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BIOGRAPHY

Fiction, Fact and Form

Ira Bruce Nadel

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VICTORIAN ARTISTS AND THE CITY (*co-editor*)

JEWISH WRITERS OF NORTH AMERICA

VICTORIAN NOVELISTS BEFORE 1885; VICTORIAN
NOVELISTS AFTER 1885 (*co-editor*)

To my parents
and
Josephine

Preface

My involvement with biography began when I sought to test the principle that biographies had an existence as independent literary texts free from their anomalous treatment by literary history as documentary works judged for their accuracy and not art. However, criticism provided little elaboration of this view and almost no commentary on the style, structure or language of biography. Indeed, most studies of biography contained only descriptions of the research problems or discoveries of the biographer – or, if the work possessed a critical impulse, concentrated on the historical rather than aesthetic development of the genre. Yet, I believed that biographies required a critical reading as works of imagination and language if they were to be accepted and understood as works of literature. In an effort to amplify this dimension of biography, I framed a series of questions and explorations of which this book is the result.

In part the problem for me was how could one attribute value to biography if the traditional moral defence of the genre, expressed by Dr Johnson when he told Boswell that 'I esteem biography as giving us what comes near to ourselves, what we can turn to use', was found unsuitable. What formal or theoretical properties could define the literary nature of the genre? I have tried to identify them by examining language, structure and theme in biography, in addition to such historical changes as the institutionalization of biography in the nineteenth century and the appearance of the professional biographer. Of particular concern has been the presentation of fact. Conscious of the discrepancies between fact and its representation, I have analysed tropological patterns and narrative techniques in biography in order to understand the transformation of fact into what I call 'authorized fictions'. Paul de Man's remark that 'metaphors are much more tenacious than facts' plus the work of Hayden White coincided with my efforts to analyse the aesthetics of biography and I have found the work of both critics stimulating. And although I draw on biographies from various periods, I concentrate on those written from 1850 to the present and limit my reading to literary biography alone.

Many have listened, encouraged, questioned and contributed to my ideas and to them I wish to offer my thanks. In particular, George Simson, editor of *biography*, has been a steadfast critic always ready to challenge and probe. Leon Edel, through his writing and teaching, furthered my interest in the subject. His arguments for the centrality and art of biography have been important guides for this study. Michael Holroyd was generous in sharing with me his concerns about biography, the result of his extended experience. James Olney remains an inspiring critic of life-writing who showed me how language and autobiography interact; he also manages that rare feat of continuing our dialogue on biography and autobiography in spite of great lapses of time and distances of space. W. E. Fredeman has been a colleague who has both directed and illuminated certain paths of scholarship for me and is a continual example of the intellectual rigour found in nineteenth-century studies today. Arthur Mizener, Daniel R. Schwarz and M. H. Abrams were all important influences on my earliest conceptions of biography, criticism and literary history. S. K. Heninger, Jr listened to many of these ideas in their initial stage and always posed lucid questions that challenged my assumptions, while N. John Hall responded to what must have been prolonged monologues with good humour and grace. My wife Josephine continues to give me a better understanding of life and literature. Doreen Todhunter is, as always, typist extraordinaire.

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Facts relating to the past, when they are collected without art, are compilations; and compilations no doubt may be useful; but they are no more History than butter, eggs, salt and herbs are an omlette.

Lytton Strachey, 'Gibbon'

Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no beginnings . . . But everything changes when you tell about life; it's a change no one notices: the proof is that people talk about true stories. As if there could possibly be true stories; things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite sense.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*

The biographer, after all, is as much of a storyteller as the novelist or historian.

Leon Edel, 'The Figure Under the Carpet'

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Introduction

How biographies are written and what form they have assumed in the last century and a half are the general subjects of this book, which developed out of my concern over the lack of critical discussion of biography among readers at the same time as the importance and publication of biography has dramatically increased. The need to understand the literary techniques and strategies of biography parallels its emergence today as perhaps the most popular, widely-read body of non-fiction writing. But for too long criticism has centred on the content rather than the form of biographical writing, undermining its literary properties. This study attempts to redress that emphasis by focusing on a series of compositional problems and their solutions in the writing of biography. It concentrates on such topics as biographical portraiture, experimentation and poetics. The goal is to show that biography is a complex narrative as well as a record of an individual's life, a literary process as well as a historical product.

An episode from *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* by Elizabeth Gaskell illustrates the complexity and need for an analytic reading of biography. Recounting a visit to Haworth, the Brontë home, in 1853, Gaskell narrates an unusual incident. To display the talents of her dead brother, Branwell, Charlotte brings out, one evening, his life-size portrait of the three sisters. Gaskell comments

not much better than sign-painting, as to manipulation: but the likenesses were, I should think, admirable. I could only judge of the fidelity with which the two other were depicted, from the striking resemblance with Charlotte, upholding the great frame of the canvas, and consequently standing right behind it, bore to her own representation, though it must have been ten years and more since the portraits were taken.¹

Here, the biographer is in a unique situation: she is able to compare a portrait of her subject with her subject, incorporating the entire scene into her text, creating yet another witness to the

event, the reader. Gaskell is observing while she is observed; Charlotte Brontë, meanwhile, is both a presence and an image. Symbolically, one may choose to see Charlotte as the figurative supporter of the entire family, as indeed she was, being the best-known and longest-living member of the group. Upholding the group portrait emblematically demonstrates Charlotte's role as survivor in a family that suffered the deaths of two sisters and a brother. But the scene possesses another meaning.

In the effort of comparing the real and the represented, Gaskell enacts the process of biography, which is the visual, mental and verbal comparison of what we read with what we think we know of the subject. The scene, in its active effort of comparing and creating (the narrator simultaneously recreates it while participating in it), represents the act of biography. Gaskell's reaction in matching the real Charlotte with the represented – there is a 'striking resemblance' proving the fidelity, she notes – is actually what occurs in biography. Fact and image attempt to unite, although content and structure often threaten the union. The reaction of the reader, based on literary and historical understanding, validates or rejects the work; in this case, Gaskell confirms the likeness which her complete analysis in the paragraph elaborates.

Most importantly, the scene illustrates what we seek in biography, the knowledge that the resemblance between the subject in the biography is equivalent to his empirical existence. But the complexity of the scene increases with the presence of the biographer, who is both an interpreter and an object of interpretation. As narrator and author, Gaskell adds two more roles to that of a character. And standing before the author, the real Charlotte, representing an historical self, holds up her timeless self-portrait, detached and silent behind it, but inviting comparison and comment. Self-consciously, Gaskell and the reader gaze at the objects, the painting and the person. As witnesses, we become aware of multiple perspectives in much the same way that we sense the complexity of vision in Velázquez's 'Las Meninas'. In that painting of the Infanta Margarita, the position of the painter, the reflected image of King Philip IV and his wife Mariana, and the unidentified courtier silhouetted against the rear stairway, plus the outward stares of various figures, challenge the viewer. So, too, is Elizabeth Gaskell challenged by Charlotte Brontë in the scene with Branwell's painting. Readers of biography, however,

often receive a text too passively; they are unaware of being placed in an interpretative position, although the very nature of biography demands it.

One way biography challenges the reader is through its narrative style. Readers of biography consistently ignore, however, what is written in favour of what is written about, treating the narrative transparently. Such a response values the content more than the form, but realizing that the narrative of a biography frames the subject and affects our vision provides us with a greater awareness of the complexity and richness of biographical form. One must remember that, especially for biography, third-person narrative, on which it relies so heavily, 'best produces the illusion of pure reference'. But, as Frank Kermode reminds us, 'it is an illusion, the effect of a rhetorical device'.² Biography, because of its concern with actual people in a definable historical period, with identifiable qualities and details, nonetheless sustains an illusion of reality, particularly in its stress on order and completeness. Yet this is one method by which biography manages to resolve its paradox of achieving completeness by selectivity – through narrative strategies which, in turn, alter our relation to fact.

The aim of this study is to make us more aware of what it is we do when we read and, possibly, write biography. In brief, we participate in a life through numerous means which can be literary, psychological or historical. But the moment we begin to read the life of someone, we begin to compare, seeking that enviable position of having our subject stand before us as she tells us her life-story without interference or distortion. The aim of the comparison is to validate the truth of the biography in historical as well as literary terms. What I shall later call the corrective impulse of biography is actually the process of validating biography. Belief in the authority of biography results from continual correction and comparison, through new evidence or interpretation, of the biographer's account with those of others. This, in turn, legitimizes the reader's belief in the authenticity of the life. Elizabeth Gaskell's witnessing the real and imagined Charlotte Brontë parallels the action of the reader of biographies who consciously and unconsciously seeks moments of comparison in the life which, if they are not in the text, he will provide. The biographer satisfies this through his impulse to correct. But the actual presence of the narrator as a character in the biography,

such as Boswell in his *Life of Johnson* or Elizabeth Gaskell in her *Brontë* alters the nature of the account, confusing its narrative structure and response of the reader. Understanding such changes and analysing such moments of correction, however, are the tasks of the critic.

The issue is that of resemblance and one response by readers is closer attention to the presentation of fact. Traditionally, fact has validated the biographical enterprise for readers while imposing limitations on writers. The difficulty, however, is that the best ordered facts cannot substitute for 'our love of sharp incident, revealing anecdote, suspenseful narrative, even explicit analysis of motivation if those are given us with insight and with style'.³ But in doing so, the biographer reveals something of himself in the process, employing methods of personal literary expression. Consequently, the signature of the biographer is as important to recognize as that of his subject. The former signs himself through literary means, the latter through the record of his life.

Facts are to biography what character is to the novel – a fundamental element of composition providing authenticity, reality and information. As early as 1761 Gibbon noted several uses for fact in his study of literature: those that prove 'nothing more than that they are facts'; those that 'may be useful in drawing a partial conclusion' where one might be able to judge 'the motives of an action, or some peculiar features in a character'; those – the rarest – whose influence prevails throughout an entire system and are so 'intimately connected as to have given motion to the springs of action'.⁴ But in biography, the role of fact has received little notice. Nonetheless, Izaak Walton employed fact to make his *Lives* more credible and dramatic, Boswell defended his life of Johnson because of his more accurate facts, Carlyle justified the length of his *Frederick* because of the volume of facts, Strachey supported his *Eminent Victorians* because of his interpretation of fact, while Virginia Woolf struggled with her life of Roger Fry because of the facts.

But facts are not conclusions nor are they meant to be. Often, they are manipulated, altered or misused to sustain an interpretation or characterization: Walton, for example, omitted the date of Donne's will in his 1640 life to maintain the impression of Donne's preparedness for death (the will was actually written only three months before Donne died in March 1631); Boswell omitted details on Johnson's youth and early manhood, concen-

trating four-fifths of the biography on his last twenty years; Carlyle begins *Frederick* announcing the abstruseness of fact and the need to interpret it symbolically 'to try for some Historical Conception of this Man and King . . . An Enterprise which turns out to be, the longer one looks at it, the more of a formidable, not to say unmanageable nature!'; Strachey, among his many shifts of fact, places a crucial conversation between Henry Edward Manning and his spiritual guide Miss Bevan, 'in the shrubbery', adding a suggestive detail when no evidence for such a setting exists; similarly, Strachey describes Florence Nightingale's dying in a 'shaded chamber' when, in fact, her room faced south, had no curtains and was open to the fresh air and sunlight. But to sustain the romantic quality of legend, Strachey creates a mysterious room. In *Roger Fry*, Virginia Woolf continually battles with fact, asking 'how can one cut loose from facts, when there they are, contradicting my theories?' Readers of biographies, however, rarely question facts because, as one critic has noticed, 'it is the spirit of the age to believe that any fact, no matter how suspect, is superior to any imaginative exercise, no matter how true.'⁵

Fact in biography, however, introduces critical questions regarding the nature of life-writing and literary form. To what extent is fact necessary in biography? To what degree does it hinder the artistic or literary impulse of the biographer? To what degree does the biographer alter fact to fit his theme or pattern? How does fact gain meaning? In 1834 Carlyle perceived these difficulties when he asked: 'What are your historical Facts; still more your biographical? Wilt thou know a Man, above all a Mankind, by stringing-together beadrolls of what thou namest Facts?' What insights can fact alone tell us about the subject? Nietzsche in 1885-6 believed 'there are no "facts-in-themselves," for a sense must always be projected into them before there can be "facts"', a philosophic concept that casts suspicion on their validity.⁶ Certain biographers and readers have long shared this scepticism, but until recently they have been subsumed by the ready acceptance of the illusion of fact and order in biography. However, contemporary theories of fictional form and narrative technique have clarified our awareness of order and belief, presentation and authenticity, in biographical writing. Nonetheless, such an attitude must combat the domination of fact in biographical expression.

The importance of fact in biography corresponds with the

seventeenth-century rise of science, the eighteenth-century emergence of empiricism, the nineteenth-century dominance by history and the modern emphasis on individual experience rather than a collective tradition. More specifically, it is aligned with a shift away from legend, hagiography or panegyric in life-writing to a concern with the record of a person's life as that record becomes more accessible and unavoidable. Facts, evidence, establish the authenticity of a life, as realism – aligned with objectivity – replaces romance. Walton's *Lives*, Fuller's *History of the Worthies of England* and Aubrey's *Brief Lives* indicate the emergence of realistic detail through the use of records, documentation and interviews which contradict an earlier tradition of impression, remembrance or fabrication. Research and investigation soon become the *sine qua non* for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biography which relied more heavily on fact than on the identification of values between biographer and subject, or the interpretation of character and narrative presentation. The development of institutions such as the Royal Society became 'perhaps rather a mnemonic than a cause . . . for [the] tyranny of Fact' as reality, itself, became anatomized into fact.⁷

As realism grew in the novel, paralleling and often imitating the factual form of biography, the usefulness of biography also became more evident. Fascination with the Plutarchian and then Johnsonian interest in 'domestic privacies' increased the authoritative and instructive nature of biography while adding to its pleasure. Boswell exuberantly demonstrated this in his *Life of Johnson* (1791); David Masson exhaustively illustrated it in his seven-volume life of Milton (1859–94). To provide such intimate detail, letters grew more important for the biographer and he used them more extensively in his accounts. The acceptance of the multi-volume life in the nineteenth century, inflated by lengthy excerpts from letters, reflects the importance of documents to validate a life, a defence as well as a justification of the biographical form. Undigested and often inaccurate, these facts were nonetheless assumed to be appropriate.

Such a concentration of fact-gathering and investigation did not abate in the post-Stracheyan world of biography, despite the influence of psychology on interpreting and selecting rather than reporting and informing. Research has relentlessly continued as libraries and archives swell with records, letters, tapes, photographs, diaries and journals. Contemporary biographers have

gleefully used this expansion of facts as justification for new biographies.⁸ Biographers, however, are in danger of suffocating from the collected mass of material, becoming lost in minor details, adhering too strictly to chronology and failing to separate what is the important from the trivial. However, since the mid-nineteenth century, there exists a counter-tradition attempting to free the biographer from the compendious life for the shaped, interpretative life where perspective, dimension and a point of view control the material.

Beginning with Lockhart's *Scott* (1837–8), biographers have departed from facts – or at the very least, altered them to exhibit a figure more consistent with their image rather than record of him. This commitment to an organic portrait, originating in sympathy and sustained by the imaginative vision of the biographer, substitutes a Boswellian emphasis on understanding for a Baconian stress on collecting data. Such a biographer goes beyond his material to maintain an intuitive sense of his subject, although this often means the manipulation of data. John Forster exhibits this habit in his life of Dickens, conflating letters and altering texts. Lytton Strachey exploits this practice in his liberal interpretation or, on occasion, refusal to include facts, as in his decision not to incorporate Queen Victoria's late correspondence in his biography because it altered his conception of the mournful Queen presented in the last third of the life. Virginia Woolf, however, implicitly defended such departures from the record when she introduced the phrase 'creative fact'.

Appearing in her essay 'The Art of Biography', partly a defence of *Queen Victoria*, 'creative fact' became a popular watchword. 'Almost any biographer', wrote Woolf, 'if he respects fact, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders.' For Woolf this is the greatest asset of the biographer, making him equal to the novelist in creative power and importance. More recent biographers have expanded this approach. Phyllis Rose in her biography of Woolf, for example, defines a life in a non-factual way: 'A life is as much a work of fiction – of guiding narrative structures – as novels and poems, and that the task of literary biography is to explore this fiction.'⁹ This displacement of facts and their inability to explain the configurations of a life highlight an entirely new approach to life-writing where the value of biography derives from the

appraisal and presentation, rather than the accumulation and accuracy, of facts.

The importance of 'creative fact', however, skirts the problem of whether those works which exceed factual detail through their allegiance to conception rather than record remain biographies. Two questions emerge: what makes a fact creative? and does this creativity impair the authenticity of biography? Although some readers initially turn to biography as a reference tool or critical handbook seeking personal detail, literary criticism or cultural history, they often discover dramatic conflict, psychological analysis or structural experimentation. Characterization and point of view frequently overtake the mere presentation of material as the biographer recognizes that personality and character often subsume chronology and objectivity. The best biographies re-invent rather than re-construct. Biography is fundamentally a narrative which has as its primary task the enactment of character and place through language – a goal similar to that of fiction.

A biography is a verbal artefact of narrative discourse. Its tool, figurative language, organizes its form. A biographer constitutes the life of his subject through the language he uses to describe it and transforms his chronicle to story through the process of emplotment. This occurs through uniting discrete facts of the life with certain modes of plot structure so that the parts form a new whole identified as 'story'. However, the transformation of events into story takes place, as Hayden White has explained, through 'the suppression or subordination of certain [events] . . . and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like . . .' These are all techniques associated with the emplotment of drama or fiction – but also biography. Four basic modes of emplotment suggested by Northrop Frye – Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire – alter biography from a mere record of past events to a meaningful literary form through the use of conventional structures of fiction. As White details, 'by the very constitution of a set of events in such a way as to make a comprehensible story out of them, the historian [and biographer] charges those events with the symbolic significance of a comprehensible plot-structure.'¹⁰ Biography as a symbolic structure employing formal elements of language, fiction and narration – this summarizes my understanding of the genre.

Directing the choice of emplotment for the biographer, giving meaning to his subject's experiences, is, as White explains, 'the dominant figurative mode of the language he has used to *describe* the elements of his account *prior* to his composition of a narrative' (p. 94). The particular figurative language, controlling metaphor or narrative mode in a biographical text becomes the basis of my later discussion of biographical theory outlined in Chapter 5. At this stage, it is essential to recognize the primary element of language in biography and its role in determining its form; indeed, language and modes of narration, not content, structure a biography. Not facts, but the presentation of those facts establish the value of biographical writing. In the composition of biography, fictive form rather than historical content dominates as the events of a life become the elements of a story. 'We make sense', says White, 'of the real world by imposing on it the formal coherency that we customarily associate with the products of writers of fiction . . .' (p. 99). This fictive power directs the composition and reading of biography, explaining how biography translates fact into literary event and why biography continually interests readers. Emplotment provides fact with fictive meaning while gratifying our desire to resolve our own sense of fragmentation through the unity or story of the lives of others – and implicitly our own. The fictive power of 'story' provides us with a coherent vision of life.

The patterns of modern fiction and contemporary biography have close connections; factual biography depends as heavily on conceptual paradigms and narrative patterns as fiction. But the suggestion that aesthetic coherence is incompatible with the truth of correspondence in biography undermines the literary nature of biography.¹¹ The most successful biographies employ facts as parts of an aesthetic as well as logical or expository whole. Boswell provides a pattern of interpretation as well as a factually accurate account of Johnson's life. Furthermore, the impulse of biography is often corrective, revising facts and details or replacing legend with fact – which, in turn, relies on literary forms of expression. Biography triumphs over experience by structuring the confusions of daily life into patterns of continuity and progress.

In transforming the unselective moments of a life into a pattern, the biographer establishes both an explanation and a theme for his subject. Fact becomes metonymic, a part relating to another part involving reduction, by virtue of the need to select and