The Development of Greek Biography

ABBREVIATIONS

FGrHist	*Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, ed. F. Jacoby
IG	*Inscriptiones Graecae*
OGIS	*Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae*
POxy	*Oxyrhynchus Papyri*
RE	*Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. A. Pauly, G. Wissowa, et al.
RhM	*Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*
SGDI	*Sammlung der griechischen Dialekt-Inschriften*, ed. H. Collitz et al.

Introduction: The Ambiguous State of Biography

When I was young, scholars wrote history and gentlemen wrote biography. But were they gentlemen? Scholars were beginning to wonder. They were increasingly suspicious of their neighbours, the biographers. The biographers were no longer keeping in their place. They claimed to be endowed with special intuitions of human motives; they even claimed to be the real historians. The old and honoured distinction between history and biography—which Polybius (10.24) had proclaimed, Plutarch (*Alexander* 1.2) had recognized, and Eduard Meyer had reconfirmed as late as 1902—was apparently being denied by the boisterous international clan to which Emil Ludwig, André Maurois, and Lytton Strachey most conspicuously belonged. Dark forces loomed behind them. Did not Virginia Woolf suspect that human nature had changed in about December 1910? Scholars had not noticed the change, but biographers had seized upon it. Freud and Jung were opposing the subconscious motives of sex and death and the ancestral archetypes to the interpretation of history in terms of productive forces and cultural environment. The pupils of Stefan George despised progress and crowds and soon realized that biography rather than poetry was the natural medium of expression for their beliefs. In 1920 Friedrich Gundolf wrote the life of George himself, "der Gesamtmensch," along with Goethe and Napoleon a true ancient character—quite unlike Mommsen and Wilamowitz, "eingefleischte moderne Protestanten," "inveterate modern Protestants."

To tell the truth, the Hellenistic distinction between history and biography had been much less generally accepted than the example of Eduard Meyer seemed to show. Meyer's blunt statement, "aber eine eigentlich historische Tätigkeit ist sie [Biographie] nicht,"[1] was an exception even for its own time. In the leading handbooks on historical method which have been written since the sixteenth century, biography is normally regarded as one of the legitimate forms of historical writing. I shall give only one example for each century. Jean Bodin in his *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (1566) distinguished between the history of one man and that of a whole nation; he argued from Plutarch just as much as from Livy. A century later Agostino Mascardi in *Dell'arte historica* (1636) included "Vite" among the various divisions of history, the others being "Effemeridi," "Annali," "Cronache," "Commentari." In the eighteenth century l'Abbé de Mably accepted Plutarch as the model "historien des moeurs."[2]

In these three centuries the Hellenistic distinction between history and biography had been replaced by a rather uncontroversial recognition of biography as a type of history. No wonder that in the nineteenth century this seemed to be too simple a solution. When universal history was interpreted as the development of ideas, or of forms of production, what could the account of an individual life mean? Even a sensible and experienced historian like Johann Gustav Droysen found it difficult to rescue biography. In a remarkable paragraph of his lectures on *Historik* he made a distinction between men about whom one may write a biography and men about whom one may not. It would be mad, he contended, to try to write the biography of Caesar or of Frederick the Great: they belong to history. But Alcibiades, Cesare Borgia, Mirabeau—"das sind durch und durch biographische Figuren."[3] In other words, the adventurer, the failure, the marginal figure, were

[1] *Kleine Schriften* (1910) 66.
[2] *De la manière d'écrire l'histoire* (ed. 1784) 10.
[3] *Historik* (ed. 1937) 292.

the subjects for biography. J. Burckhardt would have disagreed: the discovery of biography and autobiography was for him an essential part of the discovery of man in the Italian Renaissance. But the distrust of biographers as expressed in Professor Bernheim's *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* was more typical of prevailing opinion.

If the historians were so uncertain about what to leave to biographers, they could not complain if biographers claimed more and more from history. The biographers were backed by Burckhardt, by Nietzsche, by Freud, by Stefan George; they claimed to be supported by Athens and Rome, and at least had Bloomsbury behind them. Bertrand Russell was heard to laugh while reading *Eminent Victorians* in His Majesty's gaol, where he was confined as a pacifist writer in 1918. Mussolini arranged to have Emil Ludwig as his Eckermann. The previous hagiography by his lover Margherita Sarfatti was no longer enough for him. When Giovanni Papini became a convert, he announced his conversion to the world in a life of Christ written in the Emil Ludwig style. German professors collectively protested in emotional pages of the *Historische Zeitschrift* against what they called "Historische Belletristik." A relative of Theodor Mommsen wrote a discourse against Emil Ludwig. Robin Collingwood, who was very sensitive to anything Bloomsbury thought and said, reacted by reiterating Eduard Meyer's condemnation of all biography: "Of everything other than thought, there can be no history. Thus a biography, for example, however much history it contains, is constructed on principles that are not only non-historical but anti-historical."[4] Benedetto Croce more calmly reminded his readers that "writers such as Ludwig are the Guido da Veronas of historiography,"[5] Guido da Verona being a half-sentimental, half-pornographic minor novelist of the 'twenties. But Croce's theoretical position was less clear than his joke assumed. Though a keen writer of biographies himself, he had put forward many ideas

[4] *The Idea of History*, 304.
[5] *Storia della storiografia italiana nel sec. XIX* II, 3rd ed., 282.

that were bound to shake any faith in the possibility of biography. In literary criticism—witness his books on Dante and Shakespeare—he had made a sharp distinction between the biographical data and the artistic personality of a writer: the former were irrelevant to the latter. In general history he had emphasized that events, not intentions, were what counted. More radically he had denied that individuals exist: what exists, according to him, is the Universal Spirit. If Croce had been consistent, he would have denied biography any right to exist, as Collingwood had done.

As it happens, I belong to a family which was given to biographical writing in the early part of this century. The degree of sophistication and of scholarly responsibility of these biographies was high. Felice Momigliano's many biographical essays on figures of the Italian Risorgimento never amounted to full-scale biographies, but at least one of them, the psychological comparison between Mazzini and Cattaneo, was a pioneer work when it appeared in 1901. Felice Momigliano was incidentally also a biographer of Tolstoi and a major intellectual influence on his friend Luigi Pirandello. Attilio Momigliano's monograph on Manzoni, which appeared in two parts in 1915 and 1919, has of course become a classic of Italian literary criticism. The little book on Crispi by another member of my family, A. C. Jemolo, revealed an uncommon sensitiveness to psychological complexities and moral issues. The use as early as 1922 of such psychological methods in the study of one of the most controversial Italian politicians was bold and disturbing.

Felice Momigliano died in 1924, too early to be affected by the new situation. Attilio Momigliano and Arturo Carlo Jemolo stopped writing biographical works. What was a major international crisis in the writing of history became a domestic crisis in my family circle. Eucardio Momigliano, a lawyer whose successful political career had been interrupted by Fascism, published books which seemed to be dangerously inspired by Maurois and Ludwig. They were translated into five or six foreign languages and are still being reprinted now

after forty years: they have certainly proved their right to exist. But they seemed extremely embarrassing at the time—almost a betrayal of family standards.

This, perhaps, can explain my own attitude towards biographical work in my early years. Though extremely interested in the study of personality, I was anxious to avoid mere biographical detail in my youthful monographs on Claudius and Philip of Macedon. Political and cultural problems, not individuals, were my business then. In those distant days I did make a keen study of ancient biography too. As early as 1928 I studied the only surviving biographer of the Hellenistic period, Satyrus, and reviewed D. R. Stuart's *Epochs of Greek and Roman Biography*. A little later I wrote the articles on Plutarch and Suetonius for the Italian Encyclopaedia. But soon I turned away from ancient biography. I must recognize in retrospect that for thirty-five years, if not longer, I seem to have tried hard to avoid being enmeshed in the serious and diverse questions that surround ancient biography.

If now, in my old age, I come back to ancient biography, it is not so much in repentance as in the realization that what in my youth was the most difficult branch of history is now the easiest. Biography has never been so popular, so respected, so uncontroversial, among scholars as it is now. Even the palmy days of the eighteenth century, when Plutarch was the master, are nothing in comparison with the present popularity of biography among historians in general and ancient historians in particular. This unanimity extends to Marxist historians. Who would have expected to see Plutarch becoming the darling of the true Marxist–Leninist historian? Yet S. S. Averincev and other Russian scholars have been writing not only competently, but enthusiastically, about Plutarch in the *Vestnik Drevnej Istorii* and elsewhere in recent years.

There are several reasons for the new popularity of biography. It is partly due to the diversification of modern biography into various types which satisfy different needs. The traditional cultural historian can still derive infinite pleasure from masterpieces of the old type such as Werner

Kaegi's monumental biography of Burckhardt. The psychoanalyst has of course his Erikson, and the ex-Marxist can turn to the theory, if not to the practice, of Roy Pascal. Biography by the thousand—what we ancient historians call prosopography and the modern historians, at least in England, call "namierization of history"—provides the social historians with new material. What is perhaps more important is the negative fact that full-blooded social history is becoming more and more intractable owing to its increasing refinements and complications. Anyone who follows with admiration the activities of the Sixième Section of the École des Hautes Études wonders whether such a microscopic analysis of social developments can be pursued indefinitely. Will the historians ever be able to number the innumerable facets of life? In this situation of uncertainty, a biography at least seems to represent something circumscribed. Whatever objection we ancient historians may have against the prosopographical approach to Roman politics, at least it does provide firm data: careers and family connections are facts. Biography has acquired an ambiguous role in historical research: it may be a tool of social research or it may be an escape from social research.

Nobody nowadays is likely to doubt that biography is some kind of history. We may well turn back to the inventors of biography, the ancient Greeks, to ask why they never recognized that biography is history. We may also ask some other questions which spring directly from the new situation of biography in contemporary historiography. We may ask what was the position of autobiography in relation to biography in the ancient world: the same question exists for twentieth-century historiography. We may ask what was the part of philosophy in shaping the forms of ancient biography: the same question of course exists for modern biography, as Wilhelm Dilthey was the first to explain.

The new privileged position of biography in contemporary historical studies is in itself a paradox which invites questions —and doubts. We can extend our questions and clarify our

doubts if we study the history of biography in its development and in its changing relations to historiography. In these lectures I can offer only a few facts and a few suggestions concerning the origins of the imposing phenomenon of biography. I shall at least try not to avoid difficulties and not to conceal ignorance, whether it is my personal ignorance or lack of evidence.

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