

Plaited Streams of Family History: The Poet as Biographer in Vikram Seth's *Two Lives*

Jon Barry Sanders & Yuko Sawabe

..... in the attic
Sue and her boyfriend with ecstatic
Pangs of discovery and rebirth
Sift through an old trunk and unearth
Love letters of Hungarian cousins,
A blind and legless teddy bear
(With a stitched smile that mocks despair),
Two statues of the Buddha, dozens
Of unused stamps from Liechtenstein,
And bills for sacramental wine.

Down plaited streams of family history,
Alive with flotsam, on they glide!

The Golden Gate, 10:22-23

A. The Poet as Biographer

In the summer of 1994, the year following the publication of his acclaimed novel, *A Suitable Boy*, Vikram Seth's parents, Leila and Premo, visited England. While there, they saw a performance of *Arion and the Dolphin*, for which their son had written the libretto, in Plymouth. Afterwards, during their drive to Oxford, Vikram's mother made a suggestion that was later to have a profound effect on his already varied writing career:

I had invited Uncle to come to see the opera, but Plymouth was too far away from London; he was now eighty-five years old and very frail. We talked about him in the car, and Mama said, turning to me, "You don't know what exactly to write about next. Why don't you write about him?" (1.17)¹

This was actually Vikram's great uncle, Shanti Seth, familiarly referred to as Shanti Uncle, and Vikram's initial response was far from eager. For one thing, he did not know if he even wanted to write about someone close to him, and he did not want to burden his uncle with interviews. On the other hand, he knew that his uncle, a one-armed dentist married to a German-Jewish woman, had led an interesting life. It turned out that Shanti Uncle was not only enthusiastic about the project, but talking about his past seemed to re-energize him, and Seth "carried out eleven longish interviews over five months, between June and October 1994" (1.18).

The one major impediment was that Aunty Henny had died in 1989:

Any book to emerge from this process was clearly going to centre on Uncle. About Aunty Henny my information would of necessity be second-hand. I could not interview her. Even if she had been alive, the circumstances of her early life would have made me very reluctant to do so. I had no idea that something would happen that would change this balance completely. (1.17)

The reasons for Seth's reluctance will be discussed later, but what happened to substantially change the balance of the biography was the "fortuitous discovery" by Seth's father the next summer of "a small cobweb-covered tan-coloured cabin trunk" in a far corner while cleaning out Shanti Uncle's attic (3.1). The trunk contained a trove of letters to Henny covering the 1940s, thus making the epigraph from *The Golden Gate* pleasingly prophetic. Despite the excitement of this unforeseen bounty of information about Henny, Seth found himself lacking "both impetus and will" to begin working on the biography (5.4), and, in much the same way *The Golden Gate* supplanted his dissertation, Seth was soon immersed in writing *An Equal Music* (5.6, 9.10).²

We have ample reason to be thankful for *An Equal Music*, but in one important way it was also an ideal preparation for writing a biography. The primary challenge for a biographer is to be able to see through and present another's perspective without, on the one hand, imposing one's own notions, or, on the other, substituting invention where fact is missing or inconvenient. Thus, by restricting himself to the constraints of the first-person narration in *An Equal Music*, Seth had already faced one of a biographer's greatest challenges. Michael, the narrator of *An Equal Music*, cannot know Julia's thoughts unless she shares them (or unless he reads a fax not intended for his eyes), so he is often left wondering, full of questions he cannot answer. As a biographer, Seth is in a similar situation in *Two Lives*, as he does not have an omniscient narrator's knowledge of Shanti and Henny. True, he knew and had lived with them, he had interviewed Shanti at length, and he had the unexpected trove of letters to help flesh out Henny, but on many key points he is left,

like Michael, with questions about her: "Would I have succeeded in understanding something of what she felt? Would she have divulged anything? Would she have wanted me to write about it at all?" (3.1).

When such questions are unanswerable, the biographer can only offer assumptions and suppositions. However, if the biographer has done his work honestly and well, making full and open use of personal knowledge and available materials, then such conjectures ring true for the attentive reader. Having followed Seth's literary career through its succession of triumphs in an extraordinary variety of genres, it should come as no surprise that he has once again garnered critical praise for *Two Lives*, his dual biography of Shanti and Henny.³

In part two, Seth presents Shanti, depicting him from his boyhood in the small town of Biswan in northern India where he was born in 1908 to his purchase of the house at 18 Queens Road, Hendon, north London in 1948, where he began his dental practice and lived for the rest of his life. Shanti's father died before he was born, but Shanti was indulged by his landowner grandfather and enjoyed a carefree childhood, including such typical acts of mischief as flying forbidden kites, an activity considered too vulgar for an educated family: "Shanti bought a kite from time to time, tore off a bit of the corner, and claimed he'd found it. He would chase away the monkeys from the roof and fly his repaired kite in battles with his friends" (2.1).

After his grandfather died, Shanti's elder brother Raj (Vikram's grandfather and the model for the deceased Mr Rupa Mehra in *A Suitable Boy*) took responsibility for Shanti's education, and Shanti

proved to be an excellent- though still mischievous- student, becoming head boy at his boarding school (2.4). Shanti studied physics and chemistry in college. He had wanted to become an engineer like the brother he hero-worshipped, but he had no talent for drawing, so Raj proposed an alternative: "In our family we have an engineer, an accountant, a judge and a doctor, but no dentist. Why don't you train to do that?" (2.6).

Not that keen on the thought of dentistry (2.6), horrified by the "difficulty and incomprehensibility" of German (2.8), Shanti nevertheless went abroad in 1931 at the age of 23 to begin his studies in Berlin (2.11). At first he was lonely and miserable, but that soon changed when he rented a room from Mrs Caro. When Mrs Caro informed her younger daughter of the new lodger, Henny's reaction had been strongly adverse: "Nimm den Schwarzen nicht' [Don't take the black man]." The delicious irony, as Seth notes, is that Henny's unpromising remark signaled "the beginning of a relationship that was to last five and a half decades" (2.12).

Shanti was soon eating with the family (2.12), and later he was even permitted to enter the kitchen, Mrs Caro's sanctum (2.14). Although the Caros were Jewish, "there were more Christians than Jews among their friends and acquaintances" (2.14), and Shanti quickly became included in the circle of friends. Henny was the private secretary of Franz Mahnert, one of the directors of a life insurance company, and she was being courted by his son, Hans, who was often at the Caro home, and he and Shanti became friends. Shanti also liked the lively, energetic Henny, but he did not press his attentions: "Shanti liked her a great deal, but he was a good friend of Hans, and left it at that" (2.14). In fact, Hans, Henny,

and Shanti were often a threesome, and if Shanti may have suppressed himself with regard to Henny, his unspoken feelings were clear to her mother, who once told her daughter: "Even if you marry Hans, as long as Shanti is around, you won't starve" (2.18).

In the spring of 1936, Shanti passed his qualifying examination in dentistry with distinction, and six months later he received a PhD for his research into filling materials. As Seth notes, there had been quite a change in Shanti's attitude: "The work fascinated him, and he looked back with amazement to the time when he had hated the thought of studying dentistry" (2.20). Unfortunately, by 1936, also the year of the Berlin Olympics, Hitler was now in power, and the professor who offered Shanti a research position had to tell him, white-faced with shock, that the Ministry of Education had forbidden the employment of foreigners.

Shanti was forced to go to Edinburgh, which was cheaper than London, to requalify as a dentist. The coldest and most miserable year of Shanti's life was only brightened by his meeting Heinrich Etzold, a half-Jew from Germany who was also in Edinburgh to requalify in dentistry. Heinrich later changed his name to Henry Edwards, and he was to become Shanti's best friend (2.21). In December of that year (1937), Shanti went back to Berlin to visit his friends. As a Jew, Henny was no longer permitted to work for the insurance company and Herr Mahnert. Shanti sensed the growing isolation of the Caros, "as some of their old friends now avoided them," and he returned to England "deeply worried" about their situation (2.22).

London was expensive, and Shanti was in a financial pinch, as the only position he could find was as an assistant to an ailing

Parsi dentist, so the question arises as to why Shanti did not return to India, as his brother wanted him to do. The family story, which Seth got from his mother, is that Shanti needed a British qualification to practice in India, then war broke out before he could return. As a biographer, Seth knows he cannot always rely on family accounts, and he offers other plausible reasons. For one thing, Shanti may have seen "a better future for himself in England." For another, he may well have felt that in India the family would constantly interfere with his "urge for independence." But, as Seth is now well aware, "as the summer of 1939 approached, there could also have been another reason" (2.23).

The compelling reason was Henny, who, through Franz Mahnert's effort, was able to receive the necessary sponsorship from Professor Arberry (whose wife was the niece of Herr Mahnert's deceased wife) to enable her to get out of Germany just a month before the war started: "In late July 1939, Henny travelled by train from Berlin to Hamburg, then by boat to Southampton and by train to London. Shanti, the only person she knew in England, met her at Victoria Station and took her to the Arberrys" (2.24).

Shanti enlisted just a few months after England declared war, and by late 1940 he was writing to Henny from North Africa, where he was an officer in the Army Dental Corps (2.26, 2.28-29). After a posting to Syria in 1942 (2.35), Shanti was sent to Italy, and that is where he lost his right arm, which was blown off by a shell at Monte Cassino (2.36, 41).⁴ It took the despairing Shanti- "What will I do? What will I do?"- hours to write a few lines to Henny with his left hand (2.41). When Henry Edwards visited Shanti in

the hospital in Nottingham where he was being treated, Shanti was despondent about his prospects: "He had lost his hand and his profession and he had no hope, no confidence in the future" (2.44).

The story of Shanti's recovery and eventual resumption of dentistry provides an inspiring example of quiet heroism. Shanti first found work as an advisor with the Amalgamated Dental Company, where he wrote reports, lectured abroad, and learned to make documentary films, doing everything (script, photography, editing) so well he was "elected an Associate of the British Kinematograph Society" (2.49). Shanti had achieved economic and professional security, but he still longed to be independent and dreamed of practicing dentistry again.

It was Henry Edwards who helped him achieve his dream. First, he put Shanti in touch with G. M. Beaton, a dentist who had lost an arm in the First World War. Mr. Beaton's letter of encouragement is, as Seth remarks, both "generous and rather frighteningly gung-ho." A date was set for Shanti to visit, but there is no account of it, and Seth acknowledges the divide between the factual constraint of biography and the aesthetic freedom of fiction:

No further record of Beaton exists among Shanti's papers, but it is pleasant to imagine this meeting of these two unusual men, professional colleagues, each with similar injuries, each with aspirations to independence, one English, one Indian, veterans of the two great wars of the century.
(2.48)⁵

Shanti had been practicing using dental tools with his left

hand, but he was afraid to practice on a patient, even when Henry suggested he should treat one of his. In order to spur Shanti back into practice, Henry feigned his own emergency one Saturday evening, pleading with Shanti to drill his tooth, a generous act of friendship that Shanti later acknowledged with appreciation:

"I had never handled a drill with my left hand, but now I thought I had no choice. Poor fellow, I must have tortured him. There was a little cavity, but the decay had not gone very deep and I'm sure it had not been hurting him as much as he said. He just wanted to give me confidence. What a friend he was." (2.49)

Shanti began treating patients at Henry's surgery in the evenings and on Saturdays, but, despite Henry's encouragement, Shanti was still not sure he could succeed as a full-time dentist on his own. Fearing their friendship would suffer, Shanti refused Henry's offer of partnership in his practice, but when the house at 18 Queens Road, next to his lodgings, came up for sale, Shanti took it for a sign of what he should do, and in this he was certainly perceptive, as Seth acknowledges:

This was to be Shanti's home and workplace for the rest of his life. Here he established himself in his profession, from here he got married, here he lived with Henry, here I lived with them for a few short years, here Auntie Henny died, here he spent his last few years, here he too died. (2.50)

At this point, at the time when Shanti bought the house and then started his own practice, the relationship between Shanti and Henny had deepened, as Seth notes: "Henny and Shanti had been brought closer by the war" (2.52). Shanti met her when she arrived from Germany, and she turned to him for advice. Cut off from any contact with her family and friends during the war, she only had Shanti to write to, and "their letters reflect their concern for each other and, in Shanti's case certainly, love" (2.52). The qualifying phrase is of great significance in this case, for no one, including Shanti, could ever be sure of the strength of Henny's feelings for him.

Writing from Egypt with "fondest love," the ardent Shanti pleads for reassurance: "... could'nt [sic] you for once let me know exactly how you feel towards me" (2.30). Later, after he had lost his arm, he wrote from a hospital near Naples, laboriously printing it with his left hand:

YOU ARE MY ONLY HOPE, I AM MISSING YOU AS I
NEVER MISSED YOU. IS IT LOVE OR IS IT PASSION?
THE OTHER DAY I DREAMT THAT I AM WITH YOU
ALONE ON THE TOP OF A CLIFF, WHICH IS HIGH UP
IN THE CLOUDS. THERE WAS NO ONE TO DISTURB
OUR HAPPYNESS- OUR ECSTASY. ALAS! IT WAS
ONLY A DREAM. (2.43)

In retrospect, Shanti's distinction between love and passion, as well as his intimation that ecstasy is illusion, seems prescient. Seth admits that with so little evidence to go on it is "difficult to know

how things really stood," but it does seem clear to him that Henny's feelings for Shanti could not be characterized as passionate. Although it was at Shanti's request, Henny never visited him during the month he was in the hospital in Nottingham, a lack of action that could be seen to reveal a great deal: "Had she been passionately in love with him, it seems unlikely, despite the difficulties of travel, the pressures of time and his own insistence, that she would have waited till he was in London to see him" (2.52).

Vikram only knew Henny as a married woman already in her sixties. As a shy seventeen-year-old arriving to live with Shanti and Henny while attending Tonbridge (and later Oxford), Vikram initially found his tall great-aunt to be more daunting than friendly: "She greeted me with enthusiasm rather than warmth . . . She poked her head into the surgery to exclaim in her high voice, 'Shanti, Vicky is here,'" before telling him where to leave his bags (1.1). This sort of welcome was typical, as it turned out, for Henny seemed to keep her distance from the Indian side of the family she had acquired through her marriage: "Whenever my parents called, she would open the door, survey the visitors standing on the top step and shout out, in a view-halloo sort of voice, 'Shanti, your relatives are here'" (1.2).⁶

Shanti and Henny gave Vikram a "family anchor" during his years of study in England, but he noticed a distinct difference between the two in their evening conversations: "Uncle loved to talk about the family . . . Aunt Henny never spoke about her family. I had heard from my parents that they had all been killed in Germany" (1.8). And even though Shanti was voluble on family matters, there

was one notable exception, for he “did not say much about Aunty Henny’s experiences in England during the war” (2.27).

By the time Seth realized he wanted to write the biography, Henny had been dead for five years, so there was no chance to interview her, though Seth also realized that his regard for her meant he would have been unable to broach some topics. Another irreparable loss was that Shanti, out of grief, had destroyed all the photographs and letters that would remind him of Henny. Thus, as Seth writes, the surprise discovery of the letter-filled trunk amazed them both: “I at the possibilities they implied, he by the fact that so much had not been known to him, even about the person he understood best and who had best understood him” (3.1).

Seth had already learned the value of the sort of research that inspired and enabled him to create the various vivid personalities of *A Suitable Boy* (1.13). In referring to information about his grandfather Raj that he gained through the interviews with Shanti, Seth makes use of an instructive metaphor: “any information about him would add a few tesserae to the image that I had been piecing together for many years” (2.5). Now Seth had unexpectedly gained access to a trunk full of tesserae, and he could begin creating a richer and surprising mosaic of Henny:

It was from this collection of paper- printed paper, typed paper, handwritten paper, photographic paper- found by my father that day that I began to create for myself an image of Aunty Henny as she had been, only partly as I might have envisaged her, but to a great extent as neither I, nor even Shanti Uncle, could have imagined her to be. (3.1)

Henny did not know the fate of her mother and sister until after the war, but none of Henny's Jewish friends survived in Germany (3.34). It was the time of the Holocaust, Hitler's chillingly named "final solution," and Seth relies on outside sources to give an imaginative reconstruction of what happened to Henny's mother, who died in Theresienstadt, and her sister Lola, who perished in Auschwitz-Birkenau (3.7-11).⁷

For the most part, however, Seth relies on the letters from the trunk, and they form the core of part three. In addition, Seth chooses to let the letters speak for themselves, believing that their "diverse perspectives . . . bring to life the situation in Germany . . . and reflect upon the war itself . . ." (3.14). Indeed, for Seth the letters prove so evocative that he finds his own intermediation to be "somewhat superfluous," as the writers "talk themselves into existence through their words. Anything more than the lightest commentary on their letters would seem ponderous" (3.32).⁸

One surprise, given the horrors and suffering the correspondents have faced (and the deprivation most are still facing when they write), is the great value Henny and her friends place on friendship, regarding it as the highest moral value and most cherished human quality. When Henny leaves Germany, her schoolfriend Ilse Heydt writes that "a true friendship and bond spans even distances, borders and time" (3.14). After the war, Henny writes to Ilse:

I will do whatever I can to make it a little easier. These are not empty words . . . I do all this willingly from the bottom of my heart, and I know that if the circumstances were reversed you too would willingly do the same. We are, after

all, FRIENDS! Only very few people understand what friendship means, but surely I can say that we belong to these few. (3.14)

When Jazko Rabau writes to thank Henny for a parcel, he is “even more moved by the spirit of true friendship and warm humanity that it betokens.” Henny’s reply, as Seth notes, echoes Ilse’s remark about “the tenacity of true friendship,” which “can span distances, borders and time” (3.18). Sadly, the Rabaus have learned a bitter lesson, as Jazko writes later:

You know the old proverb: in times of need, one knows one’s friends. In the 12 years under the Nazis we have often had the opportunity to measure our so-called “friends” by this saying. Many were weighed in the balance and found wanting. Few passed the test. You, however, surpass them considerably. Your last letter . . . has shown us your greatness of spirit. (3.19)

For Henny, friendship “must always be unforced and natural and founded on trust” (3.21). It was supremely important to her, and this may account in part for her apparent lack of romantic passion. After all, her surprisingly low-key term for a marriage partner was “a suitable life-companion” (3.16, 24). In writing about Henny’s broken relationship with Hans, Ilse reminds Henny that she had told her in confidence “that it was not a grand passion that tied the two of you together,” which leads Seth to speculate that “it could be that deep-seated and intense love was not in her nature

... She may have felt happiest in a strong and sincere friendship with someone whose character she admired; perhaps this was her very interpretation of love" (3.24).

This conjecture makes the passionate letters from Eva Cohn all the more surprising. Eva was an Austrian refugee who lived in the same boarding house as Henny in Bayswater until emigrating to New York in 1946. Henny once wrote that they had "lived together for over 5 years" and had "become as close as sisters," but the repeated expressions in Eva's letters certainly suggest a more intense relationship:

... already I long for you so much! ... I embrace you and kiss you with the greatest love and longing... I embrace you deeply and smother you in kisses in eternal love, yearning and devotion... I take you in my arms and smother you with kisses... To take you once again so truly in my arms and to smother you with kisses!! ... whom did I ever want except you! ... Now I'm going to bed and my thoughts are with you. In my mind I run upstairs- well, and anyway you know the rest! I hold you really, really close and kiss you all over ... (3.37)

Henny and Eva remained friends, and when Shanti saw Eva after Henny's death, he did something rather surprising, particularly in light of his wholesale destruction of all that reminded him of Henny: "I gave her Henny's favourite piece of jewellery. Henny never asked me to, but I knew that was what she would have wanted." Seth neglected to ask about the jewellery, but he was left with an

even more troubling question: "What was this emblem of love so tacitly conferred, and through so understanding an intermediary? But how much did Shanti Uncle in fact understand of what Henny meant to Eva, or Eva to Henny?" (3.37).

In this case, Seth's decency as a person limits his thoroughness as a biographer- "Even if he had been alive, it would have been difficult to pursue this question. Indeed, had he been alive, I am not certain I would have been able to write this chapter at all" (3.37)- so we and the biographer are left with the "unresolvable question" about Henny's feelings for Eva and "whether this was Henny's only passionate friendship..." (4.2). What we do know is that Henny had a tolerant and understanding attitude toward same-sex relationships, for she once overrode Shanti's unpleasantly prejudiced view of the matter: "Aunty Henny quietly interrupted and said that there had been a girl in her office who had had a crush on her and had written her letters and poems. She had added that one had to understand these matters and these feelings" (4.2).

Because Seth realized that his own picture of Shanti and Henny's marriage was "somewhat skewed," he asked his family for their impressions in order to "help flesh out the portrait" he was painting (4.3). Shantum, Vikram's younger brother, who had been named after Shanti, also studied in England, and he found their home a comforting "reference point... a connection back to India," although "it didn't feel like an Indian home," since the "clockwork lifestyle" of the household "wasn't exactly relaxing" (4.5).⁹ Like others, Shantum found that "Aunty was very closed about her past" (4.5), but like his brother, Shantum also has the gift of empathy, which enabled him to understand how Henny's memories of the past might

account for the distance she maintained from Shanti's extended Indian family: "Can you think- if something like that happened to us- " (4.7).

Vikram's mother thought they were an "incongruous" couple: Shanti was short and dark- his nicknames in German were Schwarze Punkt [black spot] and Pfinkchen [little spot] (2.30)- and the tall, thin, fair-skinned Henny towered over him in her high heels. His mother could see it was "a caring relationship," but Henny never volunteered anything about her family: "In fact, we didn't even know she was Jewish for quite a long time" (4.3). His mother also thought Henny was "highly strung," and Vikram could see what she meant:

She was not overtly affectionate, she had a high voice and a strident scream of a laugh and an emphatic manner . . . When a party was thrown, she would be jittery, impatient, even dictatorial about getting things perfect . . . At times, her manner was brusque or brittle. Only part of this could be attributed to what she had gone through. (4.4)

Upon their first meeting, Vikram's father had the distinct impression that Henny "was not a very warm person." They "were all much closer to Shanti Uncle," according to his father, in part because "Henny could be very abrupt and abrasive." His father characterized the marriage as "more a mutual support system than any great love," though he also acknowledged that "a lot goes on in a marriage that no one knows" (4.3). This is an undeniable truism, but Vikram had had a privileged perspective from which to gain

greater insight into Henny's character:

This was all true, and yet I saw a side of her that my parents perhaps only glimpsed- a side that probably revealed itself only because I lived with her and Uncle for days, weeks, months and years. Under all Aunty Henny's professions of indifference and her concern for form and style, she was also protective and tolerant, affectionate, even gentle. Long before I got the chance to read her letters to her friends, I experienced her pragmatism, generosity and "optimismus"; through her letters to me when I was at Stanford, she encouraged me from afar when I was close to losing heart. (4.4)

Even a privileged insider may have a restricted view, and Seth remains puzzled "that Henny never spoke to Shanti about the deaths of Ella and Lola," but Henny's mild though definite proscription of the topic closed it off even from him: "Shanti, it's no good going into the graveyard."¹⁰ Their marriage of 38 years was undoubtedly an unusual one in many respects. They may not have been "overtly affectionate with each other," there was likely no passionate intensity on Henny's part, and we know she withheld some of her strongest emotional feelings from Shanti, but there can be no doubt, as Seth assures us, that their relationship was nourished and supported by "a deep and abiding concern" (4.14).

When Henny was dying, she asked Shanti to take her hand. In trying to convey the significance of the gesture to Vikram, Shanti used the expression "We were so well integrated..." (4.13). For readers of Seth's fiction, the remark must call to mind the Doratis,

the idealized married couple in *The Golden Gate*, whose lives were intertwined "along a common vine" (10.24). With regard to the more problematic marriage of Shanti and Henny, Seth chooses to end part four with a question and answer: "What is perfect? In a world with so much suffering, isolation and indifference, it is cause for gratitude if something is sufficiently good" (4.14).

Yet surely this is another intentional echo, this time of the final paragraph of *An Equal Music*- "Music, such music, is a sufficient gift"- and we recall that the "sufficient gift" of the ministering music was nothing less than the salvation of Michael. In this light, what may seem faint praise of a marriage is praise indeed. In the century of the Holocaust, for anything human to be "sufficiently good" is little short of a miracle.

As a poet, Seth knows that poetry has a particularly potent means of expression, for a gifted poet occasionally finds the absolutely appropriate image- a solitary, fitful kite in a darkening sky, for example- to suggest something far larger, in this case the capricious and disastrous effects of the Cultural Revolution on ordinary Chinese and Tibetan lives (*From Heaven Lake*, 74, 146). As a biographer, Seth knows he faces a daunting task, even for a poet, for how can any skein of words be fine enough to limn the "complex graph of love," as he puts it in his dedicatory acrostic poem to Shanti Uncle and Aunty Henny. Seth wants his biography "to mark them true" so that he will leave Shanti and Henny "complexly remembered," but Seth also knows that the riches of even apparently ordinary lives are "so personal as to be almost incommunicable, so

fugitive as to be almost irrecoverable" (5.23).

Once again, however, the ending of one of Seth's books contains a surprising richness of its own, for once again we see the writer's work answer the writer's doubts. For more than five years after Shanti's death, Seth had no wish to return to 18 Queens Road. When he finally does, his heart sinks at the extent of the changes- the lawn paved over, the house dingier, an upstairs window broken- and he feels it was a mistake to return:

Yet as I stand and look at the house, I see it reinhabited by people and by things, by voices and by thoughts. I see Auntie Henny picking up the telephone receiver to say, "Hendon six double three oh," Uncle spearing lettuce on to my plate with his Nelson knife, my father discovering a cobweb-covered cabin trunk in the attic, my mother listening to Uncle's anecdotes with a quiet smile... The sloping roof flattens, and a small boy, playing with his kite on the roof, finds it entangled in a lichi tree. A young man, clutching his bleeding arm, runs through the din and fear of a battle to a surgical tent. An old man, weeping in a crematorium, consigns his wife to the flames. And I hear her voice saying, in German, "Don't take the black man," and, after a while, in English, "Cathy, take care of my husband." (5.23)

Thus, in two paragraphs, *Two Lives* provides validation of the credit Seth hesitates to claim for himself as biographer, for just as Shanti and Henny come alive again in Seth's vision of the house,

so they have come alive for us on his pages. What the vision affirms for Seth is what his loving biography grants to us: Shanti and Henny have lived again, in all their impenetrable complexity, we have been deeply touched by their lives, and we miss them.¹¹

B. The Biographer as Character

To the literary eye, the most compelling branch in Seth's plaited stream of family history is his own inclusion in the story, and it is important to recognize his confession of character as a second, intertwined achievement, and not mistake it for an intrusion upon the first and only, the biography. Actually, biography and confession are compatible strands, as both are literary statements about the nature of human life in the world, and through his confession Seth courageously offers himself up as an example of moral behavior.

Seth must have forgotten about *From Heaven Lake*- which, after all, had been written more than 20 years earlier- when he told Tim Adams that *Two Lives* was "the first very personal, non-fictional thing I have written."¹² In *From Heaven Lake* Seth was writing about himself as the wandering traveller, so the early travel book was both personal and non-fictional. The only significant difference is that Seth is now a world-famous writer, not an unknown graduate student, and in *Two Lives* he is compelled to reveal more of himself than he did in constructing the persona of the youthful traveller.

Seth first describes his arrival, as a nervous, "fearfully shy" seventeen-year-old, at the house of the relatives he scarcely knows. After Henny's exclamatory announcement- "Shanti, Vicky is here"- his uncle comes out to hug him, saying "Now let me look at my little Vicky," and Seth gives us his mixed reaction to the

welcome:

In those days I was very sensitive about my height and cringed whenever anyone called me little. Shanti Uncle, however, was even shorter than I was, and Aunty Henny towered over him. Nor did I like being called Vicky, even though in India it would not be taken for a feminine diminutive. But my overwhelming sense was that of relief. (1.1)

As he settled into the household, Seth began to learn more about the unusual couple who had welcomed him, but he also began to learn more about himself and the world. When he was going to take entrance exams for Oxford, Seth found out he would have to have a European language. He was in a panic at having to learn a new language to an acceptable level of proficiency in a mere six months, but it was Henny who took matters in hand, calming Vikram, giving sound practical advice, and providing a first glimpse of her resolute attitude toward dealing with a world that could be unfair (and, in her own case, as Vikram was only to learn much later, unimaginably cruel):

But shortly afterwards Aunty Henny sat me down in the drawing-room with a cup of tea and said firmly that there was nothing for it but to accept things as they were, unfair as they might seem. This is what life was sometimes about. I would have to fulfil the requirement. In addition, it was clear that German was the right language for me, because

in the holidays she and Uncle would be able to help me where the school had left off. (1.4)¹³

As it turned out, learning German was to have unexpected benefits and far-reaching consequences for Seth. In the first place, the language brought him closer to Shanti and Henny- "It was through my study of German that my relationship with them deepened" (1.4)- for it was the German language to which they always reverted that was their "home," and Vikram was aware of its significance: once he "had learned to share their language... nothing spoken aloud at home remained veiled from me" (4.7).

Although he was still shy in English, Seth discovered that he "could be bold in German," which helped him enjoy an idyllic summer hitch-hiking around the German-speaking countries: "Almost everyone I met was friendly and hospitable and tolerant of my German. All this was a world different from anything I had known" (1.6). The world he was coming to know in England could still offer surprises, too, sometimes of a whimsical nature. After his Oxford entrance exam, Seth is summoned to Corpus Christi College for an interview, and all his anxiety and hard work regarding German are comically subverted by the casual attitude of an academic world that sometimes appears diffidently benign:

The interview, which took place by candlelight during a power cut, lasted for more than half an hour. Rather than sitting as an inquisitorial board, the tutors who conducted the interview, two men and a woman, were sprawled out casually in armchairs in a comfortable room. When, in the

course of the interview, I asked them how I'd done in the German translation paper, they looked blank. One of the two men, who had a slight stutter, said, "Oh, we don't know."

"But didn't anyone look at it?" I asked.

"Oh, not really," he continued. "The translation paper's just a formality. But we notice you have a German O-level. Why, as a matter of interest, did you study German?"

"I didn't want to," I replied. "I had to- and at quite short notice. As you know, it's a requirement to have a European language."

"Oh, is it? I suppose it is."

I paused for a second, then told them of my attempt to get an exemption.

"Oh, you needn't have bothered with the university authorities," said the don. "You should have come to us. We'd have told you we didn't care- and unofficially ignored it."

"So, in a sense, my study of German has been entirely unnecessary?"

"Entirely."

Perhaps noticing, even by candlelight, the look on my face, he quickly added: "In a sense, that is." (1.7)

The much harsher lessons about the world are yet to come.

For the biographer to be a character in the biography he is writing can have both advantages and drawbacks. The time he spent living with Shanti and Henny and his knowledge of German gave

Seth a privileged perspective of the marriage and Henny's nature, an insight that was unavailable to the others in his family (4.4). At the same time, his closeness to Henny and his sense of decency made it impossible for him to ask some questions (3.1). For Seth to have remained true to himself may have restricted him as a biographer, but it must also be admitted that a genuine and openly acknowledged mystery can enhance rather than detract from a biography. The extent of Henny's feelings for Eva (or even for Shanti) may remain an "unresolvable question" (4.2), both for Seth and the reader of *Two Lives*, but that in itself does not necessarily damage or distort the complex portrait of her that Seth pieces together.

On the other hand, Seth's efforts as a biographer compelled him to consider, just as honestly and searchingly, his own character, for in the course of his research Seth was forced to confront one of the greatest horrors of the twentieth century. In the Yad Vashem archives, Seth comes upon the actual transportation lists that consigned Ella and Lola to the death camps, and Seth experiences a powerful physical reaction: "... something happened that has never happened to me before or since. My right knee began trembling rapidly and violently. There was nothing I could do to stop it" (3.12).

Seth's emotional reaction is even stronger. When a polite schoolboy speaks to him in German-accented English, offering to help with the German, Seth can barely control his furious anger, for now even the German accent "embroiled sickness and evil..." (3.12), and Seth goes on to relate his own loss: "One of the casualties of the process of exploring the material for this book was my pleasure in the German language" (3.13). German had been "an adventure," an "incursion into another world," and it was linked to pleasant

memories of Aunt Henny singing in the kitchen and the friendliness of strangers he met on his wonderful hitch-hiking trip, but now he could no longer read his favorite Heine poems or sing his beloved Schubert lieder, for now the language itself has been spoiled: "The stench of the language in which I had read the phrases from the Gestapo letter clung to [Heine's] words as well. . . . The very verbs stank" (3.13).¹⁴

Here, Seth undergoes a violent revulsion of feeling such as he had described in *A Suitable Boy*, and Seth offers himself as an example and examines the revulsion at such length precisely because his own reaction exemplifies what should happen when a person infused with decency and morality confronts previously unimaginable evil.¹⁵ In *From Heaven Lake*, Seth earned the right to generalize about China through his academic training, his personal experiences in the country, and his thoughtful examination of his changing views. In *Two Lives*, it is Seth's confession of character that justifies and requires his diversions on Germany (3.33), Israel (3.35), and India (4.3, 5.9), for in each case Seth is demonstrating the process of trying to work out his own views about a complex situation.¹⁶

From Heaven Lake, which came out in 1983, ended with the buoyant hope that individual goodwill might, one day, enable mankind to embrace its commonalty, but in the very next year India erupted in anti-Sikh rioting after Indira Gandhi was assassinated, and the values that Seth espouses and embodies were under threat, as he laments: "Things appeared to be unravelling in the country; all our traditions of tolerance and humanity seemed to have dissolved" (1.13). Indians may know little of the historical

persecution of the Jews by Christians, but that, as he laconically admits, is of little consolation: "We have concentrated on our own religious antagonisms, our own historical hatreds, which seem so much more reasonable" (4.3).

The central biographical parts of *Two Lives*- parts two, three, and four- make up the bulk of the book, and they focus on Shanti, Henny, and their marriage. However, this biographical portion is contained within the framing and more autobiographical first and fifth parts, which are in large measure about a third life, that of Vikram Seth, the writer. In part one, the teenage Seth arrives in England to stay with Shanti and Henny, but this introductory part also sketches Seth's relationship with them during his years at Stanford and through the publications of *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy*, Henny's death, and the summer his mother suggested the biography as his next project.

In the concluding part five, Seth is the mature writer, now settled in England, frequently having to cope with and trying to come to terms with Shanti's failing health. Part five also chronicles the decline of Shanti in the years following Henny's death, and Seth makes an interesting point regarding this scrutiny when talking to Tim Adams:

"When you write about people who did not make any great impression on the history of the world . . . then you are free to dwell on those parts of their lives that a conventional biographer cannot. In Shanti's case, as important as what happened in the war were the last 10 years of his life, his

eighties, when he was a widower and grief-stricken and failing and quite manipulative and so on."¹⁷

The question that arises- Why are Shanti's last years so important to Seth?- can only be answered satisfactorily by bearing in mind the importance of the confessional strain of the book, for this perspective enables us to see that part five is far from being an unnecessary and demeaning depiction of Shanti in decline, but, rather, allows us to recognize it as a necessary and revealing examination of Seth's relationship with and reaction to Shanti during his last years.¹⁸

As his years of ill health leave Shanti physically frail, his mind begins to falter, and he begins taking pleasure in talking about money (5.3) and his will (5.5). He decides to divide his estate into six equal parts, leaving them to family members, then later adds Colin. Shanti had known Colin for years, since he had married one of Shanti's nurses (1.13), and Colin had been increasingly helpful after Shanti retired (5.6). Seth was upset that Shanti seemed bent on setting up rivalries, with Shanti saying that he and Colin would have priority for buying the house, despite Seth's insistence he did not want it: "Uncle seemed to be getting some pleasure from stirring things up. . . . the idea [of competition for the house] struck me as damaging and absurd" (5.5). Shanti became more imperious, summoning his nephew Michi from India despite the fact that Michi was still recovering from a stroke (5.8, 20), and he started saying hurtful things about Seth's mother, who had always been Shanti's favorite, referring to her as "Mack the Knife," which Seth regarded as "a quirkily vicious insult" (5.11).

During much of this time Seth was immersed in writing *An Equal Music* (5.10), but he continued to visit and check on Shanti, sometimes responding to frantic calls about imagined financial crises. In one especially thoughtful gesture, Seth takes Philippe Honoré, the friend and violinist to whom *An Equal Music* is dedicated, to the house to play for Shanti (5.9). Nevertheless, Seth becomes increasingly upset by Shanti's behavior, and when Michi calls in a rage after meeting Shanti, Seth cuts him off and refuses to listen, only to later regret his own anger (5.8). As Shanti begins hallucinating and making ever more bizarre accusations against the family, Seth cannot help becoming angry (5.14), but when, after Shanti's death, Seth learns from his mother that only Colin and one family member (Arun) are in Shanti's will, his disbelief turns to disgust:

I cannot describe the deep revulsion of feeling that overcame me after this conversation. It changed my view of- indeed, my faith in- Uncle. I had loved him and greatly respected him. This love was now tinged with anger and this respect with something corrosive. (5.19)

The "wretched business" of the will has left Seth tormented by the "acid of dismay," and his feelings about the man he once admired so much are now disturbingly ambivalent (5.19). Nevertheless, Seth realizes that the critical question is about himself- "Why then was I letting all this get to me?"- but it is only possible to answer the question if he has the courage for self-examination and is able "to look steadily at what I would rather have averted my gaze

from..." (5.21). He may not be able to identify the exact medical cause of Shanti's aberrant behavior, but Seth can resolve his own anger when he perceives that his lingering bitterness is proportionate to and a result of the admiration and reverence he had held for his uncle (5.21).

The earlier question about the will and Shanti's treatment of the family- "I often wondered what Aunty Henny would have thought about what Uncle had done" (5.19)- has now become more pointedly personal: "What would Aunty Henny have wanted?" (5.21). It is the virtue of the biography that we are confident we can supply the answer; it is the virtue of the confession that Seth can answer so assuredly:

To this I know the answer. She would have wanted me to be less troubled in spirit. She would have wanted me to think well of Uncle. She would have wanted me to try to make sense of things- but, even if I could not, to get on with them. (5.21)

Seth overcame his "blind distaste" for German through forcing himself to read the letters from Henny's friends, and "the humanity and the decency" expressed in the letters displaced his revulsion, allowing his old love for the language to revive (3.13). In a similar fashion, his feelings for Shanti revive when one day he begins writing the biography again (5.21). Seth is well aware of what he is doing in *Two Lives*, and near the end of the book he uses two images- a lens and a braid- to depict his consciousness of "the tension between authorial distance and personal immediacy" (5.22);

which is to say, the tension between the biography and the confession or memoir. To fully appreciate his achievement, the reader must be aware of the two distinct literary strains in *Two Lives*, but Seth's acknowledged skill as a writer relieves any tensions, as he skillfully intertwines his life with those of Shanti and Henny.¹⁹

The discovery of the trunk made possible the biography as we have it, and the letters were invaluable, but Seth was also intrigued by a Hebrew-German prayer-book, which he came to treat as a talisman, and twice he quotes the "humane ideal" of the litany:

Judaism teaches: 1. the unity of mankind.

It commands us therefore 2. to love our neighbour, 3. to protect our neighbour and his rights, 4. to be aware of his honour, 5. to honour his beliefs, 6. and to assuage his sorrows.

Judaism calls upon us...to bring about the loving fellowship of all mankind. (3.2, 3.5)

At the end of *From Heaven Lake*, Seth expressed the hope that individual goodwill might lead mankind to a sense of commonalty, and near the end of his consideration of Germany's role in the twentieth century, he again voices a hope that we might take a lesson to heart:

...the sense that the acts and decisions of ordinary individuals, trivial or momentous, may lead, sometimes by imperceptible gradations, sometimes by sudden jolts, and not even always in the same direction, towards making

the world a humane and reasonably secure home for all its denizens or a riven and uncertain place of grief and injustice, fear, hunger and pain. (3.33)

Unlike Fr. O'Hare in *The Golden Gate*, Seth is not given to overt preachment, and ordinarily he cautiously tempers his assertions, as he does in this instance, beginning the following paragraph with a disclaimer: "This may well smack of wishful thinking..." (3.33). Granted, "goodwill" and "friendship" might seem rather ordinary terms to carry the lofty burden of Seth's humane ideal, but if prayers for loving fellowship, expansive goodwill, and a humane humanity are dismissed by cynics as mere wishful thinking, it must also be admitted that Seth is expressing the wish that we all, in our ordinary commonalty, share.

Seth ended his biography with the justifying vision of the house at 18 Queens Road reinhabited, Shanti and Henny alive again in his mind and his book. It is likewise fitting and just that Seth, whom Franz Mahnert and Aunt Malchen would undoubtedly recognize as a "good" person, concludes his intertwined confession with a prayer of his own:

May we not be as foolish as we are almost bound to be. If we cannot eschew hatred, at least let us eschew group hatred. May we see that we could have been born as each other. May we, in short, believe in humane logic and perhaps, in due course, in love. (5.23)

Notes

¹ *Two Lives* (London: Little; New York: HarperCollins, 2005). References are to part and section rather than page number.

² Seth was working toward a PhD in economics at Stanford University when he chanced upon Charles Johnston's translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, which inspired him to abandon his dissertation and write his verse novel, *The Golden Gate*. For a concise account, see Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, *Vikram Seth: An Introduction* (Foundation / Cambridge UP India: New Delhi, 2008) 4-5.

³ For typical examples of critical praise, see Antony Beevor, "When Henny Met Shanti," rev. of *Two Lives*, *The Times* (London): Books 7 (3 Sep. 2005), who finds *Two Lives* "moving and illuminating," and Edward Luce, "What Lies Beneath: Vikram Seth Unearths the Sad Secrets of the Jewish Woman Who Married His Great Uncle," rev. of *Two Lives*, *The Financial Times* (London): Weekend Magazine 28 (17 Sep. 2005), who labels it an "extraordinary book." Many reviewers have particularly praised Seth's style: Beevor appreciates his "beautifully simple prose...the gift of a writer who wears his learning with an enchantingly light touch"; Hilary Mantel, "A Voyage Round My Uncle," rev. of *Two Lives*, *Sunday Telegraph* (11 Sep. 2005), finds his prose style "always restrained" and "assured"; Pankaj Mishra, "Two Lives: Aunt Henny and Uncle Shanti," *The New York Times* (6 Nov. 2005), borrows from Primo Levi to approve of Seth's writing as "unadorned and clear"; and Ed Smith, "Seth Tells All (Well, Almost)," Interview, *The Times* (London) (17 Sep. 2005), lauds Seth's "plain, simple prose" before referring to him as "an improbably gifted writer." The one criticism voiced by those who otherwise lavish

praise concerns the length (500 pages) of *Two Lives: Beevor*, for instance, feels that despite its "wonderful richness of detail," at times the book seems "rather long" and "heavy-going," and Rahul Jacob, "A Reluctant Genius," Interview, *The Financial Times* (London): Weekend Magazine 14 (22 Oct. 2005), also finds it "overly long."

⁴ This dramatic incident provides another example of the disjunction between family myth and unflattering fact. The favored family version is that "Shanti Uncle had delayed leaving because he had to perform an urgent extraction for someone in great pain," but this invented notion of noble sacrifice leaves Shanti shaking his head with impatience. In fact, he had not immediately followed orders to move back, but instead decided to wait a day "because his friends wanted to have a small farewell celebration for him that evening" (2.40).

⁵ Indeed, some reviewers wish that the biography had been a novel. Anita Desai, "Pilgrim's Progress," rev. of *Two Lives*, *The New York Review of Books* 53: 6 (6 Apr. 2006): 49, "can imagine a novelist or a playwright turning this story into a biting satire or a bitter farce," and Laila Lalami, "Seth's Portrait of Improbable Marriage," rev. of *Two Lives*, *The Boston Globe* (22 Jan. 2006), who unjustly faults *Two Lives* for providing an "incomplete portrait," would prefer a novel: "This might have made for a better book had Seth devoted his considerable talent to a novel based on Shanti and Henny's improbable yet lasting relationship..." This article should make clear that Desai and Lalami are misguided and mistaken on this point.

⁶ Here is Vikram's mother's reaction to Henny's typical greeting:

One evening we went to their house and parked our car on the opposite side of the road, next to Hendon Park. Uncle was upstairs, and Aunty Henny shouted out to him, "Shanti, Shanti, your relations are here." I said to her, "Aren't we your relations too?" and she smiled.

(Leila Seth, *On Balance*, 94)

The implication of Henny's smile, it seems clear, is that while Leila is technically correct, and the Seths are in fact her relations by marriage, Henny's manner of greeting them will not change, and she will continue to hold them all, with the notable exception of Vikram, at a comfortable distance. As Seth points out, "Even my mother, whom Aunt Henny liked, never graduated to being her niece" (1.2).

⁷ Seth makes use of Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (3.8) and Zdenek Lederer's *Ghetto Theresienstadt* (3.10). The last word Henny receives from her sister and mother, Lola's postcard from Auschwitz- Birkenau and Ella's from Theresienstadt, are reproduced on facing pages (3.6). Blake Morrison, "Journey to the Heart," rev. of *Two Lives*, *The Guardian* (17 Sep. 2005), notes that Seth tells the story of the death camps in a tone of "cold fury."

⁸ The extent to which Seth makes use of the letters has provoked opposing views. Nicholas Shakespeare, "Marmite: You Either Love It or You Hate It," rev. of *Two Lives*, *Daily Telegraph* (10 Oct. 2005), for instance, believes Seth "is overly respectful of letters from which he quotes too fully." In contrast, Marjorie Kehe, "Within *Two Lives*, So Many Stories," rev. of *Two Lives*, *The Christian Science Monitor* (25 Oct. 2005), feels that the letters form "one of the most fascinating sections of the book," and Sandip Roy, "An Aunt's Letters

Open Window on Exiles' Life: Family, Race, Evil Considered in Novelist's Memoir," rev. of *Two Lives*, *San Francisco Chronicle* (6 Nov. 2005), states approvingly that "the letters are amazing."

⁹ Vikram's father also felt the "regulated" nature of the household, remarking that when Henny hosted a bridge or dinner party, "everything had to run like clockwork" (4.3). However, as Lucy Hughes-Hallett, "Memoir: *Two Lives* by Vikram Seth," rev. of *Two Lives*, *The Sunday Times* (London) (4 Sep. 2005), perceptively points out, the orderliness of the Hendon household could no doubt be largely attributed to its being "the refuge of two people who had suffered appalling loss."

¹⁰ Henny had used a similar expression in a letter to Ilse Heydt:

- Ilselein, when sometimes I read old letters, I feel as if I am burrowing into a grave, and so you will, I am sure, understand that I can't visit you there anytime in the near future. (3.14)

¹¹ As Sandip Roy puts it, by the end of *Two Lives* Shanti and Henny "are not characters. They become people we know." William Grimes, "A Marriage's Mysteries, Solved by a Fond Nephew," rev. of *Two Lives*, *The New York Times* (2 Nov. 2005), praises the "loving, vivid portrait" of Shanti, "and the reader, like Mr. Seth, is reluctant to let him go when he finally dies at the age of 89." Kehe is more inclusive in her praise: "By the time you close this book you will find that you miss them, too."

¹² "Togetherness, Once Removed," Interview, rev. of *Two Lives*, *The Observer* (11 Sep. 2005).

¹³ Henny continued to encourage Vikram during his years at Stanford, although her letters also continually asked about his (lack of) progress towards his PhD. Not long before the publication of *The Golden Gate*, Henny inquires: "How is your thesis going? Do you find time to work on it?" At the end of the letter in which she expresses her and Shanti's delight at receiving a copy, Henny again asks: "Have you had any time to attend to your Ph.D.? Are you still working?" (1.13).

¹⁴ See Mishra's comment on Seth's reaction at Yad Vashem, which emphasizes its confessional nature: "Seth describes how his own research into the Holocaust briefly provoked a 'blind distaste' for the German language- a powerful confession of personal prejudice because he comes across throughout this book as attractively modest, sensitive and compassionate."

¹⁵ During the war, Henny heard nothing about the fates of her mother and sister. With regard to Germany's "final solution" to the "Jewish question," Seth writes: "Whatever she knew or hoped or feared or expected, Henny could not have imagined anything so pragmatic, evil and bizarre" (2.34). In offering himself as a moral example, Seth insists we should not act as the Old Masters of Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" would have it and turn leisurely away from tragedy in the manner of Brueghel's ploughman only to go on with our doggy lives. Instead, our knees should tremble with the force of our furious revulsion.

¹⁶ The strongest criticism of *Two Lives* is of Seth's German "diversion" (3.33), and James Urquhart, "The Dark Past of the Suburban Dentist," rev. of *Two Lives*, *The Independent* (4 Sep. 2005), is representative: "...Seth extrapolates into more general

meditations. Here *Two Lives* flounders. His rather bland pontifications on 'the effect of German history' add nothing to the narratives of Shanti and Henny..." On the contrary, these "meditations" are essential to the confessional strand of the book, but others who find fault with the digressions, regarding them as a false note in the biography, include Grimes, Luce, and Blake Morrison.

¹⁷ "Togetherness, Once Removed," Interview, rev. of *Two Lives*.

¹⁸ Blake Morrison, for example, thinks Seth "makes too much" of Shanti changing his will and his own outrage: "was it any more than an old man's paranoia and dementia?" Urquhart feels much the same, finding that Seth "obsessively pursues Shanti through hallucination and physical infirmity into a family spat over his will." Kehe, on the other hand, recognizes the confessional point about Shanti's last years: "And it is here that yet another story-within-a-story begins, as Seth tells of his uncle's final years and events that ultimately tested his own great love for Shanti."

¹⁹ While praising Seth as a "meticulous biographer," Sandip Roy also notes how Seth's "own story, from his days as an economics student at Stanford to his life as the author of *The Golden Gate* and *A Suitable Boy*, is braided through the book..." and Shakespeare remarks that the book might have been titled *Three Lives*, "since it is no less a portrait of Seth himself." Mokashi-Punekar uses two metaphors to make the same point: "... the book is as much a memoir as it is a biography, and the author acts as the reconstructing filter and a third in the braid of interwoven lives" (177). Reviewers who fail to credit the connection between the biographical and

confessional strands- such as Grimes and Urquhart- are the ones who most strongly criticize Two Live for what they perceive as faults in the biography.