

Did Pearl Harbor Change Everything?: The Deadly Sins of Biographers

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Carl Rollyson. *A Higher Form of Cannibalism?: Adventures in the Art and Politics of Biography*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005. pp. ix + 197; Carl Rollyson. *Biography: An Annotated Bibliography*. Backinprint.com, 2007. pp. 232; Nigel Hamilton. *Biography: A Brief History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. pp. 345; Ann Jefferson. *Biography and the Question of Literature in France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. pp. 448; Myriam Boucharenc. *L'Écrivain-reporter au coeur des années trente*. Villeneuve d'ascq Cédex: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2004. pp. 243.

A NUMBER OF INTRIGUING THEORETICAL PUBLICATIONS on the biographical enterprise have recently been published, offering a new opportunity to chart changes in the genre since the mid-nineteenth century, some of which have been driven by developments in journalism. Another key area for exploration is the tension between fictionalised biography and the genre as approached by historians. While an artificial distinction is sometimes posited between those whose primary focus is literary on the one hand, and scholarly writers on the other, writing well is just as important to non-fiction

writers as it is to novelists. And work that is historically verifiable will almost certainly better stand the test of time in any genre.

Carl Rollyson's *A Higher Form of Cannibalism?: Adventures in the Art and Politics of Biography* is a pleasant and colloquial exploration of American biography. Although Rollyson is a professor of English literature in New York, he presents himself here rather as a fellow biographer: he has written biographies of, among others, Rebecca West, Martha Gellhorn, Norman Mailer, and Susan Sontag. Rollyson draws a distinction between "low" and "high" biography, a distinction on which I will elaborate in this review, I hope in Rollyson's spirit. A bibliography of secondary literature on biography, edited by Rollyson, has been in circulation for years. Now a more professional edition of this work, *Biography: An annotated Bibliography*, has been published. This bibliography should be read by anyone interested in theoretical aspects of biography.

Nigel Hamilton, a biographer of John F. Kennedy who is currently writing a three-part biography of another former American president, Bill Clinton, has recently published a useful survey, *Biography: A Brief History*. In quick, easy-reading chapters, he explores the history of biographical writing from classical antiquity to the present. His book is certainly valuable for a student who would like to learn about biography as a genre, but it should be noted that Hamilton's observations, drawn from examples ranging over the entire history of the world, tend to be obvious ones. Moreover, some of the claims made in the book are downright absurd: "The upshot was that biography became not only the new symbol of democratic freedoms enjoyed in the West—especially for the way it challenged laws protecting the rich, the powerful, and the famous—but also the expression of a defining borderline separating East and West at the end of the twentieth century." (237) His dismissive first sentence in a small chapter devoted to biography in France also must be challenged. Hamilton asserts that "Biography had never taken root very deeply in France." (206) Fortunately, Ann Jefferson's recently published work shows this to be flagrant ignorance. *Biography and the Question of Literature in France* is an adventurous study in which

Jefferson evokes the French literary world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to theorize about “biographical approaches to literature and literary approaches to biography.” (23) In particular, her observations on the emergence of biographical texts in the French periodical press will be enlightening to those theorists of biography who are willing to step outside the dominant Anglo-Saxon tradition.

Commemorative versus Critical

Sidney Lee, editor of Britain’s *Dictionary of National Biography* (DNB), gave the Leslie Stephen Lecture, named for the DNB’s first editor, in 1911. In the lecture, entitled *Principles of Biography*, Lee demonstrated that these principles were products of their age. “Biography exists to satisfy a natural instinct in man—the commemorative instinct.”¹ At the time of Lee’s speech, a type of biography was already emerging that would undermine the commemorative principle, namely the critical, interpretive biography. Lee cannot be blamed for failing to foresee that certain developments in the historical sciences and journalism would lead to a new kind of biography.

Commemorative biography already had a long history. Biographies were published on the occasion of anniversaries and other commemorative milestones to remember those men and women who had lived remarkable lives in the public eye. Such works still appear today. Commemorative biography, in seeking to consolidate the subject’s reputation, is seldom scholarly. The biographical subject is seen as a unique person, rather than a representative of his time, environment, or group. The commemorative biography is celebratory, often reinforcing the good things that we already knew about a particular person. Such biographies have often been authorized, or indeed even commissioned. Intensive research into the social context in which the biographical subject lived is generally lacking. Instead, the author may be generous with stylistic devices, sometimes with success.

The critical interpretive biography, however, is based on diverse sources, both personal and indirect. It situates the biographical subject in a particular context, and addresses the extent to which he was unique in his environment. The interpretive biography is usually an unauthorized biography, and the author generally adopts the disciplinary conventions of a historian rather than the techniques of a literary author.

In some respects, the development of biography as a critical genre is analogous to developments in journalism. The interpretive biography evolved in the periodical press as a reaction to current events, thus playing a role in public opinion. In England, France, and the Netherlands, countless biographical magazines were published during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Little scholarly research has been conducted to establish the extent to which journalism, literature, and current affairs determined the content of those magazines. Samuel Johnson's writings on current affairs and biography are often seen as heralding the modern biographical genre. His "twopenny" periodical, *The Rambler*, appeared from 1750 to 1752. Johnson drew upon a variety of sources for his biographical works, not only the conventional published sources, but also private correspondence, diaries, and information derived from conversations. He used this method to write a biography of the young actor and poet Richard Savage, which was published in 1744, shortly after Savage's death. The result was an almost exclusive focus on Savage's life, and especially the sordid or salacious details that illuminated Savage's moral failings. Savage's poetry is hardly mentioned.² James Boswell's famous biography of Johnson stresses Johnson's focus on detailed journalistic information to build a complete understanding of the activities of the biographical subject. Indeed, Boswell himself adopted this approach and did not hesitate to include "even journalistic, gossipy detail and color" when writing about Johnson's life. (Hamilton, 94) Johnson was the catalyst for the many biographically inspired periodicals that would appear in later years.

La Biographie contemporaine

The tradition of interpretive biography writing is not rooted in the discipline of history or in literature, but in journalism. A biographical culture flourished in the French press. The nineteenth-century journalist Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly published articles about particular persons under titles such as "*Les Blagueurs en littérature*" and "*Les Chroniqueurs*," first in newspapers and magazines, then as pamphlets, and later compiled in book form.³ Barbey d'Aurevilly was free-spirited enough to make use of theories that would put his own journalistic practices into perspective. In his view, journalism and biography are alike: they form a conspiracy against history. They are but temporary products, but historians will come to rely on them as if they encompass eternal truths. Biographers are predators in need of prey; if there is no prey, they invent one, or base one on malicious rumours. Biographers exploit their subjects for publicity, just as is often said of journalists.

Halfway through the nineteenth century, Eugène de Mirecourt presided over the publication of a series of pamphlets in France, of which a hundred issues appeared, under the title *Les Contemporains*. Under constant pressure to be topical, the word "*contemporain*" was one that journalists gladly adopted. As early as 1830, dozens of novels written by journalists appeared in France, with subtitles like "*roman contemporain*" or "*roman d'actualité*."⁴ Later in the century, Anatole France collated his "*fiction d'actualité*"—we would now call it a literary chronicle—which he first published in *L'Écho de Paris* and in *Le Figaro*, into his four-part *L'Histoire contemporaine*.⁵ De Mirecourt did something similar with his weekly short biography of a living contemporary, the "*biographie contemporaine*." De Mirecourt was a journalist, but he promoted himself as "*le biographe*." De Mirecourt's four-part *Histoire contemporaine: Portraits et silhouettes au XIX siècle*, which reprinted and supplemented his earlier pamphlets, appeared in 1876. The form of publication was not only different, from pamphlet to book, but the ambition and status also changed. As the slightly adjusted title suggests—*Les Contemporains*

became *Histoire contemporaine*—the subject of interest was less the individual figure—Musset, Hugo, Lamartine, or Balzac—and more the contemporary history of which these persons formed a part.⁶

In the Netherlands, biographical magazines were established in the nineteenth century that let current affairs dictate their choice of subjects. The Dutch magazine *Mannen van Beteekenis* (Significant Men/Men of Honour) published its first issue, which dealt with German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, in 1870. According to the editors, this was not because he was such an admirable man, but because the name Bismarck had appeared so often in the Dutch press during the Franco-German war, and Dutch readers knew little about this German statesman.⁷ Such biographical magazines played an active role in shaping public opinion on the activities of eminent persons. In France, a written sketch as a response to current events was called “*une biographie contemporaine*.” This was a significant break with commemorative biography.

In journalism in particular, the “*biographie contemporaine*” was used to test prevailing concepts of high culture by examining the lives of the key players in this culture. For newspapers, the biographical form offered a more intimate mode of keeping up to date with current events, and those of name and fame could be judged according to society’s ideal of a worthy life. Every available means was employed for that purpose, including the revelation of intimate details of the lives of famous people. Journalism was meant to cater to the vulgar needs of the general public. The newspaper was meant for the common people, the book for the civilized citizen. In other words, the journalist did not serve a higher purpose. Public opinion was a sleeping monster that could awaken at any moment and bring turmoil into the streets.

This development naturally encountered opposition among those who came to believe that newspapers were merely a means by which the common people could express their ideas about the bourgeoisie and elite. Current affairs and news were, according to these critics, phenomena that should be absent in the lives of the real intellectuals and pure artists. It was an attitude that dated back to

what Baudelaire called “*la tyrannie de la circonstance*,” by which he meant that one should not let oneself be driven to insanity by the issues of day. In the autumn of 1927, the magazine *Margins* even devoted three special issues to “*Les Maladies actuelles de la littérature*.” There had been a tremendous shift in literacy, but mass culture and public opinion were, in the eyes of many, still dubious phenomena.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the biographer could escape from this journalistic devaluation by writing a commemorative biography, thus presenting himself as the hagiographer of a noble person. According to Nigel Hamilton, interpretive biographies appeared the moment biographers directed their attention to the vices in the lives of their heroes.

Lust

Lust seems inextricably linked to the biographical genre. Why is that so? I fear that a confusion of definitions is at stake. The tabloids promote what is sometimes called “human interest” in journalism, little stories about famous people’s unimportant personal affairs, adultery, and other intimate details. Just as there is a connection between the interpretive biography and journalism, there is also a relationship between the so-called human interest magazines and commemorative biography. Hamilton reinforces the widespread misconception that the concept of disclosure in interpretive biography is identical to the exploitation of the biographical subject’s sex life. To Hamilton, the distinction between old and new biography rests on the question of whether or not a biographer focuses heavily on private matters. He has no qualms about pairing the development of modern biography with the quantity of information about biographical subjects’ sex lives. In a similarly blunt fashion, Hamilton links French theories of biography to all kinds of ideological nonsense, noting that “the end of biography seemed to French academics almost logical once existentialism and structuralism gave way...to

poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism.” (206) Hamilton further writes that Freud was a harmful exploiter of biography, and tops it all off by suggesting, without any trace of irony, that the 1941 Japanese attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor ushered in a new era for Western biography. Once this attack occurred, he asserts, “the fate of democracy lay no longer in critical, incisive biography but in the response of ordinary and extraordinary soldiers, sailors, and airmen.” (185) In fact, the rise of the interpretive biography preceded the tabloids’ preoccupation with human interest, and came before the modern biographical focus on the bedroom secrets of actors and singers.

The nature of the research that is conducted beforehand marks the real difference between the commemorative and critical biography. The author of a commemorative biography cannot derive any benefit from sources that dispute the good reputation of his hero, and therefore will not work exhaustively to unearth those sources. These two research traditions result in two types of biographies, the “low” and “high” biography, Carl Rollyson notes in his beautiful collection of essays, *A Higher Form of Cannibalism?: Adventures in the Art and Politics of Biography*. (52) In contrast to the principle guiding the young research discipline of cultural studies, “low” and “high” do not refer to the *subject* of research itself. Cultural studies investigates low culture phenomena like soap operas and pulp fiction, but, in biographical research, “low” refers to the *kind* of research that has been conducted. Therefore, the subject in a “low biography” could be a representative of “high culture,” while a “high biography” could be a biography of a pulp-writer or popular singer. High biography is almost by definition critical biography, while low biography may include the old-fashioned commemorative biography. But while commemorative biography may claim artistry, it is not literature. Unlike a novelist, a biographer needs to accept, with some humility, that a biography has a shelf life. We all know: pride goes before a fall.

Pride

The expressions “*littérature*” and “*biographie*” were both coined in the eighteenth century, and the combination of literature and biography, culminating in the “biographical novel,” is also a phenomenon originating in the eighteenth century.⁸ As early as the nineteenth century, the meanings of the two terms began to diverge, and biography increasingly became the domain of the historian. But there were final convulsions. In the 1930s, the so called *vie romancée* made its appearance, a genre which was disparaged by the famous historian Johan Huizinga. He condemned the practice of inventing situations or events in the life of the hero of a biography, even if it was done with imagination. This was, according to Huizinga, “an unworthy concession to laziness, and a shameful victory for sensation.”⁹

In recent years, this phenomenon has given rise to another: the biography as a novel. Or more precisely: the biographer who thinks he is a novelist, like Vladimir Nabokov in his biographical portrait of the Russian author and satirist Nikolai Gogol. The curious thing is that real novelists today do not wish to be associated with biographers at all. A thick anthology could be collected of quotations in which novelists depict biographers as profiteers, vindictive losers, and so on, qualities that are also ascribed to literary critics. But it does not stop there. Over the last few years, many novels have been published in which one of the characters is a biographer. We are familiar with novels and films featuring a sloppy, alcoholic, and unreliable reporter, a journalist who cannot even dream of being the politician or sportsman he writes about. Biographers in novels are not only unreliable, but also deeply frustrated and yearning for revenge, because they cannot be writers or artists themselves. There was a time when reporters were stock characters in novels, then came the photographers, followed by the obituary writers in novels such as Porter Shreve’s *The obituary writer* (2000) and Andrej Kurkov’s *Smert’ postoronnego* (1996). Now it seems to be the biographers’ turn. A.S. Byatt’s novel *The Biographer* (2000) and *Bal Masque*

(2007) by the Spanish writer Elia Barceló are examples of novels in which the biographer plays a leading role. And this role is seldom flattering.

A recent novel in this genre, published in 2007, is *Exit Ghost* by Philip Roth. Roth's aspirant biographer consults the main character, Nathan Zuckerman, himself a celebrated writer, on the life of the writer E.I. Lonoff, whom they both admire.¹⁰ Zuckerman is outraged when the biographer confronts him with an alleged incident of incest from Lonoff's life, an incident Lonoff himself described earlier in a novel. What is really fascinating here is that Roth himself does what he accuses the biographer of doing: he describes in the person of Lonoff the life and work of his old friend, Bernard Malamud. You can read *Exit Ghost* a dozen times, but the biographical information that really leads to a better understanding of this book cannot be found in the book itself. Literary authors will certainly close ranks and condemn Roth's future biographer, who will, of course, have to figure out why Roth exploited the life of his old friend Malamud like this in a novel.

Is it so important to be able to classify a book under a specific genre? Yes, it is: it is an unwritten code that we wish to know whether something is true or false. This is certainly important when real and universally known persons are accused of murder and incest.

There is nothing wrong with using history in fiction. Dominique Noguez's book, *Lénine Dada*, plays with the fact that, in 1916, Lenin lived in the same street in Zurich where the Dadaists in Cabaret Voltaire made their anti-art.¹¹ Lenin loved mystifications and disguises. Noguez provides astonishing historical material to suggest that Lenin was involved in Cabaret Voltaire. He even claims, based on archival research, that the poems of Tristan Tzara were actually written by Lenin. However, no reader will really believe that the Bolsheviks carried out the Dada program in Russia or that the Russian Revolution was a tribute to Alfred Jarry who, according to Noguez, once wrote: "Beat them to a pulp, those Moscovians." (37)

Curt Gentry's 1991 biography of J. Edgar Hoover portrays the founder of the FBI who, as director of this agency, persevered for

forty years and coped with eight presidents, as a perverted manipulator who believed that every man could be accused of being subversive if one listened in on his telephone conversations long enough. This book also shows that the unmarried Hoover persecuted during the day what he himself yearned for at night: homosexuality. Marc Dugain wrote a wonderful novel, *La Malédiction d'Edgar*, which is based on this historical notion.¹²

Noguez and Dugain vivify a historical episode and perhaps offer deeper understanding of the problematics where sources remain silent. No reader of *Lénine Dada* or *La Malédiction d'Edgar* will believe that everything happened exactly as Noguez or Dugain describe, but the novel genre serves to clarify that which could not be sustained by facts. The same thing happens in Pierre Assouline's novel, *Lutetia*, about the Hotel Lutetia in Paris. A three-page appendix references the literature and document sources used to ground the novel in recognizable historical truths. Assouline applies a masterful solution to make the reader accept the combination of history and novel in which characters with psychological depth play their parts: the story is told by the hotel detective Edouard Kiefer. "I knew everyone, but few knew me," the fictional Kiefer explains. Everyone understands that Kiefer is made up and the rest is not.

Biographers will have to make peace with the fact that their work, in contrast to novels, is unlikely to last forever. Ernst Pawel's 1984 biography of Franz Kafka, *The Nightmare of Reason*, is, in my opinion, one of the best biographies ever written, but it will not survive for more than a few generations, while we expect that *Das Schloß* or *Die Verwandlung* surely will last for a very long time.¹³

Biographers who wish to be part of the literary scene often state in interviews that their books are creative and not academic works. But this is tantamount to admitting that they are poorly written. In fact, there is no relationship between good or bad research and attractively written books. It is also strange that biographers who research carefully in the archives should be afraid to join the tradition from which they originate: the reportage-novel.

L'Écrivain-reporter

England has a strong tradition of literary journalists, like Daniel Defoe and George Orwell, but France has had by far the most authors in this category. “*L'écritvain-reporter*” was a hero of the people in the interwar years. Figures such as Pierre Mac Orlan, Joseph Kessel, Pierre Hamp, Paul Nizan, Roger Vailland, Colette, Blaise Cendrars, and Georges Simenon were at least as famous in the 1920s and 30s for their journalistic work in *Le Matin*, *Paris-Soir*, *Gringoire*, or the even more sensational *Detective*, as for the novels they later wrote. Albert Londres’ 1925 work *La Chine en folie* and Henri Béraud’s works of travel reportage, *Ce que j’ai vu à Moscou* (1925), *Ce que j’ai vu à Berlin* (1926) and *Ce que j’ai vu à Rome* (1929) were inspirations to these writer-reporters. In fact, the French researcher Myriam Boucharenc describes the *reporter-écritvain* as the step-brother of the *écritvain-reporter* in her study analyzing the interaction between journalism and literature in the interbellum. Boucharenc’s *L'Écrivain-reporter au coeur des années trente* shows that it is impossible to overestimate the importance of journalism in the cultural life of the interbellum. It was the source of an influential genre of non-fiction, produced by non-academic writers, that was read by tens of thousands. An interwar *écritvain-reporter* wrote in a visual style, like a scriptwriter does, and presented himself in his story as a tough explorer, or smart detective with a passion for facts and truth. Such adventurers were free from the duty to report in an objective manner that restricts today’s journalists. Storytellers were less forced to obey the compelling laws of topicality and public opinion; they just had to ensure that they entertained or surprised the readers of *Le Parisien* or *Le Matin*. But one rule could not be questioned: each story should be unbelievable but true. That rule was the professional code that separated them from the authors who wrote plausible but false stories. Once they met this condition, nearly everything was permitted.

Many of these journalists pursued two goals. In the popular press, they wrote sensational news stories. In their spare time, they

wrote literary texts or—in a quest to make money—detective novels. The authors whom Boucharenc analyzes combined these two activities, writing newspaper reports that later served as material for their books. While the stories were not fictional, the style was literary. No one will question that Émile Zola was a novelist, but his work was inspired by the journalistic approach and was written as a documented chronicle, a reportage-novel. Henri Béraud remarked on the ambition driving this bold mix of genres: “Rien, après tout, ne nous empêche de croire que le reportage sera la littérature de demain.” Journalistic reports would be the literature of the future. Star reporters for major newspapers traveled to Russia, the Far East, or Africa in search of news stories that would be printed prominently on the front page, often in serial form. Jules Verne’s *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingt jours* was often a model; Gaston Stiegler, for example, published a popular travel-reportage in *Le Matin* in 1901 under the title “Tour du monde en soixante-trois jours.”¹⁴ These enormously successful stories were often subsequently re-published in book form. Béraud’s 1927 book, *Le Flâneur salarié*, suggests that the prestige attached to being a literary author, an artist, in effect, guided the direction of the work of these journalistic authors.¹⁵

In addition to the literary implications of reportage during the interbellum years, it is also likely that there was a connection between modernity in art or philosophy and the allure of mobility, preferably fast mobility. The designation “flying reporter” already suggests such a link. Let us explore that thought with biography in the back of our minds: the concepts of modernity and the seductiveness of mobility.

It is not such a strange concept. The British-based literary researcher, Martina Lauster, in her study of the physiology of the nineteenth-century journalist, theorises about the *flâneur* (idler) who was so often featured in French journalism and literature, and typifies him as an icon of modernism. The *flâneur* exists by the grace of his mobility. He travels about the city tracing clues to gather information about writers or actors in order to write a topical biographical sketch, hoping to capture the essence of the time in an essay. He is a

Bohemian freelancer. And it is clear that the *flâneur* does not base his biography on conventional sources. The biographer is not a *flâneur*, but they do share some traits. Let us consider the biographer as a historian-in-action. Not only does he study conventional sources, but he also investigates a diverse array of sources to determine whether they might be relevant to the person he is studying. This means that he has to take the byways, the less trodden paths.

How It Started

The word “biography,” in the sense of a history of a private life, was first used by John Dryden in 1683 in a preface to his English translation of *Lives* by Plutarch. It was Thomas Fuller who, in his 1662 work, *The History of the Worthies of England*, used the word “biographist” for the first time.¹⁶ Still in the same year, the word “biographer” appeared. (Hamilton, 80-81) Biographist is an admirable word. In Dutch, it can be associated with the word “bakkenist,” that is, the sidecar passenger. This association can be used as an illustrative metaphor: the driver is the reporter writing daily articles for the newspaper, the biographer is the person who sits at the side, observing and drawing thoughtful correlations for his book. It took more than one hundred and fifty years before the modern meaning of “biography” was established. At the end of the nineteenth century, a “biography” could refer to several different phenomena: a news section in a newspaper, a biographical entry in an encyclopaedia, and even a mobile cinema where the first films were shown.

In the nineteenth century, the so-called biographical encyclopaedia took root in Germany, England, France, and probably a number of other countries as well. Indeed, many sizeable biographies were written during the second half of the nineteenth century, but prior to that, the genre of the biographical encyclopaedia was very popular, an impressive example of commemorative biography. Louis-Gabriel Michaud published his fifty-two part *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne* between 1811 and 1828. In England,

the genre caught on a bit later. Leslie Stephen was responsible for the sixty-six volume *Dictionary of National Biography*, which appeared between 1885 and 1901. In his 1911 inaugural address, Sidney Lee singled Stephen out as a source of inspiration and as a theoretician of biography. Biographical encyclopaedias commissioned by organized professions offer further examples of uncritical idealization. Hamilton notes the appearance of such works as *Lives of Distinguished Shoemakers* (1849), *Heroes of Industry* (1866), *Lives of the Electricians* (1887) and *Heroes of the Telegraph* (1891). (128)

Biography has been called the bastard child of science and literature, a sweeping statement that ultimately does not lead to any deeper understanding. A clear distinction has to be made between the form of a biography and the *research* that has been conducted for it, and not—as one might think—a distinction between the form and content of a biography. But the form of a biography should also not stand apart from its sources. As Leon Edel, a biography-theorist and biographer of Henry James, wrote in his 1978 manifesto in the first edition of the journal *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, “Biography should take its form from its materials.”¹⁷ Writing a biography based on insufficient research is the hallmark of “low biography.” Certainly there are enough readers longing for *vies romancées*, but a *vie romancée* has little to do with biography. A biography based on scanty research will be faulty. If we observe the research conducted by a rigorous biographer, one can conclude that it is the research of a historian. The biographer dramatizes the story of a life, just as any good historian will also dramatize his or her story. Both biographer and historian strive to write a narrative that is beautiful rather than tedious. Like the historian, the biographer may know more than his subject. The dramatic event of a last poem, or a last farewell, is known to the biographer and reader as the *last* poem and *last* farewell, but not to the subject. The biographer, as Jacques le Goff once wrote, can base his work on an “*histoire-problème*,” to anchor it in historical theory as well as providing a dramatic touch.¹⁸

The term “literary biography” raises further questions. It might be used for biographies written in a literary style, or for

biographies of literary authors. Fortunately, in recent years, the less confusing expression “writer’s biography” has made its appearance, just as we call a biography of an artist an “artist’s biography” and that of a sportsman a “sports biography.”

A biographical approach to literary texts is something different again. This approach is derived from journalism and originates from a rejection of analytical textual studies of literature. The American New Critics strongly influenced European literary scholars in the 1960s. They believed that research into literature should only deal with the text, and that the meaning of a novel could only be inherent in the work itself. Biographical knowledge of the author was, in a way, prohibited. In the United States, Leon Edel effectively opposed the New Critics as early as 1959 with his book *Literary Biography*.¹⁹ As a result, the influence of the New Critics’ great propagandists, René Wellek and Austin Warren, was already limited in the United States by the late fifties. But the theories of New Criticism unfortunately became popular in Europe. In juxtaposition to the approach of the New Critics is the argument that the personality of a writer is a decisive factor in the assessment of his work. But among those who favour this biographical approach, there is a split into at least two different schools. On the one hand, there is the approach of Oscar Wilde, who believed that the artist’s life was indeed an important key to understanding literature. There was no need, however, for biographers to illuminate an artist’s background, as the artist’s life was already part of his oeuvre. In this sense, writers’ own lives were the best manifestation of their genius. Biographers themselves were therefore, according to Wilde, not only unnecessary, but also hazardous to literature. Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869) articulated a different approach. He wrote that, for a proper understanding of literature, it is necessary to understand the author as part of his context. Literature and personality should be considered as one, and therefore Sainte-Beuve encouraged biographical research. Reviewers of literary texts have always been fascinated by biographical information, because it can justify their opinions of literary texts, and because it attracts readers who still, in

a certain way, wish to assign “truth” to literature, and to connect it to the reality outside literature.

It is because literary texts are highly regarded that biographers so often present themselves as literary writers. A biographer, according to this view, can function like a novelist, deriving material from the real world and transforming it into a work of art. Such biographers, ironically, emphasize the opposite of what literary critics of novels find fascinating in literary texts: they do not point to the biographical treasures in their work, but rather draw attention to the fictional quality of it.²⁰ But if they are not literary authors, are biographers then historians? Not quite.

Nigel Hamilton cites an anecdote related by Joseph Addison, who was the biographer of Cato the Elder. Addison complained in 1715 that he knew of fellow biographers who were impatiently awaiting the deaths of famous contemporaries, an impatience he likened to that of the writers of newspaper obituaries. (85-86) This reproach—that biographers seek glory on the backs of others—is also heard today with reference to lawyers and journalists. But never is it said that dentists earn their keep by causing pain to others or that teachers live off children’s ignorance. Yet, Addison’s remark is interesting. At the end of the eighteenth century, there was a quiet understanding that one writes a biography only once the subject is deceased—a scruple that does not impinge upon today’s writers of popular biographies. See, for example, the already well-stocked shelves of biographies about the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy.

Besides Addison’s comparison to the writing of obituaries, there is something else that is fascinating about his reproach. The importance of a person’s life was traditionally the only criteria for a biography or biographical sketch, as Plutarch already demonstrated in the first century A.D. in his *Parallel Lives*. But in Addison’s remark lies the implication that death is a good reason to bring a well-rounded life into the limelight. Like an obituary writer, the eighteenth-century biographer suddenly saw the *topicality* of an eminent person’s death. This topicality was a means to conquer the readers’ market. It is illustrated, for example, by the biographies of

those who had been condemned to death. In the eighteenth century, we see the phenomenon of biographies as pamphlets, which were literally sold at the market during, and shortly after, the execution of a condemned criminal.²¹ These so-called “criminal biographies” nearly always had the characteristics of journalistic reports.

“Biography makes better history than history itself,” writes Ann Jefferson in her inspirational study, *Biography and the Question of Literature in France*. (91) The argument given for this adage by Louis-Gabriel Michaud is that biography provides us with details about human habits in a certain period. The biographer should then have an eye for detail and should be interested in the question of what exactly these details tell us about the described person and his environment. The biographer’s occupation is necessarily an interdisciplinary one, just as the journalist is a generalist. That is why a biographer is preferably someone who begins with a specialist background, but then branches into a biography.

The choice of research subject raises another, potentially paradoxical, question. Does a particular person become the subject because he or she is representative of a larger topic or because he or she is unique? We would read an interview with a soldier in Afghanistan to satisfy our curiosity about the NATO mission in that country, not to know more about the unique personality of each of the soldiers who have been sent there. A journalist may look for the most average interlocutor. A biographer works the other way around. His choice of subject is meant to emphasize the uniqueness of his hero, but, to achieve this aim, the high biography must include considerable context. This will demonstrate the extent to which the subject is truly unique and to what extent he was the product of his time, his occupation, his social class, or literary trend. This contextualization can be taken too far. It is unnecessary, when writing a biography about a person, to write the entire history of humankind. Robert Musil is an important writer, the author, among other works, of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, but the 2026-page biography of Musil by Karl Corino, which exhaustively treats the political devel-

opment of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland in the first half of the twentieth century, errs in this respect.²²

In low biography, the biographer uses the subject's uniqueness as point of departure, takes it as a given, and searches for information to substantiate this assertion. The freedom fighter becomes more of a freedom fighter, the football star becomes even more exceptional than we already knew he was, and so forth. The high biography will tie the subject's uniqueness in with his representativeness, and thus the person's feats become relative. Whether it is intentional or not, the modern, and thus critical, biography inevitably adopts the characteristics of a debunking book, which may create the impression that the results are the product of a prejudiced exercise. One can be disappointed or angry about it and vent one's grievances. It would be just as sensible as a plea for the establishment of a newspaper that would emphasize good news.

Wrath

To be prejudiced even before one starts working on a biography is a form of wrath. Germaine Greer, who once alleged that biographers are rapists who sacrifice their subjects to their proclivity for literary oppression, recently published a biography of Ann Hathaway.²³ Greer's principal goal in this biography, which appears under the anti-feminist title, *Shakespeare's Wife*, seems to be to indicate that all biographers of Shakespeare are women-haters, especially the most recent of them, Stephen Greenblatt. The biographer reveals, in her fury, that none of Shakespeare's biographers looked for the name Hathaway when they consulted church registers, parish archives, and other archival sources. That may be true, but Greer's own biography, which is clearly about Ann Hathaway, seems to indicate that Greer herself resisted the temptation to take on such donkey work. Thus, it falls into the category of low biography.

Former *Daily Telegraph* journalist, and biographer of Mussolini, Nicholas Farrell, is also one who would rather follow his own

ideology instead of dispassionately investigating the origins of his hero's beliefs. Farrell believes it is possible that fascism may have a great future in the twenty-first century. And to show that he is attracted to the idea, he lives in Predappio, the Italian town where Mussolini was born and buried.²⁴ "We live in a post-communist era and there are indications that we are moving towards a post-democratic era. Thus the point may have been reached where it is possible to revise Mussolini's image." By the first page of Farrell's biography, the reader is told that he should not think that he is dealing with a villain. Mussolini saved the lives of thousands of Jews, "far more than Oscar Schindler ever did." Such an introduction certainly awakens one's curiosity and seems to be interpretive, but with such preconceived motives, Farrell does not give the impression of being a reliable biographer. This impression is reinforced when he ends his biography in the same vein. Mussolini's death is to this day surrounded by conspiracy theories. Farrell hints that Italian communists and other leftists murdered Mussolini out of fear that fascism would, if given the chance, develop into socialism without a class struggle. In Farrell's "new vision," fascism has a great future on the horizon. A certain wrath lies buried in this biography about the way that Mussolini has been treated until this day. Farrell gives no outward sign of his own ideological motives.

There are many examples of wrath in biographies, accounts of lives that have been written with hidden ideological agenda. To exploit biography solely as a debunking instrument is a vice. To tie the private to the public in a nuanced manner always leads to a milder approach and a fuller understanding of one's fellow human being, and, through that, a better understanding of history. That has been the approach of the best political historians for a very long time. That is not the same as justifying the acts or statements of the biographical subject. That Hitler, Stalin, and others engaged in wicked practices is something we all know without the aid of their biographies. A biographer needs to have some level of intuition to remain on close terms with virtue and vice and still have the ability to

write the story with the mildness and empathy that yields fuller insights.

Barbey d'Aurevilly's allegation that biography has more to do with journalism than with literature is probably right: biography offers a means of popularizing history. This trend developed in eighteenth-century newspapers, but was especially fed by the rise of a press aimed at mass appeal. Since the abolition of tax on daily newspapers in the second half of the nineteenth century in most European countries, newspapers have become accessible to a broader segment of the population. At the same time, this institutional change led to newspapers devoting more attention to topics that would interest the "ordinary man," stories about well-known politicians, explorers, writers and criminals. Biography became big business, just like the news, as long as it was presented in a dramatic and attractive manner. Biographers began to use the same methods as journalists: eye-witnesses and family members were subjected to interviews, a method historians have traditionally disdained. Biographical texts, like journalistic texts, became the raw materials for the later work of historians. The newspaper writes the history of a day, the biography the history of a life.

With journalism increasingly becoming a tool to judge political or literary culture, biography similarly became a genre that held up ideals, providing examples of noble celebrities who have made the world a better place. The same questions about professionalization and standards of work have been raised about both biography and journalism. The latter occupation has become more systematic, with a greater emphasis on formal training since the 1930s or so. Just as with journalists, it is a holy maxim to the biographer that the reader should be able to trust the reliability of the text, that it should be attributable to sound sources.

Jane Kramer's 1988 book, *Europeans*, was based upon material originally compiled for *The New Yorker*. She used the fates of a few individuals, seven biographical profiles, to describe social changes in the European countryside. Biography was the form through which Kramer chose to write the recent history of Europe.

Included was the touching story of Fernande Pelletier, a French farmer's wife in the heart of the Périgord, who truly believed that the agrarian policies of Edgard Pisani, under the presidency of Charles de Gaulle, which called for an increase in scale as well as radical technological changes, would only have a superficial effect on her life. Through the trials and tribulations of Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho, Kramer sketched a probing image of the Portuguese Revolution of 1974 and its aftermath.²⁵ This method of work was also used in 1902 by Jules Huret, a well-known French reporter who wandered through France, Poland, and Austria for months on end and used personal interviews to determine Europe's social state. Kramer, Huret, and other reporters like them, not only looked for institutional sources, but also humanized the knowledge they gleaned from them. This is identical to the working method of the biographer, or at least the "high" biographer.

There is, of course, no clear-cut definition of what constitutes a good biography. Naturally, the ideal biography is well written, with a form that owes more to journalism. It must also make it clear that a life can only be understood in its relation to a whole historical context. The research methodology must include use of all available sources, with oral sources approached in an even-handed way, and every assertion substantiated by a source, which is the norm in both journalism and history. The subject's private life should be used to explain and provide context for what is public. Thus, the extensive attention that is paid to J. Edgar Hoover's secret homosexual life is respectable and even necessary as this side of his life is important in the assessment of his decades-long work as head of the FBI.

Conclusion

A good biographer does not strive towards comprehensiveness: there is nothing as dull as the biographer who tries to incorporate every fact that has been collected. Instead, the biographer's approach should revolve around focused research questions. In asking the

research questions, it is better to be modest. A biography has a shelf life and its shelf life will not be extended by asking more ambitious research questions. By asking a topical question, the chances are greater that the reader will appreciate the biography, and without contemporary appreciation a biography has no future. With the form, we can experiment to our heart's content. Of course, we would never read the biographies of James Joyce's daughter or Shakespeare's wife if we were not interested in James Joyce or Shakespeare. Changing the perspective from which a story is told is an experiment with form, but at the same time, an original arrangement of research materials can also lead to new insights. Thus the French historian Jules Michelet writes that the reign of Louis XIV can be divided into two periods: the period *before* and the period *after* the king developed a sinus problem.²⁶ It may go too far to link the boils suffered by Anton Philips' second cousin, Karl Marx, which he developed after overindulging in Dutch cherry jam in the Phillips' family home in the Netherlands, to the passages of *Das Kapital* that Marx wrote while a guest of the Phillips family, but it is an intriguing thought nonetheless. In the recently published biography of Einstein, written by Walter Isaacson, interesting links are drawn between Einstein's love of playing the violin and the unorthodox manner in which he approached the natural sciences. But before one can allow oneself to indulge in similar experiments, one needs to have engaged in the rigorous work of high biography.

As more examples of public self-reflection and self-congratulation, as well as published diaries, internet blogs, and radio and television interviews, are sent into the public sphere, the need for critical interpretive biography increases. More accessible information means that the need for a sifting of the information increases. The original meaning of biography was an encyclopaedic piece about an important person. Now, the vision of the biographer takes pride of place. The simple facts have become easily accessible, and for that we no longer need a biographer. But the interpretive biography faces a golden future. Journalism is facing increasing pressure to deliver more human interest stories, gossip about famous people, and the

media reports more and more about the same thing. The need for an authentic story to be told can only increase.

Notes

- ¹ Sidney Lee, *Principles of Biography*, The Leslie Stephen Lecture, Delivered at Senate House, Cambridge, 13 May 1911 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 7.
- ² Samuel Johnson, *Life of Savage*, ed. Clarence Tracy (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971).
- ³ J. Barbey D'Aurevilly, *Les Ridicules du temps* (Paris: Éd. Rouveyre et G. Blond, 1883). The seventh edition appeared in 2003 as a reprint by Phénix Éditions.
- ⁴ Marie-Ève Thérénty, *La Littérature au quotidien. Poétiques journalistiques au XIX^e siècles* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007), 124-152.
- ⁵ Anatole France, *La Vie littéraire* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1888).
- ⁶ Hans Renders, "Actualiteit van biografica," *Nieuw Letterkundig Magazijn* 25 (2007): 16-23.
- ⁷ Editorial, *Mannen van Beteekenis in onzen Tijd*, issue 1, Haarlem 1870.
- ⁸ Ann Jefferson, *Biography and the Question of Literature in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also: Hans Renders, "Mannen van Beteekenis: Ontstaan en groei van de biografie in de 19^{de} eeuw," *Geschiedenis Magazine* 42 (2007): 28-32.
- ⁹ Johan Huizinga, *Cultuurhistorische verkenningen* (Haarlem: H.D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1929), 46.
- ¹⁰ Philip Roth, *Exit Ghost* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).
- ¹¹ Dominique Noguez, *Lénine Dada* (Paris: Laffont, 1989).
- ¹² Curt Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991); Marc Dugain, *La Malédiction d'Edgar* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2005).
- ¹³ Ernst Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984).
- ¹⁴ Marc Martin, "Le Voyage du grand reporter, de la fin du XIX^e siècle aux années trente," *Le Temps des Médias* 4 (2007):8.
- ¹⁵ Some of these ideas are discussed in greater detail in the author's French language review of Myriam Boucharenc's book, *L'écrivain-reporter au coeur des années trente*. See *Le Temps des Médias. Revue d'histoire* 3 (2005): 268-270
- ¹⁶ Thomas Fuller, as quoted in Catherine N. Parke, *Biography: Writing Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xxxiii.
- ¹⁷ Leon Edel, "Biography: A Manifesto," *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 1 (Winter 1978): 1-3.
- ¹⁸ Jacques le Goff, "Het schrijven van een moderne historische biografie," *Bulletin Geschiedenis, Kunst, Cultuur* 2 (1993): 1-11.

- ¹⁹ Leon Edel, *Literary Biography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959). See also Anthony M. Friedson's review of this work in *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 1 (winter 1978): 83-86.
- ²⁰ Hans Renders, "Het zelfbewustzijn van de biograaf. Waarom de biografie geen roman is," *Zacht Lawijd, cultuur-historisch tijdschrift* 6 (2007): 67-81.
- ²¹ P.J. Buijnsters, *Levens van beruchte Personen. Over de criminele biografie in Nederland gedurende de 18^e eeuw* (Utrecht: H&S Publishers, 1980), 11.
- ²² Karl Corino, *Musil: eine Biographie* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2003).
- ²³ Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare's Wife* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008). The allusion to Greer's comparison between biographers and rapists comes from Martin Stannard, "The Necrophiliac Art?" in *The Literary Biography: Problems and Solutions*, ed., Dale Salwak (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 32-40.
- ²⁴ Nicholas Farrell, *Mussolini: A New life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2003).
- ²⁵ Jane Kramer, *Europeans* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988).
- ²⁶ Boris Sokoloff, *Napoleon: A Doctor's Biography* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1937), vii.