism of fiction, which reveals the world in all its absurdity, leading to reflection.

The novel "Harry and Franz" is skillfully structured, relating to eloquence. The incipit acts as an exordium, capturing our interest and introducing the subject: the admiration of a German chaplain for fighting France and his shame between two camps, two countries, and two peoples he deeply loves. He concludes, "Dirt of war." This leads to the narration of French actor Harry Baur's incarceration, the derisory confirmation of evidence, the refutation of "Nazi arguments," and then a peroration, a practical and moving summary by Father Stock in the exhibit, which transitions into a sermon.

The novel's discourse is rigorously structured and falls within the legal genre. Behind the chaplain character is the lawyer, taking centre stage and intervening in the narrative. For instance, the story's critical elements are the lawyer's speech about Harry Baur's Christian background, his religious practices, and the interrogation of Rika Radifé's knowledge of the Koran.

The work plays a critical role, multiplying discursive forms and portraits. Direct and indirect forms of protest intertwine, with each portrait, whether laudatory or critical, becoming a pretext for social, political, religious, or moral discourse.

The forms of discourse in Najjar's work are abundant and often overlap. We see manifestos against injustice, pleas for freedom of expression, and panegyrics of virtuous figures like Abbot Stock. In the biographical essay "Anatomy of a Tyrant" and the historical novel "Berlin 36," the pamphlet form is blended with indictments against despotism and dictatorship.

The work also features apologies and aphorisms, particularly in texts about Khalil Gibran, emphasizing universalism and spirituality. Parables of a religious nature characterize the biographies with a hagiographic dimension.<sup>4</sup>

Najjar uses irony and pictorial accusatory rhetoric, exhibiting the eloquence and ingenuity of the lawyer-novelist in using linguistic resources to challenge extremist and egocentric thought.

The legal dimension of the literary text assigns to the work a legal poetics where legal reasoning,

---

<sup>3</sup>As Jean-Paul Sartre thinks: "Since the writer has no means of escape, we want him to closely embrace his era; she is his unique opportunity; she is made for him and he is made for her. (...) The writer is in a situation in his time: each word has repercussions. Every silence too. ". *Situations II*. Paris: Gallimard, 1948.

<sup>4</sup>*The Man of Providence AbounaYaacoub and Saint-Jean Baptiste*.

particularly judicial reasoning, is steeped in narrativity. A moralizing dimension reinforces the oratorical extent of eloquence.

The effectiveness of legal and literary art thus depends on the power of discourse. The commonality between the jurist and the writer is evident in the scriptural strategies deployed in the works, establishing their own rules of fiction.

#### 4. What about Love Dictionaries?

"The Love Dictionary" is a collection of works in articles arranged alphabetically, diverging from a linear structure, hence its name. It differs from encyclopedias or essays due to its subjective nature, as indicated by the term "lover" in its title.

The "Love Dictionaries" collection was established in 2000. Initially founded and directed by Jean-Claude Simoën, it was later taken over by Ghislaine Bavoillot. Plon publishes the series in collaboration with other publishing houses.

Jean-Claude Simoën conceptualized this idea in 1997 with Dominique Fernandez's work "The Journey to Italy," which resembled an alphabet book and was initially subtitled "Lovers' Dictionary." This led to the creation of a subgenre blending intellectual biography and essay. Contributors include members of the French Academy such as Xavier Darcos, Alain Decaux, Jean-François Deniau, Dominique Fernandez, Max Gallo, Pierre-Jean Rémy, Danièle Sallenave, Frédéric Vitoux, Pierre Rosenberg, Alain Bauer, Jean-Claude Carrière, Jacques Lacarrière, Alain Rey, Denis Tillinac, Jean Tulard, André Comte-Sponville, and others. Notable entries include Richard Colosse's "Dictionary of Love with Japan," Malek Chebel's "Dictionary of Love with Algeria," Robert Solé's "Dictionary of Love with Egypt," and Alexandre Najjar's "Dictionary of Love with Lebanon."

The collection has enjoyed both commercial success and critical acclaim since its inception.<sup>5</sup> For example, the entry on Egypt presents a subjective and passionate view of the country, exploring its history and society through various figures and themes.

Malek Chebel, in his "Dictionary Lovers of Algeria," describes his approach in the preface: He aimed to create a free, iconoclastic, non-conformist book reflecting the nature of love, passion, and desire. He views Algeria as a nation in flux, a junction point between the north and south of the Mediterranean, rich in tormented stories.

The authors' entries are subjectively chosen by the collection, reflecting their favourites and memories. In the preface to the "Dictionary of Lovers of Lebanon," Alexandre Najjar expresses his joy in letting his love for Lebanon guide his writing, hoping to convey this passion to the reader.

What emerges from this exploration is a view of biography as a genre with porous borders, not just permeable and open to influences but also dynamic. The writing of oneself is seen as a deconstruction/reconstruction in pursuit of a poetic or philosophical truth by exploring otherness. This mobile "self" often appears fragmented but is unique, hidden behind a rich imagination revealed in the writing language: personal myth, subjectivity, and memory.

---

<sup>5</sup>In 2003, Yves Berger's "Dictionnaire amoureux de l'Amérique" was honored with the Renaudot Prize for Essay; in 2006, Michel del Castillo's "Dictionnaire amoureux de l'Espagne" received the Méditerranée Prize; in the same year, Bernard Pivot's "Dictionnaire amoureux du vin" was awarded the Gourmand Award for the best book on wine, and in 2007, it earned the Millésime Prize at the Lauriers iverts de la Forêt des livres; in 2008, Frédéric Vitoux's "Dictionnaire amoureux des chats" was granted the Dictionnaire Prize at the Lauriers verts de la Forêt des livres; in the same year, Denis Tillinac's "Dictionnaire amoureux de la France" received the literary prize of the Army - Erwan Bergot and the Maurice-Genevoix Prize; in 2013, Jean-Paul Enthoven and Raphaël Enthoven's "Dictionnaire amoureux de Marcel Proust" was awarded the Femina Essay Prize; in 2014, Henri Peña-Ruiz's "Dictionnaire amoureux de la laïcité" received the National Prize of Secularism (presented by the Comité Laïcité République) and the Secular Initiative Prize (presented by CASDEN, MAIF, and MGEN); in 2020, Olivier Weber's "Dictionnaire amoureux de Joseph Kessel" was honored with the Academy of Literature's 1900-1950 Prize.

In self-narratives or biographies today, the act consists of writing something new with something old but in a different spirit and with other aesthetic forms in response to linguistic and cultural changes. The genre, presenting a multitude of holes or tiny pores, remains permeable, fostering exchange and openness to influences: fictionalized autobiography, travelogue, intellectual biography... are all offshoots of self-writing.

## References

- ALBOUY, P. (2004). *Myths and Mythologies in French Literature*. Paris: Armand Colin. (Published in 1998).
- BAUDELLE, Y. & NARDOUT-LAFARGE, E. (Eds.). (2011). *Proper Name and Self-Writing*. Montreal: University Press. (Literary Space), Canada.
- BOUGHACHICHE, M. (2014). *Mythical Figures of Pharaonic and Eastern Egypt in French and Francophone Stories: Fantasies and Realities*. Doctoral thesis in Literary Text Sciences. Constantine I University.
- BOURDIEU, P. (1986). "The Biographical Illusion." *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, Nos. 62-63, June, pp. 69-72.
- CHEBEL, M. (2012). *Algerian Lovers Dictionary*. Paris: Plon.
- CHIANTARETTO, J-F., COHEN DE LARA, A., HOUSSIER, F., MATHA, C. (Eds.). (2022). *At the Origins of the I: The Work of Piera Aulagnier*. Proceedings of the Cerisy Conference. Itaca.
- COMPAGNON, A. (2010). *Course: Writing Life II*. Writing Life II (January 5, 2010). Collège de France.
- DOSSE, F. (2005). *The Biographical Bet: Writing a Life*. Paris: La Découverte.
- FAUCHEUX, A. (2001). *The Biographical*. Paris: Ellipses.
- FERNANDEZ, D. (1998). *Le Voyage d'Italie: Dictionary of Love*. Paris: Plon. pp.681.
- LECARME, J. & LECARME-ALTABAS, A. (1997). *The Autobiography*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- LEGOFF, J. (1989). "How to Write a Historical Biography Today?" *Le Débat*, No. 54, March-April, pp. 48-53.
- LEJEUNE, P. (1980). *I Am Another: From Literature to the Media*. Paris: Seuil.
- LEJEUNE, P. (1991). *Memory and the Oblique*. Paris: POL.
- MARGAIRAZ, D. & DE NEUFCHÂTEAU, F. (2005). *Intellectual Biography*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.
- NAJJAR, A. (2014). *Lebanon Lovers Dictionary*. Paris: Plon.
- PASSERON, J-C. (1990). "Biographies, Flows, Itineraries, Trajectories." *Revue française de sociologie*, XXXI-1, pp. 3-22.
- SOLÉ, R. (2012). *Dictionary of Lovers of Egypt*. Paris: Plon.