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Literary Biography Now and Then

The Cinderella of Literary Studies

There are no prizes for guessing who are the two ugly sisters: criticism, the elder one, dominated literary studies for the first half of the twentieth century; theory, her younger sister, flounced to the fore in the second half. One scorned Cinderella's very existence as 'the biographical fallacy'; the other attempted her assassination by announcing the 'death of the author'. Meanwhile, 'Cinders', who had been doing the chores for centuries, was magically transformed, decked out in new clothes by Michael Holroyd, Richard Holmes, Claire Tomalin, Hermione Lee, Peter Ackroyd et al. and, as the millennium approached, celebrated and admired on all sides. Two decades ago, as Malcolm Bradbury (1988) pointed out, we seemed to live in two ages at once: the age of the Literary Life and the age of the Death of the Author. Nowadays, at the start of the new century, it transpires that reports of the death were greatly exaggerated. Literary biography remains in vogue. The bibliography that carries it forward is rolling and there is no sign of it turning into a pumpkin. Why is Cinderella so popular?

One obvious if superficial answer might be that literary biography is where literary people go who find the contemporary preoccupation with theory to be personally undernourishing and critically unenlightening; they would rather stay with the literary works themselves and with the lives, the minds and the times that produced them. Yet it is not only literary biography that is thriving; life-writing in general is a staple of mainstream publishing for which the appetite of the reading public seems insatiable. This commercial high profile is responding to an evident, if unfocused, need to look at other lives and understand them. Individual reasons for the popularity of biography range from prurient interest and hero worship to a, perhaps unrecognised, search for coherence and purpose in an age that is often disinclined either to accept institutional values or to respect traditional authority.

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The motives for this search usually include the desire for recognisable success, to which end the invention of a convincing identity is essential. Biographies offer models of how others live, face challenges and cope with change; they offer prime sites for studying ourselves. Curiously, this justification for biography as providing a model for living was felt most strongly when this literary genre first emerged in its recognisably modern form in the eighteenth century. The difference nowadays is that the model has changed: biography as a moral *exemplum* based upon Christian principles has been replaced in today's celebrity culture by the demand for models of success provided by public personalities. Nonetheless, whatever the range of satisfactions readers seek in biography, life-writing offers detailed pictures of widely different ways of living and, amidst these perhaps, some clues to how an individual sense of identity might be shaped.

Literary biographies, as distinct from the past 'Lives' of politicians and military men, or the part 'Lives' of present-day footballers and pop idols, constitute a significant and, in several respects, a unique sub-genre. Literary biography often deals with subjects who stand apart from society's norms and whose intertwined lives and writings offer a critique of the world the rest of us inhabit. Whether as an outsider like Shelley or as an insider like Dickens, the literary biographer's subject tends to adopt an individualistic, critical view of the principles and practices of society which, on particular issues, may develop into outright opposition. The writer as rebel, the writer as exile, are familiar figures, particularly in the past two centuries.

Literary biography is unique, too, in that its subjects offer the prospect of access, however limited or illusory it may turn out to be, to the workings of the creative imagination. This prospect of gaining some insight into the mysteries of the artistic process is a seductive invitation to readers, one greatly enhanced by the intimacy between the biographer's and the subject's shared medium of words, their common interest in literary forms, and the particular closeness of fictional and historical narrative. When as often happens, an artistic affinity between biographer and biographee is inscribed in their relationship, the mystery of imaginative writing seems even closer. Novelists writing the 'Lives' of novelists (Mrs Gaskell on Charlotte Brontë; Peter Ackroyd on Dickens); poets writing the 'Lives' of poets (Andrew Motion on Philip Larkin; Elaine Feinstein on Ted Hughes); autobiographical writing in the form of poetry (Wordsworth) or fiction (Joyce) – all suggest specialist insights afforded by practitioners of the arts.

Literary biography also has an implicit appeal to readers as would-be authors, to the wish-fulfilment of being able to write poetry or fiction ourselves. Whether the writer's life is seemingly mundane and ordinary, hemmed in by convention or prejudice, dogged by frustration and disappointment,

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or cut short by tragedy, we tend – despite the facts – to accept it as the essential condition of the creative being, romanticising the quality of the life into an inevitable pattern that reflects the works and which, because it does so, becomes a pattern at some level to be envied. If life could be lived vicariously, the writer's life is the one we would choose; as biography, it offers a secondary life to share and enjoy alongside the secondary worlds created in the writer's works.

Yet, despite the evident attractions of biography, it has become a truism to declare that biography has failed to establish any theoretical foundations upon which to build. In a period given to literary theory, Ellis (2000: 3) speaks of 'the comparative dearth of analytic enquiry into biography'. Backscheider (1999: 2) quotes Ira Nadel's remark on the absence of 'a sustained theoretical discussion of biography incorporating some of the more probing and original speculations about language, structure, and discourse that have dominated post-structuralist thought'. She goes on to lament the poverty of criticism, the absence of a cultivated readership, the failure to engage even with the practical questions of selection, organisation or presentation, and indicates that readers of biography are too easily contented with reading for the life story. The implication is that biography is easy reading for lazy readers. D. J. Taylor, author of the biography *Orwell: The Life*, writing in *The Guardian* (8 November 2002), points to the unstable basis of the genre with a different emphasis: 'Although several universities have recently established centres of biographical research,' he says, 'there is hardly such a thing as a theory of biography, merely an acknowledgement that each age tends to explore the form in a manner consistent with its preoccupations.' This is uncontroversial if one compares pre- and post-Strachey-era biography, but it does not explain why, during the 1990s, there were four biographies of Jane Austen and three each of George Eliot and the Brontës – about all of whom we already know a great deal – let alone a dozen biographies this century of Shakespeare about whom we know next to nothing; or why, in a longer perspective, there have been over 200 'Lives' of Lord Byron (Holmes, 1995: 18). This insistent rewriting of writers' lives stems from more than commercial pressure. It indicates a genre where the life narrative can be explored from many different angles; where the revaluation and interpretation of existing and newly discovered evidence are fundamental to its history; and where biographers constantly respond to the challenge to represent the life in new artistic forms. Literary biography lies between history and fiction and has often been seen as the poor relation of both. As such it has attracted little theoretical interest from either side. Recent writing, however, has increasingly introduced elements of metabiography into studies of the genre

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(Miller, 2001; Sisman, 2001); and biographers have reflected in print upon the nature and principles of their work (Holmes, 1985; Holroyd, 2002; Lee, 2005). The issues they raise will constantly recur in the chapters which follow; and the origins of most of them are to be found in the mid-eighteenth century.

The Rise and Rise of Literary Biography

The modern history of literary biography has seen three phases of exceptional development. It was invented in the mid-eighteenth century by Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, reinvented by Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf at the start of the twentieth century, and today we are living in a period when the genre is showing a greater variety of formal innovations than ever before. Johnson and Boswell had their predecessors, notably Isaak Walton, who wrote the lives of John Donne (1640) and George Herbert (1670); and that most notorious of seventeenth-century life-writers, John Aubrey, whose *Brief Lives* (1667–1697) aimed to show that 'the best of men are but men at best'. In his accounts of scholars and writers in a wide range of fields, he avoided general comments and empty praise in favour of specific, intimate and sometimes scandalous details. But Aubrey's *Brief Lives* were just that – Milton is given eight pages, Shakespeare one and a half – and their contents are quirky, humorous, solemn and salacious by turns.

In the next two centuries, by contrast, biographies were to become long, substantial books devoted to a single subject; they aimed to incorporate the intimate details of a person's life; and in doing so they ran up against fundamental issues such as verifiable facts versus likelihoods, personal privacy versus public knowledge, the biographer's role in giving interpretations, opinions and judgements – all of which still exercise present-day biographers. No-one was more aware of these genre issues than Dr Johnson. Expressing his impatience with contemporary biographers who were content merely to log the chronology of their subject's achievements, Johnson famously declared: 'more knowledge may be gained of a man's character, by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree, and ended with his funeral' (Johnson, 'On Biography', *The Rambler*, No. 60). Johnson's essay was published in the same year, 1750, as Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*. From the outset, the line between biography and fiction was a blurred one, as indicated by Fielding's title, or by Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1760–1767). And so it continued with *Jane Eyre* (1847),

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subtitled 'An Autobiography'. Conversely, reading the opening chapter of Mrs Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) is like reading the start of one of her novels. The concurrent rise of the novel and biography meant that fictions incorporated quasi-documentary items like letters and diary entries more commonly found in biographies, whereas biographies presented scenes and people with the creative eye of the novelist. It is little wonder that boundary disputes should break out, or that biofictions like *According to Queeney* and *Author, Author* should develop the popularity they enjoy today. Nor is it surprising, given the aura that surrounds many writers, to find that recent literary biography often struggles to extricate itself not only from fiction but also from myth. The posthumous mythologizing of Sylvia Plath since her suicide in 1963, and Lucasta Miller's demythologising in *The Brontë Myth* (2001), are two modern examples taken up in Chapter 4.

Fact, fiction or myth? Literary biography has long been a mixture of all three from its beginnings in Dr Johnson's *An Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage, Son of the Earl Rivers* (1744), whose extended title attempts to mask by its assertiveness the uncertain status of its subject. Together with his *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–1781), in which the *Life of Savage* reappeared as an outsize component, Johnson is usually seen as the father of modern literary biography. The 'son', his successor and protégé in the next generation, was, of course, his own biographer James Boswell. Their approaches to biography were sharply different. Johnson's style was to assimilate what information he could find about his subjects, to order it, interpret it, and weigh its significance and to produce a series of 'Lives' of generally modest proportions. (His *Pope* and *Savage*, the one through his eminence, the other for friendship, are longer exceptions to this rule.) Boswell's view of biography was to let his subject speak for himself by quoting *verbatim* letters, conversations, stories and words of wit and wisdom, thus creating a 'baggy', loosely formed 'Life' of elephantine size. The contrast between the summary qualities of the 'distilled life' and the inclusiveness of the 'comprehensive life' punctuates the history of biography in various guises in succeeding centuries: in Strachey's scornful rejection of 'those two fat volumes' that characterise Victorian biography and, nowadays, in the difference between, say, Carol Shields's brief, personal life of *Jane Austen* (2001) and Park Honan's fully documented *Jane Austen: Her Life* (rev. edn, 1997), which, its author claims in his Preface, 'is acknowledged to be the most complete, realistic life' of its subject.

Nineteenth-century biography generally favoured the Boswellian fullness without emulating his frankness. It reflected the decorous proprieties of its

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age and, as in the most celebrated and seminal literary biography of the period – Mrs Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) – eschewed 'coarseness' and tended to sanitise its subject with the fresh bloom of respectability. As Victorian certainties began to buckle, biography began to change, albeit slowly. In science, in Darwin's account of natural selection; in society, in Marx's analysis of cultural materialism; and in psychoanalysis, in Freud's theory of the unconscious, there developed three powerful forces that subverted the conventional religious, societal and psychological views of the nature of man and the very concept of human identity. Biography, like poetry and fiction, underwent its modernist revolution, even if its Bloomsbury character made it less convincing and pervasive than its counterparts in the other arts. Nevertheless, Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) and Virginia Woolf's preoccupation with biography in all her writings during the 1920s and 1930s together form the basis for what is usually called 'the new biography', a reappraisal of life-writing which, in its way, has been as influential as the works of its eighteenth-century originators.

Eminent Victorians made a great impact on its publication in May 1918. In a world disillusioned by war and distrustful of its leaders' soundbites, Strachey's wit and irony directed at four high-profile figures in Victorian society (Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Dr Arnold and General Gordon) hit the right sceptical and 'slightly cynical' note. His Preface has become a manifesto for later biographers both for its commitment to the value of individual lives and for its stylistic brevity and editorial selectivity. The first is seen in his remark that, 'Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past. They have a value which is independent of any temporal processes – which is eternal and must be felt for its own sake' (Strachey, 1986: 10). Unremarkable as such sentiments may now seem, to the immediate post-war generation they represented a necessary reaffirmation of individual worth. Stylistically, too, Strachey was radical. He argued that the biographer has to 'adopt a subtler strategy' than that of 'scrupulous narration'. He has to be selective, coming at his subject obliquely, revealing character in unexpected ways, illuminating personality in a new light. 'He will row out over that great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity' (Strachey, 1986: 9). Strachey's style of 'short condensed biography' returned life-writing to the Johnsonian form in that it avoided both the dead weight of heavy documentation and the light weight of facile, conventional panegyric. But Strachey's subjects, unlike Johnson's, were set up as targets, representative

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of false, misleading or hypocritical values of the Victorian age, not held up to us as individuals whose lives should be a lesson to us all.

Virginia Woolf's contribution to 'The New Biography' (the title of her first essay on the subject in 1927) was of a quite different nature. Biography permeates her work, obliquely and profoundly in her novels, especially *To The Lighthouse*, humorously in *Orlando* and *Flush*, directly in her essays and in her *Life of Roger Fry*, incidentally in her letters and diaries, and movingly in her autobiographical writings collected under the title *Moments of Being*, which Hermione Lee describes as 'an evolving narrative about the process of "life-writing"' (Lee, 2002: xiii). The issues that preoccupy Woolf are fundamental to biography: the relationships between fiction and nonfiction, art and craft, documentary and invention, truth in fact and truth in art. The issues remain 'live', not only, as noted above, in current thinking about biography, but also in the innovations in the form that have appeared in the past two decades. For example, the seven controversial Interludes in Peter Ackroyd's *Dickens* (1999), which challenge the generic boundary between fact and fiction; the ten Interchapters in D. J. Taylor's *Orwell: The Life* (2004), where the biographer steps out of the time-frame and takes a sideways glance at his subject; and, most radical of all (see below in Chapter 12), in Jonathan Coe's biography of B.S. Johnson, *Like a Fiery Elephant* (2004), which, mirroring his subject's work, is fragmentary in structure and confessional in tone, 'more a dossier than a conventional literary biography', as he warns us in his Introduction. Biography is not only thriving but is thoughtfully interrogating itself; and, during its long history, two figures stand out as maintaining a continuing relevance: Dr Johnson and Virginia Woolf.

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Dr Johnson: Biographer, Theorist and Subject

The strange case of Richard Savage is an unlikely subject for the first literary biography. Savage was a minor poet, a convicted murderer who received a royal pardon, a vagrant who wandered the streets of London at night, whose life began with uncertain parentage and ended in Newgate Gaol in Bristol. The relationship between Richard Savage and Samuel Johnson which resulted in the latter's *Life of Savage* has puzzled people since its first publication in 1744. The identity of the subject and the role of the biographer lie at the heart of the story. The mystery that encompasses them unites biography then with biography now in Richard Holmes's modern masterpiece, *Dr. Johnson and Mr. Savage*, a title whose Stevensonian echo captures the unusual intimacy of the biographer and his subject.

Literary biography thus got off to a controversial start. Questions abounded:

- What relationship lay behind the *Life of Savage* in the time between Samuel Johnson's arrival in London in 1737 and Richard Savage's death in 1743?
- Why would a morally scrupulous man like Johnson become a close friend and biographer of an apparently unstable, feckless character such as Savage?
- What are we to believe about the selection and interpretation of the 'facts' of Savage's life in Johnson's biography?
- What does the account reveal about the biographer as well as his subject? About his judgements? About his qualities as a writer?

The first two questions concern the biographer/biographee relationship and, in particular, the benefits and disadvantages of friendship between the two, a subject on which Johnson was characteristically blunt: 'If the biographer writes from personal knowledge … there is a danger lest his interest, his fear, his gratitude, or his tenderness, overpower his fidelity and tempt him to conceal, if not to invent' (*The Rambler*, No. 60). The second two questions concern Johnson's skill as biographer, his handling of his materials and his strategies in turning them into a 'Life'. Three substantive issues arise in reading his *Life of Savage*, each one a particular puzzle and each having a bearing upon these wider questions.

First, who was Johnson's subject? Was he a nobleman or an imposter? His mother should know – but was she his mother and was she honest? Richard Savage claimed throughout his life that he was the illegitimate son of Lady Macclesfield and Earl Rivers, born in Holborn on 10 January 1698, but his 'mother' never acknowledged his claim to be her son and regarded him as a blackmailing impostor or a deluded crank. Johnson, as he makes clear in his full title and in his advocacy throughout the 'Life', supported Savage's claim. Whether he entertained any doubts about its truth remains open to question. Secondly, how does Johnson deal with the central incident in Savage's history – his conviction for the fatal stabbing of one James Sinclair in a coffee-house brawl on 20 November 1727? Was it murder or self-defence? In a forensic analysis of Johnson's account, Richard Holmes lays bare the ways in which Johnson defends Savage by 'bending his own rules of biographical realism' in the biased presentation of the courtroom drama, in the fictional projection of Savage's voice, and in the caricaturing of the presiding Judge Page (Holmes, 1994: 100–132). Here, too, the 'truth' hangs in suspension between fact and fiction, between the incomplete documentary

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evidence and the 'adversarial skill' Johnson shows in mounting a defence of his friend. Thirdly, what conclusions does Johnson draw in his final set-piece where, if he is to be true to his own principles, his aim is for fair and balanced judgement? Certainly, Johnson catalogues eloquently both his subject's vices and shortcomings and his virtues and abilities. The balance is evident and reflected in his carefully modulated sentences; but so seductive are their disarming tone and urbane style that Savage's faults seem merely the endearing weaknesses of a mercurial character for whom we instinctively make allowances. Johnson's precarious balance is also there in the psychological 'twist in the tail' at the very end of his biography. Richard Holmes argues that this 'Life' has, in effect, two alternative endings, the final paragraph being 'Added', the word Johnson wrote against it when preparing the second edition. This later ending condemns Savage's life as showing that 'nothing will supply the want of prudence, and that negligence and irregularity, long continued, will make knowledge useless, wit ridiculous, and genius contemptible.' By contrast, the original ending which now forms the penultimate paragraph advocates empathy rather than condemnation: 'nor will any wise man presume to say, "Had I been in Savage's condition, I should have lived or written better than Savage"'. Holmes sees this as Johnson's real conclusion, and the later ending as a 'placatory afterthought; a conciliatory gesture to the forces of social opinion' (Holmes, 1994: 226–227).

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The ambivalence of the ending is symptomatic of the unstable life upon which the whole biography is built. In Johnson's conduct of the case for the defence, we are simultaneously aware that, however brilliantly it is advocated, his is a tendentious account, a narrative in which the search for truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth is compromised through a combination of personal loyalty and rhetorical skill. Desmond McCarthy's much-quoted description of the biographer as 'an artist on oath' may be admirable in aspiration but, as Johnson's *Savage* shows, it papers over the cracks between the truth of art and the truth of fact.

Yet, Johnson believed, in theory, in telling the whole truth, as the ending of his essay 'On Biography' (*The Rambler*, No. 60) shows. In practice, however, Boswell detected some contradiction, or what he tactfully calls Johnson's 'varying from himself in talk'. On one occasion, Johnson argued that mention of Addison's and Parnell's excessive drinking should be censored since it would encourage others to do the same; on another, he argued that such an example would act as an 'instructive caution' (Boswell, 1791/1949, II: 115). There is ambivalence, too, in Johnson's view, quoted above, of the effects of friendship and 'personal knowledge' in the biographer/biographee relationship, both in writing the 'Life' of his friend Savage and

in encouraging the writing of his own 'Life' by his friend Boswell. The essay in *The Rambler*, No. 60 is, nevertheless, Johnson's principal statement. Its essential premise is the democratisation of biography: 'I have often thought that there is rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful'. The motive is educational: 'no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful … or more widely diffuse instruction'. The means should be to 'display the minute details of daily life' which 'lead the thoughts into domestic privacies', rather than dwelling on incidents that 'produce vulgar greatness'. Johnson's educative principle is that people learn from other people's experiences, from particulars not from generalities, from life histories in which everyone can imaginatively recognise shared hopes and problems, not from 'histories of the downfall of kingdoms and revolutions of empires'. Johnson's two later essays in *The Idler*, Nos. 84 and 102 provide a gloss upon these principles. The first stresses the usefulness of biography as a pragmatic guide in daily life and raises the issues of accuracy and belief in autobiography. The second promotes the idea of authors, rather than soldiers or statesmen, as biographical subjects, and ends with a typical Johnsonian side-swipe at his favourite target, the patron. Johnson was able to put this idea of literary biography into practice in his *Lives of the English Poets* in which, in the more substantial accounts of major writers such as Pope, Dryden, Swift and Milton (as well as in the recycled Savage), he shows how, for the first time, biography can explore the relationships between the writer, his works and the times. In the essays, in the 'Lives', and especially in his *Life of Savage*, Johnson did more than anyone to establish biography as a literary genre. He rescued it from the fate of 'tedious panegyric'; he demonstrated that life-writing is based upon narrative skill, on the deployment of data and evidence, and on the (re)creation of historical scenes; and, despite his all-too-human struggle to reconcile theory and practice, Johnson's belief in the ethical basis of biography, grounded in human sympathy and backed by moral principles, is never in doubt.

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Boswell's Johnson is a quite different figure from the implied image of the author of the *Life of Savage*. Young Sam Johnson, newly arrived from the provinces, shows a puzzling if consistent loyalty, a sense of justice that verges on outrage, and a degree of credulity and romanticism over Savage's misfortunes. His attitude has often provoked the question of how much he saw his own early struggles mirrored in the life of his friend. Did Johnson,

the biographer, unwittingly write something of his own autobiography? By contrast, the Johnson whom Boswell knew, and the one we have all inherited from his biography, is a mature, successful man in his mid-fifties; the revered Tory of the clubs and dinner tables, the sententious sage, confident in argument and universally respected as poet, essayist, lexicographer – the great man of letters of his age. How did Boswell create this portrait?

There are many ways in which Boswell, while firmly anchored in his time, remains our contemporary as a biographer. His procedure in compiling *The Life of Dr. Johnson* was new to the art of biography, and four of his techniques, with modifications, remain part of the biographer's armoury today. The summaries which follow draw upon Adam Sisman's invaluable and entertaining book, *Boswell's Presumptuous Task* (2001).

First, Boswell kept a journal as an *aide-mémoire* (of which Johnson approved) and which became the source for whole episodes in the 'Life'. Sisman (pp. 149–150) comments: 'A note in Boswell's journal for 25th October 1764 provides an insight into the way he worked: "My method is to make a memorandum every night of what I have seen during the day. By this means I have my materials always secured …" He called these condensed notes "portable soup": they were a kind of stock cube from which he could cook up a broth, when the time came to feed. Boswell had a remarkable memory; often only a brief note would be sufficient to prompt his recall of a long conversation.'

Secondly, Boswell wanted to portray both the strong physical presence of Johnson and his supreme abilities in conversation. The best way to achieve these ends was, wherever possible, to present Johnson's life 'in scenes'. His readers would then feel that they were watching a series of mini-dramas, with Johnson at the centre of the action. They were meant to feel 'like fellow-guests at the dinner-table. Johnson's remarks, and those of his companions, would be reported, as if in full; and rather than being given in indirect speech, the most dramatic exchanges would be cued to the speaker's name like an actor's lines, sometimes with stage-directions to indicate manner or inflexion' (Sisman, p. 169). The most elaborate example, the celebrated dinner party with John Wilkes, is examined in detail in Chapter 11.

Thirdly, Boswell amassed an enormous amount of material both by and about Johnson and he decided to incorporate as much of it as possible in the 'Life'. Extracts from letters, documents, obituaries, essays and many other sources, together with Johnson's own observations, personal and public utterances, jokes and serious arguments, fill his 'Life'. Instead of 'melting down my materials into one mass, and constantly speaking in my own person', Boswell planned to let Johnson speak for himself (Sisman, p. 171).

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Fourthly, so concerned was Boswell to justify his claim that Johnson 'will be seen in this work more completely than any man who has ever lived' (Boswell, 1791/1949, I: 8) that gap-filling became essential. Though Boswell got to know his subject better than most biographers, he did not know the first fifty-four years of Johnson's life first hand; and he was in his company for about 400 days over the remaining twenty-one years. He used much undated memorabilia from many sources (especially from Mr Bennet Langton and the Reverend William Mitchell) to plug gaps in his record for the years 1770 and 1780 when he had been unable to come to London to see Johnson. Boswell placed these anecdotes and data where they seemed to fit best chronologically, or where they illustrated a point he was making. But, as Sisman (p. 214) notes, 'Boswell admitted in his *Life of Johnson* that he had rewritten some of these sayings of Johnson's "into what he considered the authentic Johnsonian style'. What Boswell's 'Life' tells us is that, far from being a record of the plain, unvarnished truth, biography is a construct where accuracy may be sacrificed to effect, where the demands of narrative continuity may override the balanced, sequential presentation of events in time, and where the living facts of recorded situations are at the mercy of imperfect memory.

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Virginia Woolf: Time, Memory and Identity

Time and memory are also two central and related factors in Virginia Woolf's writings. They are ones she returns to repeatedly in her explorations into the nature of selfhood. Both her fiction and non-fiction works constantly ask the question, 'What is identity?' They answer it by discursive argument in her essays, by autobiographical reflection in her 'Sketch of the Past'; and they represent it by creating fictional characters that demonstrate their multiple selves filtered through fragmented, non-sequential or irregularly patterned narratives. Time, memory and identity are concepts that hover along the boundary between life-writing and fiction-writing in Woolf's works.

Hermione Lee's first paragraphs of her celebrated biography of Virginia Woolf are a *cri de coeur* concerning these problems. Her opening words quote her subject: '"My God, how does one write a Biography?" Virginia Woolf's question haunts her own biographers. How do they begin?' (Lee, 1997: 3). Then follows a first chapter, entitled 'Biography', in which Lee reviews not only the many possible approaches open to the biographer, but also shows how, in Virginia Woolf, 'fiction is often her version of biography' (p. 8). Lying behind Woolf's view of both genres is the conviction that we

can never assimilate the multiple perspectives we have of another person into a single, unified vision. From this standpoint, writing 'Lives' has a built-in failure factor. Biography is rendered an impossibility; the written 'Life' will always be elusive, at best an approximation. Yet, this very awareness makes it all the more tantalising to try to capture it in words. Nowadays, the would-be life-writer is even more biographically challenged: 'since we live in an age when a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters, and diaries, at every character from every angle, he [the biographer] must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face'. But, this is not – as might be thought – a twenty-first-century media commentator; it is Virginia Woolf in 1939, facing up to the issues in modern biography which were as true then as now. She looks forward to a future when 'Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking-glasses at odd corners … [and] from all this diversity' create 'a richer unity' (Woolf, 1967: 226). Yet, to pursue this unity was a demanding 'grind', as she called it, when writing her *Life of Roger Fry*, and finding herself shackled to facts, denied her freedom as a novelist, all bearing out her judgement that the biographer 'is a craftsman, not an artist' (p. 227). But, she concedes, through the selection and shaping of facts, the biographer is employing artistic means when creating a 'Life' in words. 'He can give us', Woolf says, 'the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders' (p. 228).

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Woolf's thinking about biography is frequently cast in this binary mode. The combination, implied in these phrases, of an artistic imagination operating upon a documentary record is reflected, too, in her best-known figure for biography: the granite and the rainbow. Her earlier essay, 'The New Biography' (1927), describes the biographer's aim as welding together the 'granite-like solidity' of truth with the 'rainbow-like intangibility' of personality into a 'seamless whole'. Truth, she claims, citing Sidney Lee's 'Life of Shakespeare', may consist of dull, dead facts; in order to make the subject come alive, facts need to be presented so as to illuminate personality by the subtle use of chiaroscuro – 'some must be brightened; others shaded; yet in the process, they must never lose their integrity' (Woolf, 1967: 229). The imagery changes but the dualism is essentially the same when, in 'Sketch of the Past', Woolf distinguishes between the routine business of daily living ('the cotton wool of daily life', she calls it) and the significant, exceptional moments which stay in the memory and which supply the invisible, silent 'scaffolding' to an individual life. Woolf is speaking personally but sees her experience as part of a general pattern. Again, in these autobiographical reflections, the binary relationship is evident: 'These separate moments of being were however embedded in many more moments of non-being' (Woolf, 2002: 83–86). In *Orlando*, as discussed below, this distinction is

cast in terms of the 'extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind' (Woolf, *Orlando*, 1998: 95). The implication of all these discriminations is that, as we live with a consciousness of both dimensions, so biography should honour this dualism. Virginia Woolf's criticism of most past biographies is that they deal only with the granite of fact, the orderly procession of events in clock-time, the mass of unmemorable moments of non-being – and fail to explore the changing, elusive, inner life of the subject which holds the key to personality.

'My God, how does one write a Biography?' *Orlando* is a playful *tour de force* in which Woolf has fun toying with the implications of, if not the answers to, her own question. *Orlando* the text and Orlando the character both defy definition. Based on the life of her friend, Vita Sackville-West, openly dedicated to her, originally published with photographs of her and her family, and given the academic embalming of a phoney Preface with acknowledgements and an equally phoney Index of Names, *Orlando* has been variously called a spoof biography, a Shandyean joke, a satire on the conventions of biographical writing. Leon Edel describes it as 'a fantasy in the form of a biography', saying that it is 'neither a literary joke nor entirely a novel: it belongs to another *genre*. It is a fable – a fable for biographers' (Edel, 1984: 192). Hermione Lee (1997: 523) describes it as 'a biography which makes a mockery of the very idea of writing biography'. Rachel Bowlby, faced with the task of editing and introducing the book, begins by echoing Woolf's plaintive question: 'What is *Orlando*'s editor to do?' for the role seems to dictate self-parody. She settles for saying what it is not: '*Orlando* is not exactly a fake biography, of a purely fictitious subject; but nor is it much like a biographical *roman-à-clef*, in which the subject would secretly stand for some real-life personage' (Bowlby, 1998: xix).

The protagonist is equally elusive. Orlando is Vita, whose very name signifies 'life', and whose multiple roles in her actual life provided Woolf with an ideal subject for the dramatisation of the plural nature of identity. 'As writer, traveller, aristocrat, lesbian, mother, diplomat's wife (to name some), she was seen by Woolf as someone who shifted between far more roles than she did herself' (Bowlby, 1998: xix). So, Orlando lives out the picaresque adventures of an engaging English aristocrat. He begins life as a youth in the Elizabethan age; he falls in love with Sasha, a Muscovite princess visiting the English court. They go skating on the Thames during the Great Frost when elaborate ceremonies and pageants are set up on the ice. Sasha proves fickle and sails away; Orlando comforts his broken heart with literature and, perhaps inspired by fleeting glimpses of Shakespeare, begins to write his poem 'The Oak Tree', which will keep him busy periodically for the rest of the

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book. He becomes ambassador to Turkey where, waking from a dream, he finds he has undergone a sex change: Orlando is now a woman. She lives for a time among gypsies and eventually returns to England in the eighteenth century. There is a law suit to resolve her property rights over the estates of her former male self. She entertains Addison, Pope and Swift to tea and sees the shadows of Dr Johnson and Boswell outlined on a window-blind as she passes by. The great black cloud of the Victorian age descends: Orlando, responsive to the times, becomes domesticated, marries, has a son, and enters the twentieth century travelling in trains and driving a car. Woolf ends Orlando's fantasy life at midnight on 11 October 1928 – the year of the book's publication.

In *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf is letting her hair down. It is a *jeu d'esprit* – 'a joke', 'a writer's holiday' as she called it; but, as the bare bones of the outrageous plot suggest, she pokes light-hearted fun at some targets and serious humour merging into satire at others: romantic love, the concept of historical periods, literary patriarchy, class divisions, diplomatic life, gender roles and, encompassing all, the idea of biography. Biographers, as might be expected, come in for the most persistent criticism. They ignore what is disagreeable (p. 15); their 'first duty … is to plod, without looking to right or left' (p. 63); on occasions, they even have 'to use the imagination' (p. 115)! No doubt with Strachey in mind, Woolf invokes 'Truth, Candour and Honesty, the austere gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer' and demand 'The Truth and nothing but the Truth!' (p. 129), while a little later she acknowledges, in an archly self-reflexive comment on the present story, that 'only those who have little need of the truth, and no respect for it – the poets and novelists – can be trusted' with it (p. 184). Literary biographers, in particular, need our sympathy, she implies with gentle mockery, since their subjects, like Orlando in role as the aspiring poet, will insist on 'sitting in a chair and thinking'; life goes on inside the writer's head, hidden from view. 'If only subjects … had more consideration for their biographers!' (pp. 254–257). And, at the end, the fundamental puzzle of how to represent the subject – even whether it is possible at all – remains: '*Orlando* is finished!' Virginia Woolf writes to Vita Sackville-West, 'I've lived in you all these months – coming out, what are you really like? Do you exist? Have I made you up?' (Nicolson, quoted in Lee, 1997: 514).

Time, memory and a sense of identity are interwoven in *Orlando* and are the basic concepts in Virginia Woolf's modernist view of biography. In respect of time, she even engages in a paragraph of self-parody of the 'Time Passes' section in her most autobiographical novel, *To The Lighthouse* (*Orlando*, p. 94), and follows it by calling up the figure of the biographer

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again as one who can merely record, not elucidate, the differential experiences of the subject's double life: 'An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second' (pp. 94–95). Activities in clock-time in the world we all share may be logged but they are experienced by the subject in a foreshortened time-scale inaccessible to the biographer; mental activities unique to the individual are also beyond the biographer's reach since the variable geometry of thoughts stretches the experience of time in many directions and fills it, Woolf says, with all kinds of 'odds and ends' of unpredictable duration.

What holds together this 'perfect rag-bag of odds and ends within us', providing the individual with a sense of self that biography cannot fathom, is memory. 'Nature', Woolf writes, 'who has played so many queer tricks upon us, making us so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite, … nature who has so much to answer for' has also found a way of stitching together each person's unique history. 'Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither' (p. 75). If in acts of self-creation, memory is acknowledged as a capricious, unreliable narrator, the biographer's chances of representing a life in ways that do justice to both granite and rainbow look slim.

At the end Time and Memory coalesce. Orlando muses to herself: '"Time has passed over me", she thought … Nothing is any longer one thing' (pp. 290–291) for, as Orlando steps into her car in Oxford Street, the striking clock punctuates the sequence of memories running through her mind. An attack of road rage propels her out of London at high speed, her fast driving resembling 'the chopping up small of identity', until she pulls herself together and her mind regains 'the illusion of holding things within itself' (p. 293). This experience of potential dissolution, of her sense of self falling apart, provokes the notion of the variety of selves within Orlando and of the biographer's impossible task of trying to accommodate them: 'a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand' (p. 295). It has taken literary theory over half a century to catch up with Virginia Woolf: in a summary of Derrida's notion of 'différance' in relation to biographical narratives, Denzin (1989: 46–47) points out that Derrida's 'deconstruction project' means that 'no reading or writing of a life is ever complete or final. *We must prevent words like autobiography, biography, and biographical method from assuming a force which gives a presence to a centred-life that it cannot have* … there can only be multiple versions of a biography or

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autobiography.' *Orlando* is the prophet of deconstruction. In expressing his/her multiple selves, while living a variety of lives, in a succession of historical periods, Orlando somehow maintains a recognisable identity, diverse in make up, changeable in outward appearances, yet coherent as a personality – a character who stands for both the lure and the impossibility of biography.

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