

PARALLEL LIVES

FIVE VICTORIAN MARRIAGES
PHYLLIS ROSE



"Brilliant and original...a remarkable book!" –Anatole Broyard, The New York Times

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LIVES

Five Victorian Marriages

PHYLLIS
ROSE

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PARALLEL
LIVES

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To
D. S.

"Marriage affords great collective excitations:
if we managed to suppress the Oedipus com-
plex and marriage, what would be left for us
to tell?"

—ROLAND BARTHES, *Roland Barthes*

manys
his
mother

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Friends who have helped me by reading and commenting on vari-

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PARALLEL
LIVES

1. Political aspect - power

2. Literary aspect
(psychological)

There are so many lives
living lives side by side

- living in their own
(ideologies & belief)

"Parallel Lives"

Prologue

When Leslie Stephen, the Victorian man of letters, read Froude's biography of Carlyle in the early 1880s, he was shocked—as were many people—by its portrait of the Carlyles' marriage. He asked himself if he had treated *his* wife as badly as it seemed to him that Thomas Carlyle had treated Jane. With the Carlyles in his mind, Stephen, after his wife's death, enshrined his self-exoneration in a lugubrious record of his domestic life which posterity has dubbed *The Mausoleum Book*, and I, reading it, conceived the idea for this book.¹ Froude's life of Carlyle is a masterpiece, but much biography shares its power to inspire comparison. Have I lived that way? Do I want to live that way? Could I make myself live that way if I wanted to? Nineteenth-century Englishmen read Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans* to learn about the perils and pitfalls of public life, but it occurred to me that there was no equivalent or even vaguely similar series of domestic portraits.

So this book began with a desire to tell the stories of some marriages as unsentimentally as possible, with attention to the shifting tides of power between a man and a woman joined, presumably, for life. My purposes were partly feminist (since marriage is so often the context within which a woman works out her destiny, it has always been an object of feminist scrutiny) and partly, in ways I shall explain, literary.

I believe, first of all, that living is an act of creativity and that, at certain moments of our lives, our creative imaginations are more conspicuously demanded than at others. At certain moments, the

need to decide upon the story of our own lives becomes particularly pressing—when we choose a mate, for example, or embark upon a career. Decisions like that make sense, retroactively, of the past and project a meaning onto the future, knit past and future together, and create, suspended between the two, the present. Questions we have all asked of ourselves such as *Why am I doing this?* or the even more basic *What am I doing?* suggest the way in which living forces us to look for and forces us to find a design within the primal stew of data which is our daily experience. There is a kind of arranging and telling and choosing of detail—of narration, in short—which we must do so that one day will prepare for the next day, one week prepare for the next week. In some way we all decide when we have grown up and what event will symbolize for us that state of maturity—leaving home, getting married, becoming a parent, losing our parents, making a million, writing a book. To the extent that we impose some narrative form onto our lives, each of us in the ordinary process of living is a fitful novelist, and the biographer is a literary critic.

Marriages, or parallel lives as I have chosen to call them, hold a particular fascination for the biographer-critic because they set two imaginations to work constructing narratives about experience presumed to be the same for both. In using the word *parallel*, however, I hope to call attention to the gap between the narrative lines as well as to their similarity.

An older school of literary biography was concerned to show how “life” had influenced an author’s work. My own assumption is that certain imaginative patterns—call them mythologies or ideologies—determine the shape of a writer’s life as well as his or her work. I therefore look for connections between the two without assuming that reality is the template for fiction—assuming, if anything, the reverse. In first approaching this material, I looked for evidence that what people read helped form their views of their own experience. Some emerged. Jane Welsh, for example, being courted by Thomas Carlyle, derived her view of their relationship from reading *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Dickens’s management of his separation from his wife seemed influenced by the melodramas in which he was fond of act-

ing. But what came to interest me more was the way in which every marriage was a narrative construct—or two narrative constructs. In unhappy marriages, for example, I see two versions of reality rather than two people in conflict. I see a struggle for imaginative dominance going on. Happy marriages seem to me those in which the two partners agree on the scenario they are enacting, even if, as was the case with Mr. and Mrs. Mill, their own idea of their relationship is totally at variance with the facts. I speak with great trepidation about “facts” in such matters, but, speaking loosely, the facts in the Mills’ case—that a woman of strong and uncomplicated will dominated a guilt-ridden man—were less important than their shared imaginative view of the facts, that their marriage fitted their shared ideal of a marriage of equals. I assume, then, as little objective truth as possible about these parallel lives, for every marriage seems to me a subjectivist fiction with two points of view often deeply in conflict, sometimes fortuitously congruent.

That, sketchily, is the ground of my literary interest in parallel lives, but there is a political dimension as well. On the basis of family life, we form our expectations about power and powerlessness, about authority and obedience in other spheres, and in that sense the family is, as has so often been insisted, the building block of society. The idea of the family as a school for civic life goes back to the ancient Romans, and feminist criticism of the family as such a school—the charge that it is a school for despots and slaves—goes back at least to John Stuart Mill.² I cite this tradition to locate, in part, my own position: like Mill, I believe marriage to be the primary political experience in which most of us engage as adults, and so I am interested in the management of power between men and women in that microcosmic relationship. Whatever the balance, every marriage is based upon some understanding, articulated or not, about the relative importance, the priority of desires, between its two partners. Marriages go bad not when love fades—love can modulate into affection without driving two people apart—but when this understanding about the balance of power breaks down, when the weaker member feels exploited or the stronger feels unrewarded for his or her strength.

People who find this a chilling way to talk about one of our most treasured human bonds will object that "power struggle" is a flawed circumstance into which relationships fall when love fails. (For some people it is impossible to discuss power without adding the word struggle.) I would counter by pointing out the human tendency to invoke love at moments when we want to disguise transactions involving power. Like the aged Lear handing over his kingdom to his daughters, when we resign power, or assume new power, we insist it is not happening and demand to be talked to about love. Perhaps that is what love is—the momentary or prolonged refusal to think of another person in terms of power. Like an enzyme which blocks momentarily a normal biological process, what we call love may inhibit the process of power negotiation—from which inhibition comes the illusion of equality so characteristic of lovers. If the impulse to abjure measurement and negotiation comes from within, unbidden, it is one of life's graces and blessings. But if it is culturally induced, and more particularly desired of one segment of humanity than another, then we may perhaps find it repugnant and call it a mask for exploitation. Surely, in regard to marriage, love has received its fair share of attention, power less than its share.³ For every social scientist discussing the family as a psychopolitical structure,⁴ for every John Stuart Mill talking about "subjection" in marriage, how many pieties are daily uttered about love? Who can resist the thought that love is the ideological bone thrown to women to distract their attention from the powerlessness of their lives? Only millions of romantics can resist it—and other millions who might see it as the bone thrown to men to distract them from the bondage of *their* lives.

In unconscious states, as we know from Freud, the mind is astonishingly fertile and inventive in its fiction-making, but in conscious states this is not so. The plots we choose to impose on our own lives are limited and limiting. And in no area are they so banal and sterile as in this of love and marriage. Nothing else being available to our imaginations, we will filter our experience through the romantic clichés with which popular culture bombards us. And because the callowness and conventionality of the plots we impose on ourselves are a betrayal of our inner richness and complexity, we feel anxious

and unhappy. We may turn to therapy for help, but the plots it evokes, if done less than expertly, are also fairly limiting.

Easy stories drive out hard ones. Simple paradigms prevail over complicated ones. If, within marriage, power is the ability to impose one's imaginative vision and make it prevail, then power is more easily obtained if one has a simple and widely accepted paradigm at hand. The patriarchal paradigm has long enforced men's power within marriage: a man works hard to make himself worthy of a woman; they marry; he heads the family; she serves him, working to please him and care for him, getting protection in return. This plot regularly generates its opposite, the plot of female power through weakness: the woman, somehow wounded by family life, needs to be cared for and requires an offering of guilt. Mrs. Rochester, the madwoman in the attic in *Jane Eyre*, is a fairly spectacular example.⁵ The suffering female demanding care has often proved stronger than the conquering male deserving care—a dialectic of imaginative visions of which the Carlyles provide a good example—but neither side of the patriarchal paradigm seems to bring out the best in humanity. In regard to marriage, we need more and more complex plots. I reveal my literary bias in saying I believe we need literature, which, by allowing us to experience more fully, to imagine more fully, enables us to live more freely. In a pragmatic way, we can profit from an immersion in the nineteenth-century novel which took the various stages of marriage as its central subject.

We tend to talk informally about other people's marriages and to disparage our own talk as gossip. But gossip may be the beginning of moral inquiry, the low end of the platonic ladder which leads to self-understanding. We are desperate for information about how other people live because we want to know how to live ourselves, yet we are taught to see this desire as an illegitimate form of prying. If marriage is, as Mill suggested, a political experience, then discussion of it ought to be taken as seriously as talk about national elections. Cultural pressure to avoid such talk as "gossip" ought to be resisted, in a spirit of good citizenship. In that spirit, then, I offer some private lives for examination and discussion. I will try to tell these stories in such a way as to raise questions about the role of power and the nature of equality within marriage, for I assume a connec-