

Tagungsbericht von Ruth Dawson

Dear Colleagues

Here is a report on the recent Wuppertal conference on legitimation mechanisms and strategies of and for biographical writing, by participant Ruth Dawson. The conference was organized by the Zentrum für Biographik. The list would welcome other brief reports on lifewriting conferences.

Craig Howes

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After two and a half full days of talks and discussions, the special biography conference ended this afternoon here in Wuppertal, Germany. Papers addressing texts that ranged from film to portraiture to opera (a bio-opera that let Sylvia Plath meet Verdi!) and books of course raised issues of genre, including how and whether to define biography and the biographical. Here are a few observations on the conference, drawing often on the excellent synthesis provided in the last session today.

The roots of biography in the written lives of "great" men continue to affect/infect the genre (with political biography a big, not invariably masculine topic). Still not sufficiently addressed in most scholarship about biography and in many biographies themselves: bodies and (gendered, raced) embodiment.

How production and reception of biography affect legitimation was another major theme. I was especially struck by the observation that public interest in biography and thus the marketability of biographical writing itself functions as a mechanism of legitimation. Then there was also the paradoxical observation that although many authors make a claim of neutrality, in fact it is the perspective of particular writers at particular moments, precisely the absence of neutrality, that makes biographies both interesting and legitimate for readers.

About legitimation mechanisms, many questions remain. Who is authorized to write about particular persons? Which persons are legitimized as subjects of biography? Is there some form of legitimation that is specific to biography? How does intercultural transfer of biographical writing happen and affect legitimacy? What is the role of journalism in establishing and legitimating a biography? Why do some historical novels with extensive invented passages get taken up as authentic, while some "scientific" biographies are dismissed as fictions? And is there a meaningful distinction between biographies that are popular and those that are serious ("scientific")?

This was the first conference organized by the Zentrum für Biographik, an independent and energetic organization of biography scholars from a wide range of disciplines--medical history, Eastern Europe studies, literary studies, history, media studies, and more--and spread across Germany (though concentrated in the old West Germany). The success of the conference seems to me to have depended in part on using the theme of legitimation mechanisms to integrate the many different approaches to biography that were shown in the papers, in part on the generous spirit of the diverse scholars who make up the center, in part on the effective mixing of more and less experienced contributors, and finally on wonderful leadership (with special thanks to Dr. Christian Klein), excellent cooperation with the center for narrative studies (Zentrum für Erzählungsforschung) at the University of Wuppertal, and generous support of the German Research Organization (DFG). Watch for whatever this lively crowd decides to do next!

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