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Why Biography?

Robert L. Mack

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Why does writing make us chase the writer? Why can't we leave well enough alone? Why aren't the books enough? . . . What makes us randy for relics? Don't we believe the words enough? Do we think the leavings of a life contain some ancillary truth? When Robert Louis Stevenson died, his business-minded Scottish nanny quietly began selling hair, which she claimed to have cut from the writer's head forty years earlier. The believers, the seekers, the pursuers bought enough of it to stuff a sofa.

—Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*

It sometimes strikes me as remarkable that a generation of professional critics who otherwise remain close to preternaturally alive to the slightest developments and mutations within any of the more fashionable or yet-emerging “schools” of literary criticism and cultural theory tend still, when referring with typical condescension to the genre of literary biography, to take for granted that the governing forms of such biographies are themselves of such inflexible custom as long since to have hardened into the stuff of immutable and dry-as-dust conventionality. Pick up any literary biography, most of today's critics seem generally to assume, and however unique or specific the precise details of the particular “life” being related might necessarily be, the biographical narrative itself — both the story it has to tell and the manner

in which it sets about telling that story — will perforce turn out to be much the same as that contained within the pages of any other comparable literary life. Whether the subject in question is Geoffrey Chaucer or Alexander Pope, Henry James or Virginia Woolf, the biographical formula, as it were, has already been set in stone; any reasonably informed reader of biographical criticism will know pretty much what to expect well before he or she has taken the trouble even to lift the latest such volume from its place on the shelf. Indeed, the pleasure to be found in the act of reading, in such instances, is assumed to consist in large part in the satisfied fulfillment of such comfortable, readerly expectations.

The formula itself is familiar, and can be laid out roughly as follows: the family background of the subject is briefly set out for the reader, thus placing the individual in question with brisk efficiency within the context of his or her defining social, cultural, domestic, and psychological milieus. The events of childhood years are then narrated with a similar concision, following the biographical subject from home school or grammar school, as the case may be, through to the achievements of their university career or to the commencement of early professional activity. The advancement of any life is then divided into a series of equally foreseeable “stages,” typically commencing with the “Early” years — productive of juvenalia and rebellion — on through the “Middle” years — the era of central, defining achievement and very often the accession of first fame and recognition — to, finally, the “Later” years — throughout which the subject is either lionized by his or her peers, or, alternatively, unaccountably neglected and left instead for posthumous resuscitation at the hands of a later, more shrewdly appreciative generation of scholars and critics.

Such, at least, is the basic itinerary. Along the way the reader can with reason expect to be treated to some hitherto unknown details regarding the life of the biographical subject. Such revelations (which in recent years have tended more often than not to disclose the nature of previously unacknowledged sexual preferences and peculiarities) arguably act as a necessary corrective to what might otherwise appear to be the genre’s nearly irresistible impulse towards hagiography. As such, they often constitute a significant if not ostentatious gesture of dispassion — an earnest scholarly objectivity. Such potentially intrusive or unseemly disclosures, after all, look to reassure the modern reader that the life writer is not blind to — and would certainly never stoop to conceal — any possibly questionable or indiscrete behavior on the part of his or her subject. So, for example, can we find Richard Ellmann, in his 1988 biography of Oscar Wilde, taking care to underscore the significance of his subject’s (conjectured) contraction of syphilis while yet a student at Oxford as “an event . . . that was to change his whole conception of himself” (92-3). So, too, does Phyllis Grosskurth go out of her way in her 1997 biography of Byron to note the “homo-erotic tinge” (48) of the poet’s Harrow friendships — a “tinge” the slightest mention of which, the reader is likely to recall, had been scrupulously avoided by Byron’s earlier and rather more reverential biographers, most notably Leslie Marchand. Likewise Benita Eisler, in her even more massive biography of the same poet, spends a significant amount of time setting the alliances of Byron and his friends within the “homoerotic underworld” of the

Harrow school, an environment in which “every form of transgressive sexuality, from gang rape to sadomasochistic activity” (61), was openly indulged. In a similar manner, Andrew Motion, in his portrait of the twentieth-century poet Philip Larkin, though obviously and with good reason himself a fan of his subject’s poetry, makes no attempt to hide or otherwise to disguise any evidence of the often appalling depths of Larkin’s racism and xenophobia, or to avoid the ethical questions raised by the poet’s secret and sometimes complicated love triangles.

Increasingly as the twentieth century drew to its end, disclosing some of the more unsavory or potentially scandalous elements of an author’s past was thought to constitute an essential component of the biographer’s task. Thus, for example, did Morton N. Cohen’s 1995 account of the life and writings of Lewis Carroll, in which Dodgson’s photography of nude children were described as “valuable examples of Charles’s photographic art” (168), pass considerably less noticed than Michael Bakewell’s competing, 1996 *Lewis Carroll*, which ends one chapter section devoted to the same subject with the ominous pronouncement that “Dodgson’s obsession with taking pictures of little girls scantily clad or ‘in Eve’s original dress’ was threatening to become dangerous” (169). This having been said, it perhaps comes as no real surprise that even the most professedly revelatory biographies have tended in recent years to ask the same predictable questions of their subjects. Was he a suppressed pedophile? Was he sexist? Was she a lesbian? Was he impotent, or did he sire an illegitimate child? Did she secretly marry X or Y? Or was it Z? The more sensational the answers to such questions, it goes without saying, the better for almost all concerned (the biographical subject, in each case, perhaps him- or herself alone excluded).

The extent to which an increasing number of more recent biographies have set about baffling even the most conventional expectations of biography as a genre, however, is so great as no longer to be ignored. If biography remains among the more obviously pleasurable reading material of a wide range of individuals (and it does; Paula Backscheider reminds us that biography is “the last literary genre to be read by a very wide cross section of people [and defies] the usual marketing categories based on age, sex, occupation, education, race, and class” [xiii]), then today’s practitioners have pushed the traditional limits of biographical inquiry so far as finally to tip the genre into something of an all-out crisis. Even the most seemingly unassailable of conventions in biography — the chronological imperative of the biographical narrative, for example (its need first and foremost to tell a life *story*) or the pretense on the part of the life-writer to some degree of objective, historical distance from his or her subject — would appear in recent years to have fallen by the wayside. No longer, it seems, will any self-respecting biographer even pretend to offer the straightforward or objective trajectory of any creative life.

Such change has been in the offing for some time now. Unapologetically creative works such as Julian Barnes’s 1984 *Flaubert’s Parrot*, after all, had looked to demonstrate just how elusive any proposed biographical subject truly was, and, in so doing, quite brilliantly drew attention to the treacherous and shifting sands on which the prospective biographer sets out to build the struc-

ture of his or her narrative. Victoria Glendenning once asked: “Is the story of your life what happens to you, or what you feel happens to you, or what observers see happening to you?” (“Lies and Silences” 51); the three separate and highly contradictory chronologies Barnes offered his readers for the outline of Flaubert’s life dramatically highlighted the differences between each of these possible approaches. The American novelist Stephen Millhauser, whose 1996 mock-biography, *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer*, was to garner major critical acclaim, had already, years earlier, dissected the conventions of the genre in his shrewdly perceptive send-up *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer, 1943-1954*. Likewise, Peter Ackroyd, who began his own career with fictional retellings of the lives of writers such as Thomas Chatterton and Oscar Wilde, and who also wrote a rather more straightforward account of T. S. Eliot, had begun more systematically to break the mold of traditional biographical telling with his massive 1990 volume, *Dickens*. Eschewing the teleology which readers had merely taken for granted in earlier and designedly authoritative accounts of the novelist’s life (including those of, say, Charles Forster, Edgar Johnson, and Christopher Hibbert), Ackroyd made a point of punctuating his own version of Dickens’ life with a variety of non-biographical explorations and interludes. These included dreams (“I have,” he confessed with some slight disappointment at one point in the volume, “only dreamt once of Charles Dickens” [1059]), mock “interviews” with his subject, near-hallucinatory encounters with Dickens’ fictional characters, moments of self-examination and critique masquerading as completed, post-publication questionnaires (for instance, answering queries such as “Why did you decide to write the book in the first place?” or “And did you like Dickens at the end of it?” [895-6]), as well as an historically impossible, round-table discussion among Ackroyd’s own biographical obsessions, namely, Chatterton, Wilde, Eliot and Dickens — a session that is introduced into the text as “a true conversation between imagined selves” (427). The cumulative effect of all these interludes and asides to the reader was, finally, radically to destabilize the genre’s pretensions to historicity and truth-telling. “How could you understand me when I do not even understand myself,” the spectral Dickens angrily asks the author at one point in the narrative. “The biographer . . .” begins his interlocutor hesitantly. “Oh, biographers,” Ackroyd’s Dickens explodes in disgust, “biographers are simply novelists without imagination!” (754).

Ackroyd’s own early lead in what would later become known as “decentering” his subject, as well as deconstructing the biographical form — exposing its necessary fictions and laying bare its conventional techniques — has since been followed with a vengeance. This would in many respects appear to be a good thing. At the very least, biographers can now lay claim to a much greater degree of freedom than ever before with regard to the manner in which they chose to expose or portray the life and work of their subjects. Glendenning’s recent account of the admittedly elusive Jonathan Swift, for instance, professes from the start to be less a conventional biography than a written “portrait” of the great Irish satirist — a “character” owing at least as much to the traditions of Theophrastus (whose own *Characters* presented the lives of thirty Athenian “types”) as to those established in eighteenth-century England by the likes of

Samuel Johnson and James Boswell. Although not forsaking the organizing principle of chronology altogether, Glendenning's *Jonathan Swift* makes much of its recurrent "thematic" arguments as well, "beginning at the beginning, circling a little, gradually zeroing in on the man himself, until the central questions about him can finally be confronted in close-up" (13). Hermoine Lee's impressive 1996 biography of Virginia Woolf adopted a similar approach to its subject, pausing within the basic narrative frame provided by Woolf's life to revisit central categories and ideas (for instance, "Houses," "Madness," "War," "Money and Fame," et cetera). Pointedly marrying personal insight with biographical evidence — candidly situating speculative interpretation and conjecture within the contextualizing gloss of any pertinent cultural history — Lee seemed intent on proving the assertion once made by Woolf in one of her own works ("The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn") that "imagination can have historical authority" (quoted in Lee 17). Reminding her readers toward the end of her volume that Woolf had herself been "intensely aware from her own reading and theorising of biography, of how lives are changed in retrospect, and how life-stories need to be retold" (769), Lee goes to some pains to underscore the fact that, in her role as biographer, she has done her best to approach the retrospective writing of Woolf's life in precisely the manner in which Woolf might herself have approached it.

Lee's approach to writing Woolf's life is obviously and necessarily unique. Yet by far the most compelling and influential biographies written in recent years have sought in some similar manner to highlight rather than to obscure the practical breakdown of many of the more traditional or (increasingly) old-fashioned biographical formulae. Some have foregrounded the inescapably fraught and often deeply personal nature of the relationship that binds the writer of biography, on the one hand, to the life of his or her designated subject, on the other. Toward the end of his overwhelming, five-volume exploration of the life and writings of George Bernard Shaw, the biographer Michael Holroyd belatedly professed his hope that he has not "specifically identified [his own] opinions and prejudices with Shaw's" (*Shaw* 82). "My deepest involvement," Holroyd protests at one point in the depths of his fourth volume, "is with biography itself and its never-ending love-affair with human nature, and my aim has been to come a little nearer a biographical ideal described by Hugh Kingsmill as 'the complete sympathy of complete detachment'" (83). The degree to which Holroyd must nevertheless have felt himself at times to have been a voyeuristic trespasser within the sacred demesne of another man's most private and inner life is suggested by the manner in which he modestly proffers his own, more recent attempt at (significantly) autobiography, *Basil Street Blues*, as — again *pace* Kingsmill — little more than "a passport for traveling into the lives of others" (303).

Are such passports, then, to be demanded of all would-be biographers? Is such a seemingly transparent and self-confessional visa in fact the documentation any writer ought to be required to produce in exchange for the right to explore (arguably to exploit) and calculatedly to represent the otherwise inscrutable history of another human being? Perhaps, though other life writers go to even greater lengths than Holroyd to emphasize the very distances — cul-

tural, historical, psychological — that separate them from their subjects and, though they rather obviously work to devise ways of bridging such gaps, make no excuses for the laborious effort of bridge-building itself. Increasingly fashionable in recent years has been what might be described as the biography-as-cultural-encyclopedia approach to life writing. Bard Gooch's 1993 chronicle *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* might stand as something of a model for this sort of account. Gooch opens his volume with an extended description of O'Hara's Long Island funeral in July, 1966, in which he recounts the eulogy delivered on that occasion by the painter Larry Rivers. "Rivers," Gooch writes,

began describing O'Hara as he looked when he had visited him a few days earlier at Bayview General Hospital in Mastic Beach, Long Island, where O'Hara had survived for almost two days after his accident. The more Rivers went on, the more groans came from the mourners. Some yelled "Stop! Stop!" "He was purple wherever his skin showed through the white hospital gown," Rivers continued. "He was a quarter larger than usual. Every few inches there was some sewing composed of dark blue thread. Some stitching was straight and three or four inches long, others were longer and semicircular. The lids of both eyes were bluish black. It was hard to see his beautiful blue eyes which receded a little into his head. He breathed with quick gasps. There was a tube in one of his nostrils down to his stomach. . . . His leg bone was broken and splintered and pierced the skin. Every rib was cracked. A third of his liver was wiped out by the impact."

A gasp stopped Rivers short. It was O'Hara's mother.

(9)

Rivers' eulogy for O'Hara, however appropriate or inappropriate it may have been to the occasion of its delivery, encapsulates the kind of invasive scrutiny that characterizes so many recent biographies. Any lingering notion that there may have been aspects of the subject's "private" life which ought properly to have remained the exclusive, discursive property of surviving friends and family has been totally and unceremoniously abandoned. And should some readers, like the mourners at O'Hara's funeral that summer, feel the impulse to cry "Stop! Stop!" — well, they can simply put down the book and stop reading. Gasping in outrage (a response that we are meant to understand to have been a betrayal only of an offended, provincial decorum) is no longer an option.

Yet one might well argue that Gooch's own account of the life of O'Hara itself falls short of the mark, at least to the extent to which any literary biography should finally leave its readers with some better understanding of the manner in which the lived experience of the biographical subject informed his or her work. In Gooch's case, some critics contended, O'Hara's creative writing is perhaps too often referred to, itself, as documentary evidence in support of the "life," and the amount of detail threatens to overwhelm the subject altogether. Joan Acocella, reviewing the volume in *The New Yorker*, complained that in Gooch's account O'Hara is not allowed even to "walk across Harvard Square

without [the reader] being told what product is being advertised on the billboard overhead" (77). This remains the case throughout the book. Narrating the events surrounding the death of O'Hara's father, for example, Gooch not only informs the reader of such details as the name of the undertakers who laid out the body (Thomas Reilly & Sons), but tells us where the firm was based as well (Westboro). When it comes to O'Hara's own funeral, we learn the name of the firm (Yardley & Williams), their location (Sag Harbor, Long Island), the size of the grave (four plot), the make of the coffin (standard), the decoration with which it is adorned (white roses and ivy), and the nature of the supports on which it rested (metal poles).

This having been said, the encyclopedic approach to life-writing seems on many occasions to yield effective and at times absolutely dazzling results. Jenny Ugelow, in her weighty analysis of the graphic satirist William Hogarth (a volume that is pointedly and appropriately subtitled "A Life and a World"), manages deftly to combine a social history of the period in question, on the one hand, with a portrait of the biographical subject, on the other, in such a way so as not to leave her readers feeling that the thoroughgoing cultural background has in any way obscured the individual life, but, rather, that it has proved indispensable to the proper illumination of that life. Ian McIntyre effects a similar balancing act in his recent *Garrick* — a comparably hefty account of the life and career of the great eighteenth-century actor and theatrical manager — at once assimilating and retailing a tremendous amount of personal correspondence, play texts, and theater records, while at the same time ensuring that the vital exuberance of Garrick's personality is felt even at a distance of over two hundred years. Likewise, the central subject of Simon Schama's 750-page study *Rembrandt's Eyes* may not make his entrance into the text which bears his name until page 202, but, as more than one reviewer pointed out, to accuse Schama himself of such sins as "an over-inclusive imagination, an irrepressible appetite for human life and a fondness for enlivening vulgarity is only, in the end, to accuse him of having a Rembrandt-esque sensibility" — which, given the context, "can hardly be counted a disadvantage" (Graham-Dixon A2). Significantly, and much like Uglow's Hogarth and McIntyre's Garrick, Schama's Rembrandt is finally a biographical subject infused with life — illumined from within — by its author's own commitment to *meaning*. Attempting at one point to sum up the sustained appeal and significance of Rembrandt's achievement, Schama writes:

he will always speak across the centuries to those for whom art might be something other than then quest for ideal forms; to the unnumbered legions of damaged humanity who recognize, instinctively and with gratitude, Rembrandt's vision of our fallen race, with all its flaws and infirmities squarely on view, as a proper subject for picturing, and, more important, as worthy of love, of saving grace.

(Quoted in Graham-Dixon A2)

As Andrew Graham-Dixon has written of such prose:

The author of that sentence is clearly no subscriber to the arid post-structuralist academic dogma which holds that every statement should be framed with ironic self doubt. . . . Schama has not been cowed out of his emotions, his morals, and his beliefs — and that is the best reason of all to applaud [his] book.

(A2)

Yet another successful biography of this type is Jeremy Wilson's close to awe-inspiring, 1989 volume *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence*. Arguing that "the diversity of Lawrence's activities and interests" had prevented anything but "piecemeal academic research" (6) into his subject's life, Wilson himself, when writing his book, took advantage of his unprecedented access to British government documents relating Lawrence's role in such events as the Arab Revolt to present the first truly integrated portrait of his multifaceted but still elusive subject.

To be sure, there are other methods of retaining the vitality so necessary to effective biographical writing — other ways of instilling the life subject with (for lack of a better word) humanity. Some biographers attempt to approach their subjects from an oblique angle, donning various narrative disguises, as it were, and looking to catch the central individuals of their studies in their most private and unguarded moments. A change in perspective can work wonders in biography; any reader who has encountered a work such as Nancy Milford's striking 1970 life of Zelda Fitzgerald on the heels of Andrew Turnbull's *Scott Fitzgerald* or Arthur Mizener's *The Far Side of Paradise* will be able to testify to the force such change can give. Dava Sobel, whose compelling account of the carpenter John Harrington's attempts to invent a marine chronometer so as to establish a means of exact longitudinal reckoning turned out to be one of the most surprising best-sellers of the late 1990s, attempted in her next book to explore some of the lesser-known and personal repercussions resulting from the 1633 trial for heresy by the Roman Inquisition of the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei. Historians have for centuries told and retold the story of the astronomer's stubborn defiance of the Church's 1616 decree that banned as heresy the discussion — much less any possible defense — of the Copernican theory that the earth and the other planets orbited the sun. Galileo's arrest and the suppression of his theories and observations by his opponents within the Church was packaged for many years as a rather simple parable that pitted the forward-looking forces of science and experimentation against the irrationality and intractable dogma of medieval theologians; more recently, much has been made of Galileo's own unwavering faith in revealed religion and of his conviction that nature and revelation could never really contradict each other. Sobel is the first, however, to attempt to retell Galileo's story as seen through the eyes of his eldest daughter, a young woman who had been placed at an early age in a convent in Florence, where she took the name of Maria Celeste. A total of one hundred and twenty-four letters written by Maria Celeste to her father survive, although all of his correspondence in answer to her was later destroyed. By so approaching the narrative of the scientist's later years from within the confines and concerns of the convent, Sobel not only sheds new light on the

depth of Galileo's religious convictions but introduces a new sensibility — a touch of “feminine human interest” (Duffy 13), in the words of one critic — into his story. Nor is Galileo the only historical figure to benefit from the fresh insight provided by such unusual perspectives. Mary S. Lovell's *A Rage to Live: A Biography of Richard and Isabel Burton* entirely rewrites the complexly intertwined lives of her two subjects. Relying on hitherto unknown or unexamined sources (most notably “seven boxes of unclassified material belonging to Isabel Burton” [xiv] in the Wiltshire Record Office), Lovell provides her reader with masses of new information — information that demands that we completely revise our understanding and assessment of both the nature of the Burtons' personal relationships and the significance of Sir Richard's various achievements as a writer, explorer, and preeminently “eminent” Victorian.

The new biographical freedom, it goes without saying, has not been limited to the retailers of strictly “literary” lives. Edmund Morris, who, after writing a prize-winning work on Theodore Roosevelt, was chosen in 1983 to be the “authorized” biographer of Ronald Reagan, decided that the best way to understand his subject was to imagine himself as a precise, historical contemporary of Reagan's. Accordingly, he inserted himself in the biographical narrative, including for good measure a wide selection of fictional friends and family whose tales run concurrent to that of the future president. Morris's book is a fascinating creation. At the very least, he could have found no subject better suited to such an approach than Reagan himself — the actor-turned-politician whose achievements and persistent popularity remain oddly insubstantial. Morris's own ambivalence toward Reagan, however, is hinted at in his prologue. “What is this mysterious yearning of biographer toward subject,” he asks, “so akin to a *coup de foudre* in its insistence? Yet so fundamentally different from love in its detachment?” (xix-xx). But the generic wreckage from which Morris's biography attempts to rise is too thoroughgoing to allow its narrative to stand unchallenged; once the frame has been so thoroughly broken — once a blatant and self-confessed fiction is permitted to assume an equal place in the biographical narrative — the life story itself is rendered hopelessly subjective and irrelevant. *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* is in many respects an experiment in applied theory gone terribly, terribly wrong.

But what, finally, have the literary theorists and cultural historians themselves had to say about all these developments? Such critics, as I have already asserted, would appear to have been slow to turn their attention to the genre at all. Volumes such as Séan Burke's 1992 study *The Death and Return of the Author* (revised in 1998) promise in their titles to address the inadequacies of the poststructural celebrations of the “death of the author” but have little to say with regard to the writing of biography *per se*. Only as the twentieth century drew to its close did some postmodern critics begin actively to regroup in an attempt to redirect the kinds of questions asked both of biographers (insofar as they constitute a particular breed of literary critics in general) and of biography itself as a genre. Admittedly, there are times when they appear to be excitedly engaged in a process akin to that of rediscovering the wheel. Nevertheless, their efforts have brought to bear on the subject of “pure” biography a number of issues — most dramatically questions concerning race, class, gender, and sex-

uality — which had too often been suppressed by those life writers whose work preceded what some have begun to call the “Moment of Theory” (that is, the period that facilitated and then followed the initial, institutional application of the work of critics such as Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida). The field of biography and the scope of biographical research, it might be argued, have consequently been “opened up” in a manner which few writers of an earlier generation — a generation which tended often to dismiss the claims of interpretive biography as indefensible — could possibly have anticipated. “Traditional forms of self-telling,” in the words of the critics and editors Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (2), demand to be re-examined in light of this paradigmatic shift. “Feminist and multi-cultural contributions . . . to the rethinking of biography,” they observe,

demonstrate that the production of meaning in biographical form is a powerful force in reshaping cultural memory. We no longer view the present as the end point of an agreed-upon narrative of progress, a view of history that fueled traditional biography’s emphasis on great men and great deeds. . . . [W]ith multi-culturalism comes an insistence that biography had limited the fullness of our culture’s memory, but biography can also become a means of challenging and recasting that memory. The life-text is, like history, open-ended.

(3)

One might, of course, rather easily challenge some of the more elementary notions embedded in such a revaluation; at the very least, most members of the previous generation would no doubt themselves be stunned to have been credited at any time with such a monolithic consensus regarding the teleology of history, or with such uniformity of opinion in the attributed assessment of the determining role of “great men” in human culture and affairs. And precisely why serviceable terms like “biography” and “autobiography” need to be replaced by such unapologetically clumsy neologisms as “life writing” or, even worse, “self-telling” remains unclear. Yet the central point of such comments possesses a certain validity. The myriad approaches borne of an historical moment such as ours not only open the doors to a hitherto untapped plurality of biographical subjects but effectively expand the range of biographical research and responsibility. Now more than ever, biographies are perceived to be just as much about cultural history as they are about individual lives. Nor is this enlarged perception of generic provenance the only important change. Further complicating the task of the literary biographer in the late twentieth century have been ethical disputes to some degree made possible only by certain unprecedented technological advances (such as the furor over Diane Wood Middlebrook’s use of taped psychotherapy sessions in her 1991 biography of the American poet Anne Sexton), protracted legal battles over the lived life as “intellectual property” (most spectacularly Linda Wagner Martin’s sordid wrangle with Ted Hughes and his sister Olwyn over the narrative of the life and death of Sylvia Plath, or the American novelist J. D. Salinger’s several attempts to block the exposure and commodification of his own life “story”), and — most

dangerously explosive — questions concerning the moral (ir)responsibility of aesthetically or politically motivated reconfigurations of the lives of well-known historical figures (such as the American director Oliver Stone's near-sociopathic film, *JFK*, or Spike Lee's similarly skewed interpretation of the life of Malcolm X). And, again, the waters have been muddied even further by lingering concerns over issues of decorum, propriety, or even the much derided notion of "common decency." The American novelist John Updike, at least, has lashed out at what he has termed the "Judas school" of biographical writing, the products of which constitute the memoirs or recollections of former intimates of any given biographical subject, and which seem invariably to dwell on the most salacious or unsavory aspects of that subject's life (such as British actress Claire Bloom's retelling of her relationship with Philip Roth). "Biography," as the writer Brenda Maddox succinctly observes, "is a touchy subject these days" (47).

Practicing biographers, again, appear only rarely to have taken it upon themselves more accurately to define the parameters or even the fundamental purpose of their chosen field of enquiry (the biographer Paula Backscheider's very recent *Reflections on Biography* is a welcome survey of the subject). Life writers, when they do attempt to define their "art," tend to sound suspiciously like the character of Imlac in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, describing the necessary accomplishments of the poet; one is tempted to respond to these enthusiastic fits with the cry, "Enough! Thou has convinced me that no human being can ever be a biographer!" What is it, finally, that the biographers themselves set out to accomplish? By what standard(s) might one measure the comparative success or failure of any written life? The plural of "anecdote" — as I so often and with reference to the status of textual evidence reiterate to my students — is not "data"; yet, in some matters, the intuitions and convictions at which we arrive in the course of our own, anecdotal experiences as individual readers are all we have to work with. The novelist Henry James once cautioned his readers: "To live over people's lives is nothing unless we live over their perceptions, live over the growth, the change, the varying intensity of the same — since it was *by* those things they themselves lived" (quoted in Oates v). The methodology implied by James in this quietly remarkable statement (at least to the extent that he appears to be articulating the essential nature of that peculiar intimacy that ought ideally to connect the life of the biographical subject, on the one hand, with the life of the reader of biography, on the other) might at first glance be dismissed by many readers as fundamentally irrational and scandalously intuitive, to say nothing of theoretically unsophisticated *ad extremum*. The nature of both the psychic and the textual connections that James would appear to be asking his readers to effect with the past are patently obscure and untenable, are they not? Surely James's intuition of the vital identification between reader and subject is somehow overstated; surely the degree of fluidity demanded of personal and historical identity by such a vision lies well beyond the powers of any reader or (for that matter) beyond the talents of any writer. James seems to be insisting that both reader and writer engage in a complicity of biographical construction, the ahistorical and near-schizophrenic intensity of which is not only elusive and perhaps unattainable, but very close to inconceivable. Such an effort of "negative capability," to use a

familiar term slightly out of context, seems no less likely than any other method of interpretation to reward even the most passionate and dedicated of its practitioners with — to use James's own word — “nothing” for their pains.

Or does it? I think we can count on the fact that James himself was sufficiently aware of the epistemological hubris inherent within the terms of such a fragile and ambitiously speculative dialectic of biographical meaning. By much the same token, however, he was arguably far more sophisticated than any subsequent critic of the genre has been in his unflinchingly honest assessment of the peculiar capacity for empathy and intuition demanded of any successful biographer. In the course of my own research on the life of the eighteenth-century poet Thomas Gray, I grew increasingly convinced that the deceptively straightforward remarks of Henry James, quoted above, in fact encapsulate an acutely perceptive vision of both the essential nature and the profound depth of what might be called the “subjective” or “personal” relationship which should ideally characterize the reader's active and emotional *engagement* with any given biographical subject. Indeed, the peculiar intensity of textual intimacy that typically emerges from within the triangular relationship connecting subject, author, and reader in the task of life writing — an intimacy that must confidently compel all three toward the successful and harmonious construction of biographical meaning — is of such a quality as might, alone, sufficiently serve to distinguish the genre from most other forms of narrative writing. The long and powerful resonance of any truly compelling biography — the lingering echoes of its portraiture — might stand in a similar manner as a generally effective measure of the quality of a particular work. The most engaging and influential literary biographies appear deliberately and almost without exception to strike a note of sustained understanding and identification between their readers and their historical subjects. “The truest biographies,” as Ackroyd has observed simply, “are those that are most engaging and inventive” (“Biography” 4). Moreover, as Ackroyd further points out, “Biography and fiction are both concerned with human narrative; they require a central character and a coherent plot, as well as a strong engagement with place and motive to drive the developing story.” He concludes: “it is possible to envisage the moment when biography and fiction — or history and fiction, to put it more grandly — cease to be separate and identifiable forms of narrative but mingle and interpenetrate one another.” Ackroyd's remarks echo the American novelist Bernard Malamud's rather more celebrated observation, in his 1979 *Dublin's Lives*: “The past exudes legend: one can't make pure clay out of time's mud. There is no life that can be recaptured wholly; as it was. Which is to say that all biography ultimately is fiction” (quoted in Maddox 47). The problem with many modern biographies, as still another successful writer of literary lives — Jay Parini — has contended along much the same lines, is that too few biographers transcend the mere facts and narratives of their subjects' lives, to achieve a glimpse of the mythos — the “true story” — of which such facts and narratives form only the outward appearance or phenomenon (Lehmann-Haupt B8). Biography, as Parini's insight implies, is at heart a risky business; only those writers who are brave or foolhardy enough to hazard their subjects on the table of their own imaginations — only those confident enough to stake their claims to biograph-

ical truth in the intertextual marketplace of all narrative and ideas — only those few stand to profit in the playing. The mere chroniclers — the mere compilers of dates and incidents — venture nothing in the game, and so lose all.

James's concise observations on the genre suggest that he, too, was unusually alive to the decisive role so often played by the near-fictional element of sympathetic identification in the comparative success or failure of any written life; the novelist clearly recognized the forceful intensity of readerly involvement — of emotional effort — demanded by good biographical writing. My own experience suggests that it is only by openly and boldly accepting the immense imaginative challenges implicit in James's definitional observation that we can hope to make any significant progress in the task of biography; that it is only *by* and *through* the inescapable processes of our own, several attempts as embodied readers to (as James puts it) "live over" the life of the biographical subject that we can ever expect to gauge the distance of that life — or begin to measure the unique experience and achievement of its history — from our own. It is only by means of the intensity of such engagement that we can arrive at some better appreciation of the individual participation of *any* life within the pattern of our own; and it is only by the light of such commitment that can we assess the continually changing significance of that life within our culture and so, perhaps, finally, achieve some sense of its transformative role in the larger world we all inescapably perpetuate and share.

James was no less perceptive when he chose to address some of the questions raised by the writing of biography — when he chose to dramatize some of the forces to which the writer of biography is subjected — in the form of ghost stories. In one such tale, "The Real Right Thing" (first published in 1900), a writer named George Withermore is approached by the widow of a well-known author, Ashton Doyne, soon after her husband's death, to compile a biography of Doyne. Withermore is encouraged to work on the book in the evenings in the room that had only recently served as his subject's study ("It's here that we're *with* him," Mrs. Doyne declares passionately). But he is soon assailed by doubts regarding his enterprise. "How did he know, without more thought, he might begin to ask himself, that the book was, on the whole, to be desired? What warrant had he ever received from Ashton Doyne himself for so direct and, as it were, so familiar an approach?" "Great was the art of biography," Withermore reasons, "but there were lives and lives, there were subjects and subjects" (115). The biographer soon discovers, however, that he is being led by the biographical subject himself. "More than once," James writes,

when, taking down a book from a shelf and finding in it marks of Doyne's pencil, he got drawn on and lost, he had heard documents on the table behind him gently shifted and stirred, had literally, on his return, found some letter he had mislaid pushed again into view, some wilderness cleared by the opening of an old journal at the very date he wanted. How should he have gone so, on occasion, to the special box or drawer, out of fifty receptacles, that would help him, had not his mysterious assistant happened, in fine prevision, to tilt its lid, or to pull it half open, in just the manner that would catch his eye? — in spite, after all, of the fact of lapses and intervals

of which, *could* one have really looked, one would have seen somebody standing before the fire a trifle detached and over-erect — somebody fixing one the least bit harder than in life.

(118-9)

Describing a similar moment of life retrospection in his own *Autobiography*, James no less accurately described such an experience from the point of view of the ghost itself:

To look back at all is to meet the apparitional and to find in its ghostly face the silent stare of an appeal. When I fix it, the hovering shadow . . . it fixes me back and seems the less lost.

(45)

As the critic Tony Tanner has observed, “The ghosts enrich James, and James, absurd though it may sound, gives the ghosts a sort of ontological stability” (74).

Any scholar or critic who has made even the most tentative of advances into the territory of another writer’s life will recognize the subtle but often close to tactile pressure of psychic *contact* — sometimes facilitating, more often inhibiting — which signals the real commencement of the biographical journey. We push against the author, unearthing secrets and disinterring desires, and the author, you can depend upon it, pushes back. It is something of a dirty secret among biographers that almost any life writer worth his or her salt — almost any, that is, who has even begun to do the job well — will him- or herself have more than one ghost story to tell. That having been said, these are not *easy* stories to tell; they are not easy, that is, unless one is actually looking forward to being treated like a pariah by one’s skeptical and intellectual colleagues. Be that as it may, and having only recently completed my biography of Gray, I’d be lying to myself if I didn’t admit that I know what it’s like to feel the ghostly hand of the biographical subject on my shoulder — that I know what it’s like to feel him breathing down my neck, to find him turning the pages of his own notebooks over when I wasn’t looking, or to sense the vague but unmistakable impression that it is he who has taken care to hide a particular piece of evidence out of sight, or to keep a certain fact from view. I’d be lying to myself if I didn’t admit that I know what it’s like, for lack of any better way to describe it, to *talk* to the past — to be haunted by ghosts.

The process by which any biographer makes contact with the dead is a gradual one. “The lives of real people, unlike those of fictional characters,” as the writer Sebastian Faulks, in the preface to his own triple biography of the short lives of three English prodigies, *The Fatal Englishman*, has observed, “seem to exert a small but constant outward force away from order” (xiv); perhaps it is the biographer’s own attempt to assert some kind of structure or design in the face of this centrifugal force — to attempt “as gently and as truthfully as possible,” in Faulks’s words, “to shape the events of their lives into some comprehensible pattern” — that provokes the spectral presence of the biographical subject in turn to assert its claims in some even more powerful or

provocative form. I only know that the metaphorical language of ghosts and spirits and hauntings provides a startlingly vivid and accurate vocabulary by which one can at least begin to address and describe — if not demonstrate and explain — the sort of discomfiting psychic journey which seems to form one of the necessary conditions for effective life writing.

I had already been pursuing my work on Thomas Gray for some time when my encounters with the poet began to assume some more palpable shape than the familiar *frisson* of pleasure and fear which had regularly accompanied what I can only describe as our increasing proximity of spirit. I might return to my desk in the British Library reading room, for example, or to my seat in one of the Cambridge college libraries, to find that the pages of a manuscript notebook which I had been turning over for hours had indeed fluttered open, in my absence, to the facing that contained precisely the reference or information for which I had so long been searching. My hunches regarding just where a particular source or reference might be located within Gray's own writing or with reference to certain books that might have been available to him were beginning to be uncannily, consistently correct. Although it may smack of hubris to say it, I can't help but feel, when I look back on these experiences now, that I had begun in some fundamental way to *think* like Thomas Gray — my mind, at least, had begun to run the increasingly well-worn and familiar grooves of the most clearly articulated legacies of his accustomed train of thought. Describing the tenor of the peculiar relationship that develops between biographer and subject, Nancy Milford has written: "I had somewhat innocently — if a passionate curiosity about another's life is ever innocent — entered into something I neither could nor would put down for six years, and in that quest the direction of my life was changed" (xiii). Milford's observation rings true for many life writers; the reciprocal quest of biography not only determines the story of the biographical subject but changes the life of the writer as well.

Some distinctly odd things started to happen, however. On one occasion, I had traveled north to visit the country just outside Durham, where Gray had in his middle years spent much time at the Old Park estate of his friend Thomas Wharton. Although Old Park itself had long since disappeared, I still thought it advisable to reconstruct from my own experience of the landscape some sense of what the area might have looked like in the middle of the eighteenth century. Taking a break from this self-imposed task of reconstruction, I took the opportunity of being in the neighborhood to revisit Durham's glorious cathedral. I had been walking within the cathedral precincts for about an hour, and found my mind returning constantly to precisely the issue of how I might describe the contact I felt I had been making with the past. Though I had been paying scant attention to much of what was around me — not reading the testaments along the aisles or moving among the stones with any particular itinerary — I was all of a sudden seized with a compelling *need* to know whose memorial I was at that moment standing on. The stone read only, clearly: T. GRAY. This was not, as I of course knew, the poet's tomb, but I leapt from the slab as if the soles of my shoes had been set alight. To this day I can in no way account for the compulsion that I felt had willed me to examine an artefact that would otherwise have completely escaped my attention.

There were other, seemingly “ghostly” incidents. One of the most consequential of these occurred in the course of a weekend visit to Houghton Hall in Norfolk. Designed originally by the great English Palladian architect Colen Campbell in 1722 and completed (with alterations by James Gibbs and Thomas Ripley) only in 1735, Houghton is arguably one of the grandest country houses in England. It was built at the behest of Sir Robert Walpole, and was meant to stand as a proud and stolidly irrefutable testament to the immensity of Walpole’s own achievement as the country’s first prime minister. Although derided in Walpole’s lifetime as the ostentatious work of a *parvenu*, Houghton has well withstood the test of time; compared, at least, with the sprawling and over-turreteted vulgarity of comparable structures such as Blenheim Palace near Woodstock, the more compact and solemnly-grounded simplicity of Walpole’s Norfolk home can easily hold its own.

As a biographer of Thomas Gray, I have some compelling if not absolutely essential reasons for undertaking a visit to Houghton. Horace Walpole — Sir Robert’s fourth son — had since his earliest childhood been one of Gray’s closest friends. Together they had attended Eton College, where they memorably joined forces with two other like-minded boys (Richard West and Thomas Ashton) to form a “Quadruple Alliance” of the imagination against both the authority of their masters and the casual tyranny of their school fellows. Both spent their later adolescent years at Cambridge (Gray at Peterhouse, Walpole at King’s College) and when the latter undertook the Grand Tour after leaving university, he invited Gray to travel with him as his companion. A violent quarrel while in Italy seemed to have put an end to their friendship in 1741, but the two men were eventually reconciled a few years later and remained in close contact until Gray’s death in 1771. It is enough to say that any biographer hoping to understand Gray and his work had better cultivate a pretty thorough understanding of Walpole as well.

As a young man, Horace Walpole had himself spent only limited time at Houghton. We know from his surviving correspondence that he had been very much impressed by the first visit he paid to his father at the property in the summer of 1736, and that he was likewise acutely aware of the significance which connected the building and grounds at Houghton with the personal achievement of Walpole’s ministry (“As fine as [Houghton] is,” Horace wrote to his father that July, “I should not have felt half the satisfaction, if it had not been your doing” [Walpole 5]); we know too that during the three years immediately preceding Sir Robert’s death in March, 1745, he divided his time between the Norfolk estate and the Walpole home in Arlington Street, London. Gray, interestingly, was himself to see Houghton only once in his life, and even then his visit was undertaken not as a personal guest of Walpole (whose uncle, Lord Orford, had inherited the estate on the death of the old minister) but as a public visitor to the property in September, 1766.

Thanks to the generosity of Houghton’s current owner, the marquis of Cholmondley, I was invited with a friend to spend a weekend at the property in the summer of 1998. I had by that time pretty much finished my original research on the Gray biography, and was attempting as best I might to tie up any remaining loose ends in the narrative of the poet’s life. Only one relative-

ly minor but, to my mind, significant stumbling block remained to be overcome, and I in no way expected to discover the means of overcoming it at Houghton. I suggested early in my study that one of the authors whose work Gray had probably first encountered in the classroom at Eton — the Roman poet Decimus Magnus Ausonius (AD 310-395) — was to exert a profound influence on his own methods of reference and parodic allusion in his mature poetry. Ausonius, and the technique of the poetic “cento” for which he was most famous, seemed to me to have played a defining role in Gray’s education as a poet, but I could nowhere point to any direct connection that linked the two in the years when Gray was yet a student at Eton or at Cambridge. The surviving Eton curriculum from the period makes no mention of Ausonius’ centos, and although we know that Ausonius’ work was familiar to writers in the period (Pope’s “Windsor Forest” includes several passages that explicitly echo the Roman poet’s work, and he is recollected also in Sir John Denham’s “Cooper’s Hill” and John Gay’s “Rural Sports”), and although we know, too, that Gray would later number a copy of the hefty 1670 edition of Ausonius’ works among the books in his own library, there was no more solid evidence that he had himself been particularly aware of Ausonius’ work by the time he first began writing English verse at university.

While at Houghton I was given the free run of Sir Robert Walpole’s library. With the exception only of the electricity by means of which it is now lit, the room would appear to look exactly as it did in the eighteenth century. All four walls are lined with books from Walpole’s own collection in sumptuous, original leather bindings. I was permitted to work at the minister’s own desk, situated in front of the library’s south-facing window (his chair, when I first saw the room, was pushed slightly away from the desk, giving the impression that the Great Man had himself only just stepped from his place, and might at any moment return). Not surprisingly, I took full advantage of the opportunity. On the Saturday evening of my visit, I had already been reading at the desk for several hours when I looked up to notice that the daylight had faded from the sky outside almost entirely. Beyond the library windows, along the lawn that edged below to the parish church and to the tiny hamlet that shared the name of Houghton, and within the sward that stretched to the east into the heart of the property’s parkland, a herd of white deer foraged comfortably in the gloaming. A lone white stag — its antlers gilded by the last rays of sunset — struck a photographic pose in the twilight. I had made no great discoveries that afternoon, but I felt immensely privileged even to have had the opportunity of sitting in Sir Robert Walpole’s place, of recreating the experience of his library as he himself might have known it. Describing precisely such an experience in “The Real Right Thing,” James had written: “I sit in his chair, I turn his books, I use his pens, I stir his fire, exactly as if, learning he would presently be back from a walk, I had come up here contentedly to wait. It’s delightful — but it’s strange” (117).

My time there was coming to an end, and I reached out to gather together some of the volumes through which I had been browsing (among them Richard Bentley’s stunningly illustrated edition of Gray’s *Poems*, and Houghton’s own original copy of the *Aedes Walpolianae*, Horace Walpole’s detailed catalogue of

his father's paintings), as if to absorb some of their presence through sheer force of osmosis. It was then that I felt my attention drawn to one of the lower bookshelves, near the window, and more specifically to a pile of heavy volumes on which I seemed not to have bestowed much attention in my initial survey of the library. I was compelled to move nearer. I crouched down closer to the leather-bound tomes and, crooking my head to one side, recognized that they indeed constituted various catalogues of the collection. As I moved to lift the mound of books from its place in the case, a single sheet of paper fluttered down from the top of the pile; it quivered lightly in the air, flying uncertainly back and forth, until it had settled on the carpet directly in front of me. Resting the heavy books on the edge of the shelf, I leaned over and peered at the paper. It was indeed a list of books, and it was very, very old — nearly as old as the library itself. On it was written in an eighteenth-century hand, a list of books that the young Horace Walpole (referred to in the document — that had clearly been addressed to Sir Robert himself — as “your son”) had been permitted to carry from the library to his rooms at King's College, Cambridge, probably after his first visit to the property in the summer of 1736. Prominently entered among the more obvious titles which might be included in such a list was the collected *Works* of Ausonius. Horace Walpole had himself taken the volume from Houghton to university, and Gray — a frequent visitor to his friend's rooms at King's — could not help but have known it intimately. Not having deliberately looked for it, I had found my missing, textual link at last.

Now, don't get me wrong. I don't necessarily mean to suggest that the actual “spirits” of Robert Walpole or his son, sensing my anxiety, had somehow or other compelled me to notice the previously overlooked pile of tomes, or that the ghost of my biographical subject himself had exerted his presence in such a way as to draw those same volumes to my notice. The loose sheet of paper itself was no lost or — quite frankly, in any other case — particularly valuable document (when I commented on what I had found later in the evening to Houghton's owner, he recognized the manuscript leaf to which I referred immediately, and with nothing more than a pleasant recollection of the little insight it offered into the genial domestic contact that must have existed between Sir Robert and his son). But how can I explain or even explain away the eerie feeling of contact — of communication — that nevertheless formed part of the spirit and the reward of the recovery of such biographical evidence? How can I convey to any other individual the curious sensation that for one slight moment, at least, the structures of time and place seemed to collapse and fold in upon themselves?

The true master of the ghost story in the English tradition, M. R. James, memorably centers one of his best and most artful tales — the wonderfully creepy “Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad” — around the figure of a Cambridge Professor of Ontography (the fictional discipline is a typically fine Jamesian touch) named Parkins. Provoked early in the narrative to express his views regarding the fashionable, late-Victorian vogue for the subject of ghosts and “hauntings,” Professor Parkins lectures one of his colleagues impatiently:

I freely own that I do *not* like careless talk about what you call ghosts. A man in my position . . . cannot, I find, be too careful about appearing to

sanction the current belief on such subjects. . . . I hold that any semblance, any appearance of concession to the view that such things might exist is equivalent to a renunciation of all that I hold most sacred.

(59)

Suffice it to say that, following the encounters experienced by the professor in the course of the next Cambridge Long Vacation, his views on "certain points" of the matter are by the end of his story rather "less clear cut than they used to be" (77). It is typical of such narratives that skeptics such as Parkins are invariably convinced by their experiences that something, though they may never entirely know exactly *what*, exists beyond the realm of human intelligence and explanation — that those who come at first to scoff will, inevitably, remain behind to pray. I can only confess, finally, to a similar acceptance that the parameters by which biographical research is bound are slightly different than those that determine other types of scholarly or critical inquiry. I can only suggest, too, if you're interested, that you try it some time for yourself. Just whistle for the past — and brace yourself for whatever happens to come your way.

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