

Letters and Diaries as Life Writing

Volker Depkat, University of Regensburg

DOI: [10.47060/jaaas.v1i1.79](https://doi.org/10.47060/jaaas.v1i1.79)

The burgeoning field of life writing studies constitutes a meeting ground of historiography and literary criticism. Historians and literary critics approach one and the same phenomenon from different disciplinary perspectives and with different epistemological interests. For historians, the texts that literary critics call life writing are personal documents, *Selbstzeugnisse*, or ego-documents that help pave the way toward understanding the “subjective dimension” of history, i.e., the personalities, minds, motivations, emotions, and worldviews of concrete historical actors, who made, experienced, or endured history.¹

In approaching life writing material in such a way, historians are interested in it as sources, which for them is all the material handed down to us from which they can draw knowledge of past realities. The great divide in the classification of sources in historiography runs between supposedly objective sources (files of government and private institutions, statistics, laws, treaties, newspapers, etc.)—*Akten* in German—and subjective or personal sources such as autobiographies, letters, and diaries.²

In treating life writing material as sources, historians try to reach through the text itself to something behind it, which, in this case, is the “self” of an historical actor. The effect of this analytical gaze, however, is that the “self” of a historical persona, their personality, and public image, become historical facts in and of themselves. Until recently, there was among historians only little awareness of the textuality of life writing material, of the narrative patterns, the genre conventions, and the strategies of emplotment that define how a past reality is and can be represented in these texts. In addition, the idea that the narrator of an autobiography or the writer of a diary or letter may not be identical with the historical actor, and that the writer of life writing pieces can actually play very different communicative roles in narrating their selves to an imagined audience, rarely crossed historians’ minds.

Against this backdrop, I have suggested that historians can fully realize the potential of life writing material as historical sources only if they approach it as texts serving concrete and identifiable purposes in a given historical context.³ This methodological premise invites historians to identify the narrative patterns of meaning-making in a life writing piece, to take into consideration the specific forms and conventions for the representation of reality and the self that a certain genre of life writing follows, and, most importantly, to understand life writing material not as a *mirror* of a solid “self” that is behind it—but rather to see the life writing text as a site of constructing, negotiating, defending, or reformulating subjectivity in view

of experienced historical change.

If one accepts the premise that life writing serves clearly identifiable personal, political, economic, or cultural purposes, and that it fulfills historically specific functions in a given biographic-historical context, then it is only consequential to analyze the textual and communicative pragmatics of a given life writing piece. Taking such an analytical path means to analyze the *what* and *how* of life writing in relation to the *when* and *why*, and it is the when and why of an autobiographical communication that bridges the gap from text to context. In some instances, the when and why of life writing can be traced from the material itself; in other instances, this contextual information has to be retrieved from other sources and materials.

Such an approach problematizes the meta-category of *life writing* because it threatens to conflate the narrative, communicative, and pragmatic specificities of life writing subgenres such as autobiography, diary, and letter. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's itemization of sixty life narrative genres suggests,⁴ scholars should differentiate between the various genres of life writing and their mechanisms and patterns of representing the *self*. Furthermore, each of the life writing subgenres can come in multiple shapes, manners, and forms, and each can have multiple communicative functions.

Most importantly, however, historians, in their quest for the historical persona behind each instance of life writing, have tended to see one and the same self at work behind a diary, a letter, or an autobiography. What they can learn from literary criticism is the simple fact that writers of letters can imagine themselves to be somebody very different from how they fashion themselves as diary writers or narrators of autobiographies.

Against this backdrop, it is important to stress that letters as a form of life writing force the author to say "I" much more so than diaries or even autobiographies do. This "I" is an "epistolary I" that must not carelessly be equated with the historical person writing the letter. Furthermore, in contrast to autobiographies with a collective dimension, letters are a much more individualistic form of life writing.⁵ At the same time, they are but traces of past communications between real people, situated in larger communicative contexts that transcend the materiality of the written letters by far. Letters are written to establish or to maintain personal contacts between real people. Hence, they do not just mirror existing social relations. Rather, social relationships are imagined, organized, and negotiated through them. This, however, means that the "epistolary I" always constructs their identity in relation to the letter's addressee.

As to traces of past communications between real people, letters can provide more than purely verbal texts because they can contain drawings, calligraphic ele-

ments, or other materials such as newspaper clippings and photos that go way beyond what is actually said and written in the letter itself. This very materiality of a letter defines part of its source value independent of its contents.

In contrast to letters and autobiographies, diaries are narrative instruments to observe oneself and one's times in an episodic and scenic form in close temporal proximity to the things written about.⁶ Diary life writing is a rather fragmented form of self-reflection in short but regular entries over a longer period of time, frequently on a daily basis. Important structural elements of self-reflection in a diary are its chronological order, the relative brevity of the entries, and their seriality. Although diary life writing unfolds as a narration of the self in days, episodes, and scenes, diaries offer more than a random accumulation of individual episodes that do not form a coherent story. In contrast to autobiographers, diarists are under next to no pressure to narrate a coherent story about their respective individual self that is meaningful as a whole and in all of its parts. Yet although diaries do not present a master narrative about the self, the episodes of a diary are interrelated insofar as any one entry makes sense only in connection to preceding or following entries.⁷

Although the form of a diary suggests the communicative situation of a monologue, self-narrations in a diary actually unfold as a dialogue. This can be the dialogue of the diarist with him- or herself, with his or her diary, or with a real or imagined recipient, which in the case of religious diaries can be God. In any case, the communication of the self in diaries is based on the suggestion of privacy, intimacy, and even secrecy. Irrespective of whether diaries were intended for private use only, the *topoi* of privacy structure the shape, manner, and form of self-reflection in a diary.

The uses and purposes of diaries are just as varied and multiple as those of all other life writing subgenres. Some of the most prominent ones in the case of diaries are the documentation of one's everyday life, a chronology of events, a description of feelings and moods, as well as introspection and self-reflection. In some cases, diaries are written as potential sources for projected autobiographies or future historiographies.

Notes

- 1 Rudolf Dekker, ed., *Egodocuments and History: Autobiographical Writing in Its Context since the Middle Ages* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2002); Volker Depkat, "Ego-Dokumente als quellenkundliches Problem," in *Die Biographie in der Stadt- und Regionalgeschichte*, ed. Marcus Stumpf (Münster: LWL – Archivamt für Westfalen, 2011), 21–32; Mary Fulbrook and Ulinka Rublack, "In Relation: The 'Social Self' and Ego-Documents," *German History* 28, no. 3 (2010): 263–72, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghq065>; Kaspar von Greyerz, "Ego-Documents: The Last Word?" *German History* 28, no. 3 (2010): 273–82, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghq064>; Benigna von Krusenstjern, "Was sind

- Selbstzeugnisse? Begriffskritische und quellenkundliche Überlegungen anhand von Beispielen aus dem 17. Jahrhundert,” *Historische Anthropologie* 2 (1994): 462–71, <https://doi.org/10.7788/ha.1994.2.3.462>; Winfried Schulze, ed., *Ego-Dokumente: Annäherung an den Menschen in der Geschichte* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1996).
- 2 This classification of sources originates in the historicist tradition which remains in place to this very day. See Ernst Bernheim, *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode und der Geschichtsphilosophie*, 5th and 6th ed. (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1908); Winfried Baumgart, ed., *Quellenkunde zur deutschen Geschichte der Neuzeit von 1500 bis zur Gegenwart* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005), CD-ROM; Ahasver von Brandt and Franz Fuchs, *Werkzeug des Historikers: Eine Einführung in die historischen Hilfswissenschaften* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 2012); G. Kitson Clark, *The Critical Historian* (Munich: Heinemann Verlag, 1967). For a critique, see Volker Depkat, “Plädoyer für eine kommunikationspragmatische Erneuerung der Quellenkunde,” in *Geschichte, Öffentlichkeit, Kommunikation: Festschrift für Bernd Sösemann zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Patrick Merziger et al. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010), 205–21.
 - 3 For the most recent synopsis, see Volker Depkat, “Doing Identity: Auto/Biographien als Akte sozialer Kommunikation,” in *Imperial Subjects: Autobiographische Praxis in den Vielvölkerreichen der Romanovs, Habsburger und Osmanen im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Martin Aust and Frithjof Benjamin Schenk (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2015), 39–58; Volker Depkat, “Autobiographie als geschichtswissenschaftliches Problem,” in *Autobiographie zwischen Text und Quelle*, ed. Volker Depkat and Wolfram Pyta (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2017), 23–40. On autobiography, see Jeremy D. Popkin, *History, Historians and Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
 - 4 Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 253–86.
 - 5 Robert Vellusig, *Schriftliche Gespräche: Briefkultur im 18. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2000); Jörg Schuster and Jochen Strobel, eds., *Briefkultur: Texte und Interpretationen – von Martin Luther bis Thomas Bernhard* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013). I also base my remarks on the results of the conference “Briefe zwischen Text und Quelle” that I co-organized with Wolfram Pyta at the Deutsche Literaturarchiv Marbach (March 29–31, 2017). The conference volume is forthcoming.
 - 6 Arno Dusini, *Tagebuch: Möglichkeiten einer Gattung* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005); Sabine Gruber, *Das Tagebuch: Ein Medium der Selbstreflexion* (Mainz: Dr.-Ing.-Hans-Joachim-Lenz-Stiftung, 2008). I also base my remarks on the results of the conference “Tagebuch zwischen Text und Quelle” that I co-organized with Wolfram Pyta at the Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies Regensburg (November 21–22, 2014). The conference volume is forthcoming.
 - 7 Dusini, *Tagebuch*, 102–4.