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卷首语

传记(life writing)是人类的纪念碑。文化的起源中就包含着传记的因素,孔子的《论语》、柏拉图的苏格拉底回忆录和“四福音书”为传记树立了不朽的经典。其他文学和文化的文本形式,大都随着时代的变迁而消亡,成为历史的陈迹,只有传记以顽强的生命力绵延不绝;到了21世纪更是超过曾经盛极一时的小说,成为文化文本中的最大类别。传统的他传、自传、回忆录、书信、日记、游记等继续繁荣,新兴的口述历史、群体传记又异军突起。传记还超越了文字的媒介,同电影、电视以及互联网和自媒体结缘,开拓出广阔的新空间,拥有难以计量的读者。越来越多的人为自己、为亲爱者写作传记,以保留一份纪念。21世纪是属于传记的时代。

传记的发展,提出了许许多多的问题,需要研究和讨论;本刊是中国境内第一个专门研究传记的刊物,创办本刊的目的就是提供一个发表和交流的园地,为中国传记的发展聊尽绵薄之力。

在一个全球化的时代,《现代传记研究》是一个开放性的刊物。它向中外传记界开放,它发表对各种传记类型的问题,包括历史的、现实的和理论的问题,所进行的不同角度的研究和探讨;它鼓励和欢迎专家、作者和读者之间的交流和互动;它提倡视角和方法与时俱进、不断创新,同时也倡导严谨、求实的文风。它的目的只有一个,促进传记学术的繁荣,推动传记的发展。

办好一份刊物是一件艰苦的事,我们会不断学习、不断反思、不断改善以求进步。我们也吁求国内外传记界的朋友们、传记爱好者的支持,你们的关注和参与,你们的能力和智慧,是办好这份刊物最有力的保证,期待着你们!

《现代传记研究》编辑部

Editor's Note

As a monument to honor human beings, life writing has permeated culture since its origin. *Analects of Confucius* by Confucius, Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, and *The Four Gospels* are immortal classics in the history of life writing. Despite the fact that many genres of literature and culture perish over time, life writing has persisted in a tenacious manner, and the twenty-first century is witnessing a golden age of life writing, which even surpasses the novel, the once-dominating genre. Life writing now is among the most esteemed of cultural texts. Such traditional forms as biography, autobiography, memoirs, letters, diary and travel writing still maintain prominence and the emerging oral history and collective lives demonstrate great momentum. Simultaneously, life writing, having crossed the border of textual medium into the domain of movies, TV, Internet and We Media, claims an ever new and extensive space with the potential for innumerable readers. An increasing number of people have taken to life writing for themselves or for their loved ones, aspiring to erect an everlasting monument. In brief, the twenty-first century is an era of life writing.

Life writing as a genre of discourse has posed a great number of questions, requiring energies devoted to deeper studies and thorough scholarly discussions. The *Journal of Modern Life Writing Studies* takes the initiative in China as the first journal exclusively devoted to life writing studies. It aims to make a distinctive contribution to the development of Chinese life writing by providing a forum for publication and exchange of views in scholarship.

In the context of globalization, the *Journal of Modern Life Writing Studies* is an open journal, accessible to the life writing community home and abroad, publishing research and explorations on all kinds of life writing issues (historical, practical and theoretical) from various perspectives, encouraging and welcoming communication and interaction among scholars, authors and readers, and highlighting innovative perspectives and methodologies as well as rigorous and realistic style. Our over-arching commitment is to facilitate the development of life writing and to bring it to a new level of excellence.

A full-fledged journal requires arduous and painstaking efforts. We pledge to consistently aim for progress through consistent learning, reflection, and improvement. We also appeal to dear friends in the life writing community at home and abroad and devotees of life writing for your support, attention and participation. Your talents and wisdom are the most powerful assurance of our success. We are looking forward to your help!

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Writing Biography: Puzzles and Mysteries

Leo Damrosch

Abstract: The older biographers used to convey an impression of omniscience, as if there was nothing they didn't know about their subjects. And whenever the available evidence was ambiguous or incomplete, they tended to minimize or ignore the puzzles that arose. More recently, biographers have been willing to let readers share in their detective work, openly acknowledging that certainty is not always possible. With Jonathan Swift and Jean-Jacques Rousseau as examples, I will discuss important aspects of their relationships with women. Rousseau, though vowing in his *Confessions* to be "transparent" to the reader, misrepresented important features of his past, and may even have been unaware of some of them. Swift was a man of secrets, and his most significant secrets are well worth exploring. In each case, I will focus on important relationships with women. We know who those women were, and we know when and where Rousseau and Swift were involved with them. But what we are far from certain about, is the true nature and depth of the relationships. And this is where the puzzles and mysteries come in. Rousseau believed that early relationships and experiences have a profound effect on the development of personality. He also thought that when a particular memory was disturbingly powerful, it must be telling him something important about his own personality — even if he found it hard to interpret. With Jonathan Swift, we face a different kind of puzzle — in fact, some genuine mysteries. Swift never wrote an autobiography, and never wanted to. He was a man of secrets, even among his friends. And his two most important relationships were hidden behind an absolute curtain of secrecy. His closest friends weren't sure exactly what was going on. And we — three hundred years later — have real detective work, to do as we try to peer behind the curtain. In conclusion, I would like to emphasize an important way in which the practice of biography has changed in recent years, very much for the better. Like the previous biographers of Swift, older biographers presented their own assumptions and conjectures as if they were fact. Readers today appreciate being taken behind the scenes, to ponder open questions along with the biographer. When the older biographers encountered puzzles and mysteries, they tended to minimize them, or even ignore them completely. Their excuse for doing that was to say that a biographer should not mention anything that couldn't be proved. But if — as in the examples

I've related — even people who knew Swift and Rousseau well were unsure about the truth, how could anyone possibly prove the truth today? But that doesn't mean that the mysteries aren't fascinating in themselves. It has been a great advance that biographers now share the game of detective work with their readers.

Key words: puzzles in biography; Rousseau; Johnathan Swift

It is a very great pleasure to speak at this distinguished International Symposium — and I want especially to thank Professor Yang for the kind invitation.

I'm afraid my remarks will not properly address the main focus of the Symposium, since although I have written several biographies, they are not really trans-cultural in nature. Still, each of these people did experience significant cultural dissonance, and that helped to inspire their most important insights.

Jonathan Swift was born in Dublin of English parents, and he thought of himself at first as an Englishman. But over the years, he came to feel that Britain was unjustly treating Ireland as an exploited colony. Increasingly, he identified with the Irish rather than the English, and he became a pioneering spokesman for Irish national consciousness.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a native of Geneva, was proud of his roots in that independent city — which in his day was not yet part of Switzerland. He also made extended stays in Italy and England, and spent most of his life in France. These experiences greatly influenced his thinking about politics and society.

Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the early 1830s, at a crucial moment in the development of American democracy, which was only fifty years old at the time. As he traveled through the country, he was constantly contrasting its institutions and values with those of his native France.

Still — today, I won't emphasize these trans-cultural considerations. Instead, I want to take you with me in the exploration, or quest for understanding, that a biographer faces when the evidence is ambiguous — or when generally accepted interpretations need to be questioned. At times, as I've suggested in the title of this talk, we are faced with puzzles, and even mysteries. It used to be that biographers ignored them, but more recently they have been realizing that these are the most interesting elements of all, in the stories they need to tell.

I will take as my examples, first Rousseau, and then Swift. In each case, I will focus on important relationships with women. We know who those women were, and we know when and where Rousseau and Swift were involved with them. But what we are far from certain about, is the true nature and depth of the relationships. And this is where the puzzles and mysteries come in.

Let's begin with Rousseau, since he left us such a rich account of his own life. His *Confessions* is one of the greatest autobiographies ever written, full of psychological insight and rich detail. So far as I know, it was the very first

autobiography to take seriously the earliest years of the writer's life — he gives two hundred pages to his first twenty years, whereas no previous autobiographer gave more than two or three pages to those years. Saint Augustine, from whom he borrowed the title *Confessions*, relates only a few brief anecdotes from his childhood and youth.

Rousseau believed that early relationships and experiences have a profound effect on the development of personality. He also thought that when a particular memory was disturbingly powerful, it must be telling him something important about his own personality — even if he found it hard to interpret.

Again and again, Rousseau's self-analysis produces stunning insights. Yet it also happens, sometimes, that he seems amazingly obtuse about aspects of his past. Let's ponder the two most important relationships in his life: with an older woman who was a kind of surrogate mother, and with a younger woman who became his lifelong companion.

The older woman was named Mme. de Warens. When Rousseau was sixteen, he was deeply unhappy in an apprenticeship to a harsh engraver of silverware — and on the spur of the moment he ran away. At this point he had no skills to speak of, and no money at all.

Geneva was a fiercely Protestant city, in the tradition of John Calvin who had been its leader two centuries earlier. But all of the territory nearby was Catholic, and Rousseau was aware that the Catholic Church would offer support to converts from Protestantism. A priest he met in the countryside suggested that he travel on foot to Annecy, twenty-five miles away, where a kind lady named Mme. de Warens would help him.

When Rousseau arrived in Annecy, he was expecting to meet some stern old devout person. Instead, she turned out to be a gorgeous blonde, still in her twenties. He spent the next year or so in Italy and then returned. At that point, she invited him to live in her home. He was desperately in love, but he also honored her as a substitute for the mother he never had — his own mother died at the time of his birth. So he called her Maman — “Mother,” and she called him Petit — “little one.” He never used her first name, which was Françoise-Louise.

She was Madame de Warens, not Mademoiselle, because she was still married, to a man living in what had been their home, near Lausanne in Switzerland. As Rousseau understood it, she had been spiritually moved to turn Catholic, and had willingly given up high social standing and financial security to do so. Her only support now was a pension from the Church, in return for the kind of service she had performed in his own case. That was what she told him — but it was essentially not true.

Rousseau lived with Mme. de Warens for ten years, and it was a crucially important stage in his life. He had been an avid reader ever since childhood, but

he had no formal education at all. She introduced him to books, and to a circle of cultivated priests and monks who encouraged him to develop his mind. It has been rightly said that if Rousseau had never met Mme. de Warens, we would probably never have heard of him.

There was another young man also living in the household, acting as its steward, in charge of practical and financial matters. His name was Claude Anet, and Rousseau quickly warmed to him like a brother.

But one day a startling incident happened. Claude Anet deliberately took an overdose of laudanum — a medical version of opium — and during the panicky effort to revive him, it came out that he was secretly the lover of Mme. de Warens. Somehow, the naïve young Rousseau never suspected it.

Things returned more or less to normal, until there was another surprise. Rousseau had begun to give music lessons to girls in the town, and their mothers were making it clear that they found him very attractive. Mme. de Warens told him that it would be better for him to be initiated sexually by herself, and now — to his consternation — he found that he was sharing her with Claude Anet. Still worse, since he regarded her as virtually his mother, he felt as if he was committing incest.

Before long, the ménage à trois came to a shocking end. Claude Anet and Mme. de Warens had gotten interested in botany, and Anet went up into the high Alps to collect some rare plants. There, he contracted a lung disease, and died in agony not long afterward — in Rousseau's arms. In the *Confessions*, Rousseau says complacently that he helped his friend to endure his final hours.

Well — all of this seems very detailed and convincing, as Rousseau relates it. And yet — researchers have located records that reveal how much he does not tell us — and maybe never even knew.

First of all, it's clear that Mme. de Warens never told him the truth about her earlier life, which we have been able to reconstruct, because she left a legal trail. Her parents died when she was very young, and she was brought up by a pair of aunts. They realized that even as a girl, she had a wild and rebellious streak, so they decided to get her married as soon as possible. That happened when she was just fourteen. Monsieur de Warens, who had a government appointment, was twenty-five at the time. He seems to have been genuinely in love with her, but the feeling was not mutual. The relationship turned especially sour when she insisted on pouring money into business ventures that failed, leaving her husband heavily in debt.

At that point, she simply deserted him. She was twenty-seven by then, and had already been married for half her life. While he was away on a trip, a servant loaded all of the family silver, along with other valuables, into a big trunk, and in the dead of night she crossed the lake to Évian, which at that time belonged to the

kingdom of Sardinia. She knew that the king himself was visiting there at the time. With a flair for the dramatic, she entered the cathedral, declared her conversion to Catholicism, and begged the king for his royal protection.

The king was happy to take responsibility for this beautiful young convert — and there was a further agenda that Rousseau never suspected. From time to time she would make a trip to Paris. The reason was that she was working as a secret agent. The king found it very useful to have an intelligent young courier who could pass along messages with no need for paper copies, and whose beauty would make it unlikely that she would be suspected as a spy. That was why she had a comfortable pension to live on — not just her service to the Church. And it's quite certain that her conversion to Catholicism was the result, not of a spiritual awakening, but of very practical considerations.

Here's something else Rousseau didn't know — but we have learned it from documents that her husband bitterly filed when he was trying to get her back. Her companion in her flight had been none other than Claude Anet. Back home, he was the nephew of her gardener, and clearly he was already her lover at the time she left her husband.

Once we know these facts, we get a better perspective on why she decided to sleep with Rousseau. If he had allowed himself to be seduced by the mothers of his music students, her secret life might well have been discovered. So it was probably a calculated decision to keep him in her own power.

Unfortunately, Anet was tormented by jealousy. Rousseau seems never to have asked himself why he tried to commit suicide. Far from regarding Rousseau as a brother, he must have resented him deeply as a rival. And it turns out that the story about gathering plants in the mountains was a complete fiction. We know the date of Anet's death, and at that time of the year, the mountains would have been covered in many feet of snow. There was no expedition to get plants. This had to be a second — and successful — suicide attempt. Rousseau never suspected it — let alone his own role in Anet's unhappiness.

Rousseau says in the *Confessions* that he wants to make himself completely “transparent” to the reader. In many ways, he achieves that goal brilliantly. And so far as we know, he always tries to tell the truth about his own past — but it was the truth as he remembered it long afterward. Sometimes it was romanticized. Sometimes it was distorted. And sometimes — as with poor Claude Anet — it was too painful even to recognize what must have happened.

Rousseau rightly presents his relationship with Mme. de Warens as the most important one in his entire life. He describes it with novelistic richness (and indeed, by the time he wrote the *Confessions*, he had published a best-selling novel). Yet thanks to the documentary evidence that dedicated scholars have located, we can see important realities that Rousseau never saw himself — or refused to see.