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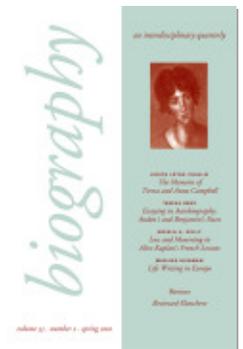
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Biography, Volume 1, Number 2, Spring 1978, pp. 86-104 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: 10.1353/bio.2010.0110



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The Basic Assumptions of Literary Biography

Biographies about creative individuals in the arts and sciences present special problems for the biographer, and biographies about literary personalities present even more particular difficulties. This discussion focuses upon literary biographies, but the basic assumptions found here also appear in other biographies. The general differences between literary and other kinds of biography are in the knowledge and understanding of the audience and in the nature of the subject.

Readers of a non-literary biography are familiar with the general outlines of the events and actions which have distinguished the biography's subject but will never be entirely knowledgeable about the details of these significant episodes. The biography provides information which clarifies and completes the readers' familiarity; impressions about those events which distinguished the biographical subject are intensified and completed for the reader in the process of reading the biography. Biographies dealing with artists, musicians, and scientists whose actions in the culture are mostly creative in a non-verbal context, concern decisions, actions, and events recognizable and familiar but beyond the readers' talents or experiences.

However, readers of a literary biography will usually have read some of the subject's works and may possibly have read all the creations for which the subject was distinguished. In contrast to readers of a non-literary biography, the literary biography's readers may well be as familiar with the subject's achievement as even the biographer, granted the availability and accuracy of the author's complete works. Information provided by the literary biography may not concern the

nature of the subject's achievement; the literary biography may neither change nor intensify the reader's understanding of that achievement, but it usually provides information which parallels the literary creations and which may be seen as supplementary to but not necessary for understanding these creations.

Literary biographies concern individuals whose achievements constitute a different dimension, not just a different magnitude, from the readers' reality. The creative process itself remains incompletely understood and is accessible to most individuals only through reading the literary products, that is, studying the results of the creative process. Having read a literary biography, readers are not necessarily closer to understanding either the subject's created works or creative process than they were before reading the biography. The literary biography can fill in background information about the subject's life and times and can connect the subject's literary creations to events in the life, but all this information must remain supplementary to and not necessarily significant for the reader's appreciation of the biographical subject's noteworthy achievements in the culture.

An interesting difference between literary and other biographies lies in the connection between the medium of the subject's achievement and the nature of the biography itself. The achievement of the literary biography's subject exists in the same realm as the biography commemorating that achievement. The subject's achievement employed words to create the outline of imagined lives, and the same abstract tool of words must create an outline of the actual life. The achievement of the subject in non-literary biography more likely concerns direct actions and language with practical applications, yet the biography's medium of communication returns to the creative, evocative uses of language.

In thinking about this difference we note a curious paradox: through the imaginative use of language in the published writings, the subject of a literary biography may have created imaginary activities for imaginary characters which are greater in scope and excitement than actual events in any life reported in a non-literary biography, even though the actual movements of the literary individual within the world are likely to have been more limited in nature than those of most subjects in conventional biographies.

There are further distinctions one might draw between literary and conventional biographies, but these general notions are sufficient to focus this discussion upon the unique concerns of literary biography while still allowing the most general characteristics of this kind of biographical achievement to be extended to the general issues relevant

to all biography. We can now look specifically at the nature of literary biography.

By focusing upon the production of literary documents as the justification for a life-history, the literary biographer automatically provides a structure for his study—he will have to make the life comprehensible in terms of the literary artifacts which justified the original inquiry, illuminate these creative events, and relate them to each other or to the known facts of the life. Until he can satisfy these criteria, the biographer's efforts exist as incomplete research; when his work can satisfy the assumptions that he, his publishers and editors, and his readers share about the appropriate coherence necessary for a biography, then can his work be finished.

We can state these assumptions about literary biography fairly easily, and recognize in them cultural biases which are so basic as to seem inevitable to us: a biography should present a unified life, should reveal this unity with specific anecdotal evidence, and should demonstrate change, development, and/or growth with the passage of time. The question we are considering now is whether these prominent characteristics of literary biography derive from the nature of life or from the nature of writing about life.

Traditionally the task of the literary biographer has been seen as one of recovery, as if some truth about an individual fully existed in historical records, challenging the diligence and thoroughness of the biographer to reconstruct, as R. D. Altick phrases it, "the whole portrait from the tiny pieces into which the accidents of time and memory had shattered it."¹ The biographer's success could then be evaluated "in terms of its degree of attainment of this ideal."²

Care in locating sources and selecting documents therefore was of primary importance, and research methodology received much attention from literary biographers. However, seeking written documents in an attempt to reconstruct the life of a human being—our only recourse when the author is no longer living—presupposes notions about the nature of man and the nature of written records which also deserve scrutiny.

If biography is conceived of as the search for historically verifiable truth, it is a scholarly problem. But when, as is more frequently the case, biography is defined as, or implied to be, a search for the understanding of personality, it becomes an interpretive problem. And those authors who suggest biography is no less than the portrayal of personality create an artistic problem as well. Each approach to biography creates particular demands upon the biographer accompanied by unique methodological and theoretical difficulties. These demands

and difficulties can be understood as limits upon the biographer's potential achievement, deriving strictly from the complexity of any human subject and the uncertainties of biographical and historical research.

The view of biography as a search for historically verifiable truth assumes that man can be defined as the sum of his actions, that what is external and visible in man is significant and what is unknown or unknowable is not, and that by carefully documenting these visible actions and accessible reports we can assemble the portrait and know the man.

If the biographer wishes to make inferences based upon more than "the data of observation"³—that is, if he wishes to define biography as the search for understanding of personality—he will be attributing to his subject cause, motive, and intention, and he must hope to discover adequate means of understanding these behaviors. The decision to write interpretive biography not only allows for but in fact demands the capability of understanding human behavior; this will be an act of interpretation, not of research, and requires a different assumption about man: that he is the source, not the sum, of his acts.

But if biography acknowledges inner experience at all, it cannot attempt to limit the possibilities of that experience. Our current understanding of the almost infinite complexity of the human mind suggests that the potentials for experiencing reality are limitless, and therefore any account of an episode in a life, whether concerned with objective or subjective behavior, must be necessarily partial and selective. Therefore, despite the potentials for accurate and honest expression of internal states of being, the materials so expressed must be understood as, at best, only the expression of one facet of experience, one selected by the writer from many in accordance with pressures of his momentary needs, his heredity, the environmental requirements, or whatever determining factor his theory of behavior requires.

Awareness of the complexity of man leads to acknowledgement that we can never know the absolute truth of experience. At best we can know different statements about how our subject constructed reality at different times in his life. Our research, even when verified and completed, reflects only partial truth. Even the subject cannot claim to know himself completely, for his self-perceptions are changing and selective. Awareness of complexities in the present is necessarily limited by his preference, prejudices, intelligence, and attention; while understanding of his past is a matter of memory and viewpoint, which can, and obviously do, change.⁴

The definitive biography, then, does not exist as a realistic

possibility which the biographer can realize once he finds that missing letter or that rumored box of manuscripts. There is no absolute truth about a man, only relative and partial truths which are themselves limited by humanity, and by depending upon subjective statements by the biographical subject and his contemporaries.

Yet literary scholars depend upon and assume the accuracy and validity of literary biographies, although the theoretical and methodological bases for the biographer's task lack the rigor to justify such faith. Most examinations of the biographer's task focus upon guaranteeing completeness, verifiability, authenticity, and accuracy of biographical information, allowing reconstruction of the factual outlines of the subject's life.

But reflection will reveal that the areas of knowledge which the biographer can never know are enormous. Altick states this problem concisely:

. . . only an infinitesimal fraction of the events in a life ever has been or can be recorded. What comes down to the biographer, under the best of conditions, is a small selection, and one that is almost wholly accidental. It has no necessary bearing on the genuinely crucial episodes and concerns of a man's life; it is merely the aggregate of the data which happened to be set down, for reasons that seldom had anything to do with their ultimate biographical importance, less all which, though once recorded, has subsequently perished. Many centrally significant events, furthermore, were never recorded in the first place; they were locked in the unwritten memories of those who participated.⁵

Writing a biography, as an intellectual process and phenomenological act, also exists within complex emotional, intellectual, social, and cultural environments, and knowing this we must further qualify the potentials of the form. Actually, it has become fashionable in biographical literature to acknowledge the inevitable subjectivity of the biographer's choices, a recognition made easier by Lytton Strachey's openly partial presentation of biographical evidence.

However, having made this admission biographers then attempt to salvage their task, arguing that since subjectivity is inevitable, at least the biographer is the best qualified interpreter of available information, and that we need the biographer's "intelligent intuition and sympathy."⁶ The reader cannot interpret the subject himself for he lacks the total documentation;⁷ the biographer must exercise choice, but at least he can be aware of exercising choice and can perform his task, it is argued, with as much rigor, care, and insight as possible.

Again this is an ideal solution, and in practice the act is immensely complicated. Clifford warns that ". . . every choice of a passage to be

quoted involves a personal decision which is motivated by all the psychological factors which have formed the biographer's own personality and opinions,"⁸ and the biographer's own prejudices, motives, and purposes of writing his subject's life deserve the scrutiny they are receiving today.⁹ When Clifford recently questioned historians and biographers about their choices in writing, all insisted upon their objectivity but, "when finally pinned to the wall, they had to confess that the choices were personal ones, and must have represented an attempt to put together some coherent character portrayal which had gradually evolved in their minds."¹⁰

This admission by practicing historians and biographers reflects a larger issue which literary biographers have yet to confront. If subjectivity is inevitable, selections must be made; if selections are not random, a principle of choice must be involved. In almost every case where biographers have expressed their thoughts on this topic, we find the same principle operating:

A biographer has to take a view of what his hero was really like, or what sort of a man he became at different times in his life, and then the biographer has to manipulate his material to sustain that view.¹¹

. . . the writer of a biography must develop in his own mind a vivid image of the person he is to describe . . . once it has been fashioned in the brain, it stands as a creative force . . . to control the selection of detail and the unfolding of the narrative.¹²

. . . most biographers . . . started with some well-developed idea of what his subject had been like, and inevitably chose his evidence to support his pattern.¹³

The logician's terms for this process are inference and deduction; the psychological term (and the one I shall use) is conceptualization, defined as "any theorizing that is imposed upon a raw narrative."¹⁴

What is the origin of the biographer's conceptualization? What is the source of his image of the subject, in keeping with which he will make his final choices? The obvious answer is that the image arises from his complete data, but the problem has further dimensions. This image doesn't arise as soon as the final document is studied, taking intelligible form like a complete jigsaw puzzle, but exists in some form almost from the beginning. The final view of one's subject will probably be modified by the research, but a sense of the author, however vague, has had to exist in the biographer's very decision to write biography. Each bit of information fills in, modifies, or alters the developing image of the subject, yet at some point the biographer feels that some bits of information are more relevant and valuable than

others for revealing his understanding of the subject. While this takes place the biography takes form.

The processes by which individual biographers have performed their labors would be as difficult to recover and communicate as the complex creative acts their biographies set out to comprehend. But it is possible to observe the tendencies toward which all individual biographical labors lean and to note how completed literary biographies share the basic assumptions already identified. These assumptions, that the published version of a life shall reveal unity and development supported by specific anecdotal materials, allow biographer and reader to share common premises about appropriate biographical form. By examining each premise in detail we can investigate the extent to which this appropriate form depends upon assumptions about life and assumptions about writing about life.

1. *The Premise of a Unified Life.* Most biographers and critics discussing biography mention the need for unity and order, referring to "the universal pattern,"¹⁵ the "tissue,"¹⁶ "the central kernel,"¹⁷ "the artistic pattern,"¹⁸ the "coherent and meaningful story,"¹⁹ "the well-knit, esthetically pleasing structure,"²⁰ or the "manifest uniqueness of organization."²¹ Different times may seek different unities, with the nineteenth-century's search for moral coherence displaced by the twentieth-century's quest for psychological consistency, but integral to the very notion of biography resides the assumption of a unified life. It is doubtful that any biographer could identify an equally satisfactory unity in his own life, or in the lives of his closest friends and relations, but his published labors seek and display such formal coherence. The reasons for the contradiction lie with the biographer and not the life, in the differing complexities of a three-hundred page book and a sixty-year life, and of course derive from the inevitable selections which characterize the nature of biographical research and writing. The biographer could select his materials randomly, producing chaos, or not select at all, resulting in the unreadable casebooks which occasionally are published; but, excepting these undesirable and impractical alternatives, the biographer must select. As we have already observed, when selections are made principles of choice are implied, and every facet of writing impels towards order as the minimal principle of choice, even though, as one critic noted, "no subject for biography ever lived his life in order to fulfill a pattern in the mind of a future biographer."²²

The biographer's conception of his function within the scholarly community also contributes to his search for and eventual discovery of

unity in his work. His biography represents scholarly labor that others should not be expected to repeat, so he feels obligated to produce a text acceptable to editors, publishers, reviewers, journals, knowledgeable readers, and previous biographers. A biography without coherence, if published at all, will be reviewed without mercy, labeled incomplete, incoherent, and perhaps irresponsible. Inconclusive or tentative analysis will only aggravate his readers: their expectations demand the clearest presentation of whatever sense the biographer has made from his materials. For his career's sake, he must make sense of his data before publishing his findings.

Even without the pressures of colleagues and editors, the biographer would seek order. His decision to write a biography and his commitment of years of his career provide pressure to conclude his project and stimulate a desire to have his conclusions accepted to justify his labors. For his own sense of closure he will work until his materials assume a shape which allows him to display familiarity with his data and understanding of his subject. His very dependence upon print, and the necessity for formal divisions within his text, imply discoveries of principles of order which are being communicated to the reader in his chapters, which are artificially and perhaps arbitrarily divided into segments of nearly equal length.

2. *The Use of Anecdotal Evidence.* The biographer dramatizes his found unity with details and anecdotes selected from the many his research has uncovered. The biographer must select, as we have seen, so therefore he selects items which he feels are most representative, most vivid, and most able to communicate the sense of his subject to his readers. The notion that some details and episodes in a man's life more than others reveal the true nature of the man is important in biography, and can be traced back to Plutarch. In his life of Alexander he argued: "the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in man; sometimes a matter of less moment, as expression or a jest, informs us better of their characters and inclinations, than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments, or the bloodiest battles whatsoever."²³ Samuel Johnson expressed this belief in *Rambler* #60,²⁴ and Boswell quotes him in the *Life* as saying, "There is nothing, Sir, too little for so little a creature as man. It is by studying little things that we attain the great art of having as little misery and as much happiness as possible."²⁵

Similar testimonies to the value of especially minute circumstances reoccur in the literature with remarkable consistency. Leslie Stephen wrote that "a single concrete fact, or a saying into which a man has

put his whole soul, is worth pages of psychological analysis,"²⁶ and twentieth-century commentators restate this point in varying terms:

. . . the picture which we carry about with us of some of the most illustrious men is created, not so much by the rounded and measured story of their lives, as by a single act or incident or sentence which stands out from the pages, whether of the best or of the most inadequate biography.²⁷

The profoundest and most general truth about a character may emerge from little details of daily life, minor anecdotes of eating and sleeping and spending and laughing and lying.²⁸

. . . a careless word, spoken with no intention whatever, a mere gesture, the lifting of the hand or the turning of the head, may fling open a wide window into a man's inmost heart.²⁹

. . . the most trivial habit will often suggest the interpretation for some major trait of character.³⁰

We may have Freud to blame for the contemporary biographer's ability to justify some trivia as "psychologically meaningful and artistically right,"³¹ but we cannot use his theories to explain away the attractiveness this view has always held for biographers. I would not presume to deny the collected wisdom of thousands of biographers, but I think it is possible to argue that belief in the value of particular anecdotes is a factor, like the search for unity, of life as observed rather than life as lived. Who, after all, ever stops to reflect that his last gesture or comment really epitomizes his character, except when he suspects it might appear inconsistent with his fancied image of himself, and he hopes his friends and enemies were not watching?³² For contemporary observers and later biographers, dedicated to discovering inner meaning from the meagre information available, the desire for revelatory anecdotes inevitably leads to selection of some as more consonant with our image of the man than others.

The biographer chooses because the conventions of literary biography require a liberal use of anecdotes. As André Maurois noted, "Human beings only live in biography to the extent that others have seen and taken note of their actions."³³ The demands of the reader also are an important factor in biography's anecdotal nature; Thomas Fuller cheerfully acknowledged reader needs in his seventeenth-century collection of biographical portraits:

I confess, the subject is but dull in itself, to tell the time and place of men's birth, and death, their names, with the names and numbers of

their books; and therefore this bare skeleton of time, place, and person, must be fleshed with some pleasant passages. To this intent I have purposely interlaced (not as meat, but as condiment), many delightful stories, that so the reader, if he do not arise (which I hope and desire) *religiosior* or *doctior*, with more piety or learning, at least he may depart *jucundior*, with more pleasure and lawful delight.³⁴

Of course contemporary biographers have more rigorous arguments for their practices, but despite the justifications they provide, I cannot avoid noticing how anecdotes appearing in literary biographies reveal stylistic invention and structural perfection noticeably absent from the lives of my contemporaries. Perhaps this reveals further evidence of the decline of civilization, but, as one historian explained the phenomenon, it also reveals how “literary style sometimes dictates the sacrifice of truth. Epigrams [and] anecdotes . . . if properly qualified in the interests of accuracy and truthful reporting, would be robbed of pithiness and color.”³⁵ It may be that the biographer’s selection depends as much upon his recognizing anecdotes which will read well as finding those which will inform.

Biography’s written form naturally creates demands for details which can be accurately transferred into print, so the verbal utterances and written phrases of the literary man seem particularly suitable as anecdotes. Reports of episodes which are complete, self-contained, and which have or can be given a form appropriate to print, that is, an introduction, a development, and a preferably witty or memorable conclusion, will be especially favored. However, there is no necessary reason to believe that an action or episode which struck an observer vividly was especially significant, meaningful, or revealing for the doer, and in any case, the biographer has no way of ever knowing this. Significance, as well as beauty, often lies in the eyes of the beholder.

If the biographer’s stylistic embellishments can distort his presentation of individual episodes in a life, any focus upon some episodes and not others inevitably creates distortion. Herbert Spencer’s objection to the autobiographer applies to the biographer as well: “by leaving out the humdrum part of the life, forming that immensely larger part which it had in common with other lives, and by setting forth only the striking things, he produces the impression that [the life] differed from other lives more than it really did.”³⁶

Desire for vivid and realistic presentation of a life, employing detail to provide what Edgar Johnson, biographer of Dickens and Scott, called “density,”³⁷ may lead the biographer to consider using narrative devices from fiction. For biographers who imagine their responsibility as including the portrayal of personality, the illusions possible

to the novelist will be especially attractive. All biographies share some narrative conventions with fiction, if only the assumption of unified character and dependence upon illustrative detail, but some incorporate dialogue, flashbacks, and dramatization. There are obviously great differences between the sources, responsibilities, practices, and readerships of fiction and biography, but to the degree that neither a fictional or biographical account can ever replace a living person, they occupy similar categories as imaginative constructions.

Both fiction and biography depend for their realization upon a reader, and both propose that their readers accept their fragmentary descriptions of recognizable reality as the outlines of a human life. Past events are retained as memories, and descriptions of imaginary events may evoke mental impressions as vivid as memories. The difference, for the reader, exists only on a secondary level of response.

The first response concerns messages about actions found in the novelist's or the biographer's descriptions. The second level of response concerns information about how to treat these primary messages. The significant difference between fiction and biography is mainly in the second realm, of metacommunication—that is, communication about the data communicated. Fiction comes with a message which says, these descriptions which stimulate your imagination were never real; biography says, the events did happen. The reader provides the appropriate response, for nothing in the material presented necessarily requires one response or the other. We can recognize this in our uncomfortable response to hagiography: the conventions of the form say the saints' lives really took place as described, but the improbability of their miraculous activities demands a response more appropriate to fiction. Our belief in the factual basis of narrative reinforces its powers to please and impress us; every biographer recognizes that he must establish the believability of his character before introducing any unconventional details.

One critic, Philip Toynbee, presents an extreme example: "if we had no other reference to Dr. Johnson, nothing would prevent us from supposing that Boswell had ingeniously *invented* his subject, out of air."³⁸ We may find the example ludicrous, but the observation is valid nonetheless; today there is controversy about whether Carlos Castenada's works about Don Juan, a Mexican shaman, are brilliant fiction, innovative anthropology, or sensational biography. This controversy exists because his readers require information about the kind of reality his work claims to represent to determine the nature of their response.

3. *The Assumption of Development and Growth.* Literary biography's assumption of development and growth arises necessarily from the premise of unity and the use of anecdotal evidence. Unity refers to the static situation, but anecdotes will refer to episodes from all periods of the life: to justify incorporating anecdotes implying different characteristics of the subject, while maintaining the notion of a unified life experience when summarizing decades of existence, biographers employ convenient abstractions such as growth, maturity, development, and progress. The biographer's belief in order and the structural requirements of his work are important determinants in his conceptualizing. He may write about "the evolution of a human soul,"³⁹ "the master-themes of a life . . ." found in "the diurnal stream of existence,"⁴⁰ or his subject's life as "a clear and beautiful stream";⁴¹ but even if he avoids this language, maintaining strict chronological terminology, he is committed to some notion of progress.

There are two dimensions of this involvement. The first, a cultural factor, reveals biographers sharing Western man's commitment to progress as an explanation for change. Change may not necessarily reflect progress or growth, or even regression or decay: all these terms are abstractions imposed upon reality. However, as we have previously noted, biographical form presupposes explanation and order, so in this matter cultural patterns reinforce biographical needs.

The second dimension of biography's search for growth derives from the practical limitations of biographical data. In no case have we accounts for all episodes of a life, and frequently, reliable data is available for only small portions of the life. The biographer, in coping with gaps in his information, must hope no crucial data is missing; he assumes the existence of connections between episodes in his subject's life which may be connected only in the chronology of his documentation. In filling gaps in his subject's life the biographer constantly makes judgments about relevance and significance in much the same way discussed by Fielding's narrator in *Tom Jones*:

When any extraordinary scene presents itself . . . , we shall spare no pains nor paper to open it at large to our readers; but if whole years should pass without producing anything worthy his notice, we shall not be afraid of a chasm in our history, but shall hasten on to matters of consequence, and leave such periods of time totally unobserved. (II.i)

When the biographer makes his judgments he must deal with a problem no novelist has to face, the fact that his subject's life may assume a form completely inappropriate for successful narrative. Especially

with literary figures, whose activities in the world may have been minimal, can this present the biographer with the problem of finding interest in a dull life, a life perhaps distinguished from all other dull lives only by the surprise appearance of a solitary literary masterpiece.

Whether the biographer searches for growth or merely interesting episodes in his subject's life, his search is always a review. Just as any autobiographical account inevitably selects and rewrites the past in light of the present, so too will a literary biographer select and interpret his subject's life in light of his privileged information about the subject's future. Retrospective views always find appropriate antecedents, but can we determine whether the subject's action or thought had the same significance during his experience, in his recollection of the experience, and in the biographer's interpretation of the subject's experience? The same practical and psychological pressures influencing the biographer's search for unity also apply to his presentation of change. He is looking for, and can be expected to find, "the 'dynamics' of the personality he is studying,"⁴² whether or not the subject, when living, recognized any such force.

If we summarize what has been said about literary biography, we find difficulties in all stages of the task. The literary biography seeks to understand the complexities of a human being, usually long dead, who expressed himself incompletely, sometimes dishonestly, usually without thinking about the use his writings would have. The biographer examines whichever documents the accidents of time have preserved and he has been fortunate enough to locate. These documents will have been written, perhaps thoughtlessly, by his subject and by contemporaries of his subject who may have deliberately distorted their writings for reasons the biographer can never recover or understand. Confronted with this mass of documentary evidence, the biographer is required by conventions of the genre, practical problems of academia, and psychological pressures he may only dimly intuit, to form a coherent view of the complex life of this long-dead human being. Then he must attempt to find in the life unity, order, and interest even if the only available evidence is inconclusive or suggests the contrary. He will select some evidence and discard the rest, never quite certain whether his selections are based on his prejudices, truth about his subject, or his intuitions about the needs of his book. And always at the back of the biographer's mind there will be the nagging realization that even if the greatest biography of all time were written about himself, he would probably question its facts, laugh at its inferences, and reject its conclusions.

So biography is an imperfect form, we conclude, and finality and perfection must be considered unachievable. But we still feel that something can be done because we know the real human being we so imperfectly approach did exist with as much complexity and life as we recognize in ourselves.⁴³ And if records of the past are untrustworthy, we must realize they are the only past available.⁴⁴ Despite all demonstrations about the difficulties of biographical inference, the biographer constantly attempts to find new approaches or procedures to enable him to penetrate the documentary remains to the person who originally created them.

There have been attempts to devise "scientific" ways of measuring true meaning, by counting the number of action words in the prose, or forming ratios between different linguistic patterns.⁴⁵ Handwriting analysis offers another quasi-scientific inferential tool. Some biographers argue that the biographer has the right, and even the obligation, to use his imagination in interpreting another's life.⁴⁶ Some interpretive biographers have even hinted that their invention of a subject's inner life may be closer to truth than the biographer's guarded suggestions.⁴⁷ Occasionally, when writing about the work they have just completed, biographers describe their insights as coming not from the careful application of a strict methodology but from "intuition"⁴⁸ or processes even more difficult to describe:

As soon as she began composition, she felt almost as if she were in a trance, as if the story were telling itself.⁴⁹

And then, without any warning, when you are in the depths of bored discouragement with the whole project, something very strange happens. The character you have been studying with decreasing enthusiasm suddenly comes alive in your mind.⁵⁰

Can we say it doesn't happen like this? But can these biographers prove their intuitions reflect truth?

Our repeated questions about what kind of information we can know about man constantly lead back to and can be seen to depend upon our view of man. If man is seen as the sum of his actions, with his inner core either denied, ignored, or considered irrelevant because unknowable, then a careful biographer can make some statement based upon the quantity and quality of evidence recovered. If man is seen as a complex psychological creature, whose actions are less significant than his often hidden motivations for these actions, then even the most careful biographer will find certainty elusive. Today's readers seem interested in what Altick describes as "the realm beyond awareness and articulation,"⁵¹ so I question whether literary biog-

raphers can satisfy their curiosity. Older biographers could simplify their subjects to satisfy their audience's expectations; modern biographers will never be able to make their works sufficiently complex.

The biographers quoted above, describing writing biography as an almost magical transcendent act, suggest one final area in which literary biographers must think further. Literary biography, by definition, focuses upon individuals who possessed great talent or even genius in their chosen areas of application; then it attempts to understand the nature of the individual's achievement and the circumstances surrounding it. As we have seen, this creates an expectation that the author of an interesting book was himself interesting.⁵² We have discussed the possibility that this expectation is false and have seen how it creates pressures on the biographer to write a particular kind of work. What if we now assume that this expectation is true, that literary talent does derive from genius or from extraordinary and unique abilities? Will this not make the biographer's task even more difficult than before? Where once he had to make inferences based upon ordinary human motivation, which he understood, or thought he understood, intuitively, now he must attempt to speculate about an area he cannot share, which has never been explained or understood, whose existence is evident only in its artistic manifestations, and which may by definition be incomprehensible to him.⁵³

On this topic let us listen to Freud, from whose theories all modern biographers take inspiration and instruction; the occasion was Freud's acceptance speech upon receiving the Goethe medal in 1930:

We all, who revere Goethe, put up, without too much protest, with the efforts of his biographers, who try to recreate his life from existing accounts and indications. But what can these biographies achieve for us? Even the best and fullest of them could not answer the two questions which alone seem worth knowing about. It could not throw any light on the riddle of the miraculous gift that makes an artist, and it could not help us to comprehend any better the value and the effect of his works.⁵⁴

What, finally, is the validity of the biographical writings upon which we, as students of literature, depend? They cannot represent truth, but neither do they qualify as fiction. André Maurois' definition of the species that he calls *Homo Biographicus*, created to supplement E. M. Forster's distinction between *Homo Fictus* and *Homo Sapiens*, presents the dilemma clearly:

Homo Biographicus is a third species. What distinguishes him from the other two is that he is much more in action. . . . *Homo Biographicus* is always in action; he is writing letters, or governing empires (or trying

to govern them), or running after women or deserting them; he is a being of quite incredible activity. . . . Homo Biographicus . . . talks very little with his fellows and never thinks when he is alone. He writes letters and often keeps a diary. If he writes no letters and does not keep a diary, it is a bad mark against him, and furthermore he is punished by the fact that he practically ceases to exist. It is true that Homo Sapiens also writes letters, but his letters are of no great importance. Very often he doesn't believe in them; he knows their proper value and would be astonished if any one should regard them as authoritative. Homo Biographicus writes a letter and always believes what he writes—at any rate, that is the impression we receive from all who are concerned with him.

Homo Biographicus is treated with much greater severity than Homo Sapiens. Homo Sapiens is continually contradicting himself. . . . We forgive him because we do not consider his career from one point of view only; we see him changing imperceptibly and consequently we have time to get used to his successive variations. Homo Biographicus, on the other hand, is put together in two or three hundred pages under the eyes of strict judges and we condemn him as soon as he contradicts himself. . . . You see that life is a difficult thing for him. . . . he is a species in process of disappearance. He was primarily made up . . . of correspondence and diaries; modern life, moreover, tends, by its rush as well as by its more rapid means of communication, to obliterate all the writing on paper which forms the flesh and blood of Homo Biographicus. The most romantic passages in life to-day take place over the telephone. . . . Verily, the life of Homo Biographicus seems to be precarious.⁵⁵

What have been described in this discussion as basic assumptions of literary biography might also be considered inevitable distortions in any written life history. The discovery of order, pattern, structure, development and insight into a life are all achievements which relate to the biographer's triumph over accumulated data rather than any breakthrough in recapturing another's life. A good biography follows the assumptions of previous biographies and creates a plausible literary document capable of evoking a pleasing and appropriate experience for its readers. This experience may even include the illusion that the essence and form, or the significant and revealing moments of the life, have been represented. But this illusion testifies only to the biographer's successful creation based upon a limited, often arbitrary selection of documents. Forced to serve as a feeble shorthand for the chaos of a once complete life, these documents help translate the biographer's conceptualizations into the reader's reality.

Admitting the illusion and avoiding the distortion by publishing merely the extant documents cannot satisfy readers. Satisfying readers

with an appropriately structured biography cannot avoid distortions imposed by the demands of the printed format. Suggesting that biography is finally an "art" admits the fictional nature of the genre, but the biographical format promises not fiction but some kind of truth.

These difficulties are inescapable because life is not art, thoughts are not documents, beliefs are not actions. Biography as a written form must follow conventions of the genre and satisfy reader expectations. It is assumed that biographies should have unity, interesting anecdotes, recognizable progressions. They will continue to make more sense of life than any life as lived, which may be their continuing attraction to readers.

By pointing out these fundamental assumptions about literary biographies, and indicating their inevitable basis in the literary format rather than in the life depicted, this discussion attempts to caution biographers about their claims for biography as a science and stress the limits of biography as an art. Readers too should be reminded to balance the neatness of the lives they read with the raggedness of the life they live. There is no expectation that the writing of biographies will decline, even if this discussion has illuminated some of the inherent contradictions of the genre. The quest for knowing and understanding another human being has always been too strong to discourage writers and readers from the impossible search for life upon the printed page.

NOTES

1. Richard D. Altick, *Lives and Letters* (New York: Knopf, 1965), p. 331.
2. Philip B. Daglian, "Introduction" in *Essays in Eighteenth Century Biography*, ed. Philip B. Daglian (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. x.
3. Gordon W. Allport, *Becoming: Basic Considerations for a Psychology of Personality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 11.
4. Peter L. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963), p. 59.
5. Altick, *Lives and Letters*, p. 302. Also see Lewis Mumford, "The Task of Modern Biography," *English Journal*, XXIII (January 1934), 2.
6. Altick, *Lives and Letters*, p. 346.
7. Leon Edel, "Literature and Biography," *Relations of Literary Study*, ed. James Thorpe (New York: Modern Language Association, 1967), p. 58.
8. James L. Clifford, "Introduction," in *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560-1960*, ed. James L. Clifford (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. xviii-xix.
9. James L. Clifford, *From Puzzles to Portraits: Problems of a Literary Biographer* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1970), pp. 99, 108, 132.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 102–103.
11. Lord Noel Annan, *The Listener*, October 27, 1966, p. 612.
12. James L. Clifford, "Speaking of Books," *New York Times Book Review*, January 29, 1956, p. 2.
13. Clifford, *From Puzzles to Portraits*, p. 111, quoting Edgar Johnson.
14. Gordon W. Allport, *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1942), p. 164.
15. Iris Origo, "Biography, True and False," *Atlantic*, February 1959, p. 42.
16. André Maurois, *Aspects of Biography* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1929), p. 28.
17. André Maurois, "The Ethics of Biography," *English Institute Annual*, 1942 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 25.
18. Altick, *Lives and Letters*, p. 98.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 348.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 345.
21. Allport, *Becoming*, p. 19.
22. Neuman I. White, "The Development, Use, and Abuse of Interpretation in Biography," *English Institute Annual*, 1942 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 47.
23. Plutarchus, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, translated by John Dryden and revised by Arthur Hugh Clough (New York: The Modern Library, 1932), p. 801.
24. ". . . the Business of the Biographer is often to pass slightly over those Performances and Incidents, which produce vulgar Greatness, to lead the Thoughts into domestick Privacies, and display the minute Details of daily Life, where exterior Appendages are cast aside. . . . There are many invisible Circumstances, which . . . are more important than publick Occurrences. . . . the Incidents which give Excellence to Biography are of a volatile and evanescent Kind, such as soon escape the Memory, and are rarely transmitted by Tradition."
25. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, July 14, 1763 (ed. Hill-Powell, I, 433); quoted in Clifford, *Biography as an Art*, p. 46.
26. *National Review*, XXII (1893), 181; quoted in Altick, *Lives and Letters*, p. 223.
27. H. H. Asquith, "Biography" (an address delivered at the Edinburgh Philosophical Institute, November 15, 1901), *Occasional Addresses* (London: Macmillan, 1918), p. 52.
28. Gamaliel Bradford, "The Art of Biography," *Saturday Review of Literature*, May 23, 1925, p. 770.
29. Gamaliel Bradford, "Psychography," *A Naturalist of Souls* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926), p. 13.
30. Emil Ludwig, "Introduction: On Historical Portraiture," *Genius and Character* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929); quoted in Clifford, *Biography as an Art*, p. 136.
31. Altick, *Lives and Letters*, p. 193.
32. See Italo Calvino's short story, "The Light-Years," *Cosmicomics* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970), pp. 149–166.
33. Maurois, *Aspects of Biography*, p. 184.
34. Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England* (1662), Chapter 1; quoted in Clifford, *Biography as an Art*, p. 10.

35. Louis Gottschalk, "The Historian and the Historical Document," in *The Use of Personal Documents in History, Anthropology, and Sociology*, ed. Louis Gottschalk, Clyde Kluckhohn, and Robert Angell (New York: Social Science Research Council Bulletin 53, 1945), p. 41.
36. Quoted in Arthur Melville Clark, *Autobiography: Its Genesis and Phases* (The Folcroft Press, Inc., 1935), p. 16.
37. Quoted in Clifford, *From Puzzles to Portraits*, p. 114.
38. Philip Toynbee, "Novel and Memoir," *Nimbus*, II (Autumn 1954); quoted in Clifford, *Biography as an Art*, p. 196.
39. Maurois, *Aspects of Biography*, pp. 109-110.
40. Paul Murray Kendall, *The Art of Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1965), p. 26.
41. Arthur Bryant, "The Art of Biography," *London Mercury*, XXX (July 1934), 237.
42. Leon Edel, "That One May Say This Was a Man," *New York Times Book Review*, June 24, 1956, p. 1.
43. Maurois, *Aspects of Biography*, p. 184.
44. Jacques Barzun, Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, revised ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), p. 141.
45. John J. Dollard and O. H. Mowrer, "A Method of Measuring Tension in Written Documents," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, XLII (January 1947), 3-32.
Alfred L. Baldwin, "Personal Structure Analysis: a Statistical Method for Investigating the Single Personality," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, XXXVII (April 1942), 163-183.
46. André Maurois, "The Ethics of Biography," pp. 17, 21; Leon Edel, "That One May Say This Was a Man," p. 1.
47. Kendall, *The Art of Biography*, p. 130.
48. Clifford, *From Puzzles to Portraits*, p. 105.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Aileen Pippett, "The Art of Leading a Double Life," *New York Times Book Review*, August 28, 1955, p.1.
51. Altick, *Lives and Letters*, p. 333.
52. P. N. Furbank, "The Biographer as Trainer," *The Listener*, December 18, 1969, p. 860; Maurois, *Aspects of Biography*, p. 156.
53. See also Kendall, *The Art of Biography*, p. xi.
54. Sigmund Freud, in address of acceptance of Goethe medal in Frankfurt, 1930, *Works*, XXI (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 211.
55. Maurois, *Aspects of Biography*, pp. 200-202.