

# LIFE WRITING: FROM THE STORY OF THE WORLD TO THE STORY OF THE SELF

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The aim of the present study is at least twofold, combining practical and theoretical perspectives: the former one is meant to highlight the enduring power of storytelling as the epitome and vital essence of connecting life and literature; and the latter one resorts to a relatively recent concept, i.e. career construction theory delineating the notion of “later career novel”. The analysis will be performed on Julian Barnes’ *Levels of Life* (2013) and *The Only Story* (2018), whereas Haruki Murakami’s *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* (2007).

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other participants: either runners or writers; and there is also a particular *discipline*, which may be read as organization, structure, rigor, a steady *pace and rhythm* to keep the process going and the flow of creative energy in continuous supply.

“In the novelist’s profession, as far as I’m concerned, there’s no such thing as winning or losing ... What’s crucial is whether your writing attains the standards you’ve set for yourself ... In this sense, writing novels and running full marathons are very much alike. Basically, a writer has a quiet, inner motivation and doesn’t seek validation in the outwardly visible.”<sup>2</sup>

However, reading further into the memoir, we come to understand that there is not pejorative connotation to the loneliness associated to such activities or mission, where solitude is opposed to isolation and it is, instead, beneficial for the performing act of running or creative one of writing. The comparison might be surprising, just like our choice of this successful and highly congenial memoir, outlining some fundamental rules endorsed by results and experience, otherwise called *ageing*. Here comes the challenging issue of late-career novelist imbued with the notion of life-writing. In writing, as in most forms of art, maturity comes with excellence “At a certain age, everybody reaches their physical peak ... It’s something everyone has to go through ... Fortunately, the peak for artists varies considerably”<sup>3</sup> The counterpoint between running and writing – gently moving back and forth in between



the two strenuous though rewarding and invigorating activities, mentally and physically – elicits a list of qualities that turn out to be a useful set of prerequisites for anyone embarking of either one: both activities require a lot of *enthusiasm, effort and talent* providing the starting fuel continuously supported by *patience, endurance and focus*, acquired and sharpened through intensive *training*, which, in the case of writer is provided by extensive reading and consistent practice of writing.

“In every interview I’m asked what’s the most important quality a novelist has to have. It’s pretty obvious: talent. No matter how much enthusiasm and effort you put into writing [our note: unlike running] if you totally lack literary talent you can forget about being a novelist. This is more of a prerequisite than a necessary quality. If you don’t have any fuel, even the best car won’t start [...] After focus, the next most important thing for a novelist is endurance [...] What’s needed for a writer of fiction [...] is the energy to focus every day for half a year, or a year, two years. You can compare it to breathing. If concentration is the process of just holding your breath, endurance is the art of slowly, quietly breathing at the same time you’re storing air in your lungs. Unless you can find a balance between both, it’ll be difficult to write novels professionally over a long time [...] Writing novels, to me, is a kind of manual labor.”<sup>4</sup>

Nicole Krauss seems to be highly aware of the current discrepancy between literature as “engaging with life and a conversation about what it means to be human” and life as “disengagement with ideas, the world, other people, their own feelings”;<sup>5</sup> The art of writing and the practice of reading represent a mode of living and thinking, more comprehensive than life itself, testified and endorsed by a fictional dialogue between writer and reader in Umberto Eco’s *Confessions of a Young Novelist*; Orhan Pamuk – *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist*; or Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Letters to a Young Novelist*; Milan Kundera’s *The Art of the Novel*. Orhan Pamuk summed up that a novel enables the reader access to a “second life”, though an imaginary one, gave an impression of increased authenticity than real life. “The better your reading skills, the better your chance of writing well.”<sup>6</sup> Reading is a transactional process between writer and reader, subject to and shaped by previous assumptions, subjective experience, prone to creating ambiguity or uncertainty, generated by the elusive and unreliable individual “mirror” reflecting a “fictional reality”.<sup>7</sup>

The peak of Haruki Murakami’s remarks and advice on the mutual interaction and impact of running and writing, though unexpected and surprising as it might seem, is summed up as follows: “Most of what I know about writing I’ve learned through running every day ... I know that if I hadn’t become a long-distance runner when I became a novelist, my work would have been vastly different.”<sup>8</sup> His memoir is enlightening and relevant, just like a Nobel Prize acceptance speech, a literary interview, letter or essay, providing an insight and valuable reflection on the role of the artist, shedding more light on the complex process of the writer as public intellectual in addition to the artist sharing similar preoccupations to other fellow human beings, although the artist is “equipped with better tools than

those of common men ... he opens our eyes for us”<sup>9</sup> and the same idea is reinforced in another Huxleyan essay: “... the artist is endowed with a sensibility and a power of communication, a capacity to ‘put things across’ which events and the majority of people to whom events happen do not possess.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, writing novels represents a cathartic release of painful experience and unbearable emotion endorsed by the ability of the artist to act as a catalyst and to subsequently produce a work of art equally congenial and relevant to the reader: “When we set off to write a novel, when we use writing to create a story, like it or not a kind of toxin that lies deep down in all humanity rises to the surface.” To conclude, a large-scale work of art – just like long-distance running – requires *stamina*, an essential characteristic balancing the maturity and success of a late-career novel and the danger of literary burnout, where the latter one can be avoided by vitality and spontaneity: “For me, writing a novel is like climbing a steep mountain, struggling up the face of a cliff, reaching the summit after a long and arduous ordeal.”<sup>11</sup>

Moving on to the second section of the present study, our aim is to highlight the some of Julian Barnes’s interviews unveiling his perspective on the role of writing in his life as well as the role of literature for humankind, though summed up in a nutshell as paradoxical statement: the purpose of fiction is “to tell the truth. It’s to tell beautiful, exact, well-constructed lies which enclose hard and shimmering truths” or “you write fiction in order to tell the truth.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Julian Barnes also distinguished between fiction and other types of writing: “Fiction is the supreme fiction. And everybody’s autobiography is a fiction but not the supreme fiction.”<sup>13</sup> He emphasized not only the ascendancy and authority of fiction but also the fact that literature is resistant to theoretical definition, scholarly standardization as literature emerges from life itself, renders it accurately and artistically since “novels come out of life, not out of theories” whereas such labels as postmodernist or other isms are dismissed and he found “the use of such labels as ‘pointless and irritating’.”<sup>14</sup>

The opening question of the landmark volume *Late-Career Novelist: Career Construction Theory, Authors and Autofiction* authored by Hywel Dix – an academic who lately developed a scholarly interest in career construction theory, more specifically the relation between literary careers and the main body of work, autofiction, late career fiction and autobiography, authorship and late career stage – reads as follows:

“When we consider the life and work of a particular writer, how often do we come to the conclusion that the author’s masterpiece – his or her career-defining work – also happened to be one of his or her last pieces of work? ... But rarely, if ever, does the idea of the major work coincide with the final stage of the career. On the contrary, the very idea of a major phase implies a subsequent later phase that is somehow less significant and more minor and therefore somehow less innovative or less important than the works produced during the writer’s so-called major phase.”<sup>15</sup>

Hywel Dix’s theory is rooted in a particular definition of the notion of late associated with artistic production and a detailed overview and assessment of Edward Said’s distinction of the

four types of conflicts that affect the authorial life, particularly stemming from the parallel and simultaneous lives of an individual: “the author’s life as an author (the precious time devoted to writing) and the author’s life as a human being” concluding that there is a distinction between writing as a vocation and writing as a professional career.<sup>16</sup> To conclude: “the late-career stage need not be seen as one of decline but can be better understood in a relational sense, in the full context of the career as a whole, where the lateness of the stage is defined by what has come before and is not merely an effect of age.”<sup>17</sup>

We believe this theory is highly appropriate for Julian Barnes recent writings, *The Only Story* and *Levels of Life*, relevant for the later-career novelist providing both a retrospective and reflective approach to his own personal and authorial life. Since storytelling is as old as humankind, and *The Only Story* is a masterful work of art summing up the only story that really matters, the one worth telling about, selected from the countless events that happen to us. Such a retrospective look is inherently selective, most often of our happiest moments and the painful ones gradually vanish into oblivion, since memory is subjective, unreliable and writing become the prop-and-pillar of making a story live longer than the timeframe of a particular experience. Nonetheless “I think there’s a different authenticity to memory, not an inferior one.

Memory sorts and sifts according to the demands made on it by the rememberer.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Julian Barnes’ *Levels of Life* is another piece of life-writing, imbued with autobiographical elements, a late-career novel and emphasized reflective tones, and highly successful in counterpointing achieved by putting together two people or two people “who have not been put together before. And the world is changed. People may not notice at that time, but that doesn’t matter. The world has been changed nonetheless.”<sup>19</sup> One of the most remarkable attainments of the novel is its depth of the self-reflexive analysis of life, performing an astute transition of the three *levels of life*: from the sin of height to the same level and ultimately to the loss of depth, the three meaningfully entitled chapters, highlighting the paradox of our own contradictory states, straddling between living on the flat, on the level, and yet aspiring. “Last but not least, deploying one’s own biography and making it the subject of a work impels that person to a level of self-reflection previously unattained in any of his/her previous works.”<sup>20</sup>

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#### Notes:

1. Hywel Dix, *Late Career Novelist: Career Construction Theory, Authors and Autofiction* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 41.
2. Haruki Murakami, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running. A Memoir* (Alfred Knopf: New York, 2008), 8.
3. *Ibid.*, 9
4. *Ibid.*, 37-38
5. Nicole Krauss, “Interview with Nicole Krauss,” *Bold Type Magazine* (Random House, 2002).
6. *Ibid.*
7. Orhan Pamuk, *Romancierul naiv si sentimental* (București: Polirom, 2012).
8. Murakami, *What I Talk About*, 39
9. Aldous Huxley, “Man and Nature,” *Texts and Pretexts* (Chatto & Windus, 1932), 4.
10. Aldous Huxley, “Tragedy and the Whole Truth,” *Music at Night* (Chatto & Windus, 1931), 17
11. Murakami, *What I Talk About*, 46
12. Vanessa Guignery and Ryan Roberts, eds., *Conversations with Julian Barnes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), ix
13. *Ibid.*, x
14. *Ibid.*, xii
15. Dix, *Late Career Novelist*, 1
16. *Ibid.*, 6
17. *Ibid.*, 5
18. Julian Barnes, *The Only Story* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2018), 28
19. Julian Barnes, *Levels of Life* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2013), 9, 35-36, 67.
20. Andrei Terian, “The Poetics of the Hypercycle in Mircea Cărtărescu’s Solenoid,” *Life Writing* (2020): 1-18.

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