Chapter II

Historicizing Life-Writing

I

This chapter proposes to examine the critical trajectory of life-writing, an umbrella term coined to “cover the protean forms of contemporary personal narrative, including interviews, profiles, ethnographies, case studies, diaries, web pages, and so on” (Eakin, 1). The term, life-writing, however, is not unanimously seen as an overarching shade over all sorts of personal narratives. Hermione Lee, for instance, in her definition of life-writing given in Body Parts: Essays on Life Writing (2005), stresses the fact that the term is specifically used when the borderline between autobiography and biography gets blurred: “The term ‘life-writing’ is sometimes used when the distinction between biography and autobiography is being deliberately blurred, or when different ways of telling a life-story—memoir, autobiography, biography, diary, letters, autobiographical fiction—are being discussed together” (Lee 100).

These two definitions of life-writing—one by Paul John Eakin, one of the stalwarts in the field of life-writing studies, and the other by Lee—speak of the presence of at least a couple of critical approaches\(^1\) to the term. One of these approaches highlights the overlapping territories within life-writing, whereas the other emphasizes distinction among the components of life-writing. This chapter will examine both the approaches with equal attention, beginning with an evaluation of the history and development of the components of life-writing that tries to understand the distinction of these components as genres. Sections two to five of this chapter will discuss biography, hagiography, autobiography and memoir respectively. Considering the significance of the feminist stands on life-writing which try to ascertain the distinctness in women’s negotiation with these genres, the sixth section of the
chapter will deal with women’s biographical and autobiographical endeavours. This section is also needed as this dissertation will have to examine the autobiography, autobiographical fictions and memoir of two women writers, Jean Rhys and Stella Bowen. The seventh section will specifically focus on some of the emerging trends in the critical writings on life-writing which will provide us with further critical options in reading Rhys who is a so-called autobiographical writer. In the final section of this chapter, the need for recognizing the importance of the overlapping territories between the different components of life-writing is stressed as such an approach to life-writing will be specifically relevant to this project.

II

The history of life-writing goes far back to antiquity. Paul Murray Kendall, the writer of *The Art of Biography* (1965), gives a good overview of the long journey that ‘biography’ has undertaken through ages in Encyclopedia Britannica. According to him, biographical literature began its journey with the poet Ion of Chios in the 5th century BC. He wrote brief sketches of his celebrated contemporaries like Pericles and Sophocles. The genre made considerable advancement in the hands of the inspired followers of two great figures, Socrates and Jesus Christ. Four lives of Jesus came some four hundred years after Plato wrote his two biographical dialogues on Socrates: *The Apology* and the *Phaedo*. The lives of Jesus were matched by the works of three biographers who were pioneers in professional biography: Plutarch, Suetonius and Tacitus. Plutarch was a Greek who was born around the late 40s or early 50s A.D. He was a prolific writer, especially known for his biographies of
two Roman emperors, Galba and Otho. Besides, he also wrote a series of forty-eight lives of famous Roman and Greek military and political figures, discussing them in pairs consisting of one Roman and one Greek personage. Suetonius, on the other hand, was born around 70 A.D. and went on to write the *Lives of the Caesars*, starting with Julius Caesar and continuing up to the life of Domitian. Cornelius Tacitus, born also in the 40s A.D, was famous for writing the life of his father-in-law, Gnaeus Julius Agricola. Significantly, these three biographers came in the same century that produced the lives of Jesus. The rapid growth of Christianity brought life-writing to a new turn signalled by a newer breed of autobiography, the *Confessions* by St. Augustine. But, “The demands of the church and the spiritual needs of men, in a twilight world of superstition and violence, transformed biography into hagiography.” There followed a thousand years of saints’ lives: the art of biography forced to serve ends other than its own.” (Kendall n.pag) The Middle Ages—rhetorically, an age of the priests and the knights—brought hardly any advancement in biographical literature, as religious literature, allegory, chivalric romances, and broad satire (the fabliaux) dominated the literary scene. Eadmer’s *Life of Anselm* (one of the saints’ lives again), Jean, sire de Joinville’s *Life of St. Louis*, Bishop Gregory of Tours’ *History of the Franks*, Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* are a few works that offered some flickers of light in the darkness. The Middle Ages, of course, cannot be called utterly barren in terms of biographical literature especially because of the 9th century work *The Life of Charlemagne*, written by a cleric of Charlemagne’s court named Einhard.

The Renaissane breathed a fresh lease of life into biography, although, initially, autobiographical literature absorbed more of the spirit, whereas, biography limited itself to “ uninspired panegyrics of Italian princes by their court Humanists” like Simonetta’s life of
the great condottiere, Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan’’ (Kendall n.pag). In the early 16th century England there appeared three biographical works which can be hailed as ancestors to modern biography: More’s History of Richard III, William Roper’s Mirrour of Vertue in Worldly Greatness or The Life of Syr Thomas More, and George Cavendish’s Life of Cardinal Wolsey. But the Renaissance could not live up to the expectations in terms of quantity, as not much was written after these. The Elizabethan age in England, indeed, did not have anything remarkable to offer in the forms of biographical literature. The otherwise literarily rich Elizabethan age showed a lack of zeal in producing life-writings. Among the very few works in this genre Sir Fulke Greville’s account of Sir Philip Sydney (1652) is spoilt by its moralizing tendency. Sir Walter Raleigh provides an explanation for this lack of biographical writings in the Elizabethan Age in his introduction to the History of the World (1614): “Whosoever in writing a modern history, shall follow truth too near the heels, it may haply strike out his teeth” (Raleigh qtd. in Lee, Bio 30). Raleigh, here, is, actually, referring to Sir John Hayward who was imprisoned in the Tower of London because of his account (1599) of Richard II’s deposition, which, although happened two hundred years ago, aroused Queen Elizabeth’s anger.

In terms of published appearances of biographies, eighteenth century was more important in several ways. It was the age of Izaak Walton who produced five noteworthy works on the lives of John Donne (1640), George Herbert (1670), Sir Henry Wotten (1651), Richard Hooker (1665) and Robert Sanderson (1678). The highlights of the first half of the eighteenth century were the three biographies by Roger North (not published until 1742 and 1744) of his three brothers: Francis, Sir Dudley and John. North’s preface to the life of Francis seems to be the first serious critical essay on biography. The second half of the century, of course,
belonged to the two giants of the genre: James Boswell and Dr. Samuel Johnson. Boswell’s 
*Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) and Johnson’s *The Lives of the English Poets* (published in parts between 1779-1781) stand out in the history of life writing for their attempts at giving a firm basis to the genre, biography. The eighteenth century also got, for the first time, women’s contribution to the genre. These works will be discussed in detail in the sixth section of this chapter. The nineteenth century began with much promise for the genre but ended up adding almost nothing new to the Boswellian model and lapsing into near hagiographic flatness. Thomas More’s *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* (1830), James Anthony Froude’s *Study of Carlyle* (1882 and 1884), John Forster’s *Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-74) conformed to the Boswellian model of biography.

The modern period of biography-writing began with the World War I. This period saw a significant increase in biography writing as well as an advancement in the field of biographical criticism. This turn was the result of the growing influence of fiction, science and psychology in literature and society in general. The influence of psychology has, probably, been more significant for biography than most of the other factors that contributed to the growth of the genre in the twentieth century because this influence “has rendered the self more exposed but also more elusive, more fascinatingly complex” (Kendall n.pag), thereby making the representation of the self in biography more complex and fascinating as well. A turn in the history of biography came in the early modernist era with another trend-setting work, *Eminent Victorians* (1918), by Lytton Strachey. This book dealt with the other side of the stories of eminent Victorian personalities. *Eminent Victorians* was followed by two other biographical works by Strachey, *Queen Victoria* (1921) and *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928). No wonder, there were works that followed this model. But, the turn in the domain of
biography writing brought about by Strachey was effected, according to Kendall, by
Strachey’s “artful selection, lacquered style, and pervasive irony” (n.pag), a combination of
qualities the other writers who tried to emulate him definitely lacked. The gradual fading out
of this mode of life-writing, iconoclastic in essence, hence, was inevitable, although that does
not mean that biography itself as an art form receded. Rather the failure of Strachey’s model
set the genre on a safer and more accepted course paving the way for an increasing popularity
for it among the common readers. However, the critical attention it has received came only in
the latter half of the twentieth century and by that time, biography has found several other
modes of expressions in forms other than literature, particularly in movies and dramas.
Contemporary time is, indeed, witnessing a deluge of biographies, along with considerable
critical activities following it.

III

Kendall’s lack of reverence for hagiography—apparently resulting from the influence of
the early twentieth century assessment of the genre where “hagiography became a bad word”
(Lee 28)—is a black spot in Kendall’s otherwise wholesome discussion of biography.
Kendall’s lack of respect for hagiography can be inferred firstly from the fact that he hardly
elaborates on the development or history of it. It can also be conjectured from Kendall’s
article that he considers hagiography as an offshoot of biography or rather as a deviation,
where the secular aspect or objective of biography as a literary genre is compromised by
hagiography’s religious objective. The following comment, quoted already above in another context, can be a clue to this understanding:

The demands of the church and the spiritual needs of men, in a twilight world of superstition and violence, transformed biography into hagiography. There followed a thousand years of saints’ lives: the art of biography forced to serve ends other than its own. (Kendall n.pag)

Hermione Lee, however, includes a good history of English hagiographic literature in her brief but important work Biography: A Very Short Introduction. What makes hagiography important is—as can be inferred from Lee’s description of it—the long life span it enjoyed or is even enjoying till now. Before going into its history we must define it and take a look at its characteristics. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English defines ‘hagiography’ as ‘the writing of the lives of saints’. “The term”, writes Lee, “derives from Latin hagiographa from Greek ‘agios’, holy, and ‘graphy’, writing” (24-25). Lee has elaborated on the characteristics of such writings and has found a pattern in them:

These are lives lived in imitation of Christ, in retreat from the world, dedicated to God, providing lessons in exceptional godliness and purity. In the standard pattern, they start with early signs of spirituality shown through childhood incidents, followed by a break, often violent and difficult, with worldly connections (family, society, politics, government), perhaps a conversion, and a commitment to a holy life. The narrative then settles down to giving examples of the holy person’s sayings, conversations, visions, and miracles, culminating in a farewell address, a holy death or martyrdom, miraculous posthumous proofs of sainthood, and evidence of lasting influence. The saint’s trial–testing of virginity, conflicts with pagan authorities, torture, imprisonment – are always emphasized, and a good death is a key part of the story. As classical Lives emphasized
traits and provided ‘exampla’ of types of behavior, saints’ Lives displayed prototypical virtues. (25)

In Lee’s account the first trace of English hagiography is to be found in about 699 when Life of Cuthbert was written by a monk of Lindisfarne. It was perfected further by Bede in his Life of Cuthbert in the 720s. Aelfric’s Life of the Saints was written around 1000 AD. The eleventh and the twelfth centuries saw the Anglo Norman saints’ Lives in Verse. The thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries produced collections like South England Legendary or Legenda Aurea by Jacobus de Voragine. The next two centuries saw a decline in hagiographic literature. The graph picked up in the Reformation again: “In Reformation England, hagiography became contested territory” (Lee 27). Protestantism participated in the contest vigorously with works like John Foxe’s Book of Martyrs (begun in 1653). Seventeenth century was quite crucial in respect of life-writing as changes came in abundance due to factors like humanism, scepticism and individualism—all patronized by the Renaissance. At this time hagiography “came under attack as a form of superstitious ideology” (Lee 28). Lee writes: “By the 17th century, Thomas Fuller, in his Protestant biographical compendium of English types, Worthies of England (1662), was pouring scorn on the ‘forgeries’ and ‘grand abuse’ to be found in the Lives of Saints,…”(28). The 19th century was not unproductive either as it came out with collections of protestant martyrs such as English Female Worthies (1883). The twentieth century continued the trends with compilations like Saints and Sinners (1931) and lives of Catholic personages like Evelyn Waugh’s Life of Edmund Campion (1935). We can conclude the discussion on hagiography by quoting Lee to observe the immensely significant purpose hagiography served:

Saints’ Lives served many purposes. They boosted cults, shrines, and the sale of relics. They encouraged piety and spirituality. They created links, in their vernacular versions,
between ordinary people and the church. They had complex political and social
agendas, including critiques of contemporary life, lessons in manners, sexual roles, and
economics, and religious dissent. Their subjects were ‘rebels, failed monarchs,
disobedient children, virginal spouses, social radicals and cross-dressers’. (26)

It has to be admitted in this context that biography’s intrinsic connection with religion
manifested in the form of hagiography is not something special about hagiography, as many
other genres also reveal their inclinations towards bearing a religious purpose in them.
Autobiography, for example, often bears the appearance of theological discourses or
narratives in them as also sometimes autobiography finds expressions in travelogues or
business or martial treaties. The next section will dwell upon the subject of autobiography to
show how it creates space for the amalgamation of multiple genres and issues.

IV

Just like biography, the earliest signs of autobiography are to be found in historical
documents. In both the cases the borderlines with history are difficult to determine. In
Kendall’s article an account of the self can be traced as early as in the second century BC in
the Historical records of Chinese classical historian, Ssu-ma Ch’ien. Similar autobiographical
representations can be found in the letters of Cicero and St. Paul and also in the

Commentaries of Julius Caesar on the Gallic Wars. St. Augustine’s fifth century
autobiography Confessions (A.D. 398-400) was more formal and wholesome in form and
shape, although, it is distinguished more for its religious aspect. The fourteenth century
Letters to Posterity of Petrarch was again an attempt at the genre. Autobiography—like its cousin, biography—made considerable advancement with the Renaissance in the fifteenth century. But curiously the first foray into the field was made not by a man but an obscure woman of England named Margery Kempe. The fifteenth century produced an even fuller autobiography which came from “a celebrated Humanist publicist of the age, Enca Silvio Piccolomini” after his elevation to Papacy in 1458 as Pius II (Kendall n.pag.). The sixteenth century has at least two autobiographies to be called worthy of the genre: the autobiography of the Italian physician and astrologer Gironimo Cardano, and the adventures of Benvenuto Cellini, a goldsmith and sculptor. The most significant autobiographical works of the seventeenth century were The Autobiography of Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1886), an English historian and diplomat and John Bunyan’s Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (1666). Colley Cibber’s Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber, Comedian (1740) is another notable work that appeared in the early eighteenth century. In the post-Renaissance period at least three works deserve mention for their uniqueness in spirit and approach to the genre and for their representation of the three utterly different selves. These are the autobiography of Edward Gibbon, the great Historian, the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, the American writer of the Confessions, and the autobiography of J.J. Rousseau, the revolutionary Swiss-French Political and Social philosopher. Mentions must also be made of Wordsworth whose autobiographical poem Prelude (1850) marked another turn in the genre.

Augustine’s Confessions records an advancement in the genre of autobiography by expressing “in full rhetorical splendor the Christian imperative to the confessions of sins and thus promote that inward-turning gaze which is the origin and basis of autobiography” (Gusdorf 18-19). How it exacts the genre in its infancy is pointed out by critics, who not only
have attributed to it the status of the “first great” autobiography, but also have found its narrative design of “decisive significance” (Pascal 22-23). Karl Weintraub has pointed out Augustine’s pioneering endeavour in opening up the soul “in the inwardness of genuine autobiography” (45). Although separated by more than one thousand years, Augustine’s *Confessions* has a successor in true sense of the term in Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) which was written after Bunyan’s imprisonment that was to last for twelve years, although intermittently. Quite like *Confessions*, *Grace Abounding* also speaks of spiritual conversion of the subject and represents a self that draws the rationality behind its existence from God. Like other religious autobiographies it also narrates events which had impact upon the soul of the subject through revelation of providential design underneath them. But its difference from the *Confessions* lies in the tone of Bunyan which never is as certain and assured as that of Augustine. Bunyan is “never as sure as Augustine...forever poised between hope and despair” (Bell 118). Rousseau’s *Confessions* brought in a crucial stage in the history of life writing because it gave “a new model of secular autobiography for the Romantic era...God is being given only a peripheral role to play: Rousseau addresses God as a source of emphasis at the beginning of his autobiography rather than turning to him, either here or elsewhere, as a pre-eminent and sufficient arbiter of a truth” (Anderson 43-44). Rousseau follows it up with other biographical works like *Dialogues* (1776) and the *Reveries* (1778). Wordsworth’s *Prelude* (1850) comes close to its contemporary, *Confessions* by “drawing on a common psychological vocabulary of sensation, feeling, memory, and imagination” (Mitchell 646-7). Both texts reveal a reverence for nature, a love of solitude and the attempt to recover childhood experiences (Anderson 55). Difference between these two texts lies in the fact that “Rousseau’s outlook is more tragic, his view of human relations hopeless and embittered” while “Wordsworth goes on affirming the value of love” (Anderson 55). Beside this, “Rousseau confesses everything and yet feels guilty for nothing”, whereas
“Wordsworth confesses nothing and yet seems to feel excessive, unmotivated guilt for some unnamed crime” (Mitchell 647).

Memoir is another genre that deserves some space in the paradigm of life-writing especially for its confusing proximity with autobiography. The two genres—having more similarities in them than dissimilarities—make it difficult as well as important to draw the line of demarcation between them. This is how The Encyclopedia Britannica distinguishes the two terms: “whereas writers of autobiography are concerned primarily with themselves as subject matter, writers of memoir are usually persons who have played roles in, or have been close observer of, historical events and whose main purpose is to describe or interpret the events” (n.pag). This more or less suggests that autobiography places the subject at the centre of the discourse, whereas, memoir keeps the subject on the periphery as a recorder/observer of or as a witness to an event or episode of history. The difference is further explained by Thomas Larson in his *The Memoir and the Memoirist* (2007) with the following words:

Memoir situates the one story as equal to or greater than—even against—epic chronology of the Life. Autobiography’s central tenet—wisdom gained through many years—is much too grandiose for the memoirist...The Encyclopedia Britannica describes the old plural form, “memoirs,” as that which emphasizes “what is remembered rather than who is remembering”...With autobiography, we think there is only one life – the person lives it, then writes it. Boom, done. But the memoirist feels
prey to (or is it desirous of?) immediate emotional memory, almost as if the point is to preserve the evanescent... It cannot be the record of the past as autobiography tries to be. Memoir is a record, a chamber-sized scoring of one part of the past. Despite its rightness, it’s a version of, perhaps a variation on, what happened. (16-19)

The above observation by Larson suggests that memoir remains aware of the limitations of representations and perspective and accepts them by adapting to them. There is, however, no denying the fact that there remains a considerably large overlapping territory between autobiography and memoir that demands serious critical attention.

VI

Women’s foray into these genres (biography and autobiography) in, at least, English literature—as mentioned earlier—began quite early. Women’s contribution to autobiography in a somewhat formal form began with Margery Kempe, a fifteenth century woman who in no way was a representative of the section touched by ‘new learning’. The discovery of Kempe’s manuscript in 1934 led to researches directed at assessing its tone, content and socio-politico-religious significance. However, researchers and critics disagreed on the issues of the merit of Kempe’s writing as a religious text of significance as it exposed Kempe as “petty, neurotic, vain, illiterate, physically and nervously over-strained” (Allen, qtd. in Gracey, 20+). Socio-political significance of the work, however, is beyond doubt. Seventeenth century saw some other notable autobiographies by women. Sara Davy’s *Heaven Realized* came out posthumously in 1670. Anne Wentworth’s autobiography, *Vindication*,
was published in 1677. Both the autobiographies have a religious ardour about them as they
deal with sinfulness, salvation and the absolute allegiance to God. But neither is reluctant to
share the private space with the readers. Davy speaks of her guilt and Wentworth divulges the
abnormally disturbed marital life of hers without prohibition. The seventeenth century is, in
fact, remarkable from the point of view of women’s negotiation with life-writing and,
especially, with autobiographical writing. How excited women were with this apparently
new form of writing becomes clear from *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by
Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby and Helen Wilcox. This book anthologizes
excerpts from nearly a dozen seventeenth-century women writers’ autobiographical writings.
The introduction to the book acknowledges the fact that this century saw quite an outburst of
autobiographical writings from English women of which the twelve included formed a
significant but small part of the entire body of similar writings. But the introduction, indeed,
mentions a number of such writings which include a bevy of forms like confessions,
conversion narratives, Quaker pamphlets, Baptist pamphlets, pamphlets with socio-political
contents, diary, verse autobiography, letters, orally dictated accounts of own life recorded by
others etc. The introduction’s brief discussion of the huge variety of life-writing forms
published in or circulated throughout England in the seventeenth century gives an idea about
the energy and enthusiasm working behind life-writing of that era. The immense variety of
forms found as to have contained attempts at life-writing in this age may also be seen as part
of a quest for the perfect form to express or represent the self properly. The presence of a
grotesque mixture of forms is, hence, disturbing and at the same time interesting to look at.
These writings include writings such as *Faith and Experience* (1649) by Mary Simpson,
manuscript of Lady Ann Fanshawe, quaker narratives of Dorothy Waugh, Hester Biddle and
Sarah Blackborow, letters by Dorothy Osborne, Constance Fowler, Rachel Wriothesley
(Lady Russell) and Dorothy Sidney (countess of Sunderland), Mary Trye’s, Hannah Wolley’s and Louise Bourgeois’s accounts as ‘healers’, pamphlets of Hester Shawe, Anne Wentworth and Mary Blaithwaite, diary of Anne Clifford, *Anna Trapnel’s Report and Plea* (1654) by Anna Trapnel, *A Short Relation* (1662) by Katharine Evans and Sarah Cheevers, *A Vindication of Anne Wentworth* (1677) by Anne Wentworth, Susanna Parr’s *Susanna’s Apology* (1659), An Collins’s verse autobiography *Divine Songs and Meditations* (1653), autobiographical devotional verse like *Eliza’a Babe* (1652) of anonymous origin and *Honey on the Rod* (1656) by Elizabeth Major, Mary Carleton’s *The Case of Madam Mary Carleton* (1663) and Joan Vokins’s *God’s Mighty power Magnified* (1691). Graham, Hinds, Hobby and Wilcox have attributed the rise in autobiographical writings to two factors. The first one is the development of bourgeois individualism. This factor was first pointed out by Watt and Mckeown who were quoted in *Her Own Life*:

The development of autobiography in the seventeenth century and the subsequent rise of the novel have often been associated with the origins in that same period of bourgeois individualism, which made possible and promoted a focus on individual experience.(1)

The second factor is “the breakdown of state control over the press during the civil war, which made publishing more possible for women, as well as for men previously excluded from print” (*Her Own Life* 1).

Seventeenth century, in fact, saw women’s first serious attempts at writing biography as well. Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle published *The Life of the Thrice Noble
Prince William Cavendish, Duke Marquess, and Earl of Newcastle in 1667. Lucy Hutchinson wrote (after 1664) Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson, the biography of one of her Puritan warrior-husband, and it was published in 1806. Lady Fanshawe wrote a biography of her ambassador husband, titled Memoir (1676) which was circulated within family and relatives in manuscripts. But the most important work of this era was Hester Thrale's Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson (1786). The seriousness of Thrale’s endeavour can be gauged from the reaction of Boswell, whose monumental work she precedes. Threatened by the fact that Thrale’s work would reach the reader in advance of his Life of Johnson (1791), Boswell attacked the accuracy of her account and solicited the “impartial reader” to discount her “small volume of Johnson’s sayings as unrepresentative” (Anderson 38).

An examination of the history of life-writing shows life-writing’s overwhelming variety—a variety that has earned significant responses from critics. In fact, critics’ responses to the genre and its subcategories have been so huge that autobiographical criticism has emerged as a significant branch of contemporary critical discourses. The next section will try to give an overview of critical discourses on life-writing with a particular focus on the contemporary theorizations in the field, as there is no denying the fact that the formation of the critical discourses on life-writing is all but a relatively recent phenomenon.
Given the complexities and possibilities dormant in life-writing, contemporary academia is constantly exploring the untrodden, hitherto unthinkable avenues of the genre. The outcome of that exploration—as is pointed out in the below quoted description of the research theme of The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities—is, naturally, extremely interesting: “Scepticism or more strongly distrust within the academy focuses on debates about the status of the self and personal identity, the rejection of notions of essentialism, the contested relation of ‘life’ to ‘works’ in literary and historical study, and unease about spectatorial and voyeuristic implications of the form, while at the same time literary and historical biography outsells more mainstream academic writing” (n.pag.). The above postulations on life-writing, indeed, envisage finer possibilities of the genre. G. Thomas Couser, one of the noted thinkers in this domain, connects life-writing to genome and DNA as they are—according to contemporary scientific research—considered to be vital clue to explaining human behavior. This is what he says in his article “Genome and Genre: DNA and Life Writing”:

“The Holy Grail,” “the Code of Codes,” “the Book of Life,” “the Book of Man,” “the autobiography of a species”—the human genome is often referred to in terms more appropriate for texts, even sacred texts, than for the tiny strips of DNA of which it actually consists. As these phrases suggest, the genome has become a contemporary icon to which many look for the unraveling of the mysteries of life and for the solution to many human problems. We regularly hear of milestones in the progress of the Human Genome Project: periodically we are informed of the discovery of the gene for
“X,” and not long after the arrival of the new millennium, the completion of the sequencing of the entire genome was announced, to predictable media fanfare. Partly as a result of extensive media coverage of the Project, we live in an era when genetic influence is given unprecedented credence as an explanation of human behaviour. I half expect that in the not-too-distant future, scientists associated with the Human Genome Project will announce that they have located the gene for autobiography. This idea may seem amusing to those who consider life writing far too complex a behaviour to be “genetic,” but behaviours seemingly as complex are commonly referred to as legitimate and plausible products of genetic influence. Consider alcoholism, criminality, poverty, and homelessness. More and more people consciously or unconsciously subscribe to the proposition that genes “r” us. Humanists are to some extent condemned to fighting a rearguard action against the spread of genetic determinism, but the Human Genome Project is a phenomenon we cannot afford to ignore. (185)

From scientific to political, economic to ethical – all aspects of this genre are put under the critical scanner for scrutiny by critics of the contemporary academia. David Parker, for instance, in his review article “Inhabiting Multiple Worlds: Auto/biography in an (Anti)Global Age” reviews and brings to us the multifarious assortment of research papers presented at the fourth International Autobiography and Biography Association (IABA) conference, held at the Chinese University of Hong Kong from 15–18 March, 2004. The globalization-life-writing relationship was explored in several papers presented at the conference. In one such paper, “The Global Age: State and Society Beyond Modernity”, Martin Albrow has brought to our notice the impact of globalization on the basic assumptions of life-writing by holding forth that identity politics, one of the essentials of life writing, has
been problematized by the process of global changes brought about by globalization as “The multiplication of worlds means that individuals can inhabit several simultaneously” (qtd. in Parker v+). The coming into being of a ‘self’ capable of inhabiting several worlds decidedly changes the trajectory of life-writing as the process of positioning and situating the ‘self’ in respect to its world, is vitiated. A self, dwelling the globalized world resisting any cultural anchorage, is definitely a theoretical challenge for the life-writing-critics in the present age. Inevitably, the floating self, like a sign floating in the langue, develops a dependence on relationality to derive an essence. According to Parker, the other papers presented in that conference follow the cue to reveal “how deeply relationality has established itself as a paradigm in contemporary auto/biography studies” (Parker v+).

If the criticism discussed above demonstrates the influence and impact of some of the contemporary concerns of academia about life writing, two books, appearing in the same year and dealing with somewhat similar subjects, reinvigorate an issue that has stirred the critics of life-writing on frequent intervals. *The Ethics of Life Writing* (2004), edited by Paul John Eakin, and *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics of Life Writing* (2004), written by G. Thomas Couser dig out the ethical concerns of writing lives with this idea in the centre that relationships take a crucial part in shaping and creating identity through a continuous process. As a result of this there remains hardly any freedom available to the life-writer to tell someone’s own story without trespassing onto the lives of the others. Eakin, in his ‘Acknowledgement’ to the book, has literally acknowledged to have inherited the anxiety from an earlier work on the same subject, as he says that his “inquiry into the ethics of life-writing began about ten years ago when David Parker and Richard Freadman invited” him “to contribute an essay on this subject” (*Ethics* vii). However, the ethical concerns for biography dates far back to 1883 when Margaret Oliphant, in one of her essays “The Ethics of Biography”, argued that “the
high-minded biographer had a duty of responsibility to the helplessness of the dead, whose private drawers could so easily be ransacked for evidence to their disadvantage. Biographical betrayal for Oliphant was an offence against social morals” (Lee, *Bio*, 69). The context of these utterances was the scandal related to the “most notorious ‘biographical betrayal’ of the time, that of Carlyle” (Lee, *Bio*, 69) by Carlyle’s historian friend Anthony Froude. Froude published a tell-all biography of Carlyle titled *Life* (1882, 1884) in two volumes and exposed many of the uncomfortable facets of Carlyle’s life backing it up with the publication of the letters Carlyle entrusted Froude with before his death in 1881. The ethical issues relating to representation have troubled the critics of life-writing ever since and have urged them to adequately theorize the field in order to discover the most powerful motivations behind the life-writer’s representation of his subject and the secrets of the disagreement between the life-writer and his subject. Eakin’s book is an attempt at addressing these concerns. Taking cue from the writer of *The Unwanted gaze: The Destruction of Privacy in America* (2000), Jeffrey Rosen, who observed that “there are few acts more aggressive than describing someone else” (qtd. in Eakin, 8), Eakin marks the principal premise of his book saying, “Because we live in relation to others, our privacies are largely shared, making it hard to demarcate the boundary where one life leaves off and another begins” (8). The eleven essays in Eakin’s volume include deliberations on this subject of ethics in life-writing by some of the renowned critics of this field. In his *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics of Life Writing*, G. Thomas Couser, who also contributed to Eakin’s volume we have already discussed, has examined the cases where the subject of life-writing is someone who is incapable of writing on his/ her own and thereby is involved in a life-writing project that is highly collaborative in nature. Typically, Couser’s cases, as the title *Vulnerable Subjects* suggests, involve patients and infirm who are clinically or biologically disabled. The principal issue in representing such lives is the ethics of respecting the vulnerable subject’s wish for the way s/he wants to
be represented in writing, a medium beyond his/ her reach because of biological or clinical reasons:

My primary concern is with the ethics of representing vulnerable subjects—persons who are liable to exposure by someone with whom they are involved in an intimate trust-based relationship but are unable to represent themselves in writing or to offer meaningful consent to their representation by someone else. (xii)

Naturally, the work carries in it the possibility of becoming treaty on bio-ethics. But Couser negates this possibility by claiming in the very first line of his preface to the book that “THIS IS NOT A BOOK ABOUT BIOETHICS” (ix). He coins a new phrase to describe his school of criticism—“auto/bio/ethics” which “fuses the term auto/biography—which refers to life-writing that focuses on the relation between the writer and a significant other—with bioethics” (ix). In the seven chapters of his book Couser examines issues relating to adoption, disability, surrogacy, and also “small but growing literature of euthanasia” (Couser xiii). In fact, Couser’s examination ranges from life-writing’s recent relationship with DNA to the ethics of neuroanthropology.

It has to be admitted at this point that though rich in critical insights, the canon of life-writing criticism suffers to some extent from the academia’s prejudiced attraction for one of life-writing’s principal components—autobiography. George Gusdorf, Philippe Lejeune, Candace Lang, James Olney, Paul De Man and Shari Benstock are some of the most notable thinkers who have incessantly explored all the unknown and untrodden avenues of autobiography as a genre. Efforts have been made by these critics to break free from critical
straight-jacketing of the earlier eras. Attempts have also been made to dissect the field to mark its centre and periphery and above all to resist simplification.

Paul Jay in his article, “What’s the Use? Critical Theory and the Study of Autobiography” (1987), has divided critical works on autobiography into two categories: “theoretical studies of autobiography generated in and by a study of autobiographical literature itself, and theoretical studies of autobiography generated by theories imported from outside the study of autobiography and applied to it” (39). Although, it is not that easy to distinguish between these two schools of autobiographical criticism, two often talked about essays on the subject, “Authorizing the Autobiographical” (1988) by Shari Benstock and “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice”, (1988) by Susan Stanford Friedman, probably fall into the first category. Both the essays by Benstock and Friedman were published in The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings (1988), a collection of essays edited by Shari Benstock herself. The book is one of the seminal works to have attempted to theorize the field of—as the title suggests—women’s autobiographical writings. This book begins with Benstock’s own essay, “Authorizing the Autobiographical”, where she initiates the task of identifying the singularity of women’s endeavour in negotiating with the genre. In order to do so, Benstock first probes into the existing critical assumptions on autobiography and exposes the cracks hidden in the existing definitions of autobiography to argue that these definitions can hardly accommodate women’s efforts in writing autobiography. In arguing so, Benstock endorses the definition of autobiography given by James Olney in his essay “Some Versions of Memory” (1980), but questions the argument of George Gusdorf who is often called the dean of autobiographical studies. Olney’s definition suggests that autobiography in general senses, “does not stretch back across time but extends down to the roots of the individual being, it is atemporal,
committed to a vertical thrust from consciousness down into the conscious rather than to a horizontal thrust from the present into the past” (Benstock 10). Benstock considers this “extended definition” to be the starting point for her volume of essays, each of which takes up and examines issues from the perspective that this definition offers. Benstock expresses her doubts about Gusdorf’s suggestion that autobiography “is an effort to recapture the self—in Hegel’s claim, to know the self through ‘consciousness’”; “such a claim”, Benstock thinks, presumes that there is such a thing as the ‘self’ and that it is knowable” (Benstock 11). Benstock acknowledges that “the autobiographical moment prepares for a meeting of ‘writing’ and ‘selfhood’”, but, she adds that in the end this meeting “is always deferred”, and hence “what begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction” (Benstock 11). Benstock questions Gusdorf’s assertion that “the appearance of autobiography implies a new spiritual revolution: the artist and model coincide, the historian tackles himself as object” (Gusdorf 31), and writes that ‘the ‘coincidence’ of artist and model is an illusion” (Benstock 12). Gusdorf’s assumption that autobiography “requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time” (35) is also refuted by Benstock as she reads in it Gusdorf’s claim that autobiography “is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image” (Gusdorf 33). The problem with Gusdorf’s thesis, Benstock thinks, lies in its failure to see how language acts as a barrier in the anticipated meeting between the “self” and the “self-image”. Employing Lacan, Benstock rejects the autobiographical subject’s presumption of knowing himself as “fenced in by language”; “the speaking subject”, Benstock argues, “is primordially divided” (16). This division within the autobiographical subject is related to the internal cracks and fissures existing in the prevalent discourses on autobiography chiefly expounded by the male commentators on the subject like Gusdorf. Benstock’s principal point is that male
autobiographies like the Confessions of Augustine or Rousseau, the autobiographies of Thomas Jefferson or Henry Adams "do not admit internal cracks, and disjunctures, rifts and ruptures", rather "the whole thrust of such works is to seal up and cover over gaps in memory, dislocations in time and space, insecurities, hesitations, and blind spots" (20). In contrast to this stand women’s autobiographical writings. Citing the examples of the modernist women practitioners of autobiographical fiction and non-fictional prose, Benstock holds that the instability of autobiographical writing "is nowhere more apparent than in women’s writing of this period [modernist period], in texts of Djuna Barnes, Isak Dinesen, H.D., Mina Loy, Anais Nin, Jean Rhys, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf" (Benstock 21).

Susan Stanford Friedman’s essay, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice”, also begins by questioning Georges Gusdorf’s take on autobiography. Gusdorf’s essay, “Conditions and limits of Autobiography”—a translation by James Olney of Gusdorf’s 1956 French original, “Conditions et limits de l’autobiographie”—appeared before the English-speaking readers in Olney’s edited volume of essays Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical published in the year 1980. Gusdorf’s 1956 article “Conditions et limits de l’autobiographie” in Formen der Selbstdarstellung: Analekten zu einer Geschichte des literarischen Selbstportraits (which has already been discussed partially in connection with Olney and Benstock), indeed, signalled the beginning of a new era in autobiography-criticism, as it offered, for the first time, a systematic analysis of autobiography’s objectives and structure. What makes this work contemporary is its success in identifying the areas of uncertainty within the genre, an issue—as we have already seen in this section of the chapter—more elaborately explored later on by other critics. Addressing the issue of why one takes the trouble of writing autobiography, Gusdorf holds that the autobiographical project/
endeavour is “conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life”, which is in a way a conviction in the writer’s mind that “I count”, as the “I” imagines itself to be the centre of a living space (29). There remains also as a driving factor behind the production of autobiography a “curiosity of the individual about himself” (31). Gusdorf has also pointed out so many times one decides to write an autobiography “to do away with misunderstandings, to restore an incomplete or deformed truth” (36). The last objective of autobiography, according to Gusdorf, lies in performing “the task of reconstructing the unity of a life across time” (37).

Gusdorf’s observations/postulations on autobiography’s structure begin with an attempt at drawing a line of distinction between autobiography and a genre sharing a close relationship with it, namely, biography. Considering both biography and autobiography as personal history, Gusdorf observes that in case of biography “[t]he historian finds himself removed from his model [the subject of biography] by the passage of time” and is always placed “at a great social distance from his model”, whereas, “[t]he appearance of autobiography implies a new spiritual revolution: the historian tackles himself as object” (31). By narrating his/her own history the author or autobiographer “strains toward a complete and coherent expression of his entire destiny” (Gusdorf 35). If biography envisages a distance between the historian and his subject, the autobiography “requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time” (Gusdorf 35), and thus, “autobiography properly speaking assumes the task of reconstructing the unity of a life across time” (Gusdorf 37). This aspect of autobiography—its concern for unity and coherence of life—is, according to Gusdorf, what makes the “truth of facts” in autobiography subservient to the “truth of the man” and makes it imperative on its critics to seek
autobiography’s significance “beyond truth and falsity” (43). It is this subservience of truth of the fact to higher order of truth, which leads Gusdorf to his final point that autobiography is not essentially a believable personal history made out of facts and evidence—it is rather a chronicle of the subject’s invisible action in the domain of his inner privacy, propelling the subject to present in his autobiography himself “not as he was, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been” (48), blurring, thereby adequately the distinction between fiction and autobiography. In her essay Friedman chiefly occupies herself with Gusdorf’s views on the role of the individual in producing autobiography—she questions Gusdorf’s argument that the autobiographical project is propelled by “a conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life” (Gusdorf 29). Friedman says that “the self, self-creation, and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities, and many non-Western peoples” (34). Friedman further particularizes the cases of women (and as minorities) by drawing our attention towards the role of culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities and the role of collective and relational identities in their individuation process, something that are uniquely experienced by women:

The fundamental inapplicability of individualistic models of the self to women and minorities is twofold. First, the emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities. Second, the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity. From both an ideological and psychological perspective, in other words, individualistic paradigms of the self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities. (34-35)
Friedman’s conclusively declares that “Isolate individualism is an illusion”; it is also “the privilege of power” (35).

Paul de Man’s “Autobiography as De-facement” (1979), Candace Lang’s “Autobiography in the Aftermath of Romanticism” (1982), Philippe Lejeune’s “The Autobiographical Contract” (1975) and “Autobiography in the Third Person” (1977), and Judith Kegan Gardiner’s “On Female Identity and Writing by Women” (1981) fall under the second category of autobiography criticism Paul Jay speaks of. de Man’s “Autobiography as De-facement” is the most cryptic of the lot and typically poststructuralist in nature. In this essay de Man makes a jibe at the theories on autobiography due to their limitations and simplifications, and especially due to their inability to address the problematic involving the genre. He finds the critical approaches to autobiography not far-fetched or aberrant, but “confining” in nature, as they “take for granted assumptions about autobiographical discourse that are in fact highly problematic” (de Man 919). de Man argues that the autobiographical self of the author in his/her autobiography is actually linguistically constructed—to be more specific, it is constituted of tropes, literary figurations. As is typical with a poststructuralist rhetorician, de Man arrives at this point by declaring that “The specular moment that is part of all understanding reveals the tropological structure that underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of the self” (de Man 922). The immediate result of this all-controlling power of tropes is the inevitability of the fact that autobiography does not reveal reliable self-knowledge and instead “demonstrate in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions” (de Man 922). Therefore, in the act of self-figuration or composing the self in autobiography, the autobiographical self is displaced or disfigured or,
in other words, dies, and hence, every act of self-representation in autobiography, in the end, turns out to be an act of writing an epitaph. de Man considers the voice of the author of autobiography in his/her work as in essence a prosopoeia, which is “positing voice or face by means of language” (930), and views the voice as an absence similar to ‘death’, which, according to de Man “is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament” (de Man 930). No doubt, de Man’s essay on autobiography initiates a process of re-evaluation of the existing critical writings on autobiography in poststructuralist terms as well as opens up possibilities of further enquiries into the genre.


It is only fair to note that Metaphors was published in 1972, and to point out, as does the preface, that it had been written during a two-year stay in the wilds of Liberia—at which time the author lived in a state of innocence concerning the wiles of critical theory. Yet if, as he announces in the introduction to Autobiography: Essays
Theoretical and Critical, Olney lost his “critical virginity” before tackling a second book on autobiography, he apparently lost few illusions. (3)

Lang’s opinion of the latter book by Olney is not redeeming either:

While Olney’s work—particularly the earlier book—presents an extreme example of “impressionistic” (emotive, intuitive) criticism, his rejection of systematic theoretical analysis and his refusal to subject the textual fabric of autobiographies to close critical (linguistic, psychoanalytic, structural, etc.) scrutiny are exemplary. The same resistance mark—though in varying (usually lesser) degrees—both the 1980 publications under consideration here: Spengemann’s The Forms of Autobiography, and most of the essays (dating back to 1956) in Olney’s anthology.

In Lang’s terms existing criticism becomes ‘romantic’ “i.e. theoretically unsophisticated” (Jay 43) and “impressionistic” meaning “emotive, intuitive” (Lang 3). This brand of criticism draws hostility from Lang for assuming that “each individual possesses a unified, unique, ineffable self”, that “the authentic self” is “pre-cultural”, that it posses “an originary universal human nature” which makes “possible communication among individuals” which is “truer” and “more immediate” than the “rational discourse,” and that the “self is a pre-linguistic entity” which can “dissimulate itself behind linguistic personae which it arbitrarily creates in order to safeguard its purity and maintain its autonomy” (Jay 43). Lang’s concluding remark lays bare the typical poststructuralist snugness and delight derived at the expense of ontological certainty:

It does seem inevitable that further exploration of the genre will constitute an important chapter of post-structuralist theory. (16)
One of the most important theorists in autobiographical studies is Philippe Lejeune, whose “Le pacte autobiographique”—first published in Le pacte autobiographique (1975) and then published in English as “The Autobiographical Contract” in Tzvetan Todorov edited French Literary Theory Today: A Reader (1982)—is an oft-cited article on the subject. In this essay, Lejeune offers a definition of autobiography as “a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (193). With the help of this definition, Lejeune, like a mathematician, catalogues the factors that determine a work as an autobiography. He considers the following four elements as essential for autobiography:

1. Linguistic form: (a) narrative; (b) prose
2. Subject treated: individual life, personal history
3. Situation of the author: author (whose name designates a real person) and narrator are identical.
4. Position of the narrator: (a) narrator and protagonist are identical; (b) narration is retrospectively oriented. (Lejeune 193)

Having catalogued and labelled the essential elements of autobiography, Lejeune very easily points out factors that differentiate autobiography from genres close to autobiography, and, quite interestingly, he does that in a single line by claiming which genre lacks which of the four above-mentioned features of autobiography:

Here is the list of the conditions not fulfilled by other genres: memoir (2); biography: (4a); first person novel: (3); autobiographical poem: (1b); diary: (4b); self-portrait or essay: (1a and 4b) (Lejeune 193)
Lejeune’s knack for precision in determining a work as autobiography or discarding one as not may appear slightly limiting, but he follows it up by problematizing the issue of the identicality of the author, the narrator and the protagonist (an issue which seems to distinguish autobiography from fiction) and says that such an identicality can hardly be established unless the work bears in it the “autobiographical contract” which brings “affirmation in the text of this identity” (Lejeune 202). “The forms of the autobiographical contract”, writes Lejeune, “are quite varied, but they all manifest an intention to ‘honour the signature’” (202). In fact, despite all these fencing off mechanisms between autobiography and fiction, the blurring boundary between these two remains tantalizing and draws forth further enquiries into the genre from Lejeune. Lejeune argues that the identity of the ‘I’ of the autobiography is distinguished and protected by the “autobiographical pact”: the “I” of the autobiographical fiction—writes Lejeune in his essay “Autobiography in the Third Person”—is protected by “a phantasmal pact [pact fantasmatique] (this conveys something about me, but is not me”)” (29). Despite these efforts of Lejeune, some theorists in the arena of autobiographical studies remain undecided regarding the distinction between fiction and autobiography as they think that the former has under its fold an isotopic twin brother of the latter in the form of autobiographical fiction. Thus what emerges from the brief overview of criticism presented above is how the autobiographical project fails because of the elusiveness of the ‘self’ which an autobiography claims to have captured in the autobiographical text. In deMan’s view the linguistically constructed self is displaced by the play of tropes, marking, in this process, metaphorically the death of the ‘self’: an event that turns, in de Man’s terms, autobiography into epitaph. Benstock’s essay suggests the same prospect of failure for the autobiographical project, as Benstock thinks that the meeting of writing and the ‘self’ that autobiography awaits to see with eagerness, never occurs in actuality. In fact, this incredulity
towards the self as well as the possibility of an authentic autobiography is the strongest characteristic of the above discussed critical works on autobiography.

The next essay we are going to discuss addresses the issues relating to women’s autobiographical writings, but does that by drawing heavily from other theoretical disciplines. Judith Kegan Gardiner’s essay “On Female Identity and Writing by Women” (1981) approaches the issues of female identity and writing by women by situating them against psychoanalytic feminist theories. Gardiner problematizes the issues by examining the deliberations of psychologists like Erik Erikson, Heinz Lichenstein, Norman Holland and Nancy Chodorow on this subject. Her point that “female identity is a process” (349), made at an early part of the essay is emphatically pronounced in her own summarization of the argument:

To summarize, female identity is a process, and primarily identity for women is more flexible and relational than for men. Female gender identity is more stable than male gender identity. Female infantile identifications are less predictable than male ones. Female social roles are more rigid and less varied than men’s. And the female counterpart of the male identity crisis may occur more diffusely, at a different stage, or not at all. Cumulatively, we see a complex interplay between women’s experiences of identity and men’s paradigm for the human experience. It is not surprising, therefore, that the area of self-concept is especially troubled for women and that contemporary writing by women reflects these dissonances. (354)
Gardiner, by pointing out the uniqueness in the process of identity formation for women, is actually in the same league with Benstock and Friedman, together with whom she helps in a great way to form a separate canon of criticism of women’s autobiography.

As the above discussion on the theoretical perspectives on autobiography reflects, the field of autobiographical studies is rich in criticism which neither lacks diversity nor depth in research. Biography—the close relative of autobiography we are going to discuss now—on the other hand, seems to have received lesser amount of critical attention. Critical writings on biography seem to have imported insights from other critical theories as well. Very much like the theoreticians on autobiography, theorists on biography too contest each other sometimes with unthinkable apathy and disgust. The critical arena on biography is populated by professional writers of popular biographies, subjects of biographies (writers, poets etc.) and theorists from other disciplines (mainly poststructuralists). Aptly the criticism of the first school is called “‘meta-autobiography’, a hybridization to which life writing critics are occasionally prone and in which theory, criticism, and the critic’s own personal narrative are freely mingled” (Ditmore, 296+). A reading of Paula R. Backscheider’s Reflections on Biography (1999) or of Linda Wagner Martin’s Telling Women’s Lives: The New Biography (1994) unquestionably accounts for the usage of the term. Backscheider is the biographer of Daniel Defoe whereas Martin is of Sylvia Plath. The meta-autobiographers, being successful explorers and practitioners of the genre of biography, seem to have an optimistic purpose of addressing unanswered questions, explaining riddles of life/personality and making a fairly realistic representation of the subject. This school—consisting mostly of professional biographers—has a long standing apathy for academic biography, a genre that claims to be a dispassionate presenter of life through accumulation of factual data. This aversion dates back
to the time of Boswell, clearly, one of the first great, successful professional biographers in English literature. Boswell criticizes Mason’s *Memoir of Mr. William Whitehead* referring to it as a work “in which there is literally no life, but a mere dry narrative of facts” (Boswell 4). The legacy is borne by the present day professional biographers with equal quantity of sarcasm. This is what Backsheider says:

Biography requires passion and the selective presentation of evidence; academics are taught to ‘survey the literature’, to locate and know everything written on the subject. Obvious dangers of the academic approach are tendencies towards encyclopedic recitations of facts—what Tony Tanner once described as an archive that feels like a mausoleum (*TLS*, 23 August 1996, 3)—and an unwillingness to assign and exploit the drama suggested by configurations of facts. Therefore, many academics' biographies become essential reference works but seldom-read books. (xix)

The meta-autobiographers’ optimism for the form is rooted in the conviction in their own craftsmanship which—they believe—can successfully represent life:

I see the primary purpose of the genre of biography to be to give a vivid picture of an interesting person whose life matters. (Backsheider xviii)

However, opposition to this kind of stance is no less strong than the support to it. The subjects of biographies — mostly literary authors — cry foul with distortion, simplification and summarization of biography and the poststructuralist theorists reject the existence of a knowable, coherent self that can be presented in biography as a shape up for comprehension.
The following comments by a mixed group consisting of poststructuralist theoreticians and authors show the distrust they show in the factuality and authenticity of biography:

Helene Cixous: All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another.  (*rootprints* 178).

Roland Barthes: (Biography is) a novel that dare not speak its name.  
(qtd. in Heilburn 28)

John Updike: (most biographies are just) ‘novels with indexes’ (qtd. in Lee 7)

Germaine Greer: (biography is) ‘rape...an unpardonable crime against self-hood’  
(qtd. in Lee 96)

Henry James: (biography is) ‘adding a new terror to death’. (qtd. in Lee, 2)

Henry James: “After a man’s long work is over and the sound of his voice is still, those in whose regard he has held a high place find his image strangely simplified and summarized. The hand of death, in passing over it, has smoothed the folds, made it more typical and general. The figure retained by memory is compressed and intensified; accidents have dropped away from it and shades have ceased to count; it stands, sharply, for a few estimated and cherished things, rather than, nebulously, for a swarm of possibilities.”  (qtd. in Edel, 11)

George Eliot: (called biography) ‘a disease of English literature.’ (qtd. in Lee, 69)

Oscar Wilde: ‘It is always Judas who writes the biography.’ (qtd. in Lee, 71)

So, a principal portion of biography-criticism engages itself in pointing out the weaknesses in the genre, rather than formulating a systematic process of study and evaluation of the genre. It is also worth noting that the volume of criticism aimed at biography as a genre is really significant and hence asks for further attention.
Although autobiography, by claiming considerable critical energy, has left biography a little less attended, a significant critical endeavour has automatically been directed at this otherwise neglected half-brother of autobiography for sharing with it the overlapping territories within the familial space of life-writing. Possibilities for such an overlapping in the critical writings on life-writing were, in fact, suggested at the very beginning of this chapter by Lee’s definition of life-writing. The notion that the boundaries between genres are hazy can also be had from the introductory discussion of *Self Impression* (2010) by Max Saunders, who also happens to be one of the biographers of Ford Madox Ford. Saunders begins his argument in his introduction to *Self Impression* with one of the striking remarks made by Oscar Wilde in his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Grey*:

The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. (qtd. in Saunders 1)

The context of this remark by Wilde was possibly his anticipation of the adverse biographical criticism of *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. Wilde perhaps was apprehensive that critics, apart from so many other things, can humiliate him for homosexuality. In self-defense, Wilde took a threatening posture towards his prospective critics, who—following the creed of Romanticism—may “attempt to tie literary works to the personality of their author” (Saunders 2). But the significance of Wilde’s remark is not limited to its topical context; it, in fact, appears to be a highly significant comment if seen from the perspective of advancement in the theoretical premises of life-writing studies. By pronouncing the highest and the lowest
form of criticism as a mode of autobiography, Wilde, according to Saunders, is, actually, ushering in ‘Modernism’ as a replacement of ‘Romanticism’ in the theoretical arena of life-writing studies, because Wilde’s stance—which considers criticism as an autobiographical act—is for the first time envisaging the act of ‘reading’ in critical activity as an autobiographical act like that of writing. The act of writing, however, has already been seen as to be carrying autobiographical intent within it almost always. Francois Mauriac, for instance, has marked fiction as a kind of autobiography and finally, Saunders reminds us of Nietzsche, who has found philosophy as “the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious auto-biography” (Nietzsche 10). This leads Saunders to hold that “[i]f discourses of impersonality such as criticism or philosophy can be read as autobiography, then all writing, all art, is equally susceptible” (2). This knowledge of all-pervasiveness of autobiographicality certainly contributes to the mapping and charting of the overlapping territories within the umbrella of life-writing, and as the present project deals with several forms of life-writing to come to terms with the complex Ford/Rhys affair, the task of charting these boundaries becomes important.

It must be recounted that an awareness of this landscape of overlapping territories within life-writing will certainly facilitate this project, as the ‘Quartet texts’ consist of autobiographical fiction (Quartet, When the Wicked Man and Barred), memoir (Drawn from Life), autobiography (Smile Please), letters (of Rhys, Ford and Bowen) and even biographies (Mizener’s provocative A Saddest Story and Angier’s Jean Rhys) making them susceptible to theoretical dissection. As all these above-mentioned texts are generically life-writing in one sense of the term, the historical and critical discussion on life-writing’s components attempted in this chapter will certainly provide an edge to that dissection. But, we must not
forget that most of these texts — the ‘Quartet texts’, so to speak — either are instigated into being by Rhys and her Quartet or they refer/write back to Quartet to ascertain their versions of the Ford/Rhys affair. All these re-writings, perhaps, would not have been necessary had Rhys’s writings not been considered autobiographical (and hence conventionally associated with truth/facts of her life) by critics, biographers and sometimes even by Rhys herself. The evaluation of Rhys’s writing as principally autobiographical in essence forms the primary part in the canon of Rhys-criticism. Such a notion has unquestionably received impetus from Rhys’s own comments and writings about her own fiction and life. Rhys, in her autobiographical non-fiction and in several of her interviews given after coming to prominence with her successful Wide Sargasso Sea, has marked her writing as autobiographical in nature. The next chapter, therefore, will examine the autobiographicality of Rhys’s fiction, especially in the light of her own remarks such as “I just write about what happened” (qtd. in Plante 52).
Notes

1. *Life-Writing: A Glossary of Terms in Biography, Autobiography, and Related Forms* (1980) by Donald J. Winslow offers a third definition of the term ‘life-writing’. Although this definition begins on a different note, it ultimately agrees with what Lee and Eakin observe about life-writing’s role in addressing the overlapping territories within life-writing. According to this glossary, “[i]n the narrower sense this term means biography, but in general it may include autobiography as well, so that it is actually a more inclusive term than biography, even though some people may consider the word biography to include autobiographical works, letters, diaries, and the like” (37).

2. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* describes ‘hagiography’ as “the writing of the lives of saints”. *Life-Writing: A Glossary of Terms in Biography, Autobiography, and Related Forms* describes hagiography as “Saints’ lives as a branch of literature or legend, generally applied to collections of biographies of saints and to other sacred writings.” (Winslow 28)

3. *Letters and Memorials of Jane Carlyle* was published by Froude in 1883.

4. Eakin’s *The Ethics of Life Writing* includes Couser’s “When Life Writing Becomes Death Writing: Disability and the Ethics of Parental Euthanography”.

5. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* defines ‘bioethics’ as “the ethics of medical and biological research”. However, as an academic discipline, bioethics addresses the controversies raised by the advancement in biology and medicine, especially the forceful application of medical and biological researches on human beings and their ethical propriety.
6. De Man makes his point by frequently referring to one of the most obscure essays of Wordsworth, namely “Essays on Epitaphs” (1810).

7. François Mauriac says, “I think that every great work of fiction is simply an interior life in novel form” (qtd. in Gusdorf 46).

Works Cited


