

Auto/biography? Yes. But Canadian?

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Chances are good these days that the morning newspaper will include an article on the “season of the memoir” or the latest instalment of a series on immigrant stories in Canada (such as “Passages to Canada” in the *Globe and Mail*). “What a life!” says the sign over a table full of auto/biographies in the entrance area of the bookstore around the corner, prominently featuring George Fetherling’s *Vintage Book of Canadian Memoirs* (2001). In the evening, television offers a wide range of auto/biography programs—from CBC’s *Life and Times* series to the Comedy Network’s *Liography*, a parody of the popular profile programs on the Arts & Entertainment channel. On occasion, we can catch one of over sixty Heritage Minutes that, for the past decade, have attempted to illustrate issues of Canada’s history and national life through mini-movies about all things Canadian—most often individuals turned heroes. Or we may watch one of seventeen episodes of the documentary *Canada: A People’s History*, a joint project of the CBC and Radio Canada that draws on the letters and diaries of people both famous and obscure in order to multiply perspectives of events of national importance and improve our understanding of our links with the past. Averaging 2.2 million viewers per episode since its launch in October 2000, this national history project now also includes a two-volume book set, video/DVD, CD soundtrack, educational material, and a multi-media website (<http://history.cbc.ca/history>). Similarly, *A Scattering of Seeds: The Creation of Canada* is a fifty-two-part documentary series for television that claims to personalize the stories of immigrants and to create collective understanding of Canadian history (<http://www.whitepinepictures.com>). In short, we live in an auto/biographical age that uses the personal narrative as a lens onto history and the contemporary world. In every medium, cultures are permeated and increasingly

transformed by auto/biographical narratives, productions, and performances of identity.

This special issue on Canadian auto/biography begins in part with this recent and prolific production in auto/biographical genres, but it also belongs in an academic history that maps the role of auto/biography studies in Canada. In 1996, Shirley Neuman, introducing *Essays on Canadian Writing: Reading Canadian Autobiography*, described the evolution of auto/biography studies in Canada. In particular, she notes that the third volume of the *Literary History of Canada* (1976), containing new chapters covering the years 1960-73, included no section on auto/biography. She suggests that critics in Canada at that time read auto/biography for Canadian content or biographical information but not at all to pursue questions about the genres or poetics of auto/biography that were involving theorists in Europe or the States. Neuman finds the auto/biographical work of Gabrielle Roy and other francophone Canadians from Québec more sophisticated than much anglophone writing, and speculates on a possible misfit between settler cultures and ancient European traditions. Writing just six years later, we note a transformation in the field that Neuman's own work has certainly helped to bring about. The proliferation of auto/biographical practices and the seriousness with which the academy is considering them testify to significant developments in this field. The essays in this volume bear witness to this theoretical sophistication and to the multiple values of auto/biographical works that are incommensurate with mere biographical information. They also engage with the "Canadianness" of the auto/biographical practices under discussion from various, albeit necessarily limited, perspectives. We note the anglophone and Eurocentric emphasis of our own work as one such perspective and are therefore particularly pleased to include work by Sophie McCall on indigenous voices and by Bina Freiwald providing a perspective from Québec.

By 1996, Neuman's research had already served to place auto/biography studies firmly on the academic map in Canada, both outlining how vast and various the field was and legitimating it as an area of research. In 1990, her massive chapter on "Life-Writing" appeared in the fourth volume of the *Literary History of Canada*, edited by W. H. New, who had invited her to write, as she puts it, on "autobiographies, memoirs, letters, diaries, travel writing, and biography within a single chapter." Our own use of the term "auto/biography" acknowledges Neuman's comprehensive agenda, insisting on the slash in auto/biography to suggest the broad continuum of life writ-

ing discourses that range from writing about the self (auto) to writing about another (biography). That slash also acknowledges that today contemporary auto/biographers increasingly practice, and theorists are recognizing, original and creative approaches to these genres, a combining or blending of genres to produce, for example, the collaborative work or the family memoir, the art installation, the film, or the web site that combine performance of identity with sophisticated levels of irony and full consciousness of theoretical implications. In this respect more than in any other, the field we investigate has developed since Neuman's last examination of it.

History and context for this volume also include a steady groundswell in conferences, essays, collections of essays, and monographs dedicated to auto/biography in Canada. K. P. Stich's edition of essays, *Reflections: Autobiography and Canadian Literature* (1988), followed a symposium in Ottawa in 1987. The 1991 Conference of the Canadian Association for Irish Studies led to *Autobiography and Biography* (1993), edited by James Noonan, in which historians and literary scholars map out their approaches to the genres of autobiography and biography, focusing on Irish-Canadian examples. The 1990 special issue of *Tessera* was dedicated to "Auto-graph(e)," as was *The Wascana Review* (2000), which focused primarily on poetry and short fiction. Marlene Kadar's *Essays on Life Writing* (1992) introduced new concepts and new issues into the discussion in Canada, assembling in one volume a community of auto/biography scholars interested in theorizing the field, and developing precisely that attention to genres and poetics of which Neuman had felt the lack. Valerie Raoul's *Distinctly Narcissistic* (1993), focusing on Québécois literature, problematized generic distinctions and drew Canadian attention to the diary and diary fiction as important auto/biographical forms. Two monographs, Helen M. Buss's *Mapping Our Selves: Canadian Women's Autobiography in English* (1993) and Jeanne Perreault's *Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autography* (1995), combined attention to women's writing and feminist theories with analysis of the role of auto/biography in gendered and historical identity. In 2001, Buss and Kadar edited *Working in Women's Archives*, in which contributors not only argue that painstaking archival work is necessary to reclaim women's lives and writing, but also challenge the notion of "the archive" as neutral, an observation that may have far-reaching implications for auto/biographical research and analysis.

Where academic biographers have continued to produce important work (for instance, Sandra Djwa, Ira Nadel, and Rosemary Sullivan), and Canadian

theorists have worked on auto/biography, the content of such work has not been exclusively Canadian. Nonetheless, the increasing volume of work and sophistication of theoretical approaches have served both to generate dialogue within Canada and to bring such Canadian discussion to the attention of the international academic community. Susanna Egan's *Mirror Talk* (1999) links contemporary auto/biographical experimentation with lived crises, placing Canadian writers alongside Americans and Europeans. "Autobiography and Changing Identities," a special issue of *biography* selected from an international conference held in Canada, includes five essays on Canadian auto/biography, positioning Canadian content and scholarship in an international context.

Although international centres of Canadian Studies have included auto/biography among their interests, few international theorists have paid attention to Canadian examples. It is, therefore, a matter of note that Margaretta Jolly includes six entries about Canadian auto/biography in her broadly conceived *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* published in 2001: Auto/biography to 1900; Diaries and Letters to 1900; 20th-Century Auto/biography; 20th-Century Diaries and Letters; French Canadian Life Writing; and Aboriginal Life Writing. Unlike the omnibus entries on "Biography and Memoirs," in English and French respectively, in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1997), separate entries in the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* edited by W. H. New recognize auto/biographical genres as distinct and refer to the unique cultural work these genres perform. In other words, Neuman's concerns about the limited focus on Canadian content, separation of Canadian content from theoretical considerations, and the lack of participation in international dialogue, seem well on their way to being resolved. Where Neuman observed just over a decade ago that "all is not well with life-writing in Canada" (1990), we feel inclined to respond that things are much better now.

Or, at least, some things are. While publications of and sales figures for auto/biographical writing soar, academic attention to Canadian auto/biography does remain limited. A quick search of the MLA databases between 1963 and 2001 identifies fewer than thirty references for Canadian autobiography, biography, life writing, and memoir combined while they provide thousands of entries for the generic terms themselves. Canadian scholars have indeed focused their attention on the poetics of the genre, but much work remains to be done with Canadian examples, not only because they increasingly provide so significant a component of Canadian literature but

also because the role and function of auto/biographical genres are so closely connected to our understanding of the times and places in which we live. The call for papers for this issue of *Canadian Literature* addresses this precise need. Considering that the time has surely come to combine generic and theoretical considerations quite specifically with Canadian texts, we have invited colleagues to address contemporary Canadian auto/biography. We want to examine the work that auto/biography is doing in the world around us and to provide some cultural analysis of this moment in Canada.

The numerous and popular uses for personal narrative indicate more than a current trend in publication or a means for examining such key concerns as gender or racial identity. Increasingly, they analyse the significance of individual and communal memory and history. They provide the means to attend to trauma on every scale, giving voice to untellable experience (of abuse and illness, for instance) and incorporating even massive disaster, such as genocide, into contemporary narratives and cultural understanding. Indigenous peoples are exploring their histories and their present opportunities in terms of personal and communal narratives that permeate the cultures around them and have come to function effectively in courts of law. Like such public institutions as the CBC and the *Globe and Mail*, and like many Québécois writers and artists, First Nations implicate auto/biographical practices in their definitions of citizenship and nation. Insofar as such matters are cultural practices, auto/biographical explorations are crucial to their articulation. At the same time, auto/biographical genres now permeate such varied disciplines as anthropology, medicine, education, history, philosophy, psychology, and the visual and performing arts. Sherrill Grace's work on Nell Shipman and Sharon Pollock in this volume is a fine example of the latter as it develops in terms of contemporary theory the auto/biographical role of theatre towards which Evelyn Hinz pointed some ten years ago. Increasingly, work in auto/biography studies is multi- or inter-disciplinary and takes its place in policy decisions at many levels, in health care and education, for example. Further, as auto/biography studies have expanded their range of both content and expertise, they have refined the analytical tools with which to investigate questions about personal and communal narratives, how they work and what they achieve. It is, therefore, safe to say that in the few years since Neuman's last analysis of the field, auto/biography has begun to provide so significant a resource in so many areas of inquiry as to require a boom in academic work to respond to the boom in production.

So we ask ourselves, each other, our readers, and colleagues: What is Canadian auto/biography? What are the issues, personal, familial, commu-

nal, historical, theoretical, that preoccupy and describe us at this point in time? What strategies are auto/biographers using to explore and articulate these issues? What does this combination of self- and other-life writing contribute to Canadian literature? What part does it play in Canadian culture? Neither the theoretical work nor the surveys provided so far have attempted to establish a unified history or theory of auto/biography studies in Canada, and that is likely a good thing. (Neuman even suggests that such work might be doomed to failure from the start [1996].) Like those who precede us, we make no claim here to outline a comprehensive history or to provide answers to all these questions. Rather, appreciating the international prominence of auto/biographical studies and the value of auto/biographical practices in Canada, we see a need and an opportunity to refocus attention on the Canadian in auto/biography and the auto/biographical in Canada.

Fetherling has raised some of our questions in his "Preface" to *The Vintage Book of Canadian Memoirs*. "People may not agree on what a literary memoir is," he writes, "but they know one when they see it, and they have created a demand, which writers and publishers rush to satisfy." Where Fetherling's anthology responds to popular demand and depends on popular recognition of the authors he includes, the essays in this volume raise more complex questions by examining less established or authoritative texts and exploring their treatment of the individual, the community, the relations between them, and the means by which they negotiate those relations. Following their lead, we may begin to answer our own questions in terms of radical reconfigurations of political maps, human geographies, ideologies of gender, class, and "race," and the scale and repetition of intolerable suffering over the past fifty years. In Canada, the cultural work of auto/biography becomes increasingly valuable after NAFTA and its inadequate protection of Canadian culture. We may recognize the opportunities auto/biography provides for making the personal political or inserting the personal into the historical as Freiwald's Québec perspective in this volume makes so abundantly clear. We should certainly acknowledge the role of mass media and new media in disseminating and interpreting the private voice in a public context. For any and all of these reasons, auto/biographical work predominates in all genres and various media. As W. H. New writes in his review of Canadian literature for the year 2000 (*Canadian Literature* 170/171), "the personal, front and centre, is the open justification for writing and the simple reason for writing well."

For this special issue, however, the more pointed questions concern the nature of contemporary Canadian auto/biography, critical/theoretical responses to it, and its uses in the fashioning of Canadian culture.

That much of the content of contemporary auto/biography quite frequently derives from pre-Canadian experience seems not to prejudice publication, promotion, and reception of work by latter-day Canadians. In *Notes from the Hyena's Belly* (2000), Nega Mezlekia situates his story exclusively in Ethiopia, and Michael David Kwan, in *Things That Must Not Be Forgotten* (2000), situates his in China, neither one so much as acknowledging conclusions or new beginnings in Canada. Neil ten Kortenaar's discussion of *Notes from the Hyena's Belly* in this issue is timely not only because Mezlekia's work and the debate surrounding it require informed analysis but also because ten Kortenaar takes up precisely these questions of past life and present narrative. Such apparently remote auto/biography plays an important role in the entirely conscious, deliberate construction (for auto/biographer and "reader" alike) of identities that explore the meaning of "Canadian."

As we study recent publications, we note that many of them complicate or even resist Canadian identity. *Baltimore's Mansion*, Wayne Johnston's memoir of his father (2000), evokes a passionately pre-Confederation Newfoundland. His family's history on the Avalon Peninsula makes even Newfoundland look like part of the continental land mass. Clive Doucet, living and working in Ottawa, traveled to New Brunswick in order to evoke his own childhood in Nova Scotia as an Acadian without a homeland. Doucet's *Notes from Exile: On Being Acadian* (1999) follows his CBC radio coverage of the first world reunion of the Acadians in 1994. For Doucet, personal memories, family memoir, and social history combine to create (for that national icon, the CBC, in the first place) a border-free zone—not Canada by contrast but Canada without edges. Don Gillmor's search for "origins" and "home" in *The desire of every living thing* (1999), magnified to a national scale in *Canada: A People's History* (2000/2001) which he co-authored, traces his family's life in Scotland but then centres on the prairies and the early years of the city of Winnipeg. For content, for location, as for a haunting sense in each text of dis-content and dis-location (that could not easily be either British or American), these works are thoroughly, indisputably Canadian. However, in these cases, identifying as Canadian involves a desire for origins and for ethnic belonging that contrasts with the unspecified and malleable nature of an imaginary Canada.

More positively, those qualities of Canadian identity that leave

descendants of early settlers unsatisfied work in favour of new immigrants. Stereotypes of identity that may seem limiting at home, where the literature begins, also operate in an international arena where they become attractive. Ken Wiwa writes in the recent *Globe and Mail* series on "Passages to Canada," "I was moving to a place that encourages you to bring your past with you. You get a pretty hefty baggage allowance when you come to Canada." Notably, this series of immigrant stories has been commissioned by the Dominion Institute of Canada, which promotes Canadian history and culture, in conjunction with Westwood Creative Artists, the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, and *The Globe and Mail*. As with CBC productions, this institutional promotion of Canadian writers, specifically in terms of their choice of Canada, articulates the public role of private lives in the constitution of national identity and culture. As Anna Porter writes in her contribution, her immersion in the writing of Canadian writers provided a rich education for "becoming a citizen." Wiwa's baggage allowance and Porter's literary immersion, and this very official sanctioning of auto/biographical experiences, all describe processes of desire and becoming rather than triumphant arrival, an exploration rather than an immediate or obvious belonging.

So easily does auto/biography in Canada situate itself as bi- or multi-national, whether technically or psychologically, that we must actually consider whether Canada as the context for reception is not also the opportunity for narrative in the first place. What can be written or analysed here that could not be examined closer to its source—such as Wiwa's relations with his father and with Nigeria in *In the Shadow of a Saint* (2000)? What secrets may be winkled from their primary contexts and safely exposed (as with Anna Porter's *The Storyteller* [2000], Janice Kulyk Keefer's *Honey and Ashes* [1998], Lisa Appignanesi's *Losing the Dead* [1999], or Eric Wright's *Always Give a Penny to a Blind Man* [1999])? Even, what becomes narrative here that would not be narrative elsewhere, like Kiyooka's *Mothertalk*? Matsuki Masutani, translator of Mary Kiyooka's oral narratives from the Japanese, is currently producing a Japanese version of *Mothertalk*, which will, however, still be a Canadian story. The term "Japanese Canadian," he suggests, is unimaginable in Japan, where nationality and belonging are emphatically singular. In a Canadian context, however, the young Japanese couple who raised their children on the prairies through the Second World War, and whose story was subsidised by the Japanese Canadian Redress Foundation, contribute to Canadian cultural and political history. They contribute, furthermore, to that fertile intersec-

tion between personal narratives, art, and documentary that is the particular purview of auto/biography studies.

Canadian auto/biographers are quite deliberate about importing foreign wares. For example, Porter subtitles *The Storyteller* (2000), her auto/biography of herself and her grandfather, *A Memoir of Hungary*. Or Austin Clarke, for his most recent auto/biographical work, *Pig Tails 'n Breadfruit* (1999), uses the subtitle *A Barbadian Memoir*. Whereas *Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack* (1980) may have evoked for many Canadians as well as for Barbadians the complex relations of colonized to colonizer, *Pig Tails* brings Barbadian English into a Toronto kitchen to demonstrate both the narrator's own transplantation and that of his reader. For Clarke, nonetheless, as for Porter or Wiwa, Canada is not the subject but the occasion and the audience. These memoirs are neither set in Canada nor explanatory of Canada as a shared experience. Rather, they are about elsewhere, other "origins," to use Gillmor's term, of narrators who have become Canadian, for primarily Canadian consumption. So, for instance, Porter's Hungarian stories are contained within the cover that describes her as "one of Canada's most respected publishing professionals." Similarly, Johnston is rooted in Avalon by his father, in particular, and by his own childhood memories, but has become what Mordecai Richler's cover note describes as "[a] major Canadian talent." Clarke has lived and worked in Canada for nearly fifty years as a writer, broadcaster, professor, politician—and a narrator primarily of Barbados. Rachel Manley, in *Drumblair* (1996) and *Slipstream* (2000), writes a political history of Jamaica in terms of the history of her own family, drawing on the distance and the audience that Canada provides. These auto/biographers recognize borders in order to cross them, their contributions to Canadian culture depending on importation from the many "elsewheres" that borders imply. Writing as two immigrants ourselves, we find this Canadian response to immigrant narratives both reassuring and quite distinctive.

As for their contributions to this field as it is currently defined in the western world, Canadian auto/biographies appear in every public sphere and in every kind from the esoteric to the popular. Always, everywhere, one can find the lives of politicians and personalities, stars of sport and popular culture. Works on Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Ernest and Preston Manning, and Wayne Gretzky, for example, or memoirs by Céline Dion, Rita MacNeil, and Pamela Wallin assume a fan club and create a mythic persona who is, after all, one of the people. Such auto/biography represents and contributes to Canadian culture by virtue of its eclectic nature and its home-grown suc-

cess. In its more esoteric or experimental forms, which tend to be self-reflexive, ironic, and intertextual, contemporary Canadian auto/biography does its cultural work at the relatively local level, often performed by small presses. Whereas the public figure relies upon the life to sell the text, the artist experiments within a web of dialogue with other artists and for a smaller audience. The academic auto/biographer, for instance, investigates form by means of personal story, like Helen M. Buss in *Memoirs from Away* (1999), turns the lens of the accomplished biographer on herself, like Elspeth Cameron in *No Previous Experience* (1997), or explores how to write auto/biographically without writing an auto/biography, like Fred Wah in *Diamond Grill* (1996) or George Bowering in *A Magpie Life* (2001). The public intellectual, like Michael Ignatieff, in *The Russian Album* (1987) and, indeed, in his political analyses, uses auto/biography not to investigate strategies for personal narrative but to unravel meaning in personal, historical, and political terms. Margery Fee and Sneja Gunew's interview with Myrna Kostash in this volume provides a sustained example of this auto/biographical venture in collaborative form, zeroing in on another Canadian writer and public intellectual. Canadian auto/biography, in other words, provides the full range of auto/biographical production as it exists elsewhere, but for the most part it presents itself in a more hesitant, subdued way, possibly suspicious of its public role or the risks of narcissistic self-absorption.

As we appreciate this full range of auto/biographical work, we are struck by the innovative nature of much Canadian life writing. If generic features are contextual constructs rather than components of an abstract, synchronic system, if genres, in other words, are ways of seeing and conceptualizing the world, then formal innovations are not only inseparable from the "content" of the life story, but can also tell us about the Canadian cultural contexts from which they emerge and in which they will operate. In fact, such challenges to generic conventions can be important means of resistance and social change. Let us briefly mention only three types of such formal experimentation that deserve more detailed examination. First, there is no shortage of new generic terms: George Bowering's "biotext" in *Errata* (1988) (further developed by Fred Wah in *Diamond Grill*), Aritha van Herk's "crypto-frictions" in *In Visible Ink* (1991), Daphne Marlatt's "fictionalysis" in "Self-Representation and Fictionalysis" (1990), and Linda Griffiths and Maria Campbell's "theatrical transformation" in *The Book of Jessica* (1989). The new generic labels signal a rethinking of auto/biographical conventions, often focusing explicitly on the curious relationship

between living a life and telling or writing one.

Second, collections of personal essays explore new ways of self-representation by bringing together conventions of auto/biography and the essay. The personal essay as a window on an individual's culture can highlight the interdependence of self and contexts, but a collection of personal essays can also trace changes in those relationships. What is more, a collection can examine the evolving essay form itself, quite possibly, in Fred Wah's words, undercutting "the hegemony of such forms" (*Faking It* [2000]). Whether writers explicitly reflect on their own discomfort with the essay form or the problem of rereading essays from a later perspective (Wah in *Faking It*, Marlatt in *Readings from the Labyrinth* [1998], and Di Brandt in *Dancing Naked* [1996]), whether they insist on the importance of writing as a social act (Roy Miki in *Broken Entries* [1996]), or attempt to think outside of the constraints of generic conventions by speaking instead of "recollections" and "notes" (Dionne Brand in *Bread out of Stone* [1994] and *A Map to the Door of No Return* [2001]), they all explore questions of identity and positioning in innovative ways through the auto/biographical practice of the personal essay.

Third, contemporary Canadian writing experiments with collaborative auto/biography, eschewing a single narrative voice and acknowledging the complexity of our relational lives and storytelling by not just accommodating but actually foregrounding multiple perspectives. From the sequential counterpoint in Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee's *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977) to the multi-layered and serial collaboration in *Mothertalk* (1997), such collaborative texts raise difficult ethical issues about power differentials, privacy, and appropriation. We may want to consider the collaboration in Julie Cruikshank's *Life Lived Like a Story* (1990), written with three Yukon native elders, and Nancy Wachowich's *Saqiyuq* (1999), written with three Inuit women, as contemporary examples of ethnographic auto/biography that position the indigenous narrator as auto/biographer rather than "informant," as keeper of her stories and interpreter of her own culture. Cruikshank and Wachowich are, to our minds, more successful in their mode of reception than Rudy Wiebe, whose *Stolen Life* (1998) with Yvonne Johnson romanticizes old habits of Native need and white beneficence. Sophie McCall's paper in this volume thoughtfully explores these important issues of singular and plural voices in aboriginal life narratives.

As we struggle to pinpoint what is Canadian about Canadian auto/biography, we are obviously participating in long-standing debates about the

role of nationalism in literary studies. This question has been of central importance to the development of Canadian literature as a distinct field of study and cannot therefore be irrelevant in auto/biographical practices. For decades now, Canadian criticism has oscillated between arguments for the power of national approaches and simultaneous calls for more cosmopolitan or global perspectives. In this editorial, we have neither the time nor the place to rehearse these critical positions, which have, anyway, been dramatically recharged by the events of 9/11. However, we note that *Essays on Canadian Writing* #71 (2000), appropriately titled “Where Is Here Now?,” invites us to reflect critically on the accomplishments and shortcomings of Canadian literary criticism at the end of the twentieth century. Suffice it to say that we are deliberately participating in these debates, recognizing the ongoing need to question nationalism as an ideology and suggesting that auto/biographical practices provide an increasingly significant register for cultural observation and analysis. In fact, we propose that auto/biographical practices offer a productive angle on questions of national identities, in part because, as Freiwald’s paper on auto/biography in Québec demonstrates, they complicate easy assumptions about nation. Auto/biographical practices introduce internal multiplicity into the equation, the personal, family, and community stories quite frequently resisting or, at the least, critiquing what counts as national.

The work in this volume addresses, accordingly, some of the ways in which auto/biographers, critics, and theorists in Canada have joined international production and debate while constituting Canada as continuously in process. We read Canadian auto/biography as a shifting configuration of cultural analysis, characterized by relations between contexts of production and reception, form and content, but also themes, places, individuals and communities. The groundwork, we suggest, has been done. Now we are beginning to see its potential—on the one hand to discover new material, modes of analysis, and questions for discussion and, on the other hand, to invigorate old debates.

