

Difficulties of Biography Writing: A Philosophical Approach

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Vefa Taşdelen¹

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ABSTRACT

What biography and biography writing means will be dealt in this article from a partly existentialist and hermeneutic point of view by looking for answers to questions such as; “what is biography?”, “why human beings want to understand the other?”, “what is the nature of biography: is it history or literature?” In this respect; knowledge value, art value, ethical value, existential value and educational value of biography will be focused on.

Introduction

In art, the realistic phase of the handled event, in other words whether the story is experienced or not, is not questioned. This way it is thought: “This is a work of art, that’s why it may be real as well as fictitious”. The artist may have produced it in his world of imagination and universe of dreams by adding his experiences, feelings, fears and expectations and shaped it. The artist does not have any obligation of to cling or to start from reality. However, we cannot claim the same thing for the people who study on historical or social events. For instance, a historian studies on an event that includes a value of reality in every sense and has “been completed long time ago”. He will try to enlighten and reconstruct the event with words by addressing information, document and statements he could find. In doing so, he is aware of the fact that the document he works on is a real. He knows that he is not supposed to interfere and he should not distort it with his own feelings and dreams. The method of a historian is different from the one used by an artist. In this respect an artist includes his views, subjectivity and feelings to his work but a historian does his best to exclude himself and avoid his feelings, ideas and expectations to interfere the event.

On the other hand, there is a person who is both artist and a historian: This is the biography writer. While collecting his sources, documents and witnesses, he questions them just like a historian who sets off from the value of reality and being experienced. Besides, he studies on “person” and takes a personal life as subject, just like a novelist. In order to paint the portrait of his hero, he depends on his imagination like an artist. From time to time, by adding his feelings inside the event, he arrives at emotional decisions about the person. But as a matter of fact, he produces a work that contains historical knowledge value as well as artistic quality pertaining an existence and experience. In this article, quality of this work will be dealt and the problems that can arise in this respect will be focused on.

1. Tercüme-i hâl

As it can be understood from the words “bios” (liveliness, life) and “graphe” (writing, shape), biography is the name given to the type of writing that tells a life story. In Ottoman Turkish, biography had rather reproductive equivalent: *Tercüme-i hâl*. This concept means disclosing a lived life, a state peculiar to person or a dark side of a life to others, or in other words verbalising these in an understandable manner. This equivalent displays that it is entirely an effort to grasp the other. No matter which word you take that combine *Tercüme-i hâl*, each completes the subject perfectly. Interpreting the meaning of making the foreign familiar is present in etymologic definition of hermeneutics and it comprises of the activity of transforming the language of a foreign world into the world that is lived in (Gadamer, 1981: 1122). “Hâl” has a better content to counterbalance situation and existence by the addressing it made towards the state of life that cannot be reduced to knowledge or concept. Based on its peculiar to the individual, it differs from person to person. Thus there are different situations, states and lives in the number of subjects. It can be said that in this difference, each individual experiences their own state. For this reason, each situation, each existence will have its counterpart and get content in the person they belong to. Otherwise, we cannot speak about it as a scientific fact which has a general character. *Tercüme-i hâl* enables us to open the gates of a

¹ Faculty of Education, Yildiz Technical University

world that is closed and that has meaning in one person due to its individuality. Biography in this sense is a study that does not only give clues about what individuals do, where they rise and die, where they live and where they work, in short not only with common features of life among people but also with personal manners and character, voice and language, logic and the way of understanding peculiar to one's self, and giving these not just "in general" but "thoroughly".

Man is a creature that understands. Heidegger considers understanding as the determined "state of mind" (*Befindlichkeit*) and "descriptive character" possessed by human beings under the sun (Heidegger, 32). We differ from other species by the feature of understanding. By doing so, we try to understand ourselves as an individual present in this universe together with the universe we live in. Understanding is like a bridge that binds us to the other and other to us. As a principle, we can understand the deeds of others and others can understand deeds we do. Speaking and listening suppose that it is possible for man to understand one another. This comprehensibility finds its roots in the rationality, purpose baseness and similarity in the human nature of the deeds the others do. I understand any other person with the personal and social conscious within my existence. It is extremely difficult to consider a type of understanding that goes beyond my-self. Our conditions, points of view and environments may be different. The more differences increase, the less the possibility for us to understand and communicate gets. Differentiation puts us apart from each other. Each life is a form with meaning that helps us to understand it. The life that is required to be understood is a life with features and meaning. The character, meaning and feature it has makes it remarkable.

As biography *isatercüme-i hâl*, writing biography will be the interpretation of the case. The interpreting signifies enlightenment, a knowing, being aware of and penetrating and these concepts come before the effort and endeavour of interpreting. We cannot interpret a language that we do not understand. So, biography writer reveals, understands the life he writes about, he is aware of the manners that the person works on and he penetrates the state of the person whose biography is written. The thing that enables him to have a good grasp and penetrating to another person's life is result of the education he receives and the personal tendency he has. The tendency is a spiritual line of descent and love affair. Love, empathy, interest, talent and experience enables the author this buoyant qualification. He will be aspired to such a work with his hearth and inner background. We cannot easily understand the people whom we do not feel familiar in terms of feelings, living and sentiments. As it is stated by Dilthey, "Intense and deep explanation or interpretation can lead to a higher level of maturity only by inner familiarity, tendency and sympathy towards the object. Here, there is not a wide possibility of practising pure analytical or reflexive thinking. Explanation and interpretation are a type of re-understanding carried out by all psychical and mental equipment of the man" (Dilthey, 1999: 37-38). Therefore, writing biography requires both having interest on the world of human being and its approach to this world with interest and empathy. The people with weak sense of interest and empathy cannot write successful biographies. Only interest, empathy and sympathy are not enough. In order to write biography, one should be sharing common values, lives and meanings with the person whose biography is to be written. What is more, it is possible to argue that these people may not be successful in literature, art and philosophy. Having an interest on the world belongs to human beings is the condition of understanding, but this is not enough. In order to write a successful biography, it is also necessary to have the values of the person whose biography is going to be written. That is to say, a biography writer cannot write everybody's biography with success, but he can write the biographies of those with whom he has common things and experiences. Before the life he is going to write about, he stands as if he is on the stage of a theatre. While watching him, he does not act just like a passive audience. While understanding the play, he makes the re-production within himself. Not only does he grasp the play with the power of empathy he has, but also he re-experiences the conditions of characters in himself. With this state of interest, sympathy and empathy, the writer would comprehend the language and texture of the life story he re-constructed in this way. This re-living, re-experiencing and re-constructing is a creative process that also brings about biography. The more we know a life, the more we are acquainted with it and the more we share common things, the better we understand it. The things in common like language, religion, culture, history and life experience strengthen the understanding. The level of understanding affects the success of biography without any question. The life that we do not feel, the life we cannot produce in ourselves cannot be understood by us. The person; in whom we cannot see ourselves and in our self we cannot see him, whose; world, language, condition is foreign to us, in short about the person with whom we cannot build an inner affinity, it is impossible to write a successful biography about him. As it is understood from the passage, the relationship between biography writer and the life he will write about is not just a rational one. More than that, between these two, there is a "spiritual affinity" or "love affair". The bond between is the trigger to force biography writer to write. The person who is not able

to form this bond shouldn't write biography. Otherwise, this attitude in understanding a life will be putting logic and rationality ahead of intuition, love and empathy. Putting logic and rationality ahead of interest, as stated by Dilthey, is "surely frustrating in terms of understanding human and spiritual world" (Dilthey, 1999: 37). The journey to the other that starts with love, sympathy, interest and tendency resumes by passing through the stops to take us to ourselves.

2. Why do we want to understand the other?

Here, this question this can be asked: Why we want to understand somebody, why we need the necessity of something like this in ourselves? Why we happen to the other, why we wish to understand each other? We have partly mentioned the answer of these questions above. We can deepen it more here: The person whose *Tercüme-i hâl* is written should at least be an important and significant person for biography writer both for his *Tercüme-i hâls* written and such a requirement is felt. This person might have been a person who; witnessed a period, was effective in shaping events, produced an important work, made his *tercüme-i hâlworthy* of calling others' interest and furthermore, he must have done a thing to put his personality forward as a role model to be taken after. Biography tries to compare us not by the ordinary but extraordinary one. That is to say, it searches for the one that is worthy of curiosity and tries to put for this. Thus, this is a study on types and individuals that obtained the feature of typology. So, biography witnesses types that become the symbol of: success or failure, gallantry or treachery, courage or cowardice, richness or poverty, self sacrifice or selfishness, beauty or ugliness and goodness or evil but mostly the types that become positive. Although it stands for a singular case or a singular world, it forms a general quality with "typology". In it, one sees humane conditions such as gallantry, goodness, beauty, generosity, bravery, courage, success, determination and sacrifice materialised in the character of one person. Although the event is singular, he feels the existentialist conditions even in conceptual level. Thence, he learns a type of knowledge that belongs to human, nature of human, world of human that have feature and generality. However, this knowledge in fact is the one that is about man themselves which means to reach or arrive and to embrace the other. For Heidegger, the types such as arts, literature, history and biography are significant in terms of understanding capacity, power, possibilities and potential of human beings, its behaviours, and potential (Heidegger, 37).

Biography gives secrets about the main location of a person in the world. This is a secret that shed light to the road from man to man. Understanding somebody else's happiness, success and victory increases the other's power and hope. As Dilthey states "much of our happiness as human-beings derive from participating psychic states of human-beings and being able to feel and experience these psychic states on our own" (Dilthey, 1996: 235). Reaching one person will bring a person gaiety and happiness. This trip flourishes and supports my unique being under the sun. In this respect, biography is not only a trip made to understand the other but also an active contribution to understand one's 'self'. I cannot understand myself as just barely myself alone, I can only understand with others by interacting with them. "Only through others do we gain true knowledge of ourselves" (Gadamer, 1987: 86). While biography takes me to the other and introduces it to me, it also takes me to me by the help of the other, it takes me to me and I will get to know myself while I try to know others. In times of understanding, we get-across with other selves. This is a coincidence to enable the discovery of our own self. I arrive at my conscious through others; I find my own self against other selves. While understanding others, I understand myself. Meeting inner realities of others forms my own awareness of singularity and being. I apprehend myself only when interacting with others. By the help of this experience, I understand by features that differ from others and recognise my own being. I can only feel my own uniqueness by the awareness of being different from the others. Getting across with others' existences reveals an awareness of being myself. Life of others enriches my life. The understanding of other helps me to reach and find my own understanding of existence. I cannot comprehend myself merely as my own and I cannot reach at my awareness only by myself. I always obtain the thing I call "myself" through interaction and communication with others. "I could only experience my singularity, more than anything, when I came across with the others; in a sense, I know my singularity by the help of awareness formed in my existence that is being different from the others. Being able to recognize my singularity requires recognition the others" (Dilthey, 1996: 236). Thus, biography not only helps me to know and understand the other, but also introduces me to myself and helps me in the compelling the road from me to myself.

Here, the reason why we wish to understand the others gets clearer. We wish to understand others for there is our own self, our happiness and gaiety in others. We wish to understand others for they accommodate our peacefulness, success and cheerfulness on earth. In order to reach our self, we trip to others. We can only perceive the thing we call 'I' in front of others and in relation with them. As it is stated by Kierkegaard, the standard of 'I' is a being other than itself. 'I' always became "own self" in front of others, reaches itself in relation with the others (Kierkegaard, 111). In biography writing or reading, the purpose of the trip to other is not just reaching the other but also our-selves. We make the trip to experience the enjoyment of this reaching. If we couldn't find ourselves in the other or the other looks only the other and we are having difficulty adding something from us to the other and other to us, thus we either lost in the other or the other is lost in us. Whether we go for finding ourselves or losing it, it is our most essential reality of existence that completes and gives us our conscious. The other is an area of reality that completes and circumscribes us. Biography takes us to it and it to us. Its mission is to explain an existence that has a feature. Ordinary life has no biography. The life whose biography is to be written should have a "story".

3. Biographical knowledge

One of the most significant answers to the question why we want to know others is related to the epistemological phase of the subject. Dilthey states this epistemological phase as follows: "First of all, I have to say that, the possibility of apprehending others is one of the conceptual problems of deep knowledge" (Dilthey, 1999: 112). Terms like "erleben", "Erlebnis" that are used in German art, literature and philosophy in the meanings such as; "experience is the thing that keeps its liveliness and vitality when something ends", "stable core of the thing that is experienced" have come to fore in nineteenth century especially in spiritual sciences, literature, arts and biography writing. If we handle the issue in terms of these two concepts, biography always focuses on things that already have happened, but the point it focuses on has already been done is the liveliness that still keeps its significance, its core. Gadamer though that Dilthey with the concept of "erlebnis" tries to attain a methodological base with positivist understanding to social sciences (Gadamer, 1981: 55, 56, 58). He is not unjust in his supposition. Yet, biography and autobiography, in terms of spiritual sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) Dilthey tried to ground, carry an epistemological meaning. Based on the sample of *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which Kant focuses on the knowledge of 'phenomenal space', a *Critique of Historical Mind* to give the knowledge of historical and spiritual side is aimed. Biography and autobiography in the path to realise this epistemological goal is an effort to understand the life left in the past, produce its knowledge and reach it. Biography shows that we can understand another person in terms of epistemology. Thereof, he associates the role of biography, which he defines as the 'definition of unity in life', in general history studies with the role of anthropology in socio-historical sciences (Dilthey, 1933: 33). The individual life he focused on with biography writing like observation fields of humanities. As how natural sciences arrive at information with objectivity and well-acceptance through observation, for Dilthey, observing life stories that include typology by biography writing resembles the qualifications in the field of spiritual sciences. For this reason, beginning with his teacher Schleiermacher, he wrote biographies of various people.

History and literature go hand in hand in biography. It is a work of history at one hand, and a study of literature on the other. It has a historical quality and uses a historical method for its insistence on showing historical events based on sources, documents and witnesses. On the other hand, it distances from the art of history and gets close to art of literature for including its own; style, imagination, fiction, personal values, point of view, in short his own world into this presentation. But, there is such a difference between novel and biography: Even the novelist base his work on social, historical or real events, the reader feels that he is reading the creation of the novelist and never asks "how real is this?" But while reading biography, he always takes "real value" of it into consideration. He wants to be sure about the work, events, people to be real ones and to do so, he always assumes this. That's the reason why biography writer is always ready to cheat and biography reader is ready to be cheated. It is possible to question in what respect the biography writer is abide by what he writes, in what level he comments on the documents based on their originals and in what scales he counted his imagination in. When a criticism uttered towards the writer about why he did not cling to reality, he can defend himself by simply saying that he is not a historian but a writer of biography which is literary a style of writing, hence, he is not obliged to bear a striking resemblance to the reality. Biography writer travels back and forth between history and literature. The work he did is literature for history, history for literature. This wide and limitless area enables him free movement area. He should work more objectively for the novelist who uses historical and social events. Besides, there are points they both are identical or analogous with each other.

Biography is an effort to understand a person's life, it carries such an assertion. But how much can we understand one person's life? The process we call life comprises of hidden and clear points from time to time. We can only perceive it from its side we know. The effort to understand a life necessitates knowing the internal processes that guide its deeds, life style and behaviours. It also requires knowing inner evolutions of the person. It is easy to observe behaviour from outside but, as it is not apparent to us, we never will be fully aware of the inner conditions of this behaviour. A life reveals itself to us with its concrete expressions and with the image it can display itself to us and we can get close to it the limit it gives itself to us. For we couldn't reach the inner reason of this phenomenon, understanding a life always includes extreme assertion. Inner-reality encircles a person's life like a membrane. This membrane serves like a protective layer. Opening this magic curtain and reaching the secret core and witness what happens in is mostly impossible. Then, in what levels can we understand this confidential inner process based on some images? How can we assume to understand it objectively? This "understanding" here may, with this or that way, be assertion and personal comment. This point wards biography off from the science of history, which seeks for objectivity and well-acceptance within the framework of the logic of social sciences, and approximates it to literature. Accordingly, the type of language biography writer uses is not necessarily a scientific one that carries the assertion of narrating the events without paying any attention to his personal values, feelings and enthusiasms. For this reason, besides being ordinary, dull, deprived of hero, the history writing with the assertion of being scientific almost always targets a determined artistic creativity. With this feature it resembles the realistic novels based on documents. The more values of reality increases, the less artistic value it contains. When writer uses his imagination more, he will produce a work with high artistic value but value of reality will be low. The quality of the biography depends thoroughly on its writer. What quality he wants to attribute to it belongs to the point of view and attitude of the writer. He might be thinking of writing a historical essay or a biography whose artistic features are dominant. In this case, the style of writing will also change. In his work of writing Dostoyevsky's biography, Troyat took such a stand against the subjective and permissive manner of the biography writer: "Yes, in fact, I did not credit myself to have the right to make the slightest mistake. I would feel a great restlessness if I had embroidered such a terrible, such a beautiful and such a gallant reality I pulled off from the memories and letters of his contemporaries, with easy adjustments" (Troyat, 06).

Whether the biography will have a historical or literary character is determined by the style of the writer as well as the personality of the person whose biography is written. As a matter of fact, every biography is historical for it goes back to past and uses resources, documents and witnesses. However, while writings concerning historical characters are mostly historical in essence, the ones that are to be written on writers and artists may include literary qualifications. This at most depends on the stand point of the writer. No matter which point of view it uses, a biography is always at a point ready to praise or blame. Because, having a stab at writing somebody else's life story starts with the assumption that this life story is important for people. If he is a good person, as generally the case is, he is worthy of being spoken well of, and if he is bad, he has already deserved to be mortified. But, for the biographies are generally written about beloved people, each sentence is created to emphasise the assertion that this person is an important person. To be able to find the medium of praise and blame always require a scientific dispassionateness and critical approach. But this does not happen almost always like this. Troyat states that: "The lives of various famous people are not analogues with their works. Seeing these straight lives, the biography writer is seized by the whim of novelist; he completes, comments, reproduces... He considers his art more than reality and himself more than his character" (Troyat, 5). According to this, writing biography at the same time is a trade off between biography writer and the person whose biography is written. During this process, they both take from and give to each other lots of things. It is in fact the writers' work to put forth the truth based on how it "suits" the reality, namely without putting the person whose biography is written into shame. On the other hand, the person whose biography he is writing contributes lots of things to him and, he learns a great many from him. This is the most prominent gain in writing biography.

4. The ethics of biography

In what respects it is ethical to; stare at someone else's life and his deeds with curious eyes, try to understand him in this or that way, look for support on him for his own suppositions and comments, place the secrets he doesn't want to be known by others or the ones he would feel shame if they are revealed, on record and announce them this way to people? Do we have to do this? Are we supposed to have such a right? Before it is a historical and literary effort, we would better confess that biography writing is an ethical

stand taken. As a biography writer, we can see that, the person whose biography we are writing is displaying an effort from beginning to the end, to escape from our conscious in every nook and cranny, getting away from our attention and this way trying hard to hide him-self in order to protect his own confidentiality. Here, the question rises is; "In what respect, until where and how much we should write the biography of a person?" The reason that privacy is personal and so, better not to be represented can be taken into consideration as a measure. But there are no clear rules to determine in whether or not a life is confidential or open to public. The most concrete measures to address in this case can be the ethical values of the society lived in. Even so, here different problems and questions arise: Can't a person's visible behaviours have their roots deep in the confidentiality and inner life of that person? Isn't it so general that mostly core of an important event is a minute overlooked excuse? How can we distribute confidential areas and open the ones to public that are mostly intermingled? In this point, biography writer is trapped between his inner self and the success of the biography he is going to write. If he wants to unburden his inner self, the success of the work will reduce, and when his work becomes successful, he will have a guilty conscious. The writer can find a midway in this case. When a person feels observed by two gigantic eyes on his defenceless bare being and experiences the uneasiness and responsibility of such a case, he would understand that person better and pay more respect to him. The poem *"Dying in the Books"* of *Behçet Necatigil* which includes the verse *"At your hands just like birds in death agony"* may be read in terms of ethical phase of biography: *"Now he is in books / Imprisoned in a place of one line, / Is he still living, / He cannot be protected, / You can kill him"* (Necatigil, 340).

When we do not respect the person whose biography we write, consider roaming around his soul and heart however we wanted, with questioning looks as a right, taking him not as living personality but a being which is an object, so our level of understanding of him will diminish and this will directly affect the success of our work. Thus, the relationship between the writer and the person whose biography he writes should be like a love and respect relationship between two living individuals. When this sensitivity is lost, the person whose biography is written turns out to be an object, a "nature mort" for the writer. This event not only trivializes the work he does, but also renders meaningless. For this reason, there is a very special relationship between biography writer and the person whose biography is written. Biography writer carries this for years inside, brings it wherever he goes, listens to his speeches, gives ear to his ideas, witnesses his feelings, and experiences his love and hate, fear and hope. By so doing, he makes another personality live in him in a sense. He learns to look through that persons eyes, hear from his ears and think by his mind. This extraordinary affiliation makes the writer successful, and gives a sense of meaning, value and taste to the work he does. Without this sensitivity, he becomes blunt. With this way, he cannot see and feel the person whose biography he is going to write. This will not only be a misfortune from the side of biography writer but also of the person whose biography is going to be written. Not only does the biography writer trivialize the person's life, challenges, effort and values with his blind, deaf and senseless attitude but also his work is trivialized in the consciousness of the readers. For this reason, if he is not supposed to write, he shouldn't write if; no special bond or bond of love or spiritual affinity does not exist between him and the person he is going to write about and also if he is not feeling an "urge" by a power inside. He shouldn't write because of the respect, love towards the person whose biography he is to write, he shouldn't write for the respect and love he feels towards the readers, furthermore, he would better not write it because of the love and respect towards himself. The reason for this is he is the person whom he defines with himself. Based on this, both the person he defines and the type of definition is important. Surely, this does not necessarily mean that, he should feel an exaggerated love, respect, enthusiasm, hatred and enmity towards the person whose biography he will write about. As how careless, impudent and imprecise narration is an insult towards the personality, similarly redundant exposition of love and exaggeration will be a deceptive stand on the part of the reader for it does not reflect the truth. It is really important to find the measure and this is one of the artful features that should be included in the biography writing. But sticking to truth may be the solution, as Troyat states that; "I didn't consider myself free to make even the slightest mistake".

Conclusion

Biography is an attempt to understand a life partly or wholly. Whether the entreated person is dead or alive, it always comments on an "accomplished" thing. In other words, he always pursues the existence but he never accompanies it. Biography has various types of values such as the value of knowledge, arts, existence, ethics and education. It takes me to the other person. The more I understand the other the more I understand myself, the more I reach the other the more I draw close to myself. Reading and writing other's successes, happiness and hopes makes me happy, strong and hopeful as an individual. As knowledge about

nature sciences makes human strong in front of the nature, having the knowledge of human experience arrive in me via various ways makes me more strong and resistant against life. Biography is a study that transmits human experiences to others. It informs the human about the human. While studying and commenting on the documents and addressing the witnesses, the writer uses the historical method. With its style and entreating one person's life, it gets a literary and artistic tendency. We do not understand the other just and only as the other. The thing we call understanding brings us together in one point. While going to the other, we also bring ourselves. While understanding, we disclose the truth that lies behind. Not only the condition of the person whose biography is narrated included in it, but also that of the writer is present. The writer does not approve all of what the person says or does. Sometimes he says "I wish it happens like this, like that, here was right and there was wrong". This shows clearly that the writer goes to other with his own being and personality. This style makes the work beautiful and includes a power of narration and amplitude. Even though writer's including himself in the work diminishes the biography in terms of science; it enriches the biography from intellectual and artistic points. Its value in terms of beauty will be dominant when artistic value of the biography is increased and its value of truth will be prominent when a scientific value is increased. No matter how much artistic it is, how much the writer includes himself in the biography he produces, the biography never creates fictional characters, and never ignores the value of "reality". This feature distinguishes the biography from historical and social novels. In terms of "morals", biography expresses a life story from its educative and instructive sides as a model. With this peculiarity, it carries an educative and moral feature. By putting forth the life in question as a model to be imitated or as an archetypal model, together with the value of knowledge, value of art and value of existence, it would have also added moral and educative values.

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