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# The Emergence of Literary Biography

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Literary biography—biographies of writers—emerged in the seventeenth century out of a tradition of historical biography and hagiography. Izaak Walton's *Life of John Donne* (1640) and *Life of George Herbert* (1670) represent a bridge between idealized lives of saints and heroes and this new genre. Walton is innovatory in writing about the lives of poets, but he presents his subjects as exemplary men of God rather than as writers.

Thomas Sprat's *Life of Cowley* (1668) has long been seen as the first proper literary biography as it focuses on Cowley as a poet. Although a preface to *The Works of Mr Abraham Cowley* rather than a stand-alone narrative, it is lengthy and incisive, generally considered as setting a standard unmatched until Johnson's *Life of Savage* (1744). It is equally important as an early articulation of biographical methodology. Sprat's insistence that we should seek to know no more about a writer than what that writer has chosen to reveal about himself in his published works would be the central plank of Wordsworth's impassioned argument about intrusive literary biography over a century later in 1816. Sprat's argument that Cowley has "given the World the best Image of his own mind in these immortal Monuments of his Wit" is usually taken as a simple ethical principle. But his insistence on biographical propriety in fact conceals his efforts to disguise awkward details of Cowley's career as a spy and his unsuccessful political maneuvering during the Restoration (Darcy 2013, 26–39). But the issue of the extent to which biography should probe a writer's private life remains a critical one today as does the often-concealed politics of life writing. Cowley's assumption that a poet is male will be echoed in biographical and critical writing throughout the eighteenth century, especially when copyright legislation gives commercial impetus to new anthologies of poetry, so crucial to canon formation.

Sprat's other influential stricture is against the use of familiar letters in biography. In "Letters that pass between particular Friends," he writes:

the Souls of Men should appear undress'd: And in that negligent habit, they may be fit to be seen by one or two in a chamber, but not to go abroad into the Streets. (Cowley 1668)

Sprat's principle is not seriously challenged until William Mason defends his innovative use of familiar letters in his biography of the poet Thomas Gray (1775), arguing, "I am well aware that I am here going to do a thing which the cautious and courtly Dr Sprat (were he now alive) would highly censure." (Mason 1775, 4).

But in fact John Dryden in his often-neglected *Life of Plutarch* (1683) argues that it is exactly this state of undress—even nakedness—that biography should reveal. Comparing biographical writing with that of history, Dryden isolates the feature that gives biography its particular interest:

[...] there is withal, a descent into minute circumstances, and trivial passages of life, which are natural to this way of writing, and which the dignity of the other [...] will not admit. There you are conducted only into the rooms of state; here you are led into the private Lodgings of the Heroe: you see him in undress, and are made Familiar with his most private actions and conversations. (Dryden 1683, 94)

Nearly all the enduring issues in the writing of literary biography—about the primacy of uncovering a person's hidden motivation, and the value of anecdote as a tool to achieve this—have their roots in classical biographical writing of Plutarch. An important legacy from Plutarch is his insistence that "it is not so much histories that we are writing but *lives*" (Duff 1999, 15). Starved of biographical information about Plutarch, Dryden uses his engaging essay to develop his own theory of biographical writing. His insistence that biography should explore the inner nature of the subject and make use of quotidian detail pre-dates Johnson's important *Rambler* 60 essay on biography by several decades.

It is also important to understand the commercial imperatives behind the growth of literary biography, in particular the development of copyright legislation. Under the Licensing Act of 1662, strict pre-censorship had been imposed on all publications. This benefited the London book trade by legally protecting their copyrights, which were held to be perpetual and thus were extremely valuable. Under these circumstances, only the holders of a particular author's copyright could publish his works—there could be no rival editions, no anthologies. Between 1695 when the Licensing Act lapsed and the Act of Queen Anne in 1710, publishers were made insecure, no longer able to enjoy legal protection for their copyrights. The Act of 1710 was largely designed to break down the monopolies of London booksellers by giving legal protection of only 14 years to new works and 21 years to works already in print. Booksellers, however, exploited a legal loophole, insisting that in common law their perpetual copyrights remained legal. The 1730s, when the first new copyrights began to expire, thus became a period of particularly fierce legal contests. These carried on until a decisive House of Lords ruling in 1774 that closed the legal loophole allowing perpetual copyright (St Clair 2004).

It is for this reason that throughout the period from 1710 to 1774 there was no incentive for booksellers to commission new lives of their poets. The main form of literary biography remained the brief biographical preface to an edition of the author's works, usually dignified and dull—a brief summary of the writer's parentage and education followed by an account of the works themselves. Tickell in his *Life of Addison* (1726), for example, deems Addison's private family life to be of minimal interest, openly stating, "I have proposed to touch but lightly on those parts of his life, which do not regard him as an author" (1726, xix). The other place where the lives of writers appeared in print was in biographical dictionaries, such as William Oldys's *Biographia Britannica* (1747–1766).

This is not to imply that the full-length biography in general remained in the doldrums in the first 75 years of the eighteenth century. Sensational biographies, such as the lives of criminals and actresses, flourished, as did new novels often purporting to be the life story of their hero or heroine. The unscrupulous Edmund Curll's practice of rushing out cheap and inaccurate biographies of recently dead celebrities led to Arbuthnot's famous quip about Curll adding a new terror to death (Baines and Rogers 2007, 1).

But biographical controversy had a powerful effect on the nascent genre of literary biography, fueling the demand for further biographies of a single author. Even Johnson, as Roger Lonsdale points out, exploited contemporary taste for scandalous biography in his *Life of Mr Richard Savage* (Darcy 2013, 59).

The final abolition of perpetual copyright in 1774 was followed, in the words of Johnson's early biographer, Sir John Hawkins, by "a scramble of the lowest and least principled of the booksellers, for the jewel thus cast among them" (Lonsdale 2006, 1:4). Most of the copyrights of the important poets had been owned singly or jointly by London booksellers. To make the most of their threatened assets, they needed to bring out an edition of all their poets before they were undercut by their rivals in Scotland. J.D. Fleeman has explained that what would establish copyright was the inclusion of new prefaces, deemed inalienable, and so these were commissioned with the intention of safeguarding the texts of the poets (Lonsdale 2006, 1:13).

This was the background to Dr. Johnson's commission to write his biographical prefaces, the *Lives of the English Poets*. When Edinburgh bookseller John Bell advertised his grand venture, an affordable 109-volume series, *The Poets of Great Britain Complete from Chaucer to Churchill*, London publishers had to act quickly. In March 1777, a large consortium of them sent a deputation to Johnson, commissioning him to write a set of prefaces for a rival anthology. By April the imminent publication of *The English Poets, with a Preface, Biographical and Critical, to each Author, By Samuel Johnson, LL.D* was being advertised. The task proved a momentous one, the completed volumes appearing between 1779 and 1781. The relatively brief prefaces Johnson envisaged became full blown pieces of literary biography in which he gave serious critical assessments of each poet's works. It is here, for example, in his "Life of Cowley," that Johnson coined the term "metaphysical poetry." These poets, 52 in all, were not selected by Johnson: the booksellers dictated who should be included. But Johnson did not feel bound by the commercial imperative to offer bland praise. The works of minor poets he dismisses. Of Richard Duke, for example, he comments, "His poems are not below mediocrity: nor have I found much in them to be praised" (Mullan 2009). He admired *Paradise Lost*, but said candidly, "No one ever wished it longer than it is" (Mullan 2009).

Johnson's interest in biography was well established long before he began *Lives of the Poets*. In 1744, as already noted, he published his wry biography of his unreliable friend, the poet Richard Savage. His periodical essay *Rambler* 60 is a text that became fundamental to biographical theory. Biographical prefaces by his contemporaries often opened with a reference either to this essay or to his *Idler* 84 on biography and autobiography. And from the eighteenth century to the present day, critics of life writing almost inevitably quote Johnson on the subject. He made a strong case for the importance of biography as a genre:

no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition. (Johnson 1969, 318–319)

The ultimate search in biography is to add to our understanding of happiness and sorrow. We look to biography, he writes in *Idler* 84, not to discover “how any man became great, but how he was made happy; not how he lost the favour of his prince, but how he became discontented with himself” (Johnson 1963, 261).

Where biography had conventionally been concerned with great men, Johnson articulates the century's new interest in the *ordinary* life: “there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful” (Johnson 1969, 320). Plutarch had written that “often a little matter like a saying or a joke hints at character more than battles where thousands die, huge troop deployments, or the sieges of cities” (Duff 1999, 15). Johnson's well-known statement “more knowledge may be made of a man's real character by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative” (1969, 322) tacitly endorses Plutarch's and lightly suggests a further aspect of it: a biographer needs to authenticate the judgment made from revealing details by consulting someone who knew his subject as a private man.

Equally famous is Johnson's statement about the value of quotidian detail:

It is frequently objected to relations of particular lives, that they are not distinguished by any striking or wonderful vicissitudes ... But 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. There are many invisible circumstances which ... are more important than public occurrences. Thus Sallust, the great master of nature, has not forgot, in his account of Catiline, to remark that ‘his walk was now quick, and again slow’, as an indication of a mind revolving something with violent commotion. (1969, 320–321)

Johnson saw the troublesome issue of “domestick privacies” and the extent to which biography ought to reveal the private life of its subject as bounded at one extreme by the pointlessness of uncritical praise. So, for instance, he criticizes Sprat's *Life of Cowley* for giving so little detail that “all is shewn confused and enlarged through the mist of panegyrick” (Lonsdale 2006, 1:191). At the other end, he believes there should be a sense of decency, writing in his “Life of Addison” that “caprice, obstinacy, frolick, and folly, however they might delight in the descriptions, should be silently forgotten” (Lonsdale 2006, 3:18).

Of single-subject literary biographies as opposed to group biographies, the most significant one between the 1774 copyright ruling and Boswell's *Life of Johnson* in 1791

was William Mason's *Memoirs of the Life and Writing of Mr Gray* (1775). Mason deliberately challenged Sprat's earlier prohibition of the use of private letters biography. By publishing Gray's letters, Mason famously declared, "Mr Gray will become his own biographer" (Mason 1775, 5). Horace Walpole immediately announced that biography had now found its epitome, writing to Mason, "You have fixed the method of biography and whoever will write a life must imitate you" (Cafarelli 1990, 22). The dominance of the life-and-letters model throughout the nineteenth century suggests Walpole was right. Together with this, Mason's coinage of the phrase "become his own biographer" took a strong hold on popular imagination. It was frequently invoked by biographers and their reviewers for decades. It seemed to promise a new level of intimacy with a famous writer.

Boswell was one of the first to declare he was following the "Mason method," by using Johnson's own words to narrate his *Life of Johnson* (1964, 1:29). But he was neither Johnson's official biographer, nor his first. He turned down a request from his publisher in December 1784, days after Johnson's death, for "an Octavo volume of 400 pages of [Johnson's] conversations ready by February" (Hyde 1973, 91).

Sir John Hawkins, another of Johnson's friends, was prepared to step in. By the following year Hester Thrale Piozzi, herself compiling a book of biographical anecdotes about Johnson, heard that there were at least six others working on his biography (Hyde 1973, 92). The rivalry between Piozzi and Boswell in Johnson's lifetime intensified in the years after his death, both determined to demonstrate their unique intimacy with the great man. Both had been recording Johnson's sayings for a good 10 years. But Boswell had to contend with the fact that Johnson had effectively lived in the household of Hester Thrale and her first husband for extended periods. Boswell, by contrast, lived and worked in Scotland and thus was unable to see Johnson for long stretches at a time. It has been estimated that he only spent in the region of 200 days in Johnson's company.

Following Johnson's death, Boswell first published his account of the journey the two men made to Scotland. His *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785) was an immediate commercial success, although it had its critics, Horace Walpole calling it "a most absurd enormous book ... the story of a mountebank and his zany" (Hyde 1973, 99). A year later, in 1786, Thrale Piozzi published her *Anecdotes of Johnson*. In her preface, she goes on the offensive with rival biographers, giving the precise date of a conversation in which Johnson asked her who she thought would be the best person to write his biography. He considers his old friend Dr. Taylor "better acquainted with my *heart* than any man or woman now alive," but adds his intention "to disappoint the rogues" and either get Piozzi herself to write it, or write one himself (Piozzi 1786, 32). Piozzi's signal is clear: Boswell is of no account, either as friend or putative biographer. In 1787 publishers offered Piozzi 500 pounds to publish Johnson's letters to her—where Johnson himself had been content with an offer of 200 guineas to write all the *Lives* (Hyde 1973, 116). When these are published in 1788, Boswell is disappointed at Johnson's lack of reference to him. He had already felt slighted by his deliberate side-lining by Piozzi in her *Anecdotes*, privately calling her "a little artful impudent malignant Devil" who "wants to bite me as much as she can" (Hyde 1973, 100). The publication of Sir John Hawkins's portentous life of Johnson in 1787, however, perturbs neither.

Boswell finally triumphs, writing himself inextricably into Johnson's legend. Even though the *Life of Johnson* only appears in 1791, it clearly towers above the other biographical

works, not just in its magnitude and dignity, but in the compelling and un-replicable methodology he uses. It seems he has been at Johnson's side since their first meeting in 1763, recording swathes of his conversations. These Boswell uses to offer dramatic representations of scene after scene of Johnson in conversation. Boswell the private man who we now know from his candid journals is kept well hidden. In the *Life* he presents himself as a usually dignified, thoughtful companion to Johnson, although he knows the value of the occasional anecdote in which Johnson belittles him.

At the outset he employs a number of classical tropes to presents his own role as biographer in a heroic light. He begins by describing the accumulated memories of Johnson as forming a memorial cairn: "every individual was eager to throw a stone upon the grave of a departed Hero" (Boswell 1964, 1:5). This is a common enough conceit, but Boswell's use of it is suggestive. The stones thrown on the grave are both individual tributes and individual memories in the form of anecdotes. There is an important difference between the usage Johnson and Boswell each make of the anecdote. Johnson's understanding of human nature is the classical one—that there are underlying universals. Thus a single anecdote is an economical way of illustrating an identifiable character trait. Boswell, on the other hand, influenced by Hume, considered human identity to be a "bundle of perceptions" and therefore in a constant state of flux (Nussbaum 1989, 109). This being the case, there was a new biographical conundrum: How could a unique, ever-changing human being be represented in biography? The logical conclusion Boswell reached was to amass as much material as he possibly could. He could therefore boast, as he does in his preface, that Johnson "will be seen in this work more completely than any man who has ever yet lived" (Boswell 1964, 1:5). At the same time, the image of the memorial cairn is troubling: Boswell displays anxiety that a comprehensive biography could become no more than an anonymous compilation of competing insights, none worth more than another (1:6). He is keen to insist that he has with "labour and anxious attention ... collected and arranged the materials" and has subjected each piece of information to critical scrutiny, sometimes having "to run half over London in order to fix a date correctly" (1:7). This insistence on a new professionalism in the verification of biographical material conveniently explains the lapse of seven years between Johnson's death and the appearance of Boswell's *Life*. He is also insisting on his skill in arranging his material—so that what he is building is not so much a cairn of accumulated anecdotes but a monument which he alone has created.

Boswell makes swift work of his rivals, firstly by placing his own friendship with Johnson at the center of the *Life*. He accuses Hawkins of "unpardonable inaccuracies" and, worse still, of "a dark uncharitable cast, by which the most unfavourable construction is put upon almost every circumstance" (Boswell 1964, 1:27). Hester Thrale Piozzi he dismisses. She has created a "small volume" of anecdotes about Johnson which can be "read in a few hours." She is guilty of "extreme inaccuracy with which her anecdotes of Dr Johnson are related, or rather discoloured and distorted" (1:416). Boswell assures us that he, however, will give us the facts "authentically from Johnson's own narration."

Building on Mason's innovatory use of letters in biography, and his own ability to reconstitute dialogue, Boswell offered a literary portrait of unrivalled vividness. Thanks largely to him, a new form of full-length, anecdotal literary biography was recognized as a distinct and significant genre. "From that time a new spirit animated all this department



of composition," the biographer John Gibson Lockhart was to write in 1836, adding, "and to the influence of Boswell we owe probably three-fourths of what is de facto most entertaining, as well as no inconsiderable portion of whatever is instructive, in all books of memoirs that have subsequently appeared" (Hart 1960, 46).

Others would deprecate Boswell's project. Coleridge was horrified that contemporary life had become "the age of personality!" and deplored "this mania of busying ourselves with the names of others, which is still more alarming as a symptom, than it is troublesome as a disease." He declared it "a crime" to "introduce the spirit of vulgar scandal and personal inquietude into the Closet and the Library." "The spirit of genuine Biography," rather, should be conspicuous for "the firmness with which it withstands the cravings of worthless curiosity." (Coleridge 1969, 1:385–387). In 1816 Wordsworth complained that the *Life of Johnson*, "had broken through many pre-existing delicacies, and afforded the British public an opportunity of acquiring experience, which before it had happily wanted" (Wordsworth 1974, 120). "To Boswellize" became a standard term for a number of biographical practices, including the use of intrusive domestic detail and the recording of private conversations (Reed 1966, 130). Boswell was blamed for a loss of pre-lapsarian innocence: writers claimed to have been made self-conscious. Thomas Love Peacock described Byron as "haunted in his retirement by varieties of the small Boswell" (Hart 1960, 56). The previous sanctity of the metaphorical dressing room had been violated, with writers now in "prepared undress" (Cafarelli 1990, 23).

Boswell's treatment of Piozzi's biographical writing speaks of an overt male bias in eighteenth-century culture to which we should be alert. Piozzi and other women who write about the lives of writers in the period, such as Maria Riddell on Burns and Anna Seward on Erasmus Darwin, were marginalized by their contemporary male rivals. Clifford Siskin's paradigm of the "Great Forgetting" of women writers at the turn of the nineteenth century (Siskin 1998), extended by Norma Clarke in *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Literature* (2004), has revealed the extent to which the new reviewing culture of the early romantic period sought to gender critical authority as male. The biographies written by such women writers tended to be modestly conceived and largely anecdotal in mode. They usually focused on their own personal knowledge of the subject—Seward, for example, concentrated on the years Erasmus Darwin spent in her home town of Lichfield, rather than offering a panoptic account of his life. Such accounts could thus be too easily dismissed by critics as being of lesser worth than the monumental constructions of certain male biographers, in particular Boswell and Hawkins. Beryl Bainbridge's inventive novel *According to Queeney* (2001) offers a refreshing and playful re-imagining of how biography might also be constructed by those who knew Johnson in domestic, largely female spaces. Aspects of his personality might appear, she suggests, that are different from the dominant image of Boswell's mighty conversationalist.

In concluding this first section on literary biography from the early modern period through the Enlightenment there is another assumption worth noting. That is that the essential character of the hero is already fully formed. There is little if any reason therefore for biographies to take into account childhood, for example, barring anecdotes that demonstrate precocious talents. Nor do many of the other common milestones of a life, such as love, marriage, and parenthood, have the special significance to an understanding of individuality they will only acquire in biography from the Romantic period onward.

As we move into an account of literary biography of the early Romantic period, it would be tempting to imagine that the candid self-scrutiny of Rousseau's *Confessions* (2000 [1782]) led to a total transformation of the genre, all subsequent life writing wholly concerned with the inner—and private—lives of writers. Romantic literary biography could then be conveniently distinguished from its Enlightenment forebear. It could additionally be characterized by its focus on, say, the figure of the creative genius himself (and it is still likely to be a male subject), perhaps linking his creativity to his isolation caused by profound melancholic suffering. We might find confirmation for this view in accounts of literary life writing that move swiftly from Boswell to the lives of the canonical Romantic poets from Byron onward.

But there is persuasive evidence that in the uneasy decade of the 1790s a number of political radicals turned to biographical and autobiographical writing with the intention of furthering social reform. This writing would not valorize the writer who stood *outside* society, but rather examine ways in which a writer might contribute *to* society in the cause of liberty. The second half of this chapter is thus concerned with the significance of this biographical writing at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Three biographies in particular exemplify a new project of experimental biographical writing that emerged around 1800. Two of these deserve to be considered as representative of a new genre: philosophical biography. I see this as a short-lived but significant experiment in biographical writing, self-consciously developed in response to a unique moment of political, social, and scientific revolution, but one which has yet to receive sustained critical attention (Darcy 2013). The term comes from Coleridge, who praised James Currie's *Account of the life of Robert Burns* (1800) as a "masterly specimen of philosophical biography" (Low 1974, 108).

It is undoubtedly an experimental genre and not perhaps an enduringly successful one. But an understanding of philosophical biography allows us to view the more orthodox, commercially successful biographies of later Romanticism in a new light. Two key philosophical biographies are William Godwin's *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft and Currie's life of Burns*. A third, William Hayley's life of William Cowper, provides an interesting contrast. Like Wollstonecraft and Burns, Cowper was a political radical, passionate, for example, in his criticism of slavery. In writing Cowper's life, Hayley opted for the still-new Mason method of a life and letters. But in a well-intentioned attempt to conceal Cowper's extreme evangelical views and the periods of suicidal madness that might have been blamed on these beliefs, he produced a cautious, conservative account. This, in fact, provoked controversy among both his evangelical and his non-evangelical readers alike.

Wollstonecraft, Cowper, and Burns were not part of one literary circle. They never met and were not influenced by one another's writings. But all were committed to radical reform, both Wollstonecraft and Cowper published by Joseph Johnson, the dissenting radical. Their deaths, around 1800, occasioned a conscious re-evaluation of the emerging genre of literary biography as controversies surrounded the posthumous reputation of each. Biographical propriety became a key issue in the wake of Boswell. Their biographers faced ethical issues over the publication of private correspondence, some of which revealed painfully raw expressions of suffering. In each case this suffering was uncomfortably bound up with other sensitive issues—Burns's drinking and womanizing, Wollstonecraft's radical politics and unorthodox life style, and Cowper's uncompromising Calvinism.



Rousseau's *Confessions* foregrounded a radical new idea about the inner life as the location of the self, a self which is not following a pre-ordained path to adulthood, but which is constantly in formation. Where Johnson spoke of the universal—"The sensations are the same in all" (1963, 263)—Rousseau famously proclaimed "I am not made like any that I have seen; I venture to believe that I was not made like any that exist" (2000, 5). He espoused the Humean understanding of the self as constantly in flux: "there are times when I am so unlike myself that you might take me for another man with a character quite contrary to my own" (125). Furthermore, he complicates but does not resolve the issue of the thinking subject. Is the "I" who writes the autobiography one and the same as the "I" whose constantly evolving life and feelings are being written about? Throughout the *Confessions*, therefore, Rousseau's overt intention is to capture his own interiority. Importantly, although he invokes the "Eternal Being" on the first page, this self-examination is not a dialogue with the divine.

But this new interest in interiority presented literary biography with a fresh challenge. Should it attempt to mine a writer's private life for the raw material, the "rude ore" of poetic inspiration? The desire to find out about the writer as a private person continued to intensify in the period. Wordsworth blamed Boswell for the trend, but it was unstoppable.

One important way in which the three biographers in question dealt with potentially explosive material was to subsume the awkward details of the biographical subject's private life into a larger philosophical framework.

Godwin had been a practitioner of biography since his unremarkable *Life of William Pitt* (1783). In 1797 his "Essay of history and romance" articulated theories of biography that have much in common with Johnson's (Godwin 1993, 5:290–301). Like Johnson, Godwin highlights the importance of biography as a genre of history, but makes more than Johnson of its psychological value: "it is only by comparison that we come to know anything of mind or of ourselves." Godwin stresses the potentially inspirational quality of biographies of great men, which "kindles into a flame the hidden flame within us" (5:292–293). He employs a familiar biographical trope of the private man in his closet as the ultimate site of biographical interest: "I am not contented to observe such a man upon the public stage, I would follow him into his closet. I would see the friend and father of a family, as well as the patriot" (5:294). Despite paying lip service to the place of other people in such a life, however, as suggested by the twin roles of father and friend, Godwin's focus is squarely on the solitary man in his study.

The 1778 edition of the *Biographia Britannica* argued for a more dynamic form of biography. Biography should become philosophical enquiry:

presenting us with a variety of events, that, like experiments in Natural Philosophy, may become the materials from which general truths and principles are to be drawn ... it rises to the dignity of a SCIENCE; and of such science as must ever be esteemed of particular importance because it hath MAN for its object. (Rivers 2003, 157)

Godwin's *Memoirs* of Mary Wollstonecraft have been called "one the most significant biographical documents in Revolutionary and Romantic writing" (Godwin 2000, 12). They merit the label 'philosophical biography' because Godwin consciously presents

Wollstonecraft's life as one lived according to a constant, unwavering belief in the importance of truth, liberty, social equality, and justice. He firmly positions her as a philosopher: "The Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman," rather than, say, a travel writer or a novelist. He insists that at every point in her life she tried courageously to find ways to live out these principles. Ultimately, he suggests, it was in her lived existence, more than in her various writings, that she demonstrated her fidelity to her vision.

The limitation of philosophical biography, however, is that its methodology had too much of a flavor of Enlightenment rationality. It invites us to view its subject objectively, asking us to accept a set of theoretical rules by which to judge personal behavior. It is only interested in interiority in order to map it onto a larger transpersonal framework. It is very far from promulgating a notion of creative genius as divinely inspired, for example. Rather it is intent on displaying the influence of a set of unique experiences on a particular individual. We can see why as a subgenre philosophical biography never really took off. It privileges general rules over chaotic, fragmentary narrative. It insists on showing not telling at a time when conventional biography was increasingly valorizing the biographical anecdote to give color and authenticity.

Godwin's autobiographical writing suggests he values the autobiographical memories of lived experience. Why then is his biography of Wollstonecraft relatively thin in texture? I would suggest this can mainly be explained in terms of his conception of the *Memoirs* as a biographical preface, rather than a free-standing life. It also suits his purpose, I suggest, to drive a biographical narrative of successful overcoming of obstacles that a longer biography might dilute.

Godwin's newly awakened awareness of the importance of feeling offers the important structural principle of the *Memoirs*. Following Rousseau's *Confessions*, Godwin depicts events in Wollstonecraft's life "as a series of 'revolutions' or turning-points" that "threaten to alienate her from society, but in fact lead to a growth in moral and political awareness" (2000, 21).

Godwin naively believes his candid account of Wollstonecraft's unconventional life will make his readers love her as he did. Notorious parts of the book included Godwin's discussion of Wollstonecraft's unreciprocated passion for the artist Fuseli and the failure of her affair with Gilbert Imlay. Critics have long since shown how these revelations were completely in keeping with Godwin and Wollstonecraft's shared belief in total frankness. In *Political Justice* he had inveighed against the institution of marriage and confidently presents Wollstonecraft's attempts to find a satisfactory route out of the conventional. Here he insists, "There are no circumstances in her life, that, in the judgment of honor and reason, could brand her with disgrace" (2000, 103). Godwin's candor extends to his revelation about Wollstonecraft's two suicide attempts, challenging the reader to defy his insistence on her rationality and courage: "She had sought, with cool and deliberate firmness, to put a period to her existence" (97), only to recover her "lofty and undaunted spirit" (101).

In the final chapters of the *Memoirs*, he describes his own love affair with Wollstonecraft and her tragic death, emphasizing the new form of domesticity they manage to create. He concludes with the remarkable declaration of the profound effect Wollstonecraft had had on his life. It reads as the secular equivalent of the climactic moment of conversion in a spiritual autobiography. The story of the hostile reception of the *Memoirs* is well known,

Southey famously writing that Godwin lacked “all feeling in stripping his dead wife naked” (Rajan 2000, 511).

The treatment of the posthumous reputation of the Scottish poet Robert Burns was also controversial but in very different ways. In 1786 Burns had shot to celebrity, Henry Mackenzie in a *Lounger* essay famously labeling him the “Heaven-taught ploughman” (Low 1974, 70). But when Burns died, in 1796, at the age of 37, obituarists sought to blame his so-called dissipated habits, accusing him of drinking to death.

Burns’s friend, Maria Riddell, quickly published a personal “character study” of Burns to counter these accusations, initiating an important strand in the Burns myth. This was her notion that his true genius lay not so much in his poetry but in his personality (Low 1974, 102–103). Later writers would point to his impressive intellect, and even, like Scott, to what he had *not* written, as evidence of his genius. This closely matches Godwin’s presentation of Wollstonecraft as a genius who had yet to live out her full potential.

Riddell’s contention that genius “never was free from irregularities” became central to the controversy that followed. Should there be, in Francis Jeffrey’s later phrase, a “special dispensation” for genius? (Low 1974, 182). Can irregular behavior be excused because it is an almost inevitable consequence of the melancholy sensibilities of the man of genius? Riddell cited a stanza from Burns’s poem “The Vision,” which becomes the touchstone for later debate: “But yet the light that led astray, / Was *light from heaven!*” (Low 1974, 106–107).

Robert Heron’s *Memoir* of Burns, published in 1797, is of interest because he consciously invokes the idea of philosophical biography, first by positioning his work as biography, as opposed to Riddell’s “character sketch.” His stated methodology is to trace the development of his subject “between the cradle and the grave,” claiming he had amassed “data” of interest to the “moral philosopher” in the “exposition of the nicer laws of the formation and progress of the human character” (Heron 1797, 2). Despite this quasi-scientific approach, Heron has little of originality to say. He seems to bear a personal animus toward Burns, accusing him of “Bacchanalian excess” in Edinburgh, which, he says, led to his self-imposed exile from good society and toward “drunkenness, in the tavern, in the brothel, on the lap of the woman of pleasure” (29, 27). Despite this slide toward self-destruction, in Heron’s final view, Burns retains something heroic, appearing “not less than archangel ruined,” though the exact nature of this quality is not explored (42).

James Currie’s landmark biography of Burns, therefore, had to counter such accusations. Currie was an eminent physician and social reformer. The task of editing Burns’s works and providing a biographical preface evidently appealed to him as both a philosophical and a literary project. His unusual prefatory essay, “Observations on the Character and Condition of the Scottish Peasantry,” is an overt attempt to employ methods of philosophical enquiry to construct biography. By describing what was then typical of the life of the Scottish peasant, Currie attempts to show both the soil from which Burns sprang and the ways in which Burns was exceptional.

Where Godwin’s *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft disappeared from critical debate, both Currie’s *Life of Burns* and subsequently Hayley’s *Life of Cowper* were extensively discussed in the influential new reviews of the 1800s: the Whig *Edinburgh Review*, launched in 1802 by Francis Jeffrey, and the rival Tory *Quarterly Review* by William Gifford in 1809.

Jeffrey ignites an enduring debate about Burns, asking if the sensibility of genius sanctions a total disregard for moral behavior and creative output. He is violently opposed to Riddell's argument that "the light that led astray" is nonetheless "light from heaven." Jeffrey calls this belief in "*the dispensing power of genius*" a "cardinal deformity" of all Burns's work, inveighing against his contempt for "prudence, decency and regularity." (Low 1974, 182). Walter Scott, however, in the *Quarterly Review* signals a new development in literary criticism by overtly focusing on the poetry of Burns rather than the life of the poet in implicit contradiction to Jeffrey (Low 1974, 196–209).

Meanwhile, a fanciful piece of myth-making by R.H. Cromek, *Reliques of Robert Burns* (1808), was to have an enduring influence on Burns's reputation. From a few of Burns's diary entries and letters to a Mary Campbell, Cromek concocted the story of "Highland Mary" as his muse and true love, her early death allowing for her presentation as refined, religious, and above all, virginal (Cromek 1808). This conveniently distracted attention from rumors of Burns's enthusiastic fathering of legitimate and illegitimate offspring. Highland Mary would become part of the iconography of Burns as the romantic lover. She appears in a multitude of nineteenth-century paintings, engravings, and figurines.

This speaks of a new direction of biographical writing in the 1800s. The biographies that start to capture public imagination during the Napoleonic wars are those, such as Southey's *Life of Nelson*, that craft a mythologized figure of their hero, deliberately suppressing controversial material, in particular, evidence of sexual irregularity. Yet there is evidently an appetite too for spicy revelation. Wordsworth is appalled by the latter. Eager to put a stop to intrusive literary biography, he published in 1816 *A Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns*. Such biographical invasiveness has made "gross breaches upon the sanctities, of domestic life, to which we have lately become more and more accustomed" (Wordsworth 1974, 122). Biography, Wordsworth declares, must be treated as "an *art*" rather than "as in the sciences." Readers, Wordsworth feels, should be content with authors' writings, rather than their lives: "Our business is with their books. . . . If their works be good, they contain within themselves all that is necessary to their being comprehended and relished" (1974, 122).

When, in 1800, another popular poet died—the gentle, pious William Cowper—his many readers were eager to find out more about the private man. His long poem *The Task* (1785) had been an instant success, signaling a new, original, and modern voice had appeared. The image of Cowper as he appeared in his poetry, a gentle, melancholic rural recluse, attracted a huge following from all classes of society. Indications before his death that he had suffered spells of madness appeared only to heighten the reverence felt for him.

William Hayley, in his *Life of William Cowper* (1803–1804), wanted to avoid controversy and so appealed to eighteenth-century notions of biographical discretion. But controversy was unavoidable. Revelations were emerging about Cowper's rigid Calvinist beliefs, including his agonizing fear of damnation. The controversy divided along sectarian lines. Evangelicals tried to separate Cowper's madness from his religious faith; detractors of Evangelicalism blamed it for Cowper's self-torture. Hayley's biographical strategy had been to play down Cowper's periods of insanity as innocent-sounding "nervous attacks." He imposed an arbitrary structure of three periods of Cowper's life (Hayley 1804, 3.320) according to the publication of his first and last books. But the crucial publication of *The Task* in 1785 is relegated to a brief mention. Hayley is clearly trying to distract

attention from the more glaring facts of Cowper's chronology, the periods of derangement by which Cowper himself always marked his life. Similarly, in choosing Mason's pioneering life-and-letters model, Hayley could suggest the transparency of his material, while silently censoring everything unsuitable.

Hayley must also have been aware that Boswell was not Johnson's only biographer and therefore he too takes pains to prove the exclusivity of his right to act as Cowper's. He believes that had Cowper "been solicited to appoint a biographer for himself, he would have assigned to me this honourable task." He will work, he says, as if he were "under the immediate and visible direction" of Cowper himself (1803, 1:11), and intends to omit such material as "the spirit of the departed poet might wish me to lay aside" (138).

He tones down Cowper's fierce Calvinism in his letters and is circumspect about the origins of Cowper's melancholy, suggesting in various places contradictory physical and psychological reasons for it. Hayley's diction suggests his main strategy to avoid imputations of Cowper being merely a religious madman is to construct him as a man of sensibility, whose melancholy is inseparable from his genius. He repeatedly describes Cowper as otherworldly, almost disembodied—a man "of tender and sublime genius," whose soul is "so refined and aetherial" that his poetry is "a nightingale's singing with a thorn in her breast" (1803, 1:11–12). Cowper's inflammatory conversion narrative, *Adelphi*, Hayley chooses, or is persuaded, to omit. Crucially, he suggests that Cowper's melancholy, if not actually the wellspring of his poetic genius, is at least divinely linked with it.

Francis Jeffrey's 1803 review of Hayley's Cowper in the *Edinburgh Review* shows that the use of familiar letters in biography still counts as a novelty. "It enables the reader," Jeffrey writes "to judge for himself . . . and holds up to him, instead of a flattering and unfaithful portrait, the very living lineaments and features" of its subject. Jeffrey does not, at this stage, foresee the possibility that in editing the letters, Hayley has made selections which are subjective and distorting (Jeffrey 1803, 64–65).

When, in 1816, two rival unauthorized editions of *Adelphi* are published, the intensity of critical reaction is marked. Reviewers describe feeling revolted. The memoirs, the *Quarterly Review* admits, for example, "have a tendency, to detract somewhat from our respect. This proceeding joins, as it were, a living body with a dead one, and we shrink from the forced and unnatural connexion" (*Quarterly Review* 1816, 123). This is the same visceral repulsion expressed in criticism of another unauthorized publication. In 1813, in his *Life of Nelson*, Robert Southey had insisted that there had been "no criminal connection" between Nelson and Emma Hamilton. The subsequent publication of their correspondence in 1814 therefore shocked the public. The *Edinburgh Review* considered that whoever had offered the letters for publication was worse than "The man who should violate the last hallowed retreat of his war-torn frame, and display, for hire, the naked and festering limbs of the departed hero" (Jeffrey 1814, 398).

Following Currie and Hayley, other biographies of Burns and Cowper appear from 1800 onward, as do biographies of other writers. Theories of biography, literary biography in particular, begin to be discussed seriously in review articles, the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly* leading the way, as already suggested. So too do the first tentative works appear devoted to biographical theory. There is one full-length study, James Field Stanfield's *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (1813), a curious work dedicated to the theory of philosophical biography. Too much has been attributed by Reed and others to Stanfield's

theories, however. The book was not reviewed or republished. More significant and certainly more commercially successful are the biographical anecdotes and essays that comprise the work of Isaac D'Israeli, one of John Murray's prolific authors. These include *Curiosities of Literature* (1791), *An Essay on the Literary Character* (1795), *Miscellanies, or, Literary Recreations* (1796), and *Calamities of Authors* (1812).

It is worth noting D'Israeli's ground-breaking introduction to his British readers of a key concept of the new German psychology. Decades before George Henry Lewes or indeed Freud, he speaks of how he has 'drawn' or 'deduced' the individual characters of the authors under discussion, he articulates the notion of hidden or unconscious forces at play, writing of how he has often

Discovered them in their secret history, as it floats on tradition, or lies concealed in authentic and original documents. I would paint what has not unhappily been called the *psychological* character

adding the footnote:

From the Grecian Psyche, or the soul, the Germans have borrowed this expressive term. They have a Psychological Magazine. Some of our own recent Authors have adopted the term peculiarly adapted to the historian of the mind. (Isaac D'Israeli 1812, preface).

The magazine to which he refers, *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde*, was an important influence on Coleridge, among others (Vickers 2007).

Literary biography of the later Romantic period would evolve in the direction of psychological rather than philosophical biography, with the opinionated, insightful biographical essays of Hazlitt and De Quincey, together with assorted celebrity memoirs of Byron and the novelistic, myth-making biographies of Burns and Walter Scott by J. G. Lockhart.

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