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Writing Lives in Contemporary Italy

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Abstract: The article provides a historical survey of the practice of biography in contemporary Italy. Addressing topics ranging from the particular relationship between biography and the nation-building process – the effort 'to make the Italians' in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries – to the different forms of telling lives in contemporary Italy, I will also examine the outlook of certain great intellectuals and historians on biography and discuss the importance of publishing firms and certain editorial collections for the practice of biography in order to understand several specific issues: national lives versus local ones; the selection of historical characters; the importance of microhistory; the biography boom of the 1970s and the 1980s; the studies about biography and the current state of research on it.

Nineteenth-Century Biography: In the Service of a National Historiography under Construction

According to Maria Pia Casalena's impressive essay on the practice of biography in nineteenth century Italy, 8,000 biographies were published between 1800 and 1915.[1] Casalena provides considerable statistical information about the publishing houses and the cities where biographies were released. As expected, Rome, Bologna, Milan, Torino, Florence and Naples prevail over the rest of the peninsula. Nevertheless, the minor centers of culture show an interesting output of biographies dedicated to local public figures. Furthermore, one should recall that many biographies were actually translations from other languages and originated abroad, above all in France, the origin of 74% of the translated biographies in Italy before the Unification in 1861. The remainder of the translations came mainly from the United Kingdom (11%), Austria, and the United States.[2] Excepting these translations, Italian biographies were concerned mostly with the lives of saints, with historical models for youth (the genre of *plutarchi*), and with political heroes. The influence of these foreign biographical and historiographical works brought French and the English theories and doctrines, such as those of Samuel Smiles, to Italy. In 1865 the Barbèra publishing house released a very successful biographical essay by Michele Lessona entitled *Volere è Potere*, inspired by Smiles's theory of *Self-help*.[3] It was meant primarily to suggest examples of contemporary personal success across the country. More generally, the book intended to 'make the Italians' – citizens had to be shaped in conformity to historical *exempla*. Another landmark of British influence is the early-twentieth-century importance in Italy of Thomas Carlyle and his *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*.

What is striking straightaway is the coexistence of two main types of biographies, the first dealing with religious figures, considered as a genre because of the specific editorial market

[1] Maria Pia Casalena, *Biografia: La scrittura delle vite in Italia tra politica, società e cultura, 1796-1915* (Milan: Mondadori, 2012).
[2] See Donald Sassoon, *The Culture of the Europeans: From 1800 to the Present* (London: Harper Collins, 2006) and Franco Moretti, *Atlante del romanzo europeo: 1800-1900* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997). Italy imported 50% of the books listed in the reading rooms' catalogues.
[3] Michele Lessona, *Volere è potere* (Florence: G. Barbèra, 1869). Each chapter is dedicated to a main city of the peninsula and provides biographies of contemporary Italians who distinguished themselves in areas such as science, art, and industry.

and audience for these books, the other treating biographies of national and foreign historical characters (politicians, leaders, artists, etc.).

Given the context of nineteenth-century publishing and writing, biographers at this time, unsurprisingly, were mostly men (only 3% were women). Catholic hagiography was also very influential. The writing and reading of lives had a strong effect on nation-building, as in every other European country of the period. Indeed, the nineteenth century in Italy was the era of the country's emancipation from Austria, which had ruled, directly or indirectly, half the peninsula. After the Unification many biographies were written and published to justify a national culture and to create national models. Throughout the *Risorgimento* biographies enhanced – in addition to the traditional history of the saints – the tradition of national patriotic martyrs that held sway during the Austrian occupation. Important examples of these national symbols are Dante Alighieri, Ludovico Ariosto, Ugo Foscolo, and Christopher Columbus. Regarding the famous navigator, Angelo Sanguineti's book *La vita di Cristoforo Colombo* (1846) is particularly noteworthy in comparison with the *Vita di Cristoforo Colombo* (1895) of Cesare De Lollis, a scholar who also studied and edited Columbus's written works. These writers give two very different views on the colonization of the New World.[4]

We should pay particular attention to great historians who wrote biographies, such as Gaudenzio Claretta, who specialized in the lives of Piedmontese nobility in the 1850s and 1860s, using thoroughly new sources.[5] We can also refer to Pasquale Villari, who integrated the new input of the historical sciences and of scientific historiography in his biographies of Savonarola (1859) and Machiavelli (1877), and to Angelo De Gubernatis, who initiated in 1878 the *Dizionario biografico degli scrittori contemporanei* and in 1889 the *Dizionario degli artisti italiani viventi*.[6]

After 1861, the year of the proclamation the Italian Kingdom, the intention of 'making the Italians' involved a politics of memory. Biography now strongly served to create a national sense of belonging, celebrating the great figures of the past and the *Risorgimento*, such as Camillo Cavour, King Vittorio Emanuele II, Giuseppe Mazzini, and Giuseppe Garibaldi. These efforts were aimed at establishing a national pantheon. In the 1870s and 1880s the school curricula for History included biographies of national figures such as ancient Roman notables, warriors, generals, poets, inventors, and navigators. These *plutarchi*, written for young boys, intended to teach courage and fortitude. Indeed, the conservative governments told their version of the Risorgimento and its heroes with a particular taste for the anecdote and an overriding sense of morality.

After World War II, when communists and socialists nearly dominated the whole of Italian culture, a different biographical vision of the *Risorgimento* emerged.[7] This new view differed from the consensus of the late nineteenth century, when popular biographies of the Unification's protagonists still flourished and were inevitably connected with the heroism and the struggle for independence.[8] As a result, the life of Giuseppe Garibaldi as rendered in

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[4] Angelo Sanguineti, *La vita di Cristoforo Colombo* (Genova: Antonio Bettolo, 1846); Cesare De Lollis, *Vita di Cristoforo Colombo* (Milan: Treves, 1895). See the article by Diego Stefanelli, 'Il Cristoforo Colombo di Cesare De Lollis', in *Carte Romanze* 1-2 (2013): 275-350.

[5] Gaudenzio Claretta, *Dizionario biografico e genealogico del Piemonte* (unpublished), kept at the Archivio di Stato in Turin.

[6] Pasquale Villari, *La storia di Girolamo Savonarola e de' suoi tempi* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1859); *Niccolò Machiavelli e i suoi tempi* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1877).

[7] For instance the biographer and politician Giuseppe Massari, *Il conte di Cavour: Ricordi biografici* (Torino: Eredi Botta, 1873); *La vita e il regno di Vittorio Emanuele II, primo re d'Italia* (Milan: Treves, 1878); and *Il generale Alfonso La Marmora. Ricordi biografici* (Florence: G. Barbèra, 1880).

[8] See Cosimo Ceccuti, 'Le grandi biografie popolari nell'editoria italiana del secondo *Ottocento*', in *Il mito del Risorgimento nell'Italia unita*, Atti del convegno, Milan, 9-12 november 1993, *Risorgimento*, A. XLVII, no. 1-2 (1995): 110-123.

biographies changed, in accordance with the respective political views of his biographers ranging from the time of the first government in 1861 through to Fascism, when his character endured nationalist distortions. He was regarded either as a hero of the independence or as a rebel, either as a savior of Southern Italy or as a dangerous republican.[9] Analogously, there are the biographies of the politician Giuseppe Mazzini, regarded sometimes as a disturbing figure for the government and sometimes as a saint of the newborn nation, a man at the center of an authentic cult because 'he became a God' in the twentieth century.[10]

Biography, as Conceived by Certain Italian Intellectuals and the Research on Biography in the Twentieth Century

Benedetto Croce was a philosopher and historian whose influence strongly marked Italian culture for several generations. In 1947 he founded the *Istituto per gli studi storici* in Naples, which became a breeding ground for great historians. Croce briefly accounted for his own conception of biography in his essay *La storia come pensiero e azione.* Here he asserts an aversion to biography on the theoretical level, even though he used to practice the genre as a writer. For Croce, biography is deprived of a specific function because 'the individual character is thought and judged only by his own work and at the same time by what is not, the work he does and that which goes beyond him.'[11] According to Croce, writers such as André Maurois, Emil Ludwig, and Lytton Strachey wrote merely 'pleasant historiographical literature' – their biographies were bound to be forgotten and would soon be out of date. But after many decades we know that Croce's judgement was completely wrong.[12] Today the biographies written by Croce are usually considered minor works. But his beautiful *Vite di avventure, di fede e di passione* contained six accurate biographies dedicated respectively to Filippo di Fiandra, il conte di Campobasso, il marchese di Vico, Isabella di Morra, Diego Duque de Estrada, and Carlo Lauberg. These were deliberately written in a spirit counter to the much-deplored fictionalized biographies.[13]

In contrast to Croce, Antonio Gramsci (one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party) recognized that the biographies written by Maurois, Ludwig, and Strachey had enabled the middle classes to come closer to history and politics than they had through the historical novels of Dumas and Hugo.[14] For Gramsci, indeed, biography has a function in the teaching of history, although, except for the *plutarchi* and the hagiographies, the Italian tradition suffered from a shortage of great popular biographies. By the way, a very recent essay on Gramsci has demonstrated that a biographical method allows for a qualification of the traditional teleological conception of his political outlook.[15]

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[9] A recent biography of Anita Garibaldi, the wife of Giuseppe, won the Giovanni Comisso Prize in 2018: Silvia Cavicchioli, *Storia e mito di Anita Garibaldi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2017).

[10] Dante Della Terza, 'L'eroe scomodo e la sua ombra. L'immagine di Mazzini e la letteratura del Risorgimento', *Letteratura e critica tra '800 e '900: itinerari di ricezione* (Cosenza: Periferia, 1989): 9-44. Pietro Finelli, "*È divenuto un Dio:* Santità, Patria e Rivoluzione nel culto di Mazzini (1872-1905)", in *Storia d'Italia*, Annali 22, *Il Risorgimento*, ed. A. M. Banti and P. Ginsborg (Turin: Einaudi, 2007). See a survey of the evolution and distortion of Mazzini in Simon Levis Sullam, *L'apostolo a brandelli: L'eredità di Mazzini tra Risorgimento e Fascismo* (Bari: Laterza, 2014).

[11] Benedetto Croce, 'L'individuo è pensato e giudicato solo nell'opera che è sua e insieme non sua, che egli fa e che lo oltrepassa', in his *La storia come pensiero e azione* (Bari: Laterza, 1954 [1938]), 13.

[12] Benedetto Croce, *Storia della storiografia italiana nel secolo decimonono* (Bari: Laterza, 1964, 4th ed.), II: 281.

[13] Benedetto Croce, *Vite di avventure, di fede e di passione* (Bari: Laterza, 1936). Minor works indeed, but with undeniable aesthetic qualities, as stated in Federico Chabod, *Lezioni di metodo storico* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1973), 192. After his death, his *Isabella di Morra e Diego Sandoval de Castro* was published as a separate biography.

[14] Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. V. Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975 [1948-1951]): 688-689.

[15] Angelo d'Orsi, *Gramsci: Una nuova biografia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2017).

In the same way, a famous historian of ancient Greece, Arnaldo Momigliano, considered biography to be not the means of creating a work of literature but rather an instrument for researching social history. He attributed importance to the relationship between biography and historiography in his four lectures at Harvard in 1968, which were published in English in his now-classic essay *The Development of Greek Biography*.[16] So did Franco Venturi and, more recently, Carlo Capra (biographer of Pietro Verri and Giovanni Ristori) in their biographies of eighteenth-century politicians and intellectuals: they considered biography to be no less than the very foundation of history.[17]

The next generation of historians, born in the 1930s and 1940s and influenced by the social sciences, developed the 'new history' in Italy. They read and practiced biography in locales such as the Fondazione Einaudi in Turin (created in 1970) and the Istituto Universitario Europeo in Fiesole (created in 1972). They exposed Italian historiography to international influences due to their activity in France, especially at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, and in the United States. Their new interest in mentalities and in the individual led to a new conception of the writing of lives. One of these historians, Carlo Ginzburg, published an important and celebrated book in 1976, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, which perceives biography to be a narrative genre belonging to the historical studies.[18] This biography tells the life of an obscure Renaissance miller called Menocchio in the Friuli (in the northeast of Italy).

In Italy, Giovanni Levi, Edoardo Grandi, and Carlo Ginzburg expressed interest in *partial* biography, no longer seeking to write an exhaustive survey of an individual's entire life. In *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist*, for example, Levi observed the behavior and the overall freedom of his subject within the interstices of a cohesive collection.[19] Fundamental to the microhistorian's practice of biography is a reduction in the scale of observation, which has led to a new interest in the individual, in what is private or intimate, in individual customs, and in the promotion of singular phenomena. By doing research on a microscopic level, by using previously neglected sources, and by paying attention to tiny details, microhistorians were able to reveal factors that had previously been overlooked.[20] Biographical studies, under the influence of microhistory, came to address the difference between uniqueness and representativeness, as well as the particulars of sexual life, eating and drinking customs, work habits, and the anthropology of the family. Giovanni Levi worked as a historian in France for the famous review *Annales ESC*, and in his labors there he considered the practice of biography to be related to sociology, anthropology, and psychology. According to Levi, the individual biography is not merely a private enterprise. It cannot be studied in an unequivocal way, because then it might be restricted to illustrating the links of individual behavior to common or expected social conditions.[21] In the 1980s, microhistory inspired the Einaudi publishing house to create

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[16] Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), then *Lo sviluppo della biografia greca*, trans. Guido Donini (Turin: Einaudi, 1974). See *Arnaldo Momigliano nella storiografia del Novecento*, ed. Leandro Polverini, *Storia e Letteratura* 224 (2006).

[17] See Pierre Musitelli, 'Usages de la biographie historique: Le cas italien entre Lumières et Restauration (2e partie)', in *La Clé des Langues* [online] (Lyon: ENS, 2015).

[18] Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi: Il cosmo di un mugnaio del Cinquecento* (Torino: Einaudi, 1976, English trans. 1980). See the issue of the Italian journal *Sigma* 17, no. 1-2 (January-August 1984), dedicated to literary biography.

[19] Giovanni Levi, *L'eredità immateriale: Carriera di un esorcista nel Piemonte del Seicento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1985, English trans. 1988).

[20] Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon, 'The Life Is Never Over: Biography as a Microhistorical Approach', in *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, ed. Hans Renders, Binne de Haan, and Jonne Harmsma (New York: Routledge, 2017), 42-52.

[21] Giovanni Levi, 'The Uses of Biography', in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*: *Approaches from History, Microhistory and Life Writing*, ed. Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 59-74.

its *Microstorie* imprint, featuring biographies taking a strong interest in the mentalities manifested in the lives of individuals, especially the obscure ones.[22]

In Italy, in the 1970s and the 1980s, the genre of historical biography was thriving. *Biografia e storiografia*, a collective essay published in 1983, symbolizes this period.[23] It was a time of intense debate in which the distinction between biography and historiography was no longer pertinent, because biography was considered part of the historical sciences. Italy was now expressing profound interest in biographies, but why? First, as we might expect, the biographical approach reflected the crisis of mass ideologies. Biography enabled Italians to imbue historical facts with meaning in a country where biography had no great tradition comparable to that of the English-speaking world.[24] Second, social history was taking a methodologically new direction toward the political and the institutional sphere. In the wake of this development there arose many new historical and political biographies.[25] For instance, we can recall the successful translation of Robert A. Rosenstone's *John Reed: Rivoluzionario romantico* in 1976, which became something of a new model for a generation of Italian biographers.[26] In Italy collective reality had long prevailed over individual facts, mainly due to the cultural influence of both the *Annales* School and Marxist ideology. Furthermore, unlike in the English-speaking world, the biographer is hardly regarded as a professional in contemporary Italy. He is not really taken seriously, because he is often a journalist and not a historian.[27] As a result, two horizons of expectation have emerged among readers: biographers primarily tell life stories addressed to a larger audience, whereas only historians can fashion biographically meticulous works, which are mainly addressed to other historians.

In the 1980s the genre of the historical biography became rather popular, as did writers' biographies. The case of the early-twentieth-century poet Dino Campana is significant: Campana was discovered again by virtue of a novelized biography by Sebastiano Vassalli published in 1984. This treatment led to a groundswell of enthusiasm for the Tuscan poet, who was regarded as a *poète maudit* because of his madness. In the wake of Vassalli's well-documented book several biographies of Campana have appeared.[28]

Today the Istituto Nazionale Ferruccio Parri in Bologna is committed to conducting research on the history of the Italian Resistance and of the contemporary period. It promotes notable projects that elaborate a contemporary form of biographical investigation: the biographies of a community. In the wake of the emergence of the microhistorical tradition, the *biografia di comunità*, particularly in the northern part of Italy, has attempted to rebuild collective memory through a biographical method. It involves the collection of documents, such as interviews and recollections of evidence, in order to gather information about many different forms of local life. This research addresses the history of a specific community during times of notable and often shocking events that, most of the time, brought with them widespread trauma or an important turn in economic life. For example, biographies have been written about a community in Tuscany shaken by a reprisal during World War II, and have addressed the impact

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[22] See Valeria Sgambati, 'Le lusinghe della biografia', in *Studi Storici* 36, no. 2 (1995): 397-413.

[23] *Biografia e storiografia*, Atti del Seminario promosso dalla fondazione G. Brodolini e dall'Istituto del diritto del lavoro e di politica sociale dell'Università degli Studi di Milano, ed. Alceo Riosa (Milan: Angeli, 1983).

[24] Monica Rebeschini, 'La biografia come genere storiografico tra storia politica e storia sociale. Questioni di metodo', in *Acta Histriae* 14 (2006): 427-446, 431.

[25] See the collective article 'La biografia: un genere storiografico in trasformazione', ed. C. Cassina and F. Traniello, *Contemporanea* 2, no. 2 (April 1999): 287-305.

[26] Robert A. Rosenstone, *John Reed: Rivoluzionario romantico* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1976 [New York: 1975]).

[27] Gabriele Turi, 'La biografia: un genere storiografico in trasformazione', in *Contemporanea* 2, no. 2 (April 1999): 295.

[28] Sebastiano Vassalli, *The Night of the Comet* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984, English trans. 1989). One year later two biographies were published: Gabriel Cacho Millet, *Dino Campana fuorilegge* (Palermo: Novecento, 1985) and Gianni Turchetta, *Dino Campana: Biografia di un poeta* (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 1985). See also Paolo Maccari, *Il poeta sotto esame, con due importanti inediti di Dino Campana* (Florence: Passigli, 2012).

of industrialization on a village in the Emilia province. These biographies deal with many individual memories that have been brought together to constitute an archive of local collective memory. Their method tries to combine the historical investigation of individual lives with a partial reconstruction of the life and outlook of a community at a specific time.[29]

The Importance of Certain Editorial Collections and the Dizionario Biografico

In the early twentieth century the Formiggini publishing house in Genoa established its Profili imprint. Between 1909 and 1938, the publisher Angelo Fortunato offered 128 books to a wide audience, which on the whole were dedicated to great or lesser-known Italian or foreign figures, among them artists, politicians, writers, and scientists. New books were regularly and successfully released every two months. The challenge was to find the right balance between popularization and the presentation of facts, and to do so without distorting history or reducing its complexity. Later, Mondadori's popular collection Le Scie [the Wake] published the disordered and overabundant 'Collana di memorie, epistolari, biografie e curiosità.' This series, founded in 1926 by Arnaldo Mondadori, took a huge interest in passionate historical figures, women, heroism, and the private lives of great figures.[30] Many translated biographies by Emil Ludwig were published under this imprint. From the '60s onwards, the publishing house UTET brought out 'La vita sociale della nuova Italia,' an important series that was perhaps the first contemporary collection of high-quality biographies,[31] responding to the new appetite for the genre, and especially for the lives of politicians.[32] One of its titles was Piero Pieri and Giorgio Rochat's biography of Marshal Pietro Badoglio, which was written more as a political biography than a story of the private life of a man who left his mark during World War II.[33] Between 1962 and 1995 the imprint, under the direction of Nino Valeri, released 42 books, making up 13% of the 288 biographies dedicated to post-Unification Italian figures in this period. The series mainly paid attention to individuals belonging to the ruling class or to the bourgeoisie, whose values were personified through their lives.[34]

Among these biographies we find great historical figures, mainly politicians and writers, as well as artists, economists, and scientists. Examples of these now-classic books include *Giovanni Boldini* by Dario Cecchi, *Edmondo De Amicis* by Lorenzo Gigli, *Pirandello* by Gaspare Giudice, and *Verga* by Giulio Cattaneo, all published between 1962 and 1963. The later *Benito Mussolini* (1969), by Gaspare Giudice, was reflective of an innovative psychological turn. The biographers that contributed to this collection of publications were principally formidable scholars of history or literature, such as Dario Cecchi and Lorenzo Gigli, but there were also professional writers specializing in the genre, such as Massimo Grillandi, the author of many biographies.[35] In the wake of the Italian economic miracle of the '50s and the '60s, a new audience emerged for biographies dedicated to the *imprenditori*, those emblematic businessmen of Italian capitalism such as Giovanni Agnelli and Vittorio Valletta.[36] In the end, the imprint succeeded in creating an editorial pantheon of exemplary portraits.

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[29] Lorena Mussini, 'Un ponte culturale tra memoria e storia: la biografia di comunità', in *E-Review* 3 (2015).
[30] Gabriele Turi, *Storia dell'editoria nell'Italia contemporanea* (Florence: Giunti Editore, 1997), 434.
[31] Claudia Gollini, 'Biografia e divulgazione: la collana 'La vita sociale della nuova Italia'', in *Italia contemporanea* 193 (December 1993): 707-716.
[32] Sergio Romano, 'Considerazioni sulla biografia', in *Storia della storiografia* 3 (1983): 113-123.
[33] Piero Pieri and Giorgio Rochat, *Badoglio* (Turin: UTET, 1974).
[34] Claudia Gollini, 'Biografia e divulgazione', 714-715.
[35] Massimo Grillandi wrote two biographies for the UTET collection (*Francesco Crispi* in 1969 and *Emilio Treves* in 1977) and then wrote about the countess of Castiglione, Belli, Rasputin, Mata Hari, Lucrezia Borgia, etc.
[36] Respectively: Valerio Castronuovo, *Giovanni Agnelli* (Turin: UTET, 1971) and Piero Bairati, *Vittorio Valletta* (Torino: UTET, 1983). Bruno Caizzi had written a double biography of Camillo and Adriano Olivetti in 1962 for the same series.

Besides this imprint, there was also Laterza, one of the main and more serious publishing houses for historical books, which sought a balance between its aim to maintain high scholarly standards and its intention of reaching many readers.[37] Its catalogue now offers masterpieces of the genre including Rosario Romeo's *Cavour e il suo tempo* (1969–84), Denis Mack Smith's *Garibaldi* (1973), and Giorgio Bocca's *Palmiro Togliatti* (1973). In the wake of the microhistory boom, another large national publishing house, Einaudi, initiated in the 1980s its Microstorie series focusing on partial biographies: its titles included Pietro Redondi's *Galileo eretico* (1983), specifically dedicated to the trial of the scientist; Roberto Zapperi's *Annibale Carracci* (1989), limited to the origins and the youth of the painter; and Sara Caribbo and Marilena Modica's *La santa dei Tomasi: Storia di Suor Maria Crocifissa* (1989), which homed in on a process of sanctity in sixteenth-century Sicily.

A current example of a biographical series, in this case developed by the Gribaudo publishing house in the 2000s, is 'Le opere, i giorni, i luoghi: una biografia per immagini'. These biographies are especially dedicated to contemporary writers. They give preference to the places where their subjects lived (Calvino, Gadda, Fenoglio, Quasimodo, Pasolini, Pavese, etc.) and incorporate substantial iconographic documents and a considerable amount of testimonies. They have been published as large-format biographical albums.

In considering here how the publishing houses have played an important role in the flourishing of biography over more than four decades, the existence of the DBI (*Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*) must be mentioned. With origins in the nationalist desire to praise noteworthy Italians, the project ultimately led to a necessary correction of the nation's historical narrative. In the nineteenth century, there was the *Galleria dei contemporanei*, published by Pomba, and the *Dizionario biografico degli scrittori contemporanei*, edited by De Gubernatis. Afterwards Leone Caetani constituted a corpus of 7,000 forms and notices for the *Dizionario biobibliografico italiano*, created in 1925 as a project of the Istituto Treccani, the Italian encyclopedia that had been founded by Giovanni Treccani and Giovanni Gentile. During the Fascist period the *Dizionario* was dominated by hagiographical lemmas that faithfully supported patriotism, nation-building, and national history as tinged by the aims and values of the Mussolini regime. Its celebrated figures were seen as reflections of the soul of the motherland. After Fascism, however, the DBI did not cease; it frequently kept up with new information obtained through historical research on eras ranging from the Roman Empire to the present. The dictionary opened itself to varied fields such as economy, business, the sciences, and the mass media. In addition, many women were included in the DBI, although they represented a minority at the beginning. It is not surprising that its contributors include important scholars such as Giovanni Levi, Arnaldo Momigliano, and Eugenio Garin.[38] Nowadays we can consult the 31,000 biographies collected in the *Dizionario degli Italiani della Repubblica* online, which contains an index of all the biographies published since the start of the First Republic in 1946.[39]

Having presented this overview of the Italian biographical tradition, I would like to remind you of an important issue specific to this tradition of writing lives. The selection of figures has always been controversial with regard to where they properly belong: that is, are they part of the national or of a regional history? – given that before 1861 every Italian simply belonged to a (sometimes great) local history having its own tradition and culture.[40] How could

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[37] Alberto Caracciolo, 'Il mercato dei libri di storia, 1968-1978: Elementi per una analisi', in *Quaderni storici* 41 (1979): 765-777.

[38] Giuseppe Pignatelli (editor of the *Dizionario* since 1964), 'Biografia e contesto', in *Contemporanea* 2, no. 2 (April 1999): 299-302.

[39] http://www.treccani.it/biografico/

[40] For instance the pre-Unification *Dizionario biografico degli uomini illustri di Sardegna*, ed. D. Pasquale Tola (Turin: Chirio e Mina, 1837-1838) and the current *Dizionario biografico dei friulani*: http://www.dizionariobiograficodeifriulani.it/ both originated in the remote eighteenth century.

a biographer forget the inherent contrast between a late, unfinished common history and a rich, long-lasting local history? For example, since Unification biographical figures from southern Italy have relatively limited space, and what treatments there were mainly came from the Kingdom of Naples. Instead, more importance on the whole was given to members of the Piedmontese upper and middle classes, which were considered to be the collective protagonist of the *Risorgimento.* These groups imposed their rules, their particular conception of national historiography. Writing good biographies in Italy today means challenging what seems obvious: it should problematize the country's senses of national identity and of belonging, and strike a balance in emphasis between individual famous or minor local lives on the one hand, and a complex collective history on the other.[41]

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[41] See Francesco Paolo Casavola, 'Dalle biografie individuali alla identità nazionale', in *Il Veltro* 5–6 (2000): 539-545.

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