I Modern Theories on Ancient Biography

I

The first fact we have to face in surveying ancient Greek and Latin biography is that our information about it is very uneven. We are especially ignorant about the period of its origins in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. and about the period of the most learned research in biography of the third and second centuries B.C. This means that the situation regarding ancient biography (leaving aside the Near East for the moment) is different from that regarding ancient political historiography. We possess some of the basic classics of the political historiography of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. —Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, though we have lost Hellanicus, Ephorus, and Theopompus. But we have none of the biographical and autobiographical literature of the fifth century and have to rely on Isocrates' *Euagoras* and Xenophon's *Agesilaus,* which describe themselves as encomia, and on a philosophic novel, Xenophon's *Cyropaedia,* for some aspects of biography in the fourth century. The loss of the original biographical writings of the third century B.C.—with the only exception of a fragment of Satyrus' life of Euripides recovered from an Oxyrhynchus papyrus in 1912—is matched by the almost total loss of the general historiography of the third century, including Hieronymus of Cardia, the historian of the successors of Alexander the Great, and Timaeus of Tauromenium, the historian of the West. But the fact that we

are reasonably well informed about the work of historians of the fourth century and that we can pick up the thread again with Polybius in the second century makes the loss of the general historiography of the third century less disastrous. There is no extant biography of the second century B.C. to perform the same service on the biographical side.

The first collection of biographies we possess is by Cornelius Nepos, a contemporary of Cicero and a writer in Latin. Next comes Nicolaus of Damascus; the fragments of his life of Augustus and of his autobiography are preserved coherently and authentically enough to represent, next to Satyrus, the earliest examples of Hellenistic biography and autobiography to have been directly transmitted to us. Nicolaus of Damascus is also the earliest writer known to have written in succession a universal history, a biography, and an autobiography. The activity of Hellenistic *érudits* in preparing biographies of poets, orators, philosophers, and so on, is known to us almost exclusively through later summaries, compilations, and scholia. All the monographs about kings which were common in the Hellenistic period are entirely lost, including the earliest histories of Alexander the Great and works on such promising subjects as "Lives of those who passed from philosophy to tyranny and despotic rule" by the third-century writer Hermippus.

Broadly speaking, the only period of ancient biography which we know from direct acquaintance with the original works is the period of the Roman Empire. The first names that occur to us in speaking of ancient biography—Plutarch, Suetonius, Diogenes Laertius, Philostratus, the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*—all belong to the Imperial age. Furthermore, it is clear that biography became far more important in the period after Constantine. Pagan philosophers and sophists and Christian saints and martyrs, the main subjects of late Roman biography, are suited even less than the heroes of the early Roman Empire to give a clear idea of Greek and Hellenistic biographies. There was of course considerable continuity in technique and content between Hellenistic and

late Roman biography. But late Roman biography reflects an age of conversion; and A. D. Nock has taught us to regard conversion as a new feature of the Christian centuries.

II

Modern scholars have tried in various ways to overcome the paucity of information about the early history of biography. Source criticism as exemplified by Wilamowitz's *Antigonos von Karystos* has undoubtedly contributed to the recognition of Hellenistic materials in later compilations. Following Wilamowitz, his pupil and rival Eduard Schwartz produced a model analysis of the sources of Diogenes Laertius in his article in Pauly–Wissowa. But neither Wilamowitz nor Schwartz ever attempted to give a general characterization of Hellenistic biography or to write a history of its antecedents. It was Friedrich Leo who tried to define the basic forms of Hellenistic biography, whereas Ivo Bruns studied the development of the characterization of individuals in pre-Hellenistic literature, and G. Misch attempted a general history of Greek and Roman autobiography. More recently A. Dihle has tried to trace the origins of Greek biography to Socrates and the Socratics. Leo, Bruns, and Misch are three great names, and their works on ancient historical literature are among the great achievements of German scholarship of the Wilamowitz era. I for one shall never forget the impression their works made on me when I first read them as an undergraduate forty years ago. The work by Dihle, though of a different class and belonging to a different age, still has its uses. But it is urgent to re-examine the very basis on which these scholars have erected their constructions. I think the best way to do this is to formulate independently the most obvious questions suggested by the extant evidence on biography and to see to what extent these questions differ from those asked by Bruns, Misch, Leo, and Dihle.

III

An account of the life of a man from birth to death is what I call biography. This is not a very profound definition, but it has the advantage of excluding any discussion of how biography should be written. It is not for a historian of biography to decide what biography should be, though he may have his preferences. It may be true, as William Roscoe Thayer suggested in *The Art of Biography* (1920), that the "constant direction in the evolution of biography has been from the outward to the inward," but this is a hypothesis which needs verification. What matters more to our purpose is that our definition leaves us free to study the prehistory of biography, the formative elements of this new literary genre. It may be objected that, fortunately or unfortunately, nobody has ever succeeded in giving, or perhaps even attempted, a complete account of what one man did during his lifetime. But this seems to be the paradoxical character of biography: it must always give *partem pro toto*; it must always achieve completeness by selectiveness. I must add that it seems very doubtful to me whether incompleteness is, as some would maintain, characteristic of all historical accounts, biographical or otherwise. I believe I can formulate historical themes in which the historian has no need to be selective in his account of the relevant facts and may even have the obligation of not being selective. A piece of historical research intended to establish what books Dante wrote must and can be exhaustive within its terms of reference. But since any biography is inevitably selective we cannot separate biography from autobiography which is the account of a life written by the man who is living it: unless you believe in spiritualism or in prophecy, autobiographies can never include the whole life from birth to death. But autobiographies can, like ordinary biographies, be so directed as to represent a whole life. In the classical world we must also bear in mind that Greeks and Romans wrote about gods and heroes who were born but did

not die, or at least died a death which was only the beginning of a new period of activity. We may ultimately choose to leave aside lives of gods and heroes in so far as they are lives of non-existing beings. But we cannot exclude a priori that biographies of gods and heroes preceded and influenced the biographies of men.

The first question is the date of the most ancient Greek biographies and autobiographies. This will have to be answered in detail later. But at this stage we can suggest that attempts at biographical writing were made in the fifth century B.C.

Professor H. Homeyer in a very valuable paper in *Philologus* 1962 has shown that Herodotus includes several biographies. Her contention that the Greeks knew biography in the fifth century can be supported by other data.

This raises our second question. It is obviously no mere coincidence that biography came into being at approximately the same time as general historiography. On the other hand, biography was never considered as history in the classical world. The relationship between history and biography varied in different periods. We have to account both for their separation and for their changing relations. This, incidentally, may lead to a more rigorous interpretation of Aristotle's statement that "a particular fact" is what Alcibiades did or what was done to him (*Poetics* 9).

Thirdly, though we hear of biographies, and perhaps of autobiographies, as early as the fifth century B.C., biography became a precise notion and got an appropriate word only in the Hellenistic age. The word is *bios*—not *biographia,* which first appears in fragments of Damascius' *Life of Isidorus* (end of the fifth century A.D.) preserved by Photius (ninth century) in his *Bibliotheca* 181 and 242. We must therefore account for the Hellenistic clarification of the notion of biography. This includes a study of the relation between *bios* and *encomium* in Hellenistic theory and practice.

Fourthly, we must not assume a priori that *bios* invariably meant the description of an individual life as such, of a man

in so far as he differs from all other men. The notion of personality is certainly found in modern European languages, but I doubt whether there is an adequate translation of it into ancient Greek. To stick to elementary facts, it gives us something to think about that Hellenistic and Roman biographers often wrote series of biographies of men of the same type—generals, philosophers, demagogues—and therefore seem to have cared for the type rather than for the individual.

Fifthly, the Greeks distinguished between history and erudition, between what they called *historia* and what they called less clearly and less unequivocally *archaeologia* or *philologia* and the Romans translated as *antiquitates*. The distinction was by no means sharp and self-evident, but it did exist, and I was able to trace its development in an old lecture of mine at the Warburg Institute.[1] The basic distinction between the two subjects was that history dealt mainly with political and military events and was written in a chronological order, whereas erudition dealt with almost anything else —from personal names to religious ceremonies—and preferred systematic survey to chronological order. It follows that it is not enough to try to define the relations between history and biography in the Greek and Roman sense of the words. We have also to ask what is the relation between biography and erudition. The question is worth asking. *Bios* was not a word reserved for the life of an individual man. It was also used for the life of a country. In Hellenistic and Roman times there existed works, such as *βίος Ἑλλάδος* (life of Greece), *vita populi romani* (life of the Roman people), of an indisputably antiquarian character. Furthermore, we know that biography developed in the Hellenistic age in conjunction with philological commentaries and surveys, such as the Callimachean *pinakes*: here we are faced by a close connection between biography and philology. But the most important fact to be examined is that ancient biographies did not necessarily follow a chronological order; nor is chronological order

[1] Now in my *Studies in Historiography* (1966) 1–35.

a necessary feature even of modern biographies. There is a characteristic type of ancient biography which Leo has taught us to identify with Suetonius; prima facie it presents formal resemblances to the systematic structure of erudite works.

Sixthly and finally, we have to face again the uncertainties and ambiguities of the relationship between biography and autobiography. If biography is an ancient Greek word, though of late antiquity, autobiography is not a Greek word but a modern invention. According to the *O.E.D.* it first appeared in English in 1809 with Robert Southey. The facts known to me seem to point to a more interesting origin. In 1796 Isaac D'Israeli devoted a chapter of his *Miscellanies or Literary Recreations* to "Some observations on diaries, self-biography and self-characters" (pages 95–110). The reviewer of D'Israeli's book in the *Monthly Review* 24 (1797) 375 noticed the word *self-biography* and commented: "We are doubtful whether the latter word be legitimate . . . yet *auto-biography* would have seemed pedantic." The anonymous writer in the *Monthly Review* seems to have invented the word *autobiography*. Though pedantic it proved to be preferable to *self-biography*, which D'Israeli had favoured. The *Wörterbuch* by the Brothers Grimm did not register this word in German in 1853. The *Grand Dictionnaire Universel Larousse* declared in 1866 that "ce mot, quoique d'origine grecque, est de fabrique anglaise." The nearest approximation in Ancient Greek is *περὶ τοῦ ἰδίου βίου καὶ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ἀγωγῆς*, which is the title of the autobiography of Nicolaus of Damascus in the *Suda*. The title is undoubtedly authentic because it corresponds to the title *De vita sua* which some Romans gave to their own memoirs in the Republican period (for instance, M. Aemilius Scaurus, consul 115, P. Rutilius). It shows that at least in the late Hellenistic period and in the early Roman Empire an autobiographical work belonged to the category of *bioi, vitae*—in other words it was treated as biography.

But the letters, speeches, commentaries (*ὑπομνήματα*, *commentarii*), and accounts of journeys performed functions which can only be called autobiographical. We shall try to go

into these works which certainly preceded the appearance of full-fledged autobiographies. Wilamowitz and Leo denied that the Greeks knew autobiography. Leo wrote: "In dieser Neigung des griechischen Geistes zum Typischen liegt der Grund, warum die Griechen keine Autobiographie besassen."[2] I wonder whether Leo could have written in this way if he had taken into account the extensive Greek autobiographical material outside the formal *bios*. One important question connected with the relations between biography and autobiography is whether an ancient writer was expected to be more objective, more careful in his facts, less inclined to praise and blame, when he wrote about somebody else's life than when he wrote about himself. Here again we must beware of modern ways of thinking. Autobiography is now the most subjective kind of self-expression. We expect confessions, rather than factual information, in autobiographies, whereas we expect factual information rather than subjective effusions in biography. The most elementary facts about ancient biographical and autobiographical writing are a warning that this may not have been so in Greece and Rome. There was a close relation, if nothing more, between *bios* and *encomium*. On the other hand autobiographical commentaries were often written for the direct purpose of being used as raw materials by historians. Whereas biographers were free to be encomiastic, autobiographers seem to have been bound to be factual—at least in certain cases.

Thus six essential problems have emerged: (1) What is the date of the most ancient Greek biographies and autobiographies? (2) What was the relation between history and biography in the classical world? (3) How did the notion of *bios* become formalized in the Hellenistic age? (4) How did autobiography develop in relation to biography? (5) What was the relation between the notion of an individual *bios* and the notion of a collective *bios*? (6) Within what limits did biography belong to erudition rather than to history? Other

[2] *Geschichte der röm. Literatur* I (1913) 342.

problems remained in the background but can now easily be added. For instance: What was the particular contribution, if any, of the Romans to the development of classical biography and autobiography? Or again (though this theme will not even be alluded to in the following lectures): Exactly what changed in biography and autobiography when the Christians took over?

These questions only partially coincide with those formulated by Bruns, Leo, Misch, and Dihle. I shall examine Dihle after Bruns and Leo after Misch for reasons which will become immediately apparent. Ivo Bruns, as is well known, published *Das literarische Porträt der Griechen im fünften und vierten Jahrhundert vor Christi Geburt* in 1896 and supplemented it with the shorter essay *Die Persönlichkeit in der Geschichtsschreibung der Alten* in 1898. The purpose of the first volume, to put it very simply, was to discover how Attic writers described and appreciated individuals. In the second book, perhaps even more significant than the first, Bruns developed the thesis that there are historians like Thucydides and Livy who characterize an individual indirectly, whereas there are others, such as Xenophon in the *Anabasis* and Polybius, who express their opinions about historical personalities by direct characterization and judgements. While Livy never said what he thought about Scipio Africanus but grouped the facts so as to convey an impression, Polybius was direct in his judgement of Scipio. Though Bruns admitted exceptions in Livy (for instance, in the famous direct characterization of Cato in book 39), he concluded that annalistic writers, such as Thucydides and Livy, preferred indirect characterization, whereas writers of monographs, biographies, and autobiographies adopted the direct method. Bruns had been impressed by Burckhardt and wanted to see whether the ancient world knew and appreciated the individual, as the Renaissance, according to Burckhardt, had done. The question, though not out of place, was too vague in one direction and too precise in another. It was too vague because Bruns never tackled the problem of the origins of either biography or autobiography, though they were well within his chronological limits. Given the importance which Burckhardt attributed to biography and autobiography in the Renaissance discovery of man, this is surprising. From another point of view, the question Bruns asked was too precise. As I have already hinted, we have no reason to believe that "literarisches Porträt," "Individualität," "Persönlichkeit," and so forth, are terms which can be transferred to the Greek and Roman world without a great deal of explaining—even of explaining away.

I put Dihle next to Bruns because I feel that something of Bruns's attitude towards the problem of Greek individualism has passed into Dihle's with a touch of Gundolf in addition. Dihle assumed that a great personality was needed to inspire the invention of biography and thought he had found this personality in Socrates. The Socratics collected the traits of Socrates' personality, and finally the Peripatos formalized biography. Now our evidence, as we shall see later, seems to point to the conclusion that biography and autobiography existed one hundred years before Socrates' death. Nor do we know that any Socratic, Aristotle included, ever wrote the life of Socrates. The extant apologies by Plato and Xenophon and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* can certainly not be overlooked in a history of biography. But they are not full biographies, and there were apologies and probably recollections by writers who lived earlier than Socrates or were remote from the Socratic schools. Dihle was certainly right in emphasizing the importance of the Socratic schools in the development of biography and autobiography. My own researches will support his contention. But neither did Socrates inspire the invention of biography, nor were the Socratics responsible for the most momentous developments in the art of biography. Concern with modern presuppositions is even more obvious in Misch's *Geschichte der Autobiographie*, the first volume of which appeared in 1907 and was immediately greeted by Wilamowitz as a masterpiece.[3] Misch revised and

[3] It is interesting to compare Wilamowitz' review in *Internat. Wochenschrift für Wissenschaft* 1 (1907) 1105–1114 with F. Jacoby's review in *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 30 (1909) 1093 and 1157. Later W. Jaeger commented on Misch's second version in *Speculum* 28 (1953) 405–410, reprinted in *Scripta Minora* II (1960) 455–462.

largely rewrote this book when he was a refugee in England during the Second World War, but we must go back to the first edition for the true flavour of the ideas which inspired him. Misch was the pupil and son-in-law of W. Dilthey and his definition of autobiography as a "history of human self-awareness"[4] is clearly influenced by Dilthey. Consequently Misch did not confine himself to what we would call autobiographical works: he tried even less to decide whether we are entitled to draw a line between true autobiographies, memoirs of one's own times, diaries, etc. He examined any piece of poetry and prose which contained personal elements, whatever their nature and whatever their purpose. He included Cicero's and Seneca's letters and gave pride of place to Marcus Aurelius' εἰς ἑαυτόν, though he knew that the latter are not autobiographical except in the first book and belong to the literary genre of the *soliloquia*. The result is something of considerable interest in so far as it clarifies what the ancients felt about themselves, but is confusing as a history of autobiography. Caesar's *Commentarii* are autobiographical (at least to a large extent), but hardly a document of self-awareness. Flavius Josephus' autobiography, the oldest we possess in its original form, is plainly written in self-defense. The first work which combines autobiographical information and self-awareness perfectly is of course St. Augustine's *Confessions*. But this means that Misch's *History of Ancient Autobiography*, as history of self-awareness, ends where it should begin.

F. Leo's *Die griechisch-römische Biographie nach ihrer literarischen Form* (1901) is a less exciting, but perhaps more lasting, performance. Leo started from Suetonius and Plutarch and made it clear that they represent two different types of biography. The Suetonian type is the combination of a tale in chronological order with the systematic characterization of an individual and of his achievements. As such it is naturally well suited to lives of writers. The Plutarchean type

[4] *History of Autobiography* I (1950) 8.

is a straightforward chronological account of events and as such is well suited to tell the life of a general or of a politician. It was Leo's opinion that the Plutarchean type of biography was invented by early Peripatetics to tell the story of statesmen, whereas the Suetonian type was introduced by Alexandrian grammarians under the influence of Aristotelian teaching. It was first used to write the lives of artists and writers. Again according to Leo, Suetonius, who was primarily a grammarian, used this type to write lives not only of literary men but also of Roman emperors.

Criticism has grown against Leo's reconstruction of the history of biography. In 1927 W. Uxkull-Gyllenband made a rather weak attempt to prove that the Plutarchean type of biography had been inspired not by Aristotle, but by Panaetius and Posidonius.[5] Neither Panaetius nor Posidonius is known to have written biographies, though Panaetius discussed biographical details within the context of his great book on philosophic sects. In 1931 A. Weizsäcker[6] and in 1951 W. Steidle[7] tried to deny or to reduce the importance of Leo's analysis of the two basic biographical forms. Weizsäcker observed that even the Plutarchean type was not entirely organized in chronological order—which is true—and concluded that therefore it is not essentially different from the Suetonian type—which does not follow. Steidle, in a more complex analysis of certain features of Suetonius' biographies, tried to indicate what is peculiarly Roman in them and dismissed as of secondary importance or irrelevant the formal features which Leo had considered significant. When Steidle pointed out that Suetonius judges Roman emperors according to Roman values, he was of course right, though perhaps not surprisingly so. But he was not justified in concluding that Suetonius' *Caesars* are less far removed from ordinary political historiography than Plutarch's heroes. What remains true in Leo's classification is the demonstration

[5] *Plutarch und die griechische Biographie.*
[6] *Untersuchungen über Plutarchs biographische Technik.*
[7] *Sueton und die antike Biographie.*

that Suetonius was under the influence of an antiquarian approach to biography, whereas Plutarch was nearer to political historiography. Other critics of Leo, such as N. I. Barbu,[8] have rather perversely emphasized Plutarch's right to be considered a historian—which is not what Plutarch claimed to be.

The real question raised by Leo's book is whether we are right in placing on the school of Aristotle the burden of having invented biography. Leo was of course familiar with most of the evidence which would point to an earlier date for some Greek biographies, but he was somehow fascinated by the obscurity which surrounds the earliest generations of the Peripatetic school. There are enough indications that the early Peripatetics collected biographical material, wrote definite biographies, and generally stimulated what we call Alexandrian scholarship. But anyone who reads Leo's chapters on the Peripatos carefully will have to admit that Leo sees Aristotle as an ancient Mommsen urging his pupils to do what he had no time to do himself and creating the conditions for new branches of learning to develop. This says much for the vitality of the German academic ideal from Leibniz through Humboldt and Niebuhr to Mommsen and his pupils, of whom Leo liked to consider himself one. *Organisation der wissenschaftlichen Arbeit* is the title of a famous paper by Hermann Usener on the Academy and the Peripatos (1884) with which Leo was well acquainted.[9] "So ist die griechische Wissenschaft geschaffen worden, das Werk, wie wir nun sehen, von zwei Generationen, genau genommen von zwei Männern, Platon und Aristoteles, das Ergebnis einer wunderbaren Organisation der geistigen Arbeit" ("Thus Greek science was created, the work, as we now see, of two generations, more precisely of two men, Plato and Aristotle, the result of a wonderful organization of intellectual work"). The

[8] *Les procédés de la peinture des caractères et la vérité historique dans les biographies de Plutarque*, 1934.

[9] *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 2nd ed., Leipzig-Berlin 1914, 67–102 = *Preussische Jahrbücher* 53 (1884) 1–25.

idea that biography and autobiography might have been born among scatterbrained Ionian sailors or among dubious dilettanti and sophists was not likely to appeal to the great men who, quite rightly, saw themselves as the continuators of the Aristotelian tradition in learning.

Burckhardt, Dilthey, Stefan George, Mommsen (or rather Mommsen's vision of an ideal Academy) have so far conditioned research on Greek biography. Bruns was inspired by Burckhardt, Misch by Dilthey, Dihle by Stefan George, Leo by Usener and Mommsen.

It becomes clear, therefore, that the question of chronology is of paramount importance in the evaluation of the history of ancient biography. Duane Reed Stuart was perhaps aware of this point when he gave his Sather Lectures, *Epochs of Greek and Roman Biography* (1928). But his was only a half-hearted attempt to seek the origins of Greek biography in the fifth century B.C. As I have said above, we owe to Professor Homeyer a far more precise analysis of some of the evidence involved.[10]

I think I can add a few other facts to those collected by Professor Homeyer. But I should like above all to try to direct attention to the complex origin of Greek historical research in the fifth century as exemplified by the birth of biography. Curiosity was a far more powerful motive in determining the oldest form of historical research than modern scholars are prepared to admit. Herodotus would have nodded his assent to Catherine Drinker Bowen's dictum: "History is in its essence exciting."[11] In 1934 Mark Longaker observed acutely, "The present day reader most often goes to biography because he is interested in himself."[12] This does not necessarily apply to ancient readers. I suspect that at first the Greek reader did not go to biography because he was interested in himself. He wanted to know about heroes, poets, unusual men, such as kings and tyrants. He liked

[10] *Philologus* 106 (1962) 75–85.

[11] *The Writing of Biography* (1950) 3.

[12] *Contemporary Biography*, 11.

biographies just as much as he liked foreign lands. Later, however, there were also in Greece readers who took to biography as a mirror of human nature. Biography did not necessarily become more concerned with the things of the spirit, but it became more ambitious.

II Fifth-Century Biographies and Autobiographies?

I

The question of what we may properly regard as the antecedents of fully developed biography and autobiography of the Hellenistic period is one that does not admit of a clear-cut answer. Any account in verse or prose that tells us something about an individual can be taken as preparatory to biography; and any statement about onself, whether in poetry or in prose, can be regarded as autobiographical. Looked at from this angle, the whole of the surviving epic and lyric poetry of the Greeks is antecedent either to biography or to autobiography.[1] But it seems reasonable to restrict the search for the antecedents of biography to works or sections of works whose explicit purpose is to give some account of an individual in isolation (instead of treating him as one of the many actors in a historical event). Similarly, I shall look for the antecedents of autobiography among accounts, however partial, of the writer's past life rather than among expressions of his present state of mind. In other words I incline to take anecdotes, collections of sayings, single or collected letters, and apologetic speeches as the truest antecedents of either biography or autobiography.

[1] The existence of specifically autobiographic poems is doubtful. Xenophanes frag. 18 Diehl^2 = 22 Diels^6 may be the beginning of such an autobiography (H. Fränkel, *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums* [2nd ed. 1962] 372). Yet cf. M. Untersteiner, *Senofane* (1955) 134.

The Development of Greek Biography

EXPANDED EDITION

Arnaldo Momigliano

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England 1993