EPILOGUE

Inventing a life – a personal view of literary careers

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There is an old story about an analytic philosopher who became exasperated with the shocking neglect of history in his field. He decided to give a lecture on the Meaning of Truth, and prefaced it by saying that, this time, he would go back to the very origins of the problem. Then the lecture proper began: 'In 1910 Bertrand Russell …'

A part of me finds that story quite sympathetic. Reflecting on the scholarly field of literary careers, I might follow the same route back to the very origins of the problem. The study of poetic careers began one January day in 1981, in Santa Barbara, California, when I gave a talk that drew on my forthcoming book *The Life of the Poet*, and that evening took part in an informal seminar where Richard Helgerson described his work in progress on laureate poets. Together we made history that day – though no one then seemed to notice. Eventually our ranks would swell and others would join the conversation, until a whole new discourse was born.[1] Or so goes my story, which seems as plausible as most that scholars tell about their own importance.

But even in a personal view, that history might be just a bit self-serving. Perhaps one ought to go back a little – say three millennia or so. Instead of starting in Santa Barbara, then, the story would begin on the mountain

[1] This essay is dedicated to the memory of Richard Helgerson. In his introduction to *European Literary Careers* (Cheney 2002a: 4), Patrick Cheney credits *The Life of the Poet* (Lipking 1981) and *Self-Crowned Laureates* (Helgerson 1983) as twin founders of the field. Cheney's account of this joint 'invention' prompted a correspondence in which I elaborated many of the ideas and recollections that inform this paper; I am grateful for his interest and suggestions. In *Self-Crowned Laureates*, Helgerson suggests that the two books are 'complementary accounts of the same phenomenon': 'He emphasizes the individual poetic utterance, the *parole*; I emphasize the literary system, the *langue*' (Helgerson 1983: 153 n.). A fuller chronicle of modern career criticism would have to mention many more pioneers. For instance, as early as 1979 Wayne C. Booth identified '*career-authors*' as one of the five main types of authorship (writers, dramatized authors, implied authors, career-authors, and public characters) and observed that: 'Some authors … work as hard at planning the trajectory of their artistic careers as they work at their actual writing' (Booth 1979: 270–1).

of Helicon. It was there that the shepherd Hesiod, while quietly minding his lambs, was accosted by Muses, who first insulted his greedy guts and then gave him an olive staff and a voice, so that he could spend the rest of his life singing their praises. That is his story, at least; he tells it in both the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. But one might note a slightly different emphasis in those two poems. The poet of the *Theogony* might be described as a *vates*, or less nicely as a ventriloquist's dummy; involuntarily inspired, he sings whatever words have been put in his mouth. But the Muses have taught the poet of *Works and Days* to sing for himself; he crosses the sea to compete against other poets at funeral games, and there wins a prize. One theme drives this book: a man must work hard for a living; and poetry, evidently, is Hesiod's work. If he has been called to a prophetic vocation, he also has made a career.

Two fundamental points emerge from Hesiod's story (whether or not we believe it).[2] The first is the peculiar relation between composing poems and making a living. To put it bluntly, the poetry business has never paid off. Very few poets historically have earned their keep through the poems they create. Other artists at least produce some tangible artefacts to be sold: a portrait, an urn, a shield. Poets rely on less solid goods, or on the pleasure of those who read and feed them. Hesiod competes for applause, until some other favourite comes along. From a material point of view, the history of literary careers is a subset of the history of patronage, or later of print culture. Hence 'career criticism' always involves some tension between the internal shape of a career – its movement or progress from one sort of work to another – and the external conditions that allow an author to function or just stay alive. Many do not stay alive. Hesiod, like Orpheus and Osip Mandelstam and plenty of others, was killed when he fell in with the wrong crowd.

The second point is the strange disparity between two versions of the poet, as inspired bard or as master artist – Virgil's sibyl, or Virgil the craftsman, who each day patiently licks a few lines into shape. How does someone become a poet? Traditionally with a visit from the muse, or today we might say with bi-polar disorder; against one's will, the rage to compose descends. The ancients knew all about it. In his famous epistle to a young would-be poet, Horace offered prudent advice: submit all your writing to some wise critic, then put it away for nine years (*Ars* 386–9). But *The Art of Poetry* starts with a crazy painter who mates people with horses, and ends with a crazy poet, cursed with an itch that drives

[2] C. G. Thomas 2005: 88–127 examines contested traditions about Hesiod's life and work.

him to rave at passers-by and hang on like a leech till gorged with blood. Evidently most poets are mad. To counter that charge, Horace and legions of other well-endowed craftsmen insist on the dignity of their profession. Spewing verses does not make one a poet, they say; the master of a discipline is always in control. This argument has given much comfort to poets. A career involves rational planning; good training; a logical progress; a sense of the work as a whole or oeuvre. It does not depend on whimsical spirits who strike in the night. No wonder that authors and critics prefer to believe that writing can be a career.

Nevertheless, few poets achieve that blessed steady state. A sceptic might view the career ideal as a convenient illusion, a way of imposing some sense of order on the chance inspirations that come and go during a lifetime. In retrospect, a work called *The Prelude* can crown a project under construction for fifty years; and thus the antechamber becomes the temple. But critics took a long time to see it as anything other than anticlimactic. Nor do the careers of most poets make sense, even posthumously. Virgil's Wheel set the pattern for only a tiny number of heroes.[3] By contrast Wordsworth, in a black moment (he was about to get married), accounted for hundreds, past and to come:

> We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;
> But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.[4]

The vast majority of British working-class poets, the 'children of nature' from Stephen Duck and Mary Leapor to Robert Bloomfield and John Clare, fall into that track (though not all began in gladness). From this point of view, the prospect of a literary career might seem a fiction foisted on gullible, needy young people. More grandly, successful authors join an exclusive club, restricted to one or two new members each generation. Like other professions, that of the laureate poet engages in a conspiracy against the public, relieving it from any need to pay attention to the less well off or merely talented. The field of career criticism is in this regard an agent of the conspiracy, united against leeches and sibyls. Poetry, we collectively say, can make lives meaningful. And insofar as scholars devote themselves to that discipline, it makes their lives meaningful too.

Thus far, however, my survey of the field has centred on poets rather than scholars, as if it were Hesiod and Horace and Petrarch and Wordsworth, rather than modern critics, who invented this discourse.

[3] On Virgil's supposed creation of a model career, see Theodorakopoulos 1997.
[4] 'Resolution and Independence', 48–9 (Gill 2000: 262).

That emphasis is quite intentional; for I do think that career criticism first belonged to poets. As *The Life of the Poet* argues, 'it is through rereading their own work, discovering the hidden meanings sown by their younger selves, that poets grow' (Lipking 1981: xiii), and such acts of interpretation also shape the paths they follow to the end. The role of scholars is therefore recreative; we try to understand careers as poets once did, and to retrace their steps. Much modern theory has been contemptuous of authors' self-understandings or conscious intentions. Randall Jarrell once ridiculed critics who do not care what poets say about poems: 'if a pig wandered up to you during a bacon-judging contest, you would say impatiently, "Go away, pig! What do you know about bacon?"' (Jarrell 1953: 66–67). But as René Wellek pointed out, 'this is literally true of the pig. It does not know anything about bacon' and could not appraise it. One would not make an elephant Professor of Zoology, Wellek concludes (Wellek 1967: 100). Since then many critics have gone much further; like vegans, they would never touch bacon and speak not of pigs but pig-functions. Yet poets, I venture, can be quite articulate about what they bring forth. Through most of western history, at least since Horace, they have been among the most influential critics. In England in particular, they dominate the critical tradition: Sidney, Dryden, Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold, Eliot and so many more. This point is so obvious that I feel embarrassed to make it.

Yet lately it has not seemed obvious at all. Poets still write intelligently about poetry and about their careers; reviews of poetry are written almost exclusively by members of the clan. But poet-critics no longer figure in the landscape of critical theory. In the early 1980s I was commissioned to write a piece on 'Poet-Critics' for *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Volume VII: *Modernism and the New Criticism*. The piece lay in a drawer for a couple of decades. By the time it was published, in 2000, the subject must have seemed dated, a historical curiosity, like the manual typewriter on which it was composed. Volume VIII of the series, *From Formalism to Poststructuralism*, had already appeared in 1995, without any hint that poet-critics had existed lately or ever existed, as my piece was able to note (Lipking 2000: 466–7).[5] The same is true of recent anthologies, not only of *Literary Theory* but of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* – no poet-critics there. Thus modern criticism, once organized around a revolution in poetics, now dangles from developments in linguistics, philosophy, cultural studies and psychoanalysis.

[5] Vol. IX of the series, *Twentieth-Century Historical, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Knellwolf and Norris 2001), also excludes poet-critics.

Career criticism, by and large, has been more attached to poetics and to the past. One reason, of course, is that so much of it is occupied with Classical texts as well as what, in this context, we still might call the Renaissance and not the Early Modern. Good literary historians cannot abandon their ties to tradition. But perhaps career critics are also accustomed to listening hard to poets. As a matter of fact, *The Life of the Poet* evolved as an offshoot or cast-off of a much larger manuscript on poet-critics. Eventually some chapters bloated so much that they had to be given a room of their own. The traces of that primal manuscript can still be detected, I think, not only in my book but in some later work on literary careers. *The Life of the Poet* itself has had two modest careers: one as an occasional influence on scholars; the other as a master plan for poets. The poets, on the whole, have been more loyal. Regularly a sheaf of poems arrives by mail or email, in which a well-wisher suggests that he or she amazingly fits my guidelines and asks what to do now. I am grateful for the attention, of course, and try not to mention my book's gloomy dictum, that most poets fail. At any rate, whatever their talents, these readers offer hope and a faith in the future. The idea of a career, for poets, is no curiosity, but still a living enterprise.

From my own perspective, as a literary historian and critic rather than a poet, the field of career criticism arose, or perhaps resumed, as a response to two contrary movements in the 1960s and 70s. One might call them historicism and anti-historicism. Anti-historicists included both formalists and structuralists, as well as early poststructuralists; or as we called them then, New Critics and deconstructionists (those labels now seem quaint). What all these varying schools shared, despite their dramatic differences, was an effort to read texts divorced from stories about authorial intention or historical contexts. New Critics developed techniques to analyse anonymous poems – poems, that is, reduced to I. A. Richards' 'protocols', discussed without reference to names and dates and origins and footnote information (Richards 1929). Structuralists and poststructuralists developed techniques to analyse poems as dehumanized pieces of language, under Heidegger's slogan 'Die Sprache spricht, nicht der Mensch' (apparently the agent who spoke for National Socialism in the 1930s was not a person but language itself).[6] Many of these close readings were technically brilliant. But their triumphs were won at the cost of the many questions they did not ask: not only questions about what authors had

[6] Heidegger's lectures on language, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (1959), have been translated by Peter Hertz (Heidegger 1971).

meant but also questions about the worlds and times and minds through which poems pass. The cleverest readings of Cleanth Brooks and Roman Jakobson and Paul de Man often left me hungry. Like many others, I wanted readings that were *saturated* – alive not only to the intricacies of language and form but also to the situations and contexts that are so deeply woven into any kind of writing. History is not external to poems; it leaves its mark in every thread of the fabric.

Yet historicism did not seem to be the answer. The critique that anti-historicists had mounted – that literary scholarship had long been in thrall to a literal-minded philology, preoccupied with source materials and biographical details – still rang true in the 1960s. When Roland Barthes accused academic criticism of 'a kind of analogical determinism, according to which the details of a given work must resemble the details of the author's life', etc.,[7] he may have been unfair, but he did describe the ideology behind much of my own graduate training. Nor did a broader historicism, which interpreted individual works as expressions of the thought of their time – Courtly Love; the Elizabethan World Picture; the Mirror and the Lamp; the Revolt of the Masses – escape from similar charges of determinism. Specific authors and texts always slipped through the mesh. Some of the great philologists, such as Erich Auerbach, Ernst Robert Curtius and Leo Spitzer, undoubtedly managed to combine immense historical learning with acute and refined close readings. But they were rare, and the culture that nourished them had already broken apart. When P. O. Kristeller looked back on his career, he compared it to the ride across Lake Constance; the ice that sustained him had melted (Kristeller 1990). A new historicism was called for. And of course it soon came. In an essay written in 1984, 'Life, Death, and Other Theories', I associated Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) with *Self-Crowned Laureates* and *The Life of the Poet* as books that redefined the author by conceiving identity as the scenario for a programme of action, within the social and historical circumstances that enabled a possible self (Lipking 1985: 188). Perhaps that was too optimistic. New historicist readings often turned out to be no less deterministic than the old. But at their best they did provide new ways of looking at careers and interrogating the texts and contexts that shaped them.

Some earlier critical and scholarly works also went into my personal habits of thinking about careers. One was W. Jackson Bate's very moving biography, *John Keats* (1963). That book, along with *The Burden of*

[7] Barthes 1971: 433; originally published in 1963.

the Past and the English Poet (1970), and to some extent Bate's anthology *Criticism: The Major Texts* and his books on Johnson and Coleridge, examined the lifework of authors in terms of two questions that no ambitious writer could keep from asking: what has been done? what is there left to do? Those questions have haunted me too. Taken seriously, they rearrange the history of literature as a series of projects, in which each new age or writer responds to the past by gathering in what has been done and charting a new direction. That view of literary history is not altogether novel; to some extent it had been anticipated, for instance, by one of my own teachers, M. H. Abrams. But career criticism has found fresh ways to explore it. When Harold Bloom dramatically and violently recast Bate's questions, in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), he made the history of poetry intensely personal – a series of agons, not a succession. Some reviewers of *The Life of the Poet* suspected that Bloom had influenced me. I do not think so; nor am I conscious of feeling anxious about it. But like everyone who ponders the struggles of poets, both of us do take up again the burden of the past.

My own work, along with that of most later career critics, departs from both Bate's and Bloom's in three crucial, interrelated aspects. The first is their devotion to Freud. Bate admires his timeless insights into a universal human nature, akin to Samuel Johnson's; heroes such as Johnson, Coleridge and Keats are valuable because they represent 'most of us', the driven, grasping, often tormented selves that Freud described as the human condition. Bloom embraces and generalizes the Oedipus Complex; in his view we suffer most because we have not created ourselves, and all strong writers must forge original selves, even at the cost of killing their fathers (Bloom himself has killed many critical fathers, not excluding Yahweh the Creator). These Freuds are not my guide. I do not believe that his wisdom is timeless, nor does patricide appeal much to me (as I once argued, Oedipus did not *want* to kill his father and marry his mother; the problem that rules his life is that, abandoned at birth, he does not know who he is (Lipking 1988: 19–20)). Insofar as Freud does cast light on literary careers, his ideas seem most useful in Erik Erikson's versions of identity and the life cycle, which draw on the existential account of life as a series of projects; the life of the poet might be a project either for wholeness or death.[8]

My second departure from Bate and Bloom concerns their investment in greatness. Bate sinks himself so deeply into his heroes that their causes

[8] E. H. Erikson 1959. On life as a project for death, see Jaspers 1955.

become his own – or vice-versa. However inspiring, these identifications tend to shut out rival views or 'minor' poets and critics. Bloom famously favours 'strong misreadings' over the craven submission to others that scars poetic and academic correctness; only the strong will survive. This homage to genius certainly simplifies the study of careers; for instance, one can pass directly from Milton to Blake and Wordsworth without having to pause at Pope or Thomson or Gray or Cowper or Charlotte Smith. Yet sometimes greatness itself must bow to the creatures it has excluded. (Virtually every great male poet has needed to borrow, at some point in his career, an abandoned woman's voice (Lipking 1988: 128–9).) As all of us know from our own lives, deep influence can flow from the humblest sources. Nor should we read history only by flashes of lightning.

And this reaction spurs my third departure from Bate and Bloom: the need to repair their historical oversimplifications. Like many Romanticists, they tend to divide the story of literature into two halves, Before and After, or as in the title of one of Bate's books, *From Classic to Romantic* (1946) – the Great Divide of 1789 or 1798. The spirit of revolution, a revolution in poetic as well as political visions, thus marks a decisive turning point in human affairs – not least, by positing that there can be such turning points, when everything changes, including human nature (pace Johnson and Freud). That story places Milton in Eden, the world before the Flood. But Renaissance scholars might well put him into the midst of the Flood, the counter-counter-Reformation that forced a poet to invent his own career track. Indeed, even Dante had to invent the pattern of his career (Ascoli 2008). The life of the poet has never been untroubled. Hence part of the attraction of career criticism, for me and many other literary historians, has been the opportunity it offers to watch the constantly shifting historical and cultural moments that entwine with each author's effort to make a life and lifework.

From the standpoint of the individual artist, every era has a potential for revolution; we all live in times of unsettling changes and hopeful or menacing futures. Young authors always stand at a crossroads, choosing a path whose end cannot yet be seen. Poetic breakthroughs, *The Life of the Poet* argues, often occur at the critical juncture when 'the poet realizes that his own personal history, reflected in his poems, coincides with the universal spiritual history of mankind' (Lipking 1981: 18). For Dante, he and Italy have reached the point when the secular and spiritual Romes must come back together; for Blake, the New Jerusalem is born in London and himself; for Yeats, the wheel of history has come round

as Anima Hominis enters Anima Mundi; for Whitman, America and the great American poem suddenly seem identical with his own coming of age; and Anna Akhmatova takes on the burden of preserving the memory of a silenced Russia in her poems. Each of these stories is different; history, despite Yeats's gyres, does not repeat itself. But telling such stories allows the poet to fabricate a historical vision in which he or she will be, if not the unacknowledged legislator of mankind, at least its acknowledged seer. Then scholars follow, unwinding the path, and interpreting the poet in terms of history, and history in terms of the poet.

In recent decades, those histories have usually been shaped according to national interests. Career criticism, by and large, has moved in the track of Helgerson, from self-crowned laureates to forms of nationhood (Helgerson 1992).[9] There is a good historical reason for this: from the beginning, the histories of literature served patriotic causes. In my first book, *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England* (1970), a chapter on the uses of literary history concludes that the first histories of English poetry were written to affirm a national identity and to define the superiority of the national character. The idea seemed novel to some scholars then, but looks like a commonplace four decades later. Some years ago, when the editor of the eighteenth-century volume of *The New Cambridge History of English Literature* commissioned me to write its essay on criticism, he supplied a title: 'Literary Criticism and the Rise of National Literary History'. I do not think that Alexander Pope would have approved of that conjunction; his *Essay on Criticism* mocks British self-congratulation, and he never wrote his prospective epic *Brutus*, on the origins of Britain's national ideals, because (he told Joseph Spence) 'I did not care for living always in boiling water'.[10] Most poets prefer to separate their careers from the party lines of patriotism. But the subordination of criticism as poets would like to think of it, in service to poems, to a mode of national history, in service to politics, has been confirmed by many recent articles and books. I took the assignment; the essay joined the consensus and did its duty (Lipking 2005).

The identification of poetic careers with national interests is not something new; it might be traced back to King David or Homer, if not to Enheduanna of Ur (the first poet whose name we know (Hallo and van

[9] Helgerson's contributions to career criticism deserve an essay of their own. *A Sonnet from Carthage: Garcilaso de la Vega and the New Poetry of Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Helgerson 2007), published less than a year before his death in April 2008, exemplifies his remarkable ability to found an original literary history on the fine-grained close reading of one particular author.

[10] Spence 1966: vol. I: 134.

Dijk 1968)). But its full potential depends, of course, on the rise of the modern nation-state, over which poets often preside as emblems or guardian angels. The phenomenon is especially clear in nations that struggle for a place in the world. In Britain the question of whether Shakespeare should claim the title of national poet, in competition with Chaucer, Spenser and Milton, provokes some interesting arguments, among them issues of what is the nation and what is a poet. Do playwrights qualify? Is the nation Great Britain or England? But such questions hardly arise in Portugal and Poland. Luis Vaz de Camões towers over Portuguese literature and history, just as his statues stand watch over Lisbon. Adam Mickiewicz represents the soul of Poland as well as its story. It is not only that *Os Lusíadas* and *Pan Tadeusz* are great poems about the making and breaking of nations, or that both poets had long and distinguished careers. It is also that each poet equates his own strivings with those of his native land – most famously in the words Camões wrote from his deathbed: 'All will see that my country was so dear to me that I was content to die not only in her but with her' (later that year, 1580, Portugal would be swallowed by Spain). Nor is it coincidental that both poems were written in exile: *Os Lusíadas* in the Far Eastern reaches of the Portuguese empire, *Pan Tadeusz* in Paris, where Chopin, already the national composer of Poland, wrote polonaises and ballades inspired by Mickiewicz. If nations are best understood as imagined communities, as Benedict Anderson argues, then no one imagines them better than exiles, whose dreams of community are uninterrupted by the confusion of the actual country, with all its local frictions (Anderson 1991). Thus displaced poets keep faith with their dreams. Even in times when those nations had ceased to exist – when Portugal was a province of Castile, and Poland a spoil of Russia, Germany and Austria – the national poems preserved them. Indeed, some lovers of poems and country might feel that such poems *were* the nation.

Career critics, however, might bring a somewhat different perspective. Perhaps the sense of exile in such poems, which culminate long careers, is internal as well as external; that is, the expression of a personal estrangement from some of the sources of national pride. The glory of Portugal lies in the past, according to *Os Lusíadas*. At present it wallows in greed and narrow self-interest, reflected not least by the inattention it pays to its starving poets. Many readers think that the best parts of the poem, as in *Paradise Lost*, are those in which the poet speaks directly in his own voice, lamenting the belatedness and afflictions that keep him apart from the bygone visions his epic unfolds, when men and gods talked together. The real nation has not lived up to its dreams, and he has been

left stranded on a farther shore. But the poet may be revealing a still darker secret: a flaw at the heart of the nation. It was not only enemies who sapped the strength of Portugal; her own imperial ambitions both raised and doomed her.

Mickiewicz never published the epilogue he drafted for *Pan Tadeusz*, but there he makes one undercurrent of the poem into something personal and explicit: his Poland is a fairytale or land of childhood, created in part to balance the exile's self-hatred. Can anyone live in that fairyland? Just before the end of the poem, when everyone claps to the sound of the national anthem, '*Poland is not yet dead*', it is Jankiel, an ancient Jew, who plays the song on his dulcimer and draws the patriotic moral: Poland awaits its saviour as the Jews their Messiah. Love and irony are both thick in the air (within the world of the poem, the moment will forever be 1812, when Napoleon and his Polish allies are poised to join forces to conquer Russia and set Poland free forever). But the special insight of the poet in 1834 is that his nation exists in memory alone, where he invents a community healed of its real tensions and fissures.[11] There, at least, the Jews will be converted. Rather than being the nation, therefore, the poem contrives a substitute nation, not unlike Zion.[12] Poetry, rather than people, will have the last word.

But poetry also has its own logic, which often differs from the ways of nations. The integrity of that internal poetic logic cannot be ignored by those who study careers. Each major poet is of course unique, not only because of the circumstances that shape him or her but also because of his or her special gifts. Yet poetic careers rehearse the same stories again and again. From one point of view, Camões and Mickiewicz have nothing in common – no nation or language or background or genre or time. And yet their achievements, and even despairs, coalesce in their lives as poets. This was the sort of puzzle I tried to address – if hardly to solve – in *The Life of the Poet*. But most of the pieces of that larger picture have yet to be filled in. One reason, obviously, is specialization. Career critics believe in reading a poet's lifework as a whole, and doing justice to even *one* poet's total achievement can be the work of a lifetime. Camões and Mickiewicz – and Ovid and Dante and Milton and hundreds of others – are fields in themselves, not merely parts of a field.

[11] A modern reader will surely notice two glaring contradictions in this picture of an ideal Polish community: the setting is a village in Lithuania, which is reckoned the heart of Poland; and the plot is driven by a brutal feud between local factions.

[12] In his great poem of exile 'By the Rivers of Babylon', Camões, like Mickiewicz, specifically associates his distant homeland with Zion.

Nor has the recent expansion, or rather explosion, of canons helped to build bridges across the frontiers of global specialization. In the 1960s a group of literary scholars in the former, always imperilled Czechoslovakia collaborated on a textbook, *The World of Literature*, intended to teach the history and principles of literature to every gymnasium student. The first volume of this text was published in 1967, but the authorities quickly suppressed it, on the eve of Prague Spring; few copies survive (Striedter 1989: 288). That may have been the last fling for the ideal of world literature. Moreover, comparative literature, as it used to be practised, has also gone out of style. Literature now seems too diverse for Northrop Frye's anatomies or other attempts at comprehensive systems. Perhaps the word 'literature' itself has regressed from its modern sense of 'writing of permanent worth' to its older inclusion of any writing at all. In similar fashion, the title of poet might no longer be honorific but simply a term for any writer of verses. If that is so, then the life of the poet, as the sign of a special career or vocation, must yield to the multiple, undefinable lives of the poets.

That takes me back to where I once began. 'We have heard too much about the lives of the poets', the first sentence of *The Life of the Poet*, hazards a little inside joke, since my previous book had wrapped up with Johnson's *Lives*. The itch to gossip, or to pry into what writers do when they are at home, can deflect attention from what they write (Johnson himself did not write *lives*, of course, but biographical and critical prefaces to a collection of poems). Most biographies of writers fail at the crucial task of shedding light on the work. What we need instead, I argued, is studies of the life that gets into poems; of Dante *within* the *Commedia*, converting his experience into vision. That argument still seems persuasive to me. But it will never be easy to carry out.

Johnson's own life as an author exemplifies the problems (Lipking 1998). Most people, and many reviewers, would rather read about him – or about that mythical figure or hero of anecdotes *Dr* Johnson – than look at the work that he left. Moreover, Johnson did not lead the life of a poet. It is no accident that his most lasting piece of verse is called *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. He never claimed to be a major poet who would devote his life to ever greater poems; and though his kind of verse did influence many later poets – Goldsmith, Crabbe, Landor, Housman, and in recent times Samuel Beckett, Donald Davie, John Wain and Philip Larkin – that line of influence conspicuously omits the great poetic careerists. Johnson's verse, quite obviously, is but a small part of his larger life as an author. And even that life might be considered glorified hackwork, shaped not by visions of work he wanted to do but by the commissions he took for money. Perhaps that is the real story of any career: no grand design but only one thing after another.

But career critics do not think so. For them – for *us* – the contrast of whole to part, or of a lifework to any piece of it, always seems superficial. The two are not opposed but mutually sustaining. Just as the word 'life' can refer to the daily grind experienced by each of us minute by minute, or else to the total shape of everything that each of us has been, so 'the work' can refer equally to an individual piece of writing or to a whole corpus. The best critics know how to read those relations. In this respect the field that we are building has expanded the hermeneutic circle. If we can understand the meaning of the whole only through understanding the meaning of each of its parts, and the parts only through a prior sense of the whole, a whole that takes in the full career will also illuminate the details of any particular text. In Gadamer's terms, the reader questions the text as if it were a 'Thou', in dialogue with an 'I'; so every good reading brings about a 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer 1994: 306–7). The life of the poet thus represents a larger Thou who points to a further horizon. I do not regard this as merely a matter of theory. At its best, career criticism has been far more than an alternate way of writing lives; it has also been the source of deeper and better readings of texts. In an era when close reading has lost its glamour, the study of poetic careers has shown how much remains to be explored. Great poets have made themselves the hard way, line by line, and that is how we must make sense of their lives. To speak for myself, that seems enough work for a lifetime.

CLASSICAL LITERARY CAREERS AND THEIR RECEPTION

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