I BIOS AND ANCIENT POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

Political biography[1], still one of the most popular forms of literature, is one of the very few literary genres that have come down to us still bearing the imprint of the literary genre as practiced in antiquity. Moreover, by far the most widespread genre of modern literature, and one without immediate roots in classical antiquity, the novel[2] very often takes on the form of a fictitious biography or autobiography. Plutarch's *Lives,* the finest achievement and model of the genre, has received increasing attention in the last generation[3], and important studies have been devoted to the work of Suetonius[4], while Nepos' biographies have been largely taken for granted; the interest in the *Lives* of the *Historia Augusta,* the focal point of feverish scholarly activity, centers on problems far removed from the present enquiry. These authors, together with the remains of many others, have also

1 On the whole, in the present study political biography follows the definition of W. Steidle, *Sueton und die antike Biographie*[2] (Zetemata I, München 1963), 140.2: "Die Bezeichnung soll, wie ausdrücklich festgestellt sei, nichts anderes als 'Biographie von Staatsmännern' bedeuten; dass der Inhalt dieser Biographien in der Hauptsache oder gar ausschliesslich politisch gewesen sei, soll damit keineswegs gesagt sein." But cf. the remarks of R.G. Lewis, *CR* 28 (1978), 71 – obviously a biography treating a person of both intellectual and political importance without or with minimal reference to the latter should not be included in the category under discussion.

2 This view is contested by, e.g., T. Hägg, *The Novel in Antiquity* (Oxford 1983), 2, who adduces, however, the supporters of the differing view.

3 The new trend was set by A.W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford 1945), 1. 54 ff.; also important is K. Ziegler, *Plutarchos von Chaironeia*[2] (Stuttgart 1964), 273 ff., and among more recent writers, P.A. Stadter, *Plutarch's Historical Methods* (Cambridge, Mass. 1965); J.R. Hamilton, *Plutarch, Alexander. A Commentary* (Oxford 1969), XXXIII ff.; C.P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford 1971), 72 ff.; D.A. Russell, *Plutarch* (London 1973), 100 ff.; A. Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives* (London 1974); B. Scardigli, *Die Römerbiographien Plutarchs: Ein Forschungsbericht* (München 1979).

4 The most important item is Steidle (supra, n. 1); see also F. Della Corte, *Suetonio eques Romanus*[2] (Firenze 1967); K.R. Bradley, *Suetonius' Life of Nero. A Historical Commentary* (Coll. Latomus 157, Bruxelles 1978); R. Syme, Biographers of the Caesars, *MH* 37 (1980), 104 ff. (= *Roman Papers* III (1984), 1251 ff); E. Cizek, *Structures et idéologie dans "Les vies des douze Césars" de Suétone* (Bucarest-Paris 1977). The important work of A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius* (London 1983) appeared to late to be considered here.

been discussed in the more general context of the History of Ancient Biography. Unfortunately, the complete collection and discussion of the Greek authors who have survived only in fragmentary form or in references found in other authors, planned to appear in the fourth part of Jacoby's monumental *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker,* is not to be expected in the foreseeable future, while the fragments of their far less numerous Latin counterparts in Peter's *Historicorum Romanorum Reliquiae* are badly in need of revision. Ever since F. Leo's epoch-making work on Greek and Roman biography[5] ancient biography has been discussed as a whole, with the emphasis set on influences and the different strains leading to the extant writers of the tradition. Leo himself recognized at the outset of his work (p. 1) some of the basic differences between political and intellectual biography. Nevertheless, his thesis maintains that the development of these two was for a time identical: the Peripatetics made use of the biographical form in order to describe the lives of men of letters, but came later to employ the same vehicle for the description of the lives of men of affairs; at a later stage the Alexandrians changed the mode and style to suit their own purposes in the composition of biographies of poets, writers, etc., though not of political personalities. This thesis has been the point of departure for all subsequent scholars treating the history of the genre: many of its components have been criticized to a greater or lesser degree and few scholars would confess today to the acceptance of Leo's thesis without significant modifications. Surprisingly enough, the one component of Leo's theory that seems to be generally accepted by present students of the problem is the assumption that in Hellenistic times, for a period at least, intellectual and political biography were written side by side in the same manner and presumably on the same scale and by the same authors. The protesting voices against this assumption were few and devoid of persuasive power, the rebuttal of their arguments seems to be accepted as axiomatic (see below, Ch. II).

It is not necessary here to review the development and ramifications of twentieth-century scholarship – this has been done often, most remarkably and with his usual flair by A. Momigliano[6]. However in the following it will be argued that political biography in Greece and

5 F. Leo, *Die griechisch-römische Biographie nach ihrer litterarischen Form* (Leipzig 1901).
6 A. Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge, Mass. 1971), 1 ff.

Rome had both its own clearly defined characteristics and a separate history and development that warrant a treatment of its own, outside the scope of the more general picture of biography. Before proceeding to the various aspects of such a treatment it will be necessary to clarify some of the underlying assumptions of the present study.

Leo's point of departure was the search for Suetonius' predecessors and influences that led to the particular form of his biographies of Emperors. It was in the course of that search that he developed his theory concerning the main types of biography in Hellenistic times. Later scholars, though often disagreeing with Leo's results, trod the same path from Steidle presenting an analysis of his own for the *Formgeschichte* of Suetonius to Dihle[7] and others who took Plutarch as their starting point. The aims of the present study are different, and more modest. Whatever happened before Suetonius and Plutarch and whatever the exact formal relationships between the works of the two it is clear that at the turn of the first and second centuries the biographical portrayal of men of political consequence was being practiced in Greece and in Rome, in Greek and Latin. How old was this practice and when and how did it start? The answers hitherto supplied to these questions will be shown to be unsatisfactory, a new solution to the problem will have to be sought. This should not and will not include a renewed discussion of all the currents and crosscurrents of ancient literature that influenced in one way or another the development of biography, and of political biography in particular. The emphasis will rather be put on the exact moment when political biography as a recognizable literary genre emerged. This does not mean that its birth is suggested to have been as of Athena's, in panoplion, out of Zeus' head; without diminishing the importance of outside influences and relationships, the very beginnings of the composition of political biography proper will be shown as a significant point in literary history, and potentially instructive for our understanding of the genre.

1. *Bios and biography.* Previous studies of the subject appear to suffer from the unwillingness of scholars to state the case in clear and unequivocal terms: are we dealing with an ancient literary genre or with a modern concept – in other words, with *βίος* or biography? If the former, the lines were too broadly drawn. Though it may be agreed that the discussion of more or less closely related forms is not only permissible but in some cases even essential, scholars often went far

7 A. Dihle, *Studien zur griechischen Biographie* (Abh. Göttingen 3.37, 1956).

beyond the requirements of the case and analysed literary works that on their own judgment were far removed from *βίος*; on the other hand, discussion of such works as Dicaearchus' *βίος Ἑλλάδος* (and, in connexion with it, Varro's *de vita populi Romani*), as well as the various dissertations on the types of lives according to the divisions of Aristotelian and post-Aristotelian philosophy[8], are of a very marginal relevance to the present enquiry. If, as appears from the title of the modern works, the subject was biography, lines were blurred and not clearly defined. Nor was the modern provenance of the term emphasized before Momigliano, at least[9], and 'biography' was often discussed as if the name of an ancient *γένος*. As often happens, a basically correct scholarly attitude not only got its due but virtually became a *reductio ad absurdum*. While the importance in classical literature of the adherence to literary genres and their rules was clearly perceived and analysed first and foremost by nineteenth century German scholarship, the conclusions drawn in some cases, notably that of biography, went to excessive lengths[10]. Not only biography, but its divisions and subdivisions were treated as if adhering to rules rigidly conceived and well known to us. Yet when dealing with ancient biography two points should have been kept in mind. Ancient literary theory in general, and the laws of the genres in particular, were developed in the first place for poetry, and it is in the context of discussions of poetic theory that our notions about them were formed. Neither the divisions of the different genres of prose nor the *lex operis* were ever fixed with such painstaking exactness – with the exception of rhetoric, for which a highly sophisticated theory was developed – as those of the various poetic *γένη*[11]. Even in the few instances where divisions of prose do

8 Cf. R. Joly, *Le thème philosophique des genres de vie dans l'antiquité classique* (Ac. Roy. Belg. 51, 1956, no. 3).

9 Momigliano, *op. cit.* 12 has drawn attention to the fact that *βιογραφία* does not occur before the sixth century (also mentioned in *OED* 870).

10 Even Ed. Fraenkel, the foremost pupil of Leo, to whose memory he was devoted, came to admit this: see his letter quoted in Momigliano, *op. cit.* 89, n. 23.

11 See the warning of Steidle, *op. cit.* 4 ff.; cf. also U. Wilamowitz, *Griechische Verskunst* (Berlin 1921), 42, n. 1: "Es gibt gar keine lateinische Satire, es gibt nur Lucilius, Horaz, Persius, Juvenal." Admittedly, Wilamowitz here contrasts Latin with Greek literature, but on the whole the remark is not inopportune to the whole of ancient literature. An important recent *caveat* against overemphasizing genre-theory is to be found in D.A. Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity* (London 1981), 148 ff.; cf. D.A. Russell and N.G. Wilson, *Menander Rhetor* (Oxford 1981), XXIX ff.; see also R.K. Hack, The Doctrine of the Literary Forms, *HSCP* 27 (1916), 1 ff.; J.F. D'Alton, *Roman Literary Theory and Criticism* (New York 1962), 425. F. Cairns, *Generic Composition in Greek and Latin Poetry* (Edinburgh 1972), preface, does not think there is much difference between the theories of poetry

occur in ancient discussions they do not, to my knowledge, go beyond a threefold division into history, rhetoric and philosophy[12]. Moreover, the crucial period under discussion is exactly the period when the laws of the literary forms even in the different genres of poetry were disregarded and when constant mutual influences brought about a cross-fertilization, involving a great amount of change and development, of most major literary genres[13]. Yet Leo and his successors speak of the literary forms of ancient biography as if these constituted different, readily recognizable literary γένη with strictly defined rules to which writers adhered – and from which sometimes writers departed – the γένη of 'Peripatetic' and 'Alexandrian' biography[14]. Not only is such a theory overschematic, but it also underestimates the personal differences between authors and the innovations they could be responsible for, as well as oversimplifying the issue of the possible fluctuations inside the oeuvre of individual authors. The progress by way of trial and error may be demonstrated, for instance, in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* as against his earlier series of the *Lives* of the Emperors. Indeed, at this date it may be no longer necessary to dwell in detail on the absurdity of an analysis which attempts to trace the differences between various Lives in a series to the fact that their predecessors belonged to different literary γένη[15]. The discovery in 1912 of the Oxyrynchus papyrus containing large portions of Satyrus' *Life* of Euripides in the altogether unexpected form of dialogue[16] made Leo repent in details[17], without inducing him to draw more general conclusions concerning the state of our knowledge or the *genus-bedingt* uniformity of ancient literary products.

and prose. B. Baldwin, Biography at Rome, *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* 1 (Coll. Latomus 164, Bruxelles 1979) opens his paper with the sentence: "Much, perhaps too much, has been written on ancient biography as a literary genre with formal origins and fixed rules."

12 Or, in Demetrius 19 ff. 'dialogue' for 'philosophy'. I do not think that *ibid.*, 223 ff. means that the author regarded epistles as a separate genre. See also P. Steinmetz, Gattungen und Epochen der griechischen Literatur in der Sicht Quintilians, *H* 92 (1964), 459 ff. Note the author's emphasis on the importance of subject-matter as against literary genre!

13 See W. Kroll, *Studien zur Verständnis der lateinischen Literatur* (Stuttgart 1924), 202 ff.; L.E. Rossi, I generi letterari e le loro leggi scritte e non scritte nelle letterature classiche, *BICS* 18 (1971), 69 ff.

14 For a well-founded criticism of this distinction, see S. West, Satyrus: Peripatetic or Alexandrian?, *GRBS* 19 (1974), 279 ff.

15 Thus in Leo's analysis of the *Lives* of Nepos, esp. *op. cit.*, 203 ff.

16 Besides Cicero's *Brutus*, parallels seem to occur only in hagiography: see D.R. Stuart, *Epochs of Greek Biography* (Berkeley 1928), 79 ff.; P. Coleman-Norton, The Use of Dialogue in the Vitae Sanctorum, *JTS* 27 (1926), 388 ff.

17 F. Leo, Satyros βίος Εὐριπίδου, *Nachr. Göttingen* (1912), 273 ff. (= *Kl. Schr.* II [1960], 365 ff.).

It was a futile path that led to the reconstruction of ancient literary theory in the hope of exploring the history of ancient biography. Such a theory may never have existed, and was perhaps never even consciously in the minds of the various practitioners of the genre. One may perhaps compare the case of the novel, for present purposes a well-defined genre of Greek literature, that apparently did not acquire a name of its own during antiquity[18]. Thus, it appears that a more profitable path will take its departure from modern conceptions: the history of ancient biography is more easily approachable with modern definitions which may in the event provide solutions to the problems as set by ourselves. This was clearly sensed by Momigliano when he began his discussion of ancient biography with a definition of his own: 'An account of the life of a man from birth to death is what I call biography'[19]. Yet this definition, though conveniently broad and in particular admirably well-suited to Momigliano's main thesis in its universality, suffers from an important omission, an omission that determines the entire approach and the main conclusions of the book. Influenced as he was by H. Homeyer's views on the early development of Greek biography[20], Momigliano failed to perceive the basic importance of defining the subject – be it as broadly and in as general terms as possible – not only in terms of its contents but also of its form. In other words, even though we reject the old and doctrinaire approach to the problem and the presumption of rigidly applied ancient laws governing the production of literary works it is nevertheless essential to insist on perceiving biography as a species of works of literature complete, autonomous and possessed of a unity of their own[21]. Momigliano's definition allows for the inclusion of portions, however small, of other literary genres under its umbrella: thus, following Homeyer, he could devote a whole chapter to 'Fifth Century Biographies and Autobi-

18 See, e.g., E. Rohde, *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer*[3] (Leipzig 1914), 3; A. Lesky, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*[3] (Bonn-München 1971), 960. The oft-repeated assurance, that the novel lacked a special name of its own and was referred to by the names of existing genres (e.g., drama) because the literary critics chose to disregard it seems to me to entail a logical contradiction: was not dignifying it (e.g., by Photius) by the name of drama not at least as bad, from this point of view, as giving it a particular name or, even better, paraphrasing it?

19 Momigliano, *op. cit.*, 11.

20 See H. Homeyer, Zu den Anfängen der griechischen Biographie, *Philologus* 106 (1962), 75 ff.; for Momigliano's overrating Homeyer, cf. also I. Gallo, L'origine e lo sviluppo della biografia greca, *QUCC* 18 (1974), 173 ff. at 176.

21 Cf. the definition of biography in the *OED*: "The history of the lives of individual men, as a branch of literature."

ographies' and discuss such phenomena as Biography in Herodotus. Without detracting from Homeyer's merit in describing fifth century antecedents of biography, or from Momigliano's for his additional material and especially for throwing light on the wider connexions, we should see these important contributions plainly for what they are: efforts to place biography in a broader context and discover its roots rather than the exploration of biography proper. It is important to draw a clear line between biographical elements in various literary forms – and some biographical elements may appear in most literary forms – and between a literary form devoted to biography[22]. Though the biographical sketches in Thucydides, for instance, are valuable towards a better understanding of the future development of political biography they still do not answer the question of how there evolved literary works devoted in their entirety to the descriptions of the lives of statesmen and generals. The distinction seems important, even crucial. While willingly acknowledging the contributions of Homeyer and Momigliano towards the understanding of the rise of the biographical interest in general and the lives of statesmen and generals in particular, I must insist that these explorations did little towards answering the question when and how did it happen that entire works came to be devoted to 'the account of the life of a man (we may add here 'of political importance') from birth to death' instead of forming minor themes, digressions or incidental descriptions in recognized literary forms such as History. Similarly, analyses of works belonging to associated literary genres, such as Isocrates' *Euagoras* and Xenophon's *Agesilaus,* as well as of his *Cyropaideia,* no doubt broadened our understanding – but still failed to provide an answer to the question posited above. Thus, the present study sets itself the much more restricted aim of discussing only works that qualify under the modern definition of biography, and singling out from that group the *Lives* of men of political importance only.

The delineations of political biography will have to define it against the two bordering realms of *encomium* on the one hand and the political monograph centred around the figure of a statesman or a general

22 Again the parallel of the Greek novel may be adduced where, against Rohde and his followers who discussed the novel proper and its direct antecedents, one should mention the celebrated study of E. Schwartz, *Fünf Vorträge über den griechischen Roman*[2] (Berlin 1943) whose real intention had to be classified by adding, from his own text, a subtitle to the second edition, *Das Romanhafte in der erzählenden Literatur der Griechen.* Similarly, 'satire' is often applied by modern critics to various literary genres that contain a satirical element, not only to 'satura' proper.

on the other hand. Both these types of literature are fairly well represented in our surviving texts: the first, as already said, by such works as the *Euagoras* and the *Agesilaus*, the second in such later works as Arrian's *History of Alexander* or *Maccabees II* (an abbreviated version of a work by a certain Jason of Cyrene) to mention only the most prominent.

The border with *encomium* is clearly defined. *Encomium* has the purpose of praising an individual[23], and its organisation is laid down by the rules of epideictic rhetoric, taken in a fairly narrow sense (viz., not as in rhetors like Hermogenes 404 ff, who treat history itself as a branch of epideictic). Political biography, on the other hand, like history, has as its function the record of facts: political biography's *genus proximum* is history.

The political monograph, though clearly centred around one figure, abides by the rules of history in its choice and presentation of the material. Neither Arrian nor *Maccabees II* is in any sense 'an account of the life of a man from birth to death': to give just one obvious example, it would never have occurred to the authors of these works to describe the childhood or anecdotes connected with the upbringing of Alexander or of Judas Maccabaeus[24]. Conversely, it would have been unimaginable to leave out of these accounts narratives of important sieges and battles, incidents that could be dispensed with in political biography (Plut. *Alex.* 1). Despite these obvious limits of the different genres particular works of prose could include elements taken from a number of literary forms (see above): yet the question before us is not the exact lineage of such a work as the *Agricola* or the connexions of the *Cyropaideia* with a variety of literary genres: problems of that sort have received sufficient attention in their proper place. What we are interested in is the beginnings of the biography of kings, generals or statesmen; and it should not be rejected as a tautology if we define these biographies as what a modern reader would accept as biography.

23 Cf. the beginning of Johnson's *Life of Cowley*: "(Dr Sprat's) zeal of friendship, or ambition of eloquence, has produced a funeral oration rather than a history; he has given the character, not the life of Cowley; for he writes with so little detail, that scarcely anything is distinctly known, but all is shown confused and enlarged through the mist of panegyrick."

24 This fact has been all but ignored in the important recent works on Arrian, as P.A. Stadter, *Arrian of Nicomedia* (Chapel Hill 1980); A.B. Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander I* (Oxford 1980). P.A. Brunt acknowledges the fact in one sentence in his Loeb Arrian II.566. Recently, in a paper in Hebrew (The History of Judas Maccabaeus: on One Aspect of Hellenistic Historiography, *Zion* 49 (1983–84), 1 ff.), I drew attention to the parallel case of *Macc.* II as regards the initial point of the history of Judas.

The foregoing remarks should not be construed as denying the existence of certain underlying rules guiding the composition of different forms of biography, as of other forms of literature. However, the essence and function of such rules should be clearly understood. Ancient literary theory followed, rather than preceded, the invention and development of literary genres. The rules of the genre were descriptive rather than normative, taking their cue from what were considered its inventors and finest examples. The function of these descriptive rules was both clearly to define the criteria by which existing works were to be judged and to set standards for the future practitioners of the γένη. That these literary γένη evolved under and were influenced by the prevailing social conditions and conventions of the ancient world goes without saying: but it should be clearly perceived that these were the true reasons for the formulation of certain series of rules, whether explicitly discussed in literary theory or implicitly accepted by authors. It is the underlying assumption of Greek civilization that kings and heroes are more exalted and important personages than Sausage-sellers that made these respectively the central characters of widely differing dramatic works.

It was for reasons of Greek social history that Greek dramatic poetry did not invent a tragic hero with an everyday background – though, as we are aware now, this can be done and the fate of, say, Scandinavian burghers can be as heart-rending as that of Greek kings. The later formulation of these assumptions as required standards to be adhered to by any aspiring dramatist gave only formal recognition to an already existing state of affairs. True, in the more formal genres of poetry these rules could be defined in a very rigid manner, thus enabling Petronius to criticize Lucan for discarding the divine apparatus in his epos[25]. In the much more flexible forms of prose the situation seems to have been quite different. This can be perhaps best demonstrated on the example of History. One of the characteristic features of ancient historiography is its tendency to reflection and self-assessment. Ancient historians, more than authors of other kinds of literature in antiquity, are repeatedly analysing and explaining – sometimes apologising for – the rules of their craft or the way they understand and interpret these rules. It is not only the Fathers of Historiography, Herodotus and Thucydides, who had to lay down the rules for their newly found trade; later historians with a tradition of centuries behind them, from Polybius to Tacitus, found it incumbent on themselves to clarify

25 Petr. 118.6.

their positions and attitudes[26]. It will be seen in the following that the reflections to be found in writers of political biography are closely akin to those of the historians; and that they were formulated very much for the same reasons. A pragmatic approach will analyse the pronouncements of the ancient biographers as a means of covering their personal attitudes and determining their contributions to the history of ancient biography rather than as a clue for discovering some theoretical rules of the genre.

2. *Biography and political biography.* The present study is limited to the exploration of certain aspects of ancient political biography. Since previous students of ancient biography have dealt with *Lives* of statesmen and generals, as well as with the *Lives* of persons from different intellectual spheres, an explanation of the present course of action is called for. The reasons are twofold. First, it will be shown that there exists ample theoretical and practical justification for treating the two types of biography apart; secondly, it will be seen that while intellectual biography has, on the whole, received sufficient attention, political biography has, on the one hand, been misinterpreted in some of its essential characteristics and, on the other hand, some of the generally held assumptions about its history and development do not stand up to scrutiny.

What is the justification for considering political biography apart from other types of biography? The character of an ancient literary work is to a great extent determined by its subject matter, which forms an important, even central part in its definition. Thus, it is only self-evident that prime importance be accorded to the person who was the subject of the biography. While comedy is dealing with characters of a low type (*φαυλότεροι* Ar. *poet.* 5 1449a31), the subject matter of tragedy, as of epos, deals with characters of a more exalted nature (*σπουδαῖοι ibid.* 49b9). It is a consequence of this difference that there are, on the whole, markedly different types of plots for comedy and tragedy: tragedy is the imitation of a serious action (*μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας ibid.* 6 1449b24) precisely for the reason that it deals with serious persons. That this analogy is neither unduly doctrinaire nor in any way irrelevant may be demonstrated by one of the most characteristic features of ancient biographical writing. Almost the entire output of biographies from antiquity still extant, or identifiable from re-

26 These reflections occur very often in the prefaces of the various works; for a bibliography of main items, see, e.g., Stadter, *op. cit.*, 210, n. 1.

mains and references in ancient sources, did belong to clearly defined biographical series. These series were, as far as we can see without exception, organised according to the sorts of careers pursued by their heroes: thus, we have, or have evidence of, series of *Lives* of philosophers, tragic poets, the Seven Sages, the Twelve Caesars, Roman Generals, and the like. This is, on reflection, a feature of ancient biography in need of some explanation[27], precisely because it differs sharply from modern practice. Modern biography, taking as its theme the life of one man or one woman, seeks the individual and the particular rather than the characteristic for a whole type of human activity or behaviour. It is the different and the atypical that is more often than not described and given emphasis. Contrarily, the ancient biographer, dealing as he did in series – and sometimes with very long series, or a great number of series – could not but dwell on the typical and characteristic of each group. This peculiarity of ancient biography should make us pause before unquestioningly assuming that the *Lives* of, e.g., Socrates and Alcibiades belong of necessity to the same literary category, even though it is well known that the actions of, e.g., Oedipus and of Strepsiades and Pheidippides are represented in basically different forms of drama. From all this it does not follow, of course, that we have to accept unhesitatingly the reverse contention: in the ensuing argument an attempt will be made to prove, rather than assume, the differences between intellectual and political biography.

The rise and the growing popularity of the description of the lives of men connected with the intellectual world has been seen variously by the light of the emerging interest in the personality, of the influence of the personality of Socrates and the attempts to describe and imitate his *βίος*, of the development of scientific preoccupations, be it by Peripatetic, Alexandrian or other Hellenistic scholars[28]. On the other hand, for those who wished to know more about the lives of great statesmen and generals there was no need, at least initially, to develop a new literary genre. The particular, 'what Alcibiades did or suffered' (*τί Ἀλκιβιάδης ἔπραξεν ἢ τί ἔπαθεν* Ar. *poet.* 9 1451b11), was the proper subject of History. Indeed, fourth-century, and in particular

27 Explanation, that is, from the analytical rather than from the historical point of view: the connexion with and derivation from Peripatetic practice seems established and will not be challenged.

28 See I. Bruns, *Das literarische Porträt der Griechen im fünften und vierten Jahrhundert vor Christi Geburt* (Berlin 1896); idem, *Die Persönlichkeit in der Geschichtschreibung der Alten* (Berlin 1898); Dihle, *op. cit.*; Leo, *op. cit.*

Hellenistic historiography, differs from the fifth-century founders of the genre by its increasing emphasis on the central personalities[29].

Yet it is remarkable that the same interest in personality produced, on the one hand, a literary genre and, on the other hand, for a different set of characters, brought about the adaptation, to different degrees, of an existing genre to a new interest. It was in part the reflection of a very real change in the historical circumstances that caused a shift in emphasis in historiography from such themes as "The War between the Athenians and the Lacedaemonians" to such as "The Deeds of Alexander". The shifting balance was due to the authors as much as to their circumstances. The emphasis on historical process and causation in Herodotus and Thucydides is to be contrasted not only with later times but also with popular attitudes, like the one surfacing in Aristophanes' version of the causes of the Peloponnesian War. However, there must have been common ground between the different literary genres: the interest in Alexander's deeds and triumphs did not exclude glimpses of more everyday matters; nevertheless, there was no justification for making the drinking or sexual mores of Alexander the centres of interest.

When eventually a separate political biography did emerge it continued to exist side by side with history – in other words, while a writer who wanted to describe the life, actions and character of Socrates could do so only in the biographical genre, Alcibiades in the event could be treated in two different ways, either as the central figure of a History of his times or else as the subject of a biography. Moreover, there exists a corresponding division between political and intellectual biography in their relations to their sources. Political biography, on the whole, does not differ from history in its handling of evidence, though clearly the differences between individual biographers may be as great as those between the various historians. Not so biographies of poets, philosophers and the like. It has been long recognised that very little reliable source material was available about such persons and that most data found in their *Lives* were inferred by the authors from the works of their subjects[30]. Clearly such a procedure was unnecessary, and apparently far removed from the attitudes of the authors of political biography.

29 Cf. already Leo, *op. cit.*, 107 ff.

30 The evidence has been recently collected and analysed by M.R. Lefkowitz, *The Lives of the Greek Poets* (Oxford 1981).

It may say something about the tenacity of this division that even at the present day, when virtually all literary distinctions between the biographies of different kinds of persons have become extinct and the same techniques can be applied to descriptions of the lives of Beethoven and Napoleon, in the case of Napoleon there still exists the choice, and the dichotomy between biographies and histories of his times centring around his figure – a distinction absent in the case of Beethoven.

It is the major aim of the present study to follow the development that led to the state of affairs best seen as reflected in the well known protests of Cornelius Nepos and of Plutarch that they were writing biography, not history[31]. No similar protests are heard from writers of intellectual biography for the simple reason that to their goal led a single (and in the times from which such *Lives* survive, well-trodden) path. It is the element of choice that brings about reflection and justification, its absence the assumption that things can be taken for granted. The question of ancient political biography thus presents itself as of some relevance to the understanding of ancient historiography, in the final stage of which in Imperial Rome Biography for a time all but supplanted History.

3. *Ancient political biography.* In the preceding discussion it has been shown that 'biography' is here treated as a modern term for a species of literary works often, though not always, coinciding with the ancient term *βίος*, and that there is good reason to treat political biography separately from the forms of biography devoted to the lives of poets, philosophers and the like. Our next step will be a definition of ancient political biography, the subject of the present study. This definition does not, and could not, aim at reconstructing ancient theory; it is rather a modern definition of the subject, making use as much as possible of the available views of the ancients themselves. These views will include not only the pronouncements of such writers of biography as Nepos, Plutarch and Jerome, but will also make use of classical, Aristotelian, literary theory.

Among extant writers of political biography both Nepos and Plutarch emphasize their contention that they are writing Biography, not History. It will be worthwhile to submit these pronouncements to some scrutiny. We shall start with Nepos (*praef.* 1):

31 Nepos, *praef.*; *Pelop.* 1.1; Plu. *Alex.* 1; unfortunately, the beginning of Suetonius' *Caesars*, where a similar pronouncement may have been opportune, is lost.

> Non dubito fore plerosque, Attice, qui hoc genus scripturae leve et non satis dignum summorum virorum personis iudicent, cum relatum legent, quis musicam docuerit Epaminondam, aut in eius virtutibus commemorari, saltasse eum commode scienterque tibiis cantasse.

Nepos continues to dwell, in a similar vein, on the differences between the social conventions of Greece and Rome, writing as he does for the benefit of the *expertes litterarum Graecarum.* To this passage should be added one from the beginning of the *Life* of Pelopidas:

> Pelopidas Thebanus, magis historicis quam vulgo notus, cuius de virtutibus dubito quem ad modum exponam, quod vereor, si res explicare incipiam, non vitam eius enarrare, sed historiam videar scribere . . .

Were it not for repeated misunderstandings, there were no need to explain the rather simple Latin of Nepos. Of course he does not use such a phrase as *genus scripturae leve,* which thus cannot be taken as a description of the biographical genre[32]. *Hoc genus scripturae* refers to the literary work he is about to engage upon; and it may be judged by some as being *leve et non satis dignum* for the description of the persons of *summi viri.* Who the *summi viri* were would be easy to guess with a rudimentary knowledge of Roman values and attitudes; as things are, even this is not necessary, as the example of Epaminondas (and somewhat later) of Cimon demonstrates. Political biography is, in Roman terms, the biography of *summi viri;* only for those may it seem improper to play music or to dance – qualities that could have been hardly reprehensible in, say, lyric or dramatic poets. (At least Nepos seems to imply that you descend from the proper level if you describe the relaxations of great men.) That Nepos clearly differentiates between political and intellectual biography is self-evident; the implications for the history of biography will have to be discussed in a later part of the present investigation. On the other hand, political biography is defined as against history: if one does not take care, it is implied in the passage from the *Life* of Pelopidas, one can easily slip from the description of the life of a political personage into the writing of his deeds, of history. The obvious implication of the present pronouncement is that history is the *genus proximum* of political biography.

We also have the same implication, and a fairly good account of the differences between the two, in the first chapter of Plutarch's *Alexander* where the biographer provides an important enumeration of those

32 Contra E. Jenkinson, Nepos, An Introduction to Latin Biography, in: *Latin Biography*, ed. T.A. Dorey (London 1967), 5; ead., Genus Scripturae Leve: Cornelius Nepos and the Early History of Biography at Rome, *ANRW* I.3 (Berlin 1973), 703 ff.

components that are characteristic for biography as opposed to the subject matter of history[33].

> It is the life of Alexander the king, and of Caesar, who overthrew Pompey, that I am writing in this book, and the multitude of the deeds to be treated is so great that I shall make no other preface than to entreat my readers, in case I do not tell of all the famous actions of these men, nor even speak exhaustively at all in each particular case, but in epitome for the most part, not to complain. For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue and vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities. Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests. (transl. – B. Perrin)

No similar delineation existed to define the limits of intellectual biography, no *genus proximum* threatened the writer erring in his path. For the Ancients history was political history, its main characters and prime movers kings, statesmen and generals. Thus, it is very improbable that a writer should have had fears of slipping from the biography of poets or philosophers to the totally strange realm of history or some other conceivable literary genre. An interesting point: as we shall see, political biography rose relatively late to provide an alternative to history and had a development totally different from that of intellectual biography. History of philosophy or literature proper never came into being in antiquity, and series of Lives of philosophers and writers were the nearest equivalent. It is because of this state of affairs that, e.g., Diogenes Laertius' wretched composition is about the closest to a history of ancient philosophy that we possess. On the other hand, attempts at literary history, such as Cicero's *Brutus*, are very close to the construction of a biographical series.

If we accept that the closely related subject matter rendered history the *genus proximum* of political biography, we may go on and argue that the two genres were closely akin in their aims and attitudes. Much of ancient historiography was moralistic in its aims, a subject hardly in need of a new discussion. Neither is it a novelty to argue the point

33 Other important pronouncements of Plutarch on the subject of biography are *Cimon* 2.2 ff.; *Aem. Paul.* 1; *Pericl.* 1; *Nic.* 1; *Galba* 2 fin; cf. also *Cato min.* 37 fin; *Pomp.* 8.6; *Fa. Max.* 16 fin; *Artax.* 8.1; on historiography *glor. Ath.* 347 DE; *Hdt. malign.* 855 F; on the moral purpose of the biographies also *Arat.* 1; *Demetr.* 1; *Aem. Paul.* 5 fin.

for Plutarch's *Lives*[34], or, for that matter, for Nepos[35]. Suetonius, too, though not given to open moralising, by his very division of the acts and characteristics of Emperors into morally good and bad ones, must have been concerned with driving home a lesson on what was and what was not morally desirable in a Roman Emperor. Needless to say, the short Lives of *rhetores* and *grammatici* are totally devoid of any details of moral evaluation. Thus, it will hardly be felt that we are dealing with different literary genres when we compare pronouncements in, e.g., Livy's preface and in the introduction to Plutarch's *Lives* of Aemilius Paullus and Timoleon as to the writers' attitudes and aims in presenting the reader with the composition in question.

It will readily be seen that again a major difference between intellectual and political biography does present itself. It would hardly be expected that the approach of authors of the *Lives* of poets, philosophers and the like would be moralistic, designed to edify the public; in fact, such attitudes may be discerned only in such relatively late compositions as Philostratus' *Vita Apollonii* and Porphyrius' *Vita Plotini*, as well as in hagiography from Athanasius' *Vita Antonii* on.

No doubt this attitude can be explained by discussing the origins of intellectual biography; after all, it may be pointed out that modern attitudes do not preclude similar approaches to the biographies of men from widely different walks of life. But the important fact remains, that the impressive number of surviving ancient intellectual biographies as well as the numerous fragments of such works do not seem to indicate a moralistic purpose. The aim of intellectual biography seems to have been to supply information – sometimes scholarly, at other times no doubt of a pronouncedly gossipy and flippant nature. But this much should be clear: the *Life of Alexander* described the character of the man responsible for the famous deeds – and the acquaintance with many of these was taken for granted so that the deeds did not find their way into biography as they had been included in history. His character was presented to the reading public with the purpose of drawing the appropriate moral lesson from it. The *Life of Euripides*, on the other hand, took its departure from the dramatic output of the playwright and attempted (admittedly more often than not by having recourse to guesswork and conjecture) to link the plays to the character

34 See the passages quoted in the previous note and, among recent discussions, C.P. Jones, *op. cit.*, 103 ff.; Russell, *op. cit.*, 100 ff.; Wardman, *op. cit.*, 1 ff.

35 See, e.g., Nipperdey-Witte[12] 9; cf. also T.G. McCarty, The Content of Cornelius Nepos' *De Viris Illustribus*, *CW* 67 (1973/4), 386 ff.; L. Alfonsi, Discussioni su letteratura storiografica "inconnue," *Studi Urbinati* . . . , 39 ff. at 43 f.

of the man in a meaningful way. To put it at the crudest: according to ancient views, if you wanted to become a Euripides you had to master perfectly the rules of his craft; hatred of women in itself could not guarantee the ability to write tragedies that could vie with those of Euripides in the delineation of female character. On the other hand, if your goal was imitating Alexander it was his moral build and character that you had to contend with.

Moral build and character, rather than technical knowledge of military matters or political expertise, were responsible for the achievements of glorious generals and successful statesmen: it was these one had to imitate if one wished to emulate their deeds. Surprisingly, this attitude can be said to have been valid even for philosophers and teachers of ethics; if an example was pointed out in, say the manner of the death of a philosopher (such as Epicurus, for instance), it was in order to demonstrate his adherence to his own doctrines; even in such anecdotal episodes it is clear that the doctrine was the valid issue and point of departure as opposed to the moral qualities of men[36].

To return to political biography, its subject matter is not, by and large, different from that of history; it is in the choice and disposition of the material and the relative importance of its components that the two differ, as well as in narrative technique and form.

Next to subject matter, aims. To follow good Aristotelian practice these must form a major part in any definition of a literary genre. After all, tragedy is characterised even more than by its characters, plot and manner of delivery by the aims it pursues and the effect it achieves: *δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν*. Are we justified in speaking of the aims of biography in general or would it be more profitable to discuss intellectual and political biography separately? Where these different types of *Lives* written – and read – with the same purpose or with different aims in mind? Did one write – and read – a *Life* of Alexander with very much the same purpose he had with a *Life* of Euripides?

Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae. Leo, of course, was well aware of the importance of discussing the aims of literary genres, and accordingly distinguished between two main types of biography, 'Peripatetic', designed mainly to please, and 'Alexandrian', scholarly, with an eye to instructing the reader. It has been remarked earlier that this distinction can hardly serve a useful purpose in the present enquiry. Though Leo went some way towards acknowledging that one or

36 See Diog. Laer. 10.16 and the epigram quoted there (*AP* 7.106).

the other of these forms of biography was particularly suited to the description of different types of men, it seems that his priorities were wrong in not taking his departure rather from the types of men. To return to our analogy: it is the μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας of characters that are σπουδαῖοι that brings about, through pity and fear, the purgation of such emotions – our reaction to the fate of characters who are φαυλότεροι being inescapably quite different. It is only natural to assume that whatever aims writers of biography may have had in mind, these aims must have been determined by their chosen subject matter to a greater degree than by any theoretical adherence to rigidly defined literary forms.

Another characteristic that may be of some relevance to the discussion of political biography is that of size. Aristotle's insistence on μέγεθος as an important part of the definition of tragedy is not without its modern parallels, be it in the discussion of such modern literary forms as the novel versus the short story or in the more problematic concepts of the epos as against the epyllion[37]. Obviously there can be no hard-and-fast rules in this matter; on the other hand, convention as well as pragmatic considerations (such as, e.g., the necessity to have a set number of dramatic productions a day, and the wish to fill that day with the dramatic productions to a more or less foreseeable extent, the time a person may be expected to devote to the viewing of a movie) have brought about a measure of standardization in the size of many literary forms, both ancient and modern.

The consideration of size is to be connected with a theme that has been discussed above – the viewing of ancient biography as an autonomous form of literature, of literary works devoted in their entirety to the Life of a person, and not as a literary phenomenon in a variety of literary genres. 'The account of the life of a man from birth to death' is not a biography if it consists of the bare outlines only, any more than is a three-line epitaph. The pen-sketches of historical figures to be found in ancient historians, however admirable and influential

37 I have no wish to go into a complex subject not related to the matter of the present study nor to explain *obscurum per obscurius*; on the *epyllion*, see M.M. Crump, *The Epyllion from Theocritus to Ovid* (Oxford 1931); fundamental rejection of the term (whose provenance is nineteenth-century) in W. Allen, Jr., The Epyllion: A Chapter in the History of Literary Criticism, *TAPA* 71 (1940), 1 ff.; later correctives to Allen, see in L. Richardson, Jr., *Poetical Theory in Republican Rome. An Analytical Discussion of the Shorter Narrative Hexameter Poems Written in Latin during the First Century before Christ* (New Haven 1944); S. Koster, *Antike Epostheorien* (Palingenesia V, Wiesbaden 1970), 67 ff.; J. van Sickle, Epic and Bucolic (Theocritus Id. VII; Virgil, Ecl. I) *QUCC* 19 (1975), 45 ff., esp. 54.

some of them are and however important that influence on the subsequent tradition, must be denied the status of biography not only because they constitute part of a literary work belonging to a genre different from biography, but also, in most cases, on account of their brevity. Moreover, a certain length may be a not unimportant constituent of the fully developed art-form. In fact, it will be argued in a later part of this study that this factor should not be left out of consideration when discussing Nepos' *Lives*.

Though there are a number of reasons to account for the unique status of the *Life of Atticus* among Nepos' biographies (see below), the factor of length should also be taken into account. Moreover, even with an accomplished writer such as Plutarch it often seems that some of his most successful *Lives* from the literary point of view, e.g., the *Antony*[38], are also the longest. Of course, some of this may be laid at the door of the availability or otherwise of source material. There are the raisins that are necessary to render the cake tasty – in our case, those witty sayings, anecdotes and the like that are all important for biography. We must also consider the relative importance of the various heroes in a series: not only does Suetonius very properly accord much less space to the combined *Lives* of Galba, Otho and Vitellius (crammed into a single book) than to Caesar or Augustus, who have each a lengthy book devoted to him, but one may also consider the inordinate length of the *Life* of Herodes Atticus (and, a close second, of Polemo) in comparison with the other, lesser sophists in Philostratus. Is it meaningful to ask whether such distinctions exist also between different series? It is obvious that Suetonius commanded much more material for the *Lives* of Caesar or Augustus than for those of, say, Aurelius Opillus or Sevius Nicanor; can a difference of genre be construed out of this distinction? Can size be a relevant factor in determining the differences between the various biographical forms? It is just possible that such a theoretical distinction in an ancient writer can be detected in the famous passage from Jerome's preface to his *de viris illustribus* that will be discussed in the next chapter. Jerome promises to Dexter to do exactly what Suetonius did (quod ille ... fecit ... ego ... hoc faciam); thus he will describe in brief (breviter exponam) the ecclesiastical writers. On the present analysis it is understood that the analogy between the work of Suetonius and Jerome is perfect with the sole exception of the distinction that the one wrote about pagan, the other about Christian authors. If this is accepted, it

38 Cf. the admirable analysis of Russell, *op. cit.*, 134 ff.

follows that *breviter* describes the work of Suetonius as well as that of Jerome – and indeed the literary *Lives* of Suetonius were on a comparable scale to the *Lives* in Jerome's book. Now we may proceed to the next sentence, where Jerome invokes Suetonius' Hellenistic and Latin predecessors: Fecerunt quidem hoc idem, etc. The implication seems to be that for these writers, too, relative brevity was a distinguishing characteristic of their biographies.

It is obvious, as has been mentioned above, that we are dealing with a highly elastic term, and that such a distinction can easily be nullified when, e.g., the largest specimen of a 'small' species exceeds in size the smaller specimens of a 'large' species. However, exceptions are usually not difficult to account for: the length of Nepos' *Life* of his close friend Atticus is almost self-explanatory – the *Cato* may be more representative of the length of his literary *Lives*. (It may be observed in passing that the *Cato* was the abbreviated version of the volume length *Life* published earlier at the behest of Atticus: obviously Nepos could trim it down to whatever size he considered the most appropriate: it is a not altogether absurd inference that the size of this extant *Life* was determined by what was the most usual for the series, though it may be stressed again that there were certainly no theoretical guidelines in the matter.) Similar explanations are readily to be found for cases like Philostratus' *Herodes Atticus* and a few others. On the whole, one forms the impression that political biography in its fully developed form was as a rule a much lengthier literary genre than intellectual biography. Plutarch's *Parallel* Lives is divided into books of two Lives each – some of these books of relatively great length; Suetonius' *Caesares* fluctuates between a book for each of the first six Emperors and three Emperors to a book in the case of the Emperors of 69 and the Flavians. On the other hand, intellectual biography is much shorter, as can be seen in such series as Philostratus' Sophists or Diogenes Laertius' Philosophers. Other extant intellectual biographies usually conform to this pattern, the maximum size perhaps indicated with such works as Satyrus', where the three writers of tragedy, included in one book, may have set the upper limit of acceptable length[39], while other lost works may have been on a much smaller scale. The present contention concerning the relevance of length to the different types of biography is consonant with the view presented here about the history of biography as emerging in two distinct times and sets of circumstances. Surely political biography as here analysed had to be

39 Cf. below, Ch. II, n. 14.

of a certain length in its fully developed form in order to give the due weight to its subject matter. Like history, it had to treat its heroes on a scope more or less commensurate with their importance. In the event the fully developed political biography extended to a length midway between that of intellectual biography and the historical monograph. Thus, Plutarch very properly apologizes in the preface to the *Alexander-Caesar* about the choice of material and the exclusion of much that would have been included in History. Plutarch's half-book length βίος strongly contrasts with the extant Histories of Alexander of Curtius Rufus and Arrian, originally ten and seven books long, respectively, as well as with the Lost Histories[40] on the one hand, and with the great majority of extant intellectual biographies on the other hand. This point will be taken up again in the third chapter, where the length of the *Lives* of Nepos' Generals will serve as a minor indicator to their place in literary history as argued in the present study.

The foregoing discussion has attempted to demonstrate the possibility, indeed, the necessity, of according separate treatment to political biography. The following two chapters aim to justify such a procedure with discussions of the formative periods of the history of ancient political biography. Much of that justification would disappear were we to find that the two forms of biography enjoyed – as is usually believed to be the case – a common development. Conversely, a separate development – such as we shall attempt to demonstrate in the following – is almost in itself proof of different sets of characteristics. It is the history and development of ancient political biography that sets it definitely apart from the other branches of the biographical genre and rates it a separate discussion.

40 Unfortunately, we do not know the number of books of the most important historians of Alexander, such as Ptolemy, Aristobulos, Nearchus and Callisthenes, but it should be noted that Onesicritus composed at least four books, and probably much more (eight, if the parallel with the *Cyrupaedia* can be accepted; see below, Ch. II), Chares' work consisted of ten books at least, and Cleisthenes is quoted from the twelfth book.

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CORNELIUS NEPOS AND ANCIENT POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

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