

compared to the most recent French-language study on Sarraute's novels, André Allemand's *L'OEuvre romanesque de Nathalie Sarraute* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1980), which overlong, less sensitive, and somewhat pedantic. As an introduction to Sarraute's fiction, it is too forbidding; as a scholarly investigation, it is no more thorough than Minogue's. Perhaps scholars exaggerate the difficulty inherent in Sarraute's novels; granted, they are not easy to analyze, but is it really that arduous a task to read them? Is it not possible to enjoy them without having an official guide on how to proceed? This opens the question of the diverse functions of criticism versus academic scholarship and the problems that arise when one straddles the two, as Valerie Minogue and many others are wont to do. She believes that Sarraute "makes considerable, and even at times excessive, demands on the reader" (p. 168). That may or may not be true, but for my part I should prefer to repeat what she herself says at the end of a mock debate on Sarraute's works between prosecution and defense: "I call the works themselves to the witness-box. Examine them for yourself" (p. 179). Also, forget your prejudices about what a novel should or should not be, and do not repress your imaginative responses to the text.

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(Auto)biography: Bernard Malamud's *Dubin's Lives*

"'When you write biography you want to write about people who will make you strain to understand them.' Dubin said it was like chasing a runner you would never catch up with. 'But the game is, I suppose, to make the reader think that's exactly what you have done, and maybe in a blaze of illumination even have out-distanced him. It's an illusionary farce that holds me by the tail.'" What more elusive (auto)biographical subject is there than self? So Bernard Malamud proves in his (non)fictional, (auto)biographical account of the life of (auto)biographer, William B. Dubin. *Dubin's Lives* is an example of autobiography by indirection. While presenting the life of another person, Malamud provides—perhaps inevitably—a version of himself. Although he states in a *New York Times* interview that the novel is "not basically autobiographical,"² his interviewer describes the book as "intimately connected to him [Malamud], nerve end to nerve end" (*NYT*, p. 31). Malamud calls it "his attempt at bigness, at summing up what he has learned over the long haul" (*NYT*, p. 31). In a journal he kept while working on the novel, Malamud writes: "One must transcend the autobiographical detail by inventing it after it is remembered" (*NYT*, p. 31).

Although Malamud invents and transcends, the reader can, without straining, detect biographical similarities shared by Malamud and his fictional protagonist. His biographer-hero is fifty-six in 1973 when the novel begins. He has "a bulge of a disciplined belly—thus far and no farther" (*DL*, p. 4), "grizzled" (*DL*, p. 4) gray hair, and a "head perhaps a half-size small for his height" (*DL*, p. 4). He

¹Bernard Malamud, *Dubin's Lives* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979) p. 14. Subsequent references to this text will be marked *DL* and will appear parenthetically following quoted material.

²Ralph Tyler, "A Talk with the Novelist," *The New York Book Review* (February 18, 1979), p. 31. All other references to this article will be marked *NYT* and will appear parenthetically after the quoted text.

has a wife of twenty-five years, Kitty; two children, Maud and Gerald, who have moved away from home. A Jew, he lives in non-Jewish Center Campobello, New York, "a town of 4,601 souls" (*DL* p. 13) near the Vermont border. His favorite exercise is walking. We know little of Dubin's early life, except that his mother, whose insanity darkened his childhood, died while he was an adolescent. His father was a hard-working, ill-rewarded waiter. For a living, Dubin writes the biographies of political and literary figures. His early works are *Short Lives*, a collection of biographies about people who do not live past forty; *Abraham Lincoln*; *Mark Twain*; and *H. D. Thoreau*. As *Dubin's Lives* commences, Dubin is beginning a book, the title of which, *The Passion of D. H. Lawrence: A Life*, is more than the name of its subject. As such, it promises more. Through the course of the narrative, the reader traces Dubin's involvement with the project. Malamud, on the other hand, is about the same age as Dubin. He is slight and graying and careful about his weight. Like Dubin, Malamud has a wife to whom he has been married for about thirty years; a son, Paul; and a daughter, Janna. Malamud spends most of his time in Vermont. As does Dubin, he visits Italy periodically. There are also similarities in their early lives. Malamud grew up in a Jewish home in Brooklyn where his father was a struggling shopkeeper. His mother "had some kind of unhappiness of middle-age" (*NYT*, p. 33). She died when Malamud was fifteen. Like Dubin, Malamud is obviously a writer. He published six novels before writing *Dubin's Lives*. Dubin, we learn in an afternote to the novel, eventually publishes seven works.

But because his purpose is larger than traditional autobiography, Malamud does not encourage readers to see a simple equation between writer and biographical subject. Dubin's journey and his surname begin *DUBin*, where Malamud's ends. Dubin is simultaneously Malamud and Everyperson who passes indelicately from middle to old age. He is Adam from Newark, New Jersey. As he points out to an American priest whom he meets in Italy: "We're all from the Garden State—maybe from the same garden" (*DL*, p. 73). He resembles the earlier Dub(1)in quester-for-self, as he smells his friend's, Fanny's, "blooming perfume" (*DL*, p. 7). He is also the child, William Dubin, who, at fourteen, tries to confirm his existence by writing, "many times, a single word: 'Will i am'" (*DL*, p. 175).

Although Malamud claims that he tried first to make his hero a cellist, Dubin's career as a writer is essential to what the novel ultimately accomplishes. As with the other biographical information, Malamud uses Dubin's writing to make his hero resemble himself yet be distinctly different. Malamud's and Dubin's writing careers move together, for example, from opposite directions. Malamud began by writing pure fiction and in *Dubin's Lives* attempts to explore the complex interrelationship between fiction, biography, and autobiography. Dubin, certainly, has begun by writing relatively objective biographical pieces, his *Short Lives*, for example, and his book on Abraham Lincoln. His Lawrence project, however, leads him toward an acute sense of the subjectivity inherent in writing biography. Lawrence has engrossed and involved him in a way that none of his other subjects has. Dubin begins seeing the world as Lawrence would: "Dubin remembered once, in approaching Capri in search of D. H. Lawrence, the hills like a big-breasted woman on her back, raising her head to kiss the sky" (*DL*, p. 5). And he begins to see himself in what he writes about Lawrence: "I could do it the way Montaigne did—you start an essay and thus begin an examination of your life. 'Reader, I am myself the subject of my book; you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a matter'" (*DL*, p. 5). Recognizing this linkage between life and art does not help him to keep these two strands separate. Dubin even contemplates the ultimate subjectivity of doing an autobiography: "He'd had thoughts while shaving that he ought to try developing a

few notes for an autobiographical memoir—type a page or two to see if they came to life with texture, heft” (*DL*, p. 5). Even so, Dubin recognizes the interrelationship of *any* kind of writing project and one’s sense of self.

A question one might reasonably ask is why Malamud bothers to create and then blur the similarities between his own life and Dubin’s. Why does he simultaneously write and then absent himself and “truth” from his (auto)biographical (non)fiction work? What, if there is one, is Malamud’s larger purpose? There are, I would suggest, at least three such purposes.

First, Malamud uses the (non)fiction, (auto)biographical genre as a vehicle for celebration and consolation. His and all our biographies are contained in *Dubin’s Lives*. As biographer Dubin once notes: “Completed, most lives are alike in stages of living—joys, celebrations, crises, illusions, losses, sorrow” (*DL*, p. 12). What we see in *Dubin’s Lives* are all of these. Fearing impotence, loneliness, aging, and death, Dubin grasps hold of Fanny Bick, the family’s lusty, Lawrenceian cleaning person. Through contact with her, through his children’s personal struggles, through his wife’s trusting love, Dubin celebrates growing wiser and kinder as he also grows old. The consolation Malamud offers is the comfortable knowledge that human foolishness in the face of death is a universal malaise. Confronting the certainty of physical and intellectual decay, we need not be ashamed of our futile struggles to stay the inexorable approach of the future.

Second, just as Malamud places himself, to an extent, in his (non)fiction, so must the reader. We explore Lawrence’s “passionate life” with Dubin, feeling as he does “like an ant getting ready to eat an oak tree” (*DL*, p. 20). One reads (auto)biography in much the same way as another person creates it:

“You assimilated another[’s] . . . experience and tried to arrange it into ‘thoughtful centrality’”—Samuel Johnson’s expression. In order to do that honestly well, you had to anchor yourself in a place of perspective; you had as a strategy to imagine you were the one you were writing about, though it meant laying illusion on illusion, pretense that he, Dubin, who knew himself passing well, knew, or might know the life of D. H. Lawrence . . . And though the evidence pertains to Lawrence, the miner’s son, how can it escape the taint, subjectivity, the existence of Willie Dubin, Charlie-the-Waiter’s son, via the contaminated language he chooses to put down as he eases his boy ever so gently into an imagined life? My life joining his with reservations. (*DL*, p. 20)

With the artist so deeply involved and yet simultaneously uninvolved in his own creation, the reader is invited to participate in a similar way. Who am I in relation to this character? How does my life connect with this one? Thus *reading* Malamud’s *Dubin’s Lives* becomes tantamount to *writing* it, more so in (auto)biography than in any other genre. One loses oneself to, places oneself in, the book: “He had sacrificed his labors that many hours, that many years. Prufrock had measured out his life with measuring spoons; Dubin, in books resurrecting the lives of others. *You* lost as *you* gained; there’s only one subject for a poem” (*DL*, p. 12).

Third, not only is the writer/reader of *Dubin’s Lives*, or any (auto)biography, intimately involved in its action, but also that person takes from the work a vision, a means of creating her/his own life. Through *Dubin’s Lives*, one contemplates not only the effects of “truth” on “fiction,” but also the equally unsettling effects of “fiction” on “truth.” The second time Dubin sights Fanny, for example, he returns to his study with thoughts not purely salacious: “What also ran through

his mind was whether he had responded to her as his usual self, or as one presently steeped in Lawrence's sexual theories, odd as they were. He had thought much on the subject as he read the man's work. Despite his reservations it tended to charge him up some. Dubin counteracted the effect by recalling the continuous excitement of Thoreau, woodsy dybbuk, possessing him as he was writing his life. The biographer had for a time become the celibate nature lover, or so it had seemed" (*DL*, p. 23).

Similarly, the reader is invited to take away from the (non)fiction more than a smattering of details about a writer's life. One is invited to accept from William B. Dubin, from his subjects, D. H. Lawrence and Thoreau, or from his creator, Malamud, something of the "continuous excitement of Thoreau," something of the passionate sensualism of Lawrence, the desire to understand oneself through others.

Another (auto)biography was released at about the same time as *Dubin's Lives*, this one, *In Memory Yet Green*, by Isaac Asimov. Volume I of Asimov's memoirs is 708 pages long; at its conclusion Asimov is only thirty-four years old. The pages of this autobiography are packed with trivia: the way Asimov eats a hard-boiled egg, the particular kind of cookies he liked as a child to dunk in his hot chocolate at Sunday morning breakfasts, the manner in which he combed his hair. Asimov's autobiography is a relic from the days in which people read autobiography and biography alike to learn the secrets of a successful life. If I eat that kind of cookie, consume a hard-boiled egg in just that way, effect that kind of hairdo, can I become a science fiction writer—successful—too? The product of a less optimistic perspective, Malamud, like Yourcenar, offers us less yet so much more. In *Dubin's Lives*, the biographer, Dubin, ponders why he writes. One writes, one reads, Malamud has him conclude, the lives that are not ours: "Everybody's life is mine un-lived. One writes lives . . . [one] cannot live. To live forever is a human hunger" (*DL*, p. 11). Even so (auto)biography is bound to fail. There are limits on what we can know of another's journey, and especially of our own. Even Dubin's "blaze of illumination" is an "illusory farce." As Dubin observes: "The past exudes legend: one cannot make pure clay of time's mud. There is no life that can be captured wholly; as it was. Which is to say that all biography is ultimately fiction. What does that tell you about the nature of life, and does one really want to know?" (*DL*, p. 20).

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