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E. S. SHAFFER
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Cambridge. He is also Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. His publications include *The Garden, the Ark, the Tower, the Temple* (with Jim Bennett, Oxford UP 1998) and *Footprints of the Lion: Isaac Newton at Work* (Cambridge UP 2001).

MIKE MOTTRAM lives in Fife, where he cultivates his own and other people's gardens.

BEATE J. PERREY is visiting professor in musicology at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris during 2003–4, after which she will take up a Senior Lectureship at the University of Liverpool. She is the author of Schumann's *Dichterliebe and Early Romantic Poetics: Fragmentation of Desire* (Cambridge UP 2002), and editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Schumann* (Cambridge UP forthcoming) and of *Schubert after Adorno,* a volume to comprise the first English translation of Adorno's 1928 essay 'Schubert' and twelve short critical commentaries. At present she is working on a book about Schubert song cycles entitled 'Schubert Constellations'.

D. VENKAT RAO teaches in the School of Critical Humanities at the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, India. He has publications in the areas of postcolonial studies, mnemocultures, new technologies and India studies. *In Citations: Readings in Area Studies of Culture* (Delhi, 1999), was his last publication. Apart from finalizing the translation of 'The Last Brahmin', he is nearing completion of a full-length work on critical uses of song-cultures in India (with a special focus on the continuing work of a legendary cultural-political activist).

ELINOR SHAFFER is Senior Fellow, Institute of Germanic Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, and Director of the Research Project on the Reception of British Authors in Europe, a multi-volume series published by Continuum Books. She is the author of a number of books and articles on Coleridge and European Romanticism, and on Samuel Butler, organizer of exhibitions on Butler's painting and photography, and Editor of *Comparative Criticism. William Beckford and the Visual Arts* (with John Wilton-Ely) is in preparation.

RANI SHIVASHANKARA SHARMA teaches Sanskrit in a small-town school in the Southern state of Andhra Pradesh. His literary work includes short stories, poetry, and essays in Telugu. He has written experimental, 'hybrid' poetry in collaboration with Dalit (marginalized castes of India) writers. His collection, *Vooru Vada: Samkara Kavita* (*Village and Street: Hybrid Poetry*) is well known in this regard. Sharma has actively participated in grass-root social movements in Andhra Pradesh.

CONTRIBUTORS

TIMOTHY ADÈS is a translator-poet. The sonnets won a BCLA/BCLT award and appeared in *Comparative Criticism* 19. Arc has now republished his *33 Sonnets and Other Poems* by Jean Cassou Victor Hugo's *How to be a Grandfather* is published by Hearing Eye. *Homer in Cuernavaca* by Alfonso Reyes won the Premio Valle-Inclán for the Edinburgh U.P. journal, *Translation and Literature*. He is working on a large selection of the poetry of Robert Desnos. Some of his work is on the internet at www.brindin.com.

MALCOLM BOWIE is Master of Christ's College, Cambridge, and former Marshal Foch Professor of French Literature at Oxford and Fellow of All Souls. He was the initiator of the European Humanities Research Centre in Oxford and the LEGENDA series of monographs in modern languages. His many publications include *Proust Among the Stars* (1998), books on Freud and Lacan, and articles exploring interdisciplinary aspects of the arts. He is currently President of the British Comparative Literature Association.

KATHARINE CONLEY is Associate Professor of French at Dartmouth College. She is the author of *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* (The University of Nebraska Press, 2003) and of *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism* (The University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

BRIAN HARRISON has been studying, teaching and researching at Oxford since 1958. After thirty-three years as a Tutorial Fellow teaching history and politics at Corpus Christi College, he became Editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* in 2000. He has published many books and articles on nineteenth-century British social and political history, and is writing the final volume (1951-1990) in the *New Oxford History of England.*

SCOTT MANDELBROTE is Official Fellow, Tutor for Undergraduate Admissions, and Director of Studies in History at Peterhouse,

Cambridge. He is also Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. His publications include *The Garden, the Ark, the Tower, the Temple* (with Jim Bennett, Oxford UP 1998) and *Footprints of the Lion: Isaac Newton at Work* (Cambridge UP 2001).

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GALIN TIHANOV holds doctorates in Bulgarian literature (Sofia, 1996) and in Comparative Literature (Oxford, 1998). He is Reader in Comparative Literature and Intellectual History at the University of Lancaster. His publications include *The Master and the Slave: Lukács, Bakhtin, and the Ideas of Their Time* (Oxford UP, 2000), two books on Bulgarian literature (1994 and 1998), and numerous articles on the history of ideas and comparative literature. He is also co-editor of *Materializing Bakhtin: The Bakhtin Circle and Social Theory* (Macmillan, 2000; with Craig Brandist), of *The Bakhtin Circle: In the Master's Absence* (Manchester UP, 2003; with D. Shepherd and C. Brandist), and guest-editor of *Russian Avant-Garde Visual Culture and Photography (1910s-1930s)*, a special issue of *History of Photography* (2000).

JANET TODD is Francis Hutcheson Professor of English at the University of Glasgow and an Honorary Fellow of Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge. She is an authority on early women writers and her most recent books are *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn* (Andre Deutsch, 1996), *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (Columbia UP 2000), *Rebel Daughters: Ireland in Conflict* (Viking, 2003) and an edition of the letters of Mary Wollstonecraft (Columbia UP 2003). She is General Editor of the Cambridge edition of the complete works of Jane Austen and is working on a study of the early life of Mary Shelley.

CHRISTOPHER WILEY is a doctoral student and Teaching Assistant in the Department of Music at Royal Holloway, University of London, where he is preparing a thesis entitled 'Re-writing Composers' Lives: Critical Historiography and Musical Biography'. He is the author of articles in *Music & Letters* (2004), *Dictionnaire Berlioz* (2003), *Scope* (2003) and *Virginia Woolf Bulletin* (2002). He also pursues a parallel career as a performer, principally on oboe and organ.

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Dances of life and death: comparative biography

As Wordsworth wrote to an aspiring biographer of Coleridge three years after the latter's death, refusing his cooperation:

> I cannot bear that the Public should be made Confidants of several friendships and affections almost as soon as one or both of the partners are laid in their graves. (*Letters*, III, 442)

In these days of less scrupulous regard for privacy and propriety such a sentiment will be brushed aside (and even in 1837 the biographer proceeded to publish his work). Delicacy in this instance concealed a good deal of personal culpability. A greater degree of openness may benefit as well as harm the subject of biography (for respect for privacy often went hand in hand with censoriousness). Yet many serious questions must attach to the current vogue for biography, which appears to have followed like a frenzied tarantella or dance of death on the attempts to construct a less personal literary theory that have dominated the last thirty years. Barthes' proclaimed 'death of the author' and Foucault's 'author-factor' have dropped below the critical horizon. One of the most serious questions is how the actual achievement of the subject in his particular discipline or métier (the reason for interest) can be conveyed to an audience of non-specialists. The resort to, substitution, or invention of more entertaining or intimate aspects of the life has become all too familiar, as life-story shoulders aside the text. As in a now infamous icon, Marilyn Monroe's body is attached to Virginia Woolf's head.

Cinematic biography is of course a special offender. A recent account by a baffled scriptwriter called upon to script a film about Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath records the 'eureka' moment of his solution: 'I suddenly realized that when they were doing the washing up, they didn't speak in verse. From that point on, wherever possible, I cut dialogue and if I couldn't cut it I made it as banal as I could.' 'It was a love story between two giants', he enthuses. (John Brownlow, 'Who's Afraid of Sylvia Plath?',

The Guardian, Aug. 22 2003). But in what sense are they giants, once shorn of their shared poetic vocation, and stripped even of words?

Biography is often considered an English concern, though as a form it had been flourishing in Italy between 1300 and 1600, the word appearing first in English only in the 1660's, when Thomas Fuller's *History of the Worthies of England* appeared, an early dictionary of national biography, including for each county leading figures and 'memorable persons' who have 'an extraordinary (not vicious) remark upon them'. (Quoted in Ian Donaldson, 'National Biography and the Arts of Memory', in *Mapping Lives*, eds Peter France and William St. Clair, OUP for the British Academy, 2002, p. 77.)

Biography has never been considered a serious form in Germany (though practiced at the popular level). Academics and writers look down on it, and much biographical detail is provided in editions of correspondence rather than in chronicles of the life. But there are positive reasons for these attitudes, and very real German contributions to biographical writing which arise from them. The *Charakteristik*, a form notable for its succinctness, is intended to extract the significance of the life work, or to understand the life as a function of the work. One of its best practitioners was the Romantic critic Friedrich Schlegel, whose 'Lessing' is a fine example (though in fact there are several good large-scale biographies of Lessing). More fictionalized works, like the brief but immensely influential portrait of an imaginary composer, Wackenroder and Tieck's *Herzensergiessungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders* (1797), 'The Outpourings of an Art-loving Monk', capture the essence of the vocation; and the Romantic novella and *Kűnstlerroman* or novel of the artist developed this into major works now looked on as fiction. But the portrait of the vocation, or of the discipline, bore fruit in more philosophical biography as well. A major example is the *Life of Jesus*, by David Friedrich Strauss (1835), translated into English by George Eliot, in which all the sources for the life and the meaning of the life were sifted, the fruit of more than a century of Biblical criticism. Another major biography of a discipline was produced by Wilhelm Dilthey, philosopher and critic: in writing a two-volume *Life of Schleiermacher* (1870), on the Romantic writer and religious philosopher, whose lectures on hermeneutics were then little known, he founded the history of the emergent discipline of modern hermeneutics and began its application to the diverging methods of the humanities and social sciences.

But recently there has been a surge in biography as we know it even in Germany–Michael Butler (*TLS* Apr 25 2003) points out that in the last few months substantial books have appeared on Peter Handke,

Franz Kafka, Christa Wolf, Siegfried Unseld, and Leni Riefenstahl (the first, third and last then still living) as well as major reassessments of Willy Brandt and Erich Honecker; capped by a life of the major author Günther Grass: Michael Jürgs, *Bürger Grass: Biographie eines deutschen Dichters* (Bertelsmann), Citizen Grass: Biography of a German Poet. Of these eight, half are literary writers, two are well-known east German politicians, one a reputable publisher (Unseld of Suhrkamp), and one, the unclassifiable Riefenstahl, is perhaps best called a film-maker. Now despite this increase in the number and range of biographies it is not biography as such that is gaining attention but the gradual re-emergence of German experiences that for more than half a century have been buried, glossed over, lived through with gritted teeth, suppressed and forgotten with might and main, overcome, outlived, transcended. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the overcoming of the past, has entered a new phase. At least three recent books, Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945, The Fire: Germany in the Bombing War;* Max Sebald's posthumous *The Natural History of Destruction* (2003), on the suppression of the experiences of the last days of the war; and most of all Günther Grass's latest novel itself, on the great ship disaster, the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff, in which a boatload of German refugees, mainly NS supporters, fleeing from Russia in 1939, went down at sea, have opened up chapters of German suffering, especially in the bombing raids at the end of World War II and their aftermath, that have long been left undescribed yet form part of the first-hand memory and experience of still living persons now overdue for biography. Sebald, in his Zurich lectures *Luftkrieg und Literatur, Air War and Literature,* takes German writers to task for not dealing directly with these sufferings, and he pillories Albert Andersch as typical of the evasions of morality and of taste that show up evasions of truth. (This essay was added to the German edition of 1997, two more, on Jean Améry – whose *At the Mind's Limits* he approved – and Peter Weiss, to the English edition, 2003.) The general charge against German-language writers is certainly not wholly justified; but we cannot discuss it adequately here.

The point for our present purposes is that the spate of biographies is only a new phase of the displacement of biography, for it is a new phase of comment on 'the German condition', on the German (not the Jewish) Holocaust ('Der Brand', the Fire), on the overcoming of collective guilt, past and present, on a new phase of memory and forgetting. This brings one up short, for 'Holocaust' has properly seemed to refer to the fate of victims of Nazism; yet the world's history, we have increasingly come to know, has many holocausts, genocides, and democides. As Blanchot has

said, 'The disaster always takes place after having taken place.' It continues to take place; and 'cultural memory' has become one of the themes of our time, in and out of the academy. The studies of the trauma of defeat and loss, both historical and current, have mounted. The individual biography as chronicle of a life becomes, or stands for, a group experience, even a lived myth. Only victors can afford to take their own myths as straight history, as the English do, as 'pragmatic' and 'empirical' and 'commonsense' – because no one has forced them to eat their words. They have not had to say 'sorry'. Only victors can assume that the trivia of their enduring past, the even tenor of their ways, are all of consuming interest, and only victors can continue unperturbed to pen triumphal biographies of the great and the good, the small and the amusingly naughty. The loser must die, or grovel, surrender, lie, forswear, betray himself and his friends and all he and they once stood for, in order to survive; and he must undergo trial, conviction, punishment, penance, conversion, pardon, self-examination, and public examination in order to reinstate himself. Only the defeated could produce a study like Albert Speer's of himself or Gitta Serenyi's relentless interrogation of him and his own public and private subterfuges and evasions, his twists and turns of bad faith and conscience. The German and English cases only highlight a general truth: history belongs to the victors. It is of some interest that whereas the home audience of the television series on 'The Greatest Briton' voted for Churchill, the BBC Overseas Service audience voted for Newton. A truly comparative form of biography (in the days of European Union and of post-colonialism) might well be expected at least to take cognizance of a supranational standpoint, overcoming, as with other intellectual and cultural history, the narrowly national interest.

In this volume on the 'Lives of the Disciplines: comparative biography' we publish a rich and diverse group of papers which shed light on the current state of biography, and suggest some unexpected ways in which lives may render the actual achievement of a biographee in a particular field for a general public. The discipline itself may be a new one, definable only through the experience and the work of the individual under scrutiny, or it may be the achievement of the biographer to make this emerge, as Dilthey's biography of Schleiermacher served to bring modern hermeneutics to light. Further, comparative biography of disciplines figuring within individual lives may yield insights that no mere chronicle of the life could.

Brian Harrison surveys the ground from the magisterial standpoint of the New *DNB*, or as it will be known on publication the *Oxford Dictionary*

of National Biography, of which he is General Editor, in succession to Colin Matthew, after the latter's untimely death. The old *DNB* was a great undertaking in national biography under the editorship of Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf's father, who guided it through the first massive edition and contributed notable entries. The New *DNB*, necessarily more massive still (incorporating the supplements published in the intervening century as well as recent entries), maintains the obligation to render the lives of the nation's great and good in a manner that does justice to their accomplishments and to the nation's credit and gain. It has scrutinized its own criteria, as Harrison shows, and made some adjustments to allow more space for women, and to give in some instances a less 'varnished', Victorian account of the lives of the biographees. While a number of entries for minor figures in the Church included in the first *DNB* have been omitted or curtailed, the 15% of entries for women they set as an initial target has not been met. The laudable aim of representing the contributions of foreigners, whether or not they became British subjects, settled permanently, visited for short or long periods, carried on trade, or simply wrote productively from afar on British phenomena (like the Russian who first described the practicalities of holding a democratic election) opens a potentially large and somewhat fuzzy field of new material which comparatists will take a particularly keen interest in. The role of obituaries in building these entries has been highlighted recently by the publication of four volumes of *Daily Telegraph* obituaries; so popular did they prove, that a fifth volume was selected from the others. The will and the obligation to show the recently dead in the best light, as an act of homage and of respect, often of personal memorial, continues to leave its traces on official biography, which adds the need to express the nation's long-term, historical debt to the individual. This long view – now lengthened by another century – may lead to a more balanced judgement, but is still concerned to locate the positive contributions of the individual life to the communal life. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* is official biography as practised today. It serves as a norm to set others next to, though not as a 'gold standard'.

In early life-writing and in other traditions, the exemplary life provides the standard. The life of the eminent person is governed by accomplishment in a particular kind, according to the ideal definition of that office or profession: the life of the Chinese imperial official, or of the religious figure, or of the artist. Suetonius, with Plutarch the major Roman writer of lives of the illustrious, explicitly embraced the logical ordering according to criteria as against the chronological telling of the events.

(See Sergei Averintsov, 'From Biography to Hagiography', in *Mapping Lives*, 20–1.) The classical *Lives of the Artists* by Pliny the Elder lays down standard elements that have continued to be observed in constructing the lives of European artists from Vasari's pioneering *Lives of the Artists* (1550) onwards. Western religious hagiography, the Catholic *Lives of the Saints* or the Protestant Foxe's *Book of Martyrs,* has similar 'patterned' characteristics reinforced by Christian interpretations of the desirable traits.

We publish here an extraordinary contemporary version of the life of the religious figure, in 'The Last Brahmin', by Rani Shivashankara Sharma, which exhibits with great clarity the traditional attributes of a Hindu sage (marked out by his high caste status) while also displaying the challenges and tensions that in today's world threaten to undermine this vocation and its values. D. Venkat Rao has translated Sharma's work from the South Indian language Telugu and introduces the narrative of the life. The form of the traditional life has undergone changes: for there is a fictional element here, the voice of the young son of the religious sage, which is a troubled and dissenting voice. The son sees with intense pain what price is paid for the spirituality and the caste claims of the sage, and he ultimately refuses to play his appointed role, either as continuator of the tradition or as the son of his father, leaving his mother to carry out the last rites and to immolate herself as tradition demands. The biography is a tragic one, in which the traditional form of authority is destroyed by new historical conditions, and the traditional form of the biography is broken in on by outside generic conventions.

The traditional, impersonal biography treated in fictional terms has itself become a genre; the German, then Swiss novelist Hermann Hesse's novel *Glasperlenspiel* (1943), The Glass Pearl Game, translated as *Magister Ludi*, raises the dedicated life to an aesthetic form; a recent book by a young Swiss-German writer, Richard Weihe, *Meer der Tusche,* Sea of Ink (itself an honorific title for the academy of artists) takes as model the life of the historical Chinese painter, Bada Shanren, born a prince at the end of the Ming dynasty who survived into the Manchu era in the seventeenth century, and relates the traditional training of the Buddhist painter in a quiet, impersonal, unembellished style; but on closer inspection the book writes the life of the paintings that have survived, displaying the individual emerging within the highly stylized paintings. In effect, the life of the man is inferred from his paintings, and the interpreted paintings (described in the act of making) render up his inferred life, rather than the life being read into the works, as so often in vulgar biography in the West. The Romantic

Charakteristik, fictions of the lives of the artist, and the biography of the discipline set the parameters of the still flourishing genre. The narrow and precarious boundary between fiction and biography is proving a fertile ground for recent writing as for criticism.

Janet Todd, in speaking of the lives of women, in particular that of Mary Wollstonecraft, author of the *Rights of Women*, the equivalent of Paine's *Rights of Man*, and several novels as well as travels, takes another tack: what if the facts of the life seem to undermine, even to contradict the significance of the works? What if this contradiction is a threat also to the biographer, to whom this significance is all-important, both in a personal sense (as a woman looking for the pioneers of liberation) and as a biographer? She pinpoints Wollstonecraft's failed attempts at suicide, apparently prompted by abandonment by her lover (and father of her child), and accompanied by a suicide note in the style of the 'deserted woman'. This contradiction, Todd argues, is not and must not be smoothed out; and indeed became the spur to the biography she wrote. Perhaps this contradiction between the life and the works has itself become a hallmark of women's biography, for so often the work has had to be born against all the odds and carried out against opposition or disapproval, which often curtailed or crippled it. The contradiction between life and work is a condition of the production of women's works in whatever discipline. If in novel-writing women were numerous and even dominated this still despised genre for a time at the end of the eighteenth century, in music (as Christopher Wiley makes clear in his study of nineteenth-century music biographies) they were firmly relegated to the role of 'muse', even when as patently gifted as Clara Schumann. Only one woman made her way into the recent account of scientists' lives and careers in *Cambridge Scientific Minds*, which Scott Mandelbrote reviews here: Mary Cartwright (b. 1900) was the first woman to take the mathematics finals at Oxford, and the first woman mathematician to be elected to the Royal Society, for her work in differential equations. Another candidate for mention is Jocelyn Bell, the discoverer of the pulsar; but she is firmly kept in her place as a research student working for Antony Hewish, author of his own chapter on 'The Discovery of the Pulsar'. Hewish shared the Nobel Prize in Physics (1974) with his former teacher, Sir Martin Ryle. The case has been compared with the exclusion of Rosalind Franklin from credit for the discovery of DNA (though Franklin was dead and so not eligible by the time of the award of the Nobel to Crick, Watson, and Maurice Wilkins, head of the laboratory at King's College London where she had done her work on the structure of DNA). Franklin now has the dubious posthumous reward