1977, United States	W. Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (Pulitzer Prize); First Edgar Allan Poe Critical/Biographical Award to the *Encyclopedia of Mystery and Detection*
1978– , United States	*Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* (Biographical Research Center, University of Hawaii); *Dictionary of Literary Biography*
1979, 1979, 1994; United States	Frederick R. Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives*; *Franz Kafka, Representative Man*; Editor, *Biography and Source Studies*
1979–1982 United States	*American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present*, 4 vols.
1980, United States	Jean Strouse, *Alice James: A Biography*
1981, United States	First International Symposium on Biography, Biographical Research Center, University of Hawaii
1986–1987, United States	Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 2 vols., *Volume 1 1902–1941, I, Too, Sing America* (1986); *Volume 2 1941–1967, I Dream a World (1988)*
1990– , United States	*Biography* series on Arts & Entertainment Network (profiles including Josephine Baker, Princess Diana, Amelia Earhart, Alfred Hitchcock, Muhammed Ali)
1994, United States	Joan Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (Pulitzer Prize)
1996, United States	New York University Master of Arts concentration in Literary Biography

Chapter 1

BIOGRAPHY: AN OVERVIEW OF THE GENRE

The words *biography* and *biographer* in English and their relate forms in modern European languages, from the Greek roo *bios*, life, and *graphein*, to write, do not appear until the mid-se enteenth century.[1] The writing of lives, however, and th impulses and aims that have inspired such writing date back se eral thousand years. The twin urges for immediate fame and sul sequent immortality inspired the earliest records of powerfu people's lives. Commemorative writings aimed to reach beyon if not entirely to circumvent, the finitude of human life, whi their subjects, materials, and audiences served simultaneously a constant reminders of the flux and mutability inspiring biogr phy's memorializing function.

In ancient Egypt the formulaic accounts of Pharaohs' liv praised the continuity of dynastic power. Although typical written in the first person, these pronouncements are publi general testimonials, not personal utterances. This practice co tinued in Babylonia and later in Assyria, where it took the for of chronicles, introducing temporality into the genre and diver ing from such earlier atemporal or transtemporal formulas a

"I am the king, I am the lord, I am the exalted, the great, the strong, I am famous, I am the prince, I am the noble, the powerful in war, I am a lion, I am a hero of youthful strength."[2] However much modern readers may wish to flatter themselves that biography has progressed in subtlety of technique, variety of forms, and self-awareness about its aims, methods, and responsibilities since the appearance of these ancient documents, it would be a mistake not to recognize that the primary urges to celebrate, commemorate, and immortalize, the impulse of life against death, have continued to be among the chief motives for writing lives.

Classical Greece and Rome developed flourishing biographical traditions. Portraits of eminent statesmen and generals appeared in the historical writings of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and Polybius in Greece and in work of the Roman historians, Livy, Tacitus, and Dio Cassius. The first century B.C.E. Chinese Grand Historian, Szuma Chien, composed *Records of the Historian* (104–91 B.C.E.), a series of biographies narrating an official history. Szuma Chien's portraits introduced a new form of highly realistic historical writing in China. The biographer broke with formulaic utterances, used vernacular language, and interwove anecdote, conversation, and illustrative detail.[3] He concludes each portrait with interpretive summary, usually including a moral, exemplified in this passage from the life of Han Hsin:

> *When I visited Huaiyin, the local people told me* that even while a common citizen Han Hsin was not like ordinary people. At the time of his mother's death he could not afford to give her a funeral, yet he found a high burial ground with room enough for ten thousand households to settle. *I visited his mother's grave and confirmed that this was true.* . . . Had Han Hsin followed the Way [of Confucius] and been more modest instead of boasting of his achievements and glorying in his ability, all would have been well. . . . But instead he attempted to revolt when the empire was united. To have his family wiped out was no more than he deserved. (Szuma Chien, 286–87, my emphasis)

Szuma Chien's remarks also demonstrate the operations of biographical skepticism and primary research, which twentieth-century biography cannot claim to have invented.

As early as the fourth century B.C.E. in the Western tradition, biography began to be distinguished from general history as a separate rhetorical form. Two principal lines emerged: historical

biography chronicling the subject's entire life, and popular biography recounting notable incidents and sayings with little or no attempt to establish chronology or to depict the subject in historical context.

Among the earliest accounts of an individual life is *Evagoras* (ca. 365 B.C.E), a discourse on the King of Cyprus (ca. 411–374 B.C.E.), written by the Attic orator and teacher Isocrates. This life was followed shortly by the *Memorabilia*, Xenophon's homage to his teacher Socrates. This late-fourth-century B.C.E. text consists of separate pieces, later combined, though not by Xenophon. The *Memorabilia* includes an account of Socrates's philosophy and personal anecdotes about this famous man, organized topically and beginning with a lengthy critique of the state's charges against Socrates for rejecting the gods and corrupting youth.

Though not formal biography, the *Memorabilia* introduced several subsequently important characteristics of the genre. First, Xenophon's choice of Socrates as his subject departed from conventional subjects since Socrates was a man of popular interest chiefly in and for himself, not a king or general. Second, Xenophon placed a new exploratory emphasis on the subject's work in relation to the life. Third, he used anecdotes, which include conversation, though of uncertain reliability, to enliven the portrait, as, for example, in the opening of book 2, where Socrates exhorts Aristippus to practice temperance in all things, beginning with the question: "Tell me, Aristippus, if you were required to take charge of two youths and educate them so that the one would be fit to rule and the other would never think of putting himself forward, how would you educate them? Shall we consider it, beginning with the elementary question of food?"[4]

Plato who, like Xenophon, knew Socrates personally, collected his teacher's lectures. By contrast with Xenophon's depiction of a "wise, simple, friendly, moral instructor," Plato depicts a "provocative disturber of mental and civic rest and assumption."[5] Plato's late-fourth-century B.C.E. *Dialogues,* while not a formal narrative biography, is generally agreed to present a coherent dramatic portrait of Socrates the thinker, particularly in the early dialogues, the *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, and *Ion*, where Socrates is less the lecturer and more the dramatic inquirer.

These two early instances of personal acquaintance between biographers and their subjects introduce an issue with a long history of actively debated pros and cons. Acquaintance is still con

sidered by many biographers and readers alike to be an empowering qualification, if not an essential one, for writing a life. Much of the power and authority of the four New Testament Gospels—aside from considerations of the historical complexities of actual authorship—are understood to derive from their being written by men who knew the historical Jesus. In the mid-Renaissance William Roper announced his competence to write the *Life of Sir Thomas More* (ca. 1570) on the basis of being More's son-in-law who had lived in More's house for more than fifteen years. Four centuries later Tom Clark, Rock Hudson's publicist and housemate of twenty years, argues the authority of *Rock Hudson, Friend of Mine* (1989) by recounting how friends encouraged him to write this book, drawing on his intimate knowledge of the man, in order to correct sensational errors in other Hudson biographies. Eric Lax in *Woody Allen: A Biography* (1991) claims authority for his book based, in part, on having spent four years watching Allen make movies and talking with friends and intimates whom Allen instructed to speak frankly with the biographer.

If biographers' and their subjects' personal acquaintance is often considered a significant resource for life writing, its accompanying liability of nearly unavoidable bias has almost as often been viewed as a challenge, sometimes even an outright obstacle, to the modern ideal of skeptical objectivity. In chapter 2 on Samuel Johnson I will return to this matter.

Theophrastus, the Greek philosopher of the fourth and late third century B.C.E., applied to the art of verbal portraiture his teacher Aristotle's proposition that character, the root word meaning a mark or stamp, as in the impression on a coin, is best revealed by acts. The *Characters* is a book of ideal types illustrated by specific behavior. Theophrastus's types include the irascible man, the complaisant man, the suspicious man, the boor, the miser, and the man of petty ambition. Scholar-critics generally agree that Theophrastus probably drew on acquaintance and personal experience to compose these portraits. Yet his types are not informed by the idea of inner individuality so familiar to the post-Renaissance mind.[6] The *Characters*, revived and translated into English beginning in the late sixteenth century, influenced verbal portraiture in drama, poetry, and the newly developing genres of fiction and nonfiction prose from the Renaissance on.

Biographical writing flourished along with the growth of the Roman Empire. Inspired by Greek models and adapted to suit

the Roman version of the Greek tradition of family pride, t genre was also applied to express the new politics of imperialis Tacitus, Suetonius, and Plutarch were the three most popul and important biographers of the first and second centuries a again later, when their work was revived in Renaissance transl tions. These three writers' achievements identify three distir aspects of method, form, and subject matter still relevant to t modern theory and practice of biography.

Cornelius Tacitus wrote the life of the soldier-statesman Ag cola, who was also his admired father-in-law. Historians of bio raphy have noted the continued predominance of convention panegyric in this life. Tacitus, for instance, announces as his a "to publish the records of virtue" to an age hard in spirit a "cynical towards virtue."[7] Yet the biographer's laudatory accou of Agricola's career, also notable for its description of the co quest of Britain, is enlivened by the biographer's person acquaintance and close observation of Agricola, as, for instanc in this passage on his son's death: "In the beginning of the sur mer Agricola suffered a domestic blow: he lost the son born year before. He took the loss neither with bravado, like mc strong men, nor yet with the lamentations and mournings of woman. Among other things, he turned for comfort to fightin (Tacitus, 219).

Suetonius, a contemporary of Tacitus, wrote the highly pop lar *Lives of the Caesars*. By virtue of the biographer's industrio gathering of facts, anecdotes, and sayings, and the celebrated infamous reputations of his subjects, these lives have been calle the first tell-all biographies. Light on interpretation and unde standing but full of riveting, often scandalous detail abo famous people, Suetonius's life of Gaius Caligula is perhaps t most dramatic of all the portraits. The biographer depic Caligula's melodramatic cruelty and viciousness, including ince tuous relations with his sisters, fascination with executions a torture, chronic gluttony, adultery. He gives hideous deta about the emperor's dark-spotted corpse, froth at the mouth, a a heart that withstood cremation, suggesting to contemporari his having been poisoned by one of the many people who ha reason to despise him. Suetonius, whose *Caesars* was translate into English by Philemon Holland in 1606, also began writir another collective biography, the lives of the eminent gramma ans, rhetoricians, and poets, apparently never completed.

The work of Tacitus and Suetonius, translated into most modern European languages during the Renaissance, assuredly influenced life writers of both their own and later periods. But it was Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (forty-six Greek and Roman biographies of military and political leaders, including Lucullus and Cimon, Alexander and Caesar, Demosthenes and Cicero, each Greek paired with a Roman to shed light on one another), composed around the beginning of the second century, that stands as the distinct predecessor of modern biography, which subsequently branched out into the lives of other professionals in the arts and sciences.

Plutarch, like his predecessor Cornelius Nepos, the first-century-B.C.E. author of an earlier important collection of *Lives of Eminent Men*, which survives only in part,[8] announced a clear distinction between history and biography. History describes what people do, Plutarch affirms, while biography reveals who they are. Since their primary aim was not to write history but to dramatize character, both Nepos and Plutarch emphasized the selective presentation of anecdote and detail rather than an exhaustive chronological narrative. In the following passage Plutarch illustrates Alcibiades's "mightiest passions," his "love of rivalry and love of preeminence," in the following story recorded of the Athenian statesman and general's childhood: "He was once hard pressed in wrestling, and to save himself from getting a fall, set his teeth in his opponent's arms, where they clutched him, and was like to have bitten through them. His adversary, letting go his hold, cried: 'You bite, Alcibiades, as women do!' 'Not I,' said Alcibiades, 'but as lions do.'"[9] Plutarch's identification of a distinct formal and conceptual space for biography is a key event in the history of the genre. Chiefly a moralist, his guiding notion was the image of the virtuous man, which is to say the heroic man, and he wrote lives to dramatize this idea.

Plutarch was not a scholar first and foremost, as scholar would come later to be defined in terms of responsibility to historiographical standards, generally agreed upon methods, and criteria for gathering, assessing, interpreting and judging evidence. But he was highly conscious of the distinctive project he had undertaken. Plutarch was an artist who considered biography to be both educationally substantive and imaginatively pleasurable. His enduring reputation, his revival during the Renaissance, and influence on subsequent major writers, including Shakespeare and Dryden, all

testify to Plutarch's success as a biographer who, by Ralph Wal Emerson's estimate, "will be perpetually rediscovered from ti to time as long as books last."[10]

Other notable classical biographers of the first three centur were Arrian (*Discourses of Epictetus*, the stoic philosopher w whom Arrian had studied, ca. 60), Philostratus (life of Apolloni the philosopher Tyana, composed from oral and written sour and from the *Lives of the Sophists*, early third century), and D genes Laertius (*Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, a early third century).

The Christian era applied biography to its educational missi of dramatizing the life and spreading the teachings of Jesus. T four Gospels, thought to have been composed between ca. and 110, combine depictions of the earthly and spiritual aspe of Jesus's life with an explication and exhortation of his tea ings. Reminiscent of their pre-Christian predecessors, includi popular biographies of Epictetus, Apollonius, and Socrates, t first three Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke), which prese similar but not identical accounts of their subject, praise th protagonist, gather and interpret his best sayings, and, in doing, attempt to convince readers that studying Jesus's li works, and words is essential to their spiritual welfare. T Gospel of John, less readily recognizable as a biographical nar tive, is a philosophical and visionary meditation on the meani of Jesus's life and death.

As time passed and the Apocalypse, originally predicted arrive before the second century, did not come, the early Chur began making institutional plans for a prolonged earthly m sion. These plans included commemorating lives of saints a martyrs, first in the form of saint's-day calendars, then gradua developing into narrative accounts. The ninth century marks significant divide between the lives composed in Latin a Greek, intended for clergy who could read, and the producti of more explicitly didactic lives written in the vernacular. The latter hortatory biographies, often intended as materials for s mons delivered to nonreaders, may also possibly have been re by a larger lay audience.

Students of biography generally agree that the early Christi era was an unhappy digression from the line of development modern biography stretching back to Plutarch. This linea defines the genre as the reconstruction of an individual life

historical context, combining thorough scholarship with skeptical assessment of evidence and sympathetic engagement. Modern biography's chief aim is understood to be neither praise nor blame, at least not explicitly so, nor is didacticism understood to be its driving motive. Medieval hagiography, when judged by post-Medieval standards informed by the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, may seem incompetent, naive, or both.

Yet there is, of course, as with all such issues, another side to the story. Sacred biographers saw no necessary contradiction between the worlds of fact and legend. Both fact and legend were for them signs of fundamental truth about the nature of things in relation to the realm of the spirit. These were different evidentiary signs from those which the modern scientific world of the sixteenth century and after would find convincing. But in terms of this period's standards and beliefs, these signs were understood to reveal unimpeachable and indispensably educative truth. The sacred biographers' aim of instruction recognized imagination as an accurate lens to focus on essential, which is to say holy, truths. Popular lives of St. Christina, for instance, describe a scene in which the protagonist's faith and purity are tested by enemies tossing poisonous snakes on her head and shoulders. The snakes are miraculously changed into "small infaunts" who suckle from St. Christina's breasts and "custe hure" (kissed her).[11]

The perceived interconnections among reason and fantasy, imagination and truth, and the earthly and spiritual realms that characterize the world view underwriting sacred biography were severely scrutinized during the early modern scientific period of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Distinction and commensurability became more highly valued ways of thinking than fusion and the identification of symbolic interconnections. These changes informed the ways in which life was conceived of and recounted. The subsequent Enlightenment emphasis on distinguishing reason from fantasy and common sense from imagination resulted in skeptical discounting of medieval sacred biographies. The word *hagiography* has became synonymous with biographical irresponsibility, as, for example, in these remarks on a life of the baseball player Ted Williams: "The only other creditable full length biography [of Williams] has been characterized even by novelist John Updike, a truly unreconstructed Williams fan, as a 'hagiography.' Williams deserves something other . . .

than sainthood."[12] The Middle Ages might not have mac Williams a saint, but it would not have agreed that a huma being could deserve something better than sainthood. And i this difference it is evident how cultural beliefs and values esse tially inform biography.

One culture's ways of thinking may appear foolish, ignoran or self-deluded to people living in another time or place, jud ments which would doubtless surprise the original thinker Thus there is often much to be learned about a particular perio by studying the ways it tells lives and the purposes it conceiv for biography. When, for example, the twentieth-century biogr pher James L. Clifford recounts the anecdote of how Agnellu mid-ninth-century Bishop of Ravenna, prayed to God and fello believers to provide missing documentary evidence to comple a series of saints' lives, Clifford finds fault with the bishop scholarship. But the bishop held himself accountable to other va ues and criteria than the secular, skeptical standards which we to become methodological commonplaces of post-Enlightenme biographical research.[13] Modern biography holds itself accoun able to standards of objective scholarship, as exemplified in th passage from a biography of Dizzy Dean written for young rea ers: "Some anonymous railroad conductor (his name cann even be determined at this late date) saw Diz pitch, either for th Twelfth Field Artillery or for the Public Service Corps. Whoev he was, he knew a pitcher when he saw one and he reported h find to Don Curtis."[14] Regarding the two issues of eviden reported in this passage, the small but meaningful details of th railroad conductor and the first team Dean pitched for, the bio rapher goes no farther than documentation can support.

The scientific and humanistic revolutions of the Renaissan and following did not bring an immediate end to saints' live which continued to be written into the sixteenth and seve teenth centuries. Among the most famous is John Foxe's *Actes a Monuments*, better known as the *Book of Martyrs*, a history of th Christian Church told through the lives of martyrs (Latin editio 1554; first English translation, 1563), and the *Acta Sanctoru* undertaken by the Flemish Jesuit John Bolland, which bega appearing in 1643 and continued into the next century. The latt has been identified as the first biographical dictionary compile in Europe.[15]

A few generally agreed upon exceptions to modern scholars' typically low assessment of medieval biography include the early-twelfth-century life of St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, written by the English monk Eadmer, called by Harold Nicolson "the first 'pure' biography" written in England;[16] and secular lives, such as a ninth-century life of Charlemagne by the Frankish noble and historian Einhard. These lives diverge from formulaic patterns, demonstrate the authors' commitment to factual accuracy, if not a thoroughgoing skepticism, and exhibit a distinct consciousness of their genre.

The hallmark of the fourteenth-century Italian Renaissance was humanism's ranging, temporal, secular curiosity, which revived interest in Greek and Roman achievements, biography central among them. Humanism also placed a distinctive new emphasis on the individual that renewed fascination and experimentation with this genre. Giovanni Boccaccio's life of Dante and Filippo Villani's *Lives of Illustrious Florentines* exemplify modern developments that trace back to the two main tendencies of early Hellenistic and Roman biography: (1) individual lives developing out of the rhetorical techniques of praise and criticism, more often the former than the latter; and (2) collective biographies of philosophers, painters, musicians, grammarians, and other practitioners of specialized skills and arts, developing out of the Peripatetics' encyclopedic interest in knowledge and technical skill.[17] Villani's late-sixteenth-century lives are a collection of sketches of successful secular figures, artists, scholars, soldiers, and politicians. This early modern collective biography, a form increasingly popular beginning in the Renaissance, examines the subjects' lives in relation to their work.

Collective biography and dictionaries of biography, more fully treated in chapter 5, such as Villani's and his fellow Italian Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Architects, Painters, and Sculptors* (1550), tend to develop during periods of nationalistic and imperialistic expansion, such as characterize Anglo-European history from the sixteenth into the late nineteenth centuries. Noteworthy examples are Konrad Gesner's *Bibliotheca Universalis* (Geneva, 1545–1549), the earliest European bio-bibliographical dictionary of authors and their writings in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew; Antoine du Verdier's *Prosopographia, ou description des personnes insignes* (Lyons, 1573), a universal biographical dictionary listing as its chief categories patriarchs, prophets, religious figures, heads of state, philosophers, orators, poets and inventors; Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697; English translation 1734), an important early work of scientific biography and critique of religion and legend, with entries including actual historical figures, typically those who had not been treated adequately in other sources (Lacydes, the Greek philosopher, Arngrimus Jonas, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Icelandic historian, Joseph Hall, the seventeenth-century English prelate), sects and movements (Manicheans, Paulicians, Mammilarians), and mythico-religious figures (Jupiter, Chrysis, Abimelech, David); and finally Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–1781).

Johnson, late in his career, was approached by a group of London publishers to write biographical-critical prefaces for an edition of the works of the English poets—Addison, Butler, Cowley, Dryden, Gray, Milton, and Pope, to name only a handful of the fifty-two authors included. This publishing venture was calculated to rival an edition already in production by a Scottish firm. This commission indicates the publishers' assessment of the project's marketability, especially when combined with Johnson's biographical prefaces. Johnson's fifty-two essays on Restoration and early-eighteenth-century writers narrate collectively a history of the early years of modern professional writing, unfolding in the new world of the printed book and expanding literacy.

Other group biographies, such as Bartolomé Mitre's collection of short biographies of Argentine national heroes, *Biografias estudios* (1856), were sometimes written to support independence movements or other nationalistic agendas. Throughout Europe, beginning in Sweden with the publication of the twenty-three volume Swedish dictionary of national biography (1835–1857), the new nation states, including Holland, Austria, Germany, and England, published multivolume works to narrate national history through the lives of its major participants. Lydia Maria Child, a white abolitionist, wrote *The Freedmen's Book* (1865), a textbook for use in freedmen's schools, which contains, among other pieces, short biographies of exemplary figures, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Benjamin Banneker, Phillis Wheatley, and Frederick Douglass notable among them. The author, in her dedication "To the Freedmen," describes the project in the following way

that demonstrates how biography's ethical-exemplary-historical dimensions have remained vigorous since its origins: "I have prepared this book expressly for you, with the hope that those of you who can read will read it aloud to others, and that all of you will derive fresh strength and courage from this true record of what colored men [*sic*] have accomplished, under great disadvantages."[18]

The history of modern translations of Plutarch's collection of famous Greeks and Romans gives one measure of the Renaissance's energetic interest in biography. By the mid-sixteenth century Plutarch had been translated into French by Jacques Amyot (1559). Shortly thereafter a version by Sir Thomas North (1579) appeared in English, followed by Sir Henry Savile's translation of Tacitus's *Agricola* (1591) and Philemon Holland's *Suetonius* (1606), all within a half century.

The composition of original, contemporary lives accompanied this flurry of translation from the classical period of biography. Distinguished examples include William Roper's mid-sixteenth-century life of his father-in-law, Sir Thomas More, and, in the same period, a life of Cardinal Wolsey written by his gentleman usher, George Cavendish, circulated in manuscript but not printed until 1641. Cavendish's work exemplifies Johnson's later observation that "More knowledge may be gained of a man's real character by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree, and ended with his funeral."[19] While praise and commemoration still seem to be Roper's and Cavendish's chief motivations, both biographies bear lively marks of intimate familiarity between author and subject. Two hundred years later, James Boswell would recombine these elements of commemoration and intimacy with agile self-awareness, bravado, and literary sophistication in the *Life of Samuel Johnson*.

During the early modern period the assumptions and methods of the new science distributed its effects among other disciplines and arts. Historians of biography typically assert that the new science, with its emphasis on experience, the inductive search for truth in a world of particulars, and the critique of traditional authority, combined with Christian humanism's and Puritanism's valuing of the individual conscience and consciousness to constitute a new world view distinctly hospitable to biography. During this period biography and autobiography, little distinction being made between the two until after the seventeenth century, were metonymies for vital cultural revolutions. Life writing was not merely the result of but also the signifier and vehicle of changes that ushered in the modern era of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among these changes were new conceptions of personal and cultural identity associated with the notion of the secular individual, the explosion of print culture and other technologies of mass production, increased literacy, imperialistic exploration, new global trade and commercialism, and a heightened interest in childhood as a distinct phase of existence, all of which combined to produce new senses of what constitutes a life, its possibilities and meanings, and the reasons for and ways of telling a life story.[20]

Biography now became a fully separate branch of literature, the record of a life used not merely as an opportunity for celebrating certain ideal qualities or as an occasion for discussing broad philosophical, religious, or historical ideas and issues but examined for its own sake, Edmund Gosse observes, in its singleness, even its singularity.[21]

At the outset of the seventeenth century, biography began to shift its creative center of gravity to England, as this nation entered its most active period of commerical, technological, and cultural global expansion, matters whose generative relations with life writing I will return to at the end of this chapter. Sir Francis Bacon, in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), proposed a three-part distinction among the kinds of history, biography being one of these. He catalogued history as *chronicles* (representing time), *lives* (representing people), and *narrations* or *relations* (representing action). Of these forms, he prefers lives, noting that "if they be well written, propounding to themselves a person to represent in whom actions both greater and smaller, public and private, have a commixture, must of necessity contain a more true, native, and lively representation."[22] Bacon encouraged life writing, noting this genre's curious scarcity in an age when active empirical investigation in other areas should also have motivated similar scientific interest in biography. Whether or not directly traceable to Bacon's urging, many more lives were being written by the end of his century than at the beginning.

The first appearance of the word *biographer*, in the variant form *biographist*, is attributed to Thomas Fuller's *History of the Worthies of England* (1662). Fuller notes the "want of honest hearts in the

Biographists of these Saints, which betrayed their pens to such abominable untruths."[23] The biographer's primary responsibility to truthfulness appears early in the history of the poetics of this genre.

John Dryden's *Life of Plutarch,* prefatory to a translation of *Plutarch's Lives* (1683) by several hands, provides the earliest, most developed description of the genre in English: "[In] *Biographia,* or the history of particular men's lives . . . all things here are circumscribed and driven to a point. . . . [H]ere you are led into the private lodgings of the hero; you see him in undress, and are made familiar with his most private actions and conversations."[24] Dryden's remarks focus on the distinguishing particularity of the life and the intimacy of the evidence. He admires Plutarch for displacing the public record as sufficient source of evidence for a life.

The new science's fascination with empirically verifiable evidence fueled the antiquarian and scholarly inquiries of such writers as Anthony Wood, a contemporary of Dryden and author of the first English biographical dictionary of authors (1691–1692). John Aubrey, Wood's assistant, also wrote a collection of lives. Though less devoted to authorized facts, these biographies recreate a felt sense of life, personality, and circumstantial particularity that account for the enduring appeal of Aubrey's work better known by its later title, *Brief Lives.*

Izaak Walton was the third major biographer of the seventeenth century. Walton, in his lives of the poets and clerics John Donne (1640) and George Herbert (1670) and of the theologians Richard Hooker (1665) and Bishop Sanderson (1678), gave nearly equal attention to accurate detail regarding character and career and to satisfying narrative which includes substantial accounts of people formatively significant in his subjects' lives. Walton, in the *Life of Herbert,* for instance, describes Herbert's mother in what he refers to as "my promis'd account." He characterizes Lady Herbert's understanding of her children's temperament as being so astute to the need to balance instruction and pleasure that she managed the education of her oldest son "without rigid sourness." In addition, she became a valued friend and correspondent of Donne (Walton inserts the detail that he possesses some of their correspondence) and the subject of Donne's poem "Autumnal Beauty."[25] It is no happenstance that Johnson, the great eighteenth-century theorist and practitioner of biography, admired Walton's *Lives* and planned, though never completed, a new edition.

The history of biography from the eighteenth century to the present is dense and complex, so firmly has the form identified itself with modern Western consciousness and culture. To begin a survey of the past three hundred years it is useful to return briefly to Plutarch, specifically to his two main points about the biographer's reponsibility to method and genre. For though chiefly a moralist and artist, not a genuine scholar as we would recognize the activities involved in that occupation, Plutarch did identify two definitive tenets of the modern form: First, the biographer is responsible for gathering accurate facts.[26] Second, history and biography are not identical. Plutarch makes these distinctions about the form in which he is writing in the *Lives*: "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 or 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."[27] Plutarch's paired emphases on accurate facts and the interpretation of character have become touchstones of modern biography. Arnold Rampersad, authorized biographer of Langston Hughes, has, for instance, elaborated these criteria in his observation that contemporary biography is characterized by "exhaustiveness of research, an appreciation for accumulated, verified detail . . . and a relative certainty that the life of the subject can be absolutely understood, usually through the application of psychological schemas largely derived from Freud."[28]

Eighteenth-century England produced the first substantial body of critical writings on biography to foster the burgeoning genre. This criticism was motivated by many of the same impulses of experimentation and skepticism that inspired the new science. Johnson, who assimilated and revised the best elements of earlier biographical tradition, became the foremost biographer of his age. His distinctive formal and theoretical contributions, discussed thoroughly in chapter 2, are exemplified in this well known passage from *Rambler* No. 60 (1750), one of his two important essays on biography:

> Those parallel circumstances, and kindred images, to which we readily conform our minds, are, above all other writings, to be found in narratives of the lives of particular persons; and therefore no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since

> none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition.[29]

Johnson identifies biography as a particular kind of writing with distinctly powerful psychological effects and widespread ethical uses. This genre appeals first to the reader's emotions, while its chief aim and hence the biographer's chief responsibility is instruction. Like Bacon before him, Johnson urges the "cultivation" of biography.

Johnson's most noteworthy contribution to the poetics of modern biography appears in his observation that "there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful." With this statement he expands the traditional qualifications of the biographical subject (formulaic virtue and conventional greatness), widening the field to include many possible subjects beyond the rich, royal, famous, infamous, and holy.[30]

Johnson wrote biography throughout his career from the late 1730s into the last decade of his life. His *Life of Richard Savage* (1744) was based on personal acquaintance. His *Prefaces Biographical and Critical to the Works of the English Poets* (1779–1781), published also as a separate collection under the more familiar title, *Lives of the English Poets*, was based on a lifetime of reading, writing, and observing human behavior. With Johnson's *Lives*, it is often noted, modern literary biography was underway.

Johnson valued primary materials most highly, the authenticated personal details and evidence such as letters and autobiographical documents, anecdotes, and contemporary accounts which he thought revealed the subject's character most precisely and engaged the reader most pleasurably. He regretted, for instance, that so little of Alexander Pope's authenticated conversation remained even shortly after the poet's death in 1747. In regretting this lack, Johnson identified what has proved to be a perduring modern interest in personality and the documented social and private life of the artist. Johnson's biographer, James Boswell, was alert to the challenge of preventing such losses in the case of another great writer. He decided, not long after meeting Johnson, to begin gathering materials for a life and to interweave the generic and social arts of biographical documentation and friendship in order to write a definitive life of Johnson.

Johnson's theory and practice of biography, underwritten by his profound sense of human frailty (both the subject's and the biographer's), identified by Ellmann as the key to great biography, were brilliantly assimilated by his friend and protégé Boswell.[31] Well read in previous biographies, willing, as he said of himelf, to "run half over London in order to fix a date correctly," a tireless recorder and recreator of conversation, which he understood to be the chief value of his life of Johnson, Boswell set out to write a life to supplant all other lives of Johnson, past, present, and future. His self-announced emphasis on painstaking primary research continues to be a major criterion of the genre. When Robert Creamer opens his life of Babe Ruth with the mock-serious confession "I apologize for not having talked to everybody," he places himself in an investigative tradition tracing back directly to Boswell, who, in turn, credits Johnson for his education in biography.[32]

Boswell masterfully scripts the biographer's double role as part invisible secretary, part self-spotlighted, self-aggrandizing director, in equal parts subservient and managerial. He also recognized the necessity of the reader's co-creative imaginative participation. Even his detractors usually agree, if grudgingly, that Boswell wrote the first definitive modern biography. A wholehearted admirer of Boswell and herself a masterful biographer, Gertrude Stein, acknowledges him as an invaluable mentor. Yet Boswell established a model which, while it may have inspired many, has rarely, if ever, been precisely imitated.

The main difference between Johnson and Boswell as biographers centers on their respective viewpoints regarding the question of what biographers should do to and with their materials. Should they write "biography pure and simple," to borrow George Saintsbury's phrase, in which all the collected materials are passed through the mind of the biographer, few if any materials appearing except in altered, digested, and interpreted form?—which is Johnson's manner. Or should biography be essentially a collection of primary documents (letters, sayings, conversations, anecdotes) connected by minimal narrative or other transition devices provided by the biographer but otherwise unaltered?—which is Boswell's manner. Once established as a question by the appearance of Johnson's and Boswell's fundamentally different kinds of biographical writings, debate on this issue has continued. Technical and conceptual differences

aside, Johnson and Boswell would almost certainly have agreed on the fundamentals of the following definition of the genre, a definition all but inconceivable before the eighteenth century: the history of an individual, not a type or exemplar, depicted accurately and fully in domestic and other private settings, set in historical, circumstantial context, and examined skeptically, though not without sympathy.

The work of Johnson and Boswell had been anticipated in their own century by the innovative biographer Roger North. North wrote lives of his three brothers and an essay on biography (ca. 1718 through 1730s), much of this work remaining in manuscript until the nineteenth century and thus probably unavailable to either Johnson or Boswell. North, in the "General Preface," proposes a quintessentially modern poetics of biography based on the greater usefulness of biography over history:

> The history of private lives adapted to the perusal of common men is more beneficial (generally) than the most solemn registers of ages and nations, or the acts and monuments of famed governors, statesmen, prelates, or generals of armies. The gross reason is because the latter contain little if anything comparate or applicable to instruct a private economy, or tending to make a man either wiser or more cautelous [cautious] in his own proper concerns.[33]

The striking similarities among North's, Johnson's, and Boswell's conceptions of biography, again readily apparent in the passage below, lend support to the notion, hardly a surprising one, that the development of modern biography in the eighteenth century, though pioneered by individuals, arose from factors more generally distributed throughout the culture:

> No man at large, who is not expressly qualified, can fairly take upon him to write the life of any other man. They may make gatherings and excerpts out of letters, books, or reports concerning him, but those are memorials, or rather bundles of uncemented materials, but not the life, and it is obnoxious to this shrewd failing that all these gatherings, and the conjectures built upon them, are of course taken as positive truths, of which much or the greatest part most commonly are utter mistakes, and without a due check make a strange history. . . . a man's character is not, and scarce can be, justly represented by mere words in the way of history without some specimens derived from himself, either of his writing, or some speaking testimony of things remaining, and referred to. (North, 77, 80)

North's assertion that to write biography requires training, along with his emphasis on the necessity of autobiographical materials in genuine biography, recurs in Johnson's and Boswell's work only a few years later.

The eighteenth century saw the rise of the professional biographer in the literary marketplace, the cultivation by publishers of an avid reading public, and the appearance of a body of critical writings on the genre. This period's unique equilibrium whereby, as Donald A. Stauffer observes, both the individual and the world were for a time valued as equivalent realities, conditioned contemporaneous developments in the related form of the novel. The novel and biography ran on parallel tracks, borrowing from, imitating, and mutually inspiring one another in the dramatic depiction of the progress and pattern of the protagonist's life in a world of circumstance and contingency. A multitude of novels have titles that blur distinctions between historical life writing and fiction, many of these novels written in the first person: *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (1722); *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1760–1767); *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778); *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography* (1847). These fictions, sometimes purporting to be actual life histories, often included quasi-documentary materials, such as letters and diary entries, that were also becoming evidentiary staples of factual biography. Borrowing also occurred in the other direction, as biography adapted techniques from fiction, and both genres learned from drama how to depict scene and character.[34]

While the origins of biography and the novel are substantially allied, the use of fictional techniques and the possibility of soundly interweaving the two forms have been points of chronic dispute. The novelist Henry James, who also wrote biography, believed that only fiction could capture the otherwise elusive qualities of life. "The art of the biographer—devilish art!—is somehow practically *thinning*. It simplifies even while seeking to enrich—& even the Immortal[s] are so helpless & passive in death."[35] Classical and early modern biography, which aimed to commemorate the glorious or edifying meaning of a person's life, took on a simpler task than has modern biography, at least as James here defines it: to find words which, though not the equivalents of life, since this is presumably impossible, are adequate imaginative correlatives of that life. Biography, being nonfiction,

could not, according to James, approximate the virtual reality of the imagination.

Less than fifty years after Johnson and Boswell had convincingly argued that panegyric and commemoration are inappropriate aims for modern biography and thus had seemingly put that issue to rest, an emphasis on respectability and the forms of politenesss, associated with Queen Victoria's reign (1837–1901), reintroduced these decorums as responsible proprieties of the genre. When the new biographers of the early twentieth century, Strachey and Woolf among them, looked back on the preceding century, they saw muffled, lifeless, distractingly detailed compilations of sanitized facts or portraits of improbable goodness. Yet as in the case of medieval hagiography, there is at least one other side to the story.

Robert Southey's lives of Admiral Nelson (1813) and John Wesley, the famous Methodist preacher and hymnist (1820), are two exemplary biographies of the early nineteenth century. Subsequently J. G. Lockhart's seven-volume *Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1837–1838), the popular novelist, was both successful and highly regarded as a specimen of the genre in its own time and later in reprints and Lockhart's abridgment. Some critics have praised Lockhart over and above Boswell for his thoroughness and attractive style. Yet this life also met with criticism from contemporary readers, Thomas Carlyle, himself a notable biographer, among them. Carlyle criticized Lockhart for writing a mere compilation of facts, not genuine biography. For Carlyle, to whom I will return shortly, biography must be based on ideas not driven by data. Lockhart, ten years after the first edition of his life of Scott, produced at his publisher's request an abridgment which he described as "more strictly narrative" than the original.

The novelist Elizabeth Gaskell wrote the important *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). This biography, commissioned by Patrick Brontë, Charlotte's father, announces as its aim to depict Brontë the model daughter and wife, not Brontë the professional writer. In spite of its decorum, this biography bears the imaginative energy of Gaskell's fiction in its depiction of scenery and character, frequent citation from primary documents, including juvenilia and especially letters, and its insights into the Brontë family psychology, particularly the Brontë sisters' relations and their artistic collaboration, described in moving detail in the following passage:

> It was the household custom among these girls to sew till nine o'clock at night. At that hour, Miss Branwell generally went to bed, and her nieces' duties for the day were accounted done. They put away their work, and began to pace the room backwards and forwards, up and down,—as often with the candles extinguished, for economy's sake, as not,—their figures glancing into the fire-light, and out into the shadow, perpetually. At this time, they talked over past cares, and troubles; they planned for the future, and consulted each other as to their plans. In after years, this was the time for discussing together the plots of their novels. And again, still later, this was the time for the last surviving sister to walk alone, from old accustomed habit, round and round the desolate room, thinking sadly upon the "days that were no more."[36]

The combination of material detail and psychological acumen produces an insightful group portrait.

James A. Froude is the late-Victorian biographer most often credited with reintroducing Boswellian detail and candor. Carlyle appointed Froude to be his literary executor in 1871, providing him with memoirs and correspondence with his wife, Jane Welsh Carlyle, and others. Froude's two-volume *Thomas Carlyle: History of the First Forty Years of His Life* (1882), followed by its two-volume sequel, *Thomas Carlyle: History of His Life in London* (1884), was considered indecorous, even scandalous in its own time, for the biographer's frankness regarding Carlyle's personal life, particularly his sexual dysfunction.

In the United States, the early history of biography was dominated by the Mather family in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. No American family, except the Adamses, Daniel B. Shea Jr. observes, "rivaled the Mathers in an hereditary inclination toward biography and autobiography."[37] Mather sons regularly wrote their fathers' lives: Increase Mather wrote a biography of Richard (1670), the first American Mather; Cotton Mather wrote the life of Increase (1724); and Samuel wrote the life of Cotton (1729). Cotton Mather's major work, the *Magnalia Christi Americana, or the Ecclesiastical History from Its First Planting in the Year 1620, unto the Year of Our Lord, 1698* ("The Great Achievements of Christ in America," 1702), includes a series of character portraits focusing on exemplary spiritual features of the founders of New England. Mather depicts these early clergy and governors as soldiers of Christ, during the first seventy-eight years of the Plymouth and Massachusetts colonies.[38] The following passage from

the chapter on Edward Hopkins, governor of the Connecticut colony, gives a specimen of Mather's biographical ethos:

> When the great God of heaven had carried his *peculiar people* into a *wilderness*, the *theocracy*, wherein he became (as he was for *that reason* stiled) *the Lord of Hosts*, unto them and the *four* squadrons of their *army*, was most eminently displayed in *his* enacting of their *laws*, *his* directing of their *wars*, and his electing and inspiring of their *judges*. . . . Now among the first *judges* of New-England, was EDWARD HOPKINS, Esq. in whose time the *colony of Connecticut* was favoured with *judges as at the first*; and put under the power of those with whom it was a maxim, *Gratius est pietatis Nomen, quam potestatis*.[39]

Just as divine will directs the general unfolding of history, so too it guides and manifests itself in the individual life of a chosen soldier of the Lord. The subsequent history of American biography in the early nineteenth century was also dominated by clergy and educators. The genre was motivated by moral purpose, combined with the sense of civic responsibility, to forge a new nation by instructing citizens in worthy public and private behavior. This agenda discouraged what would be considered, by present-day standards, responsibly skeptical inquiry.

Best known among early American biographers are Jared Sparks and Mason Locke Weems (Parson Weems), whose popular *Life of [George] Washington* (1800–1808) appeared first as the eighty-page *Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington* about a month after Washington's death on December 14, 1799. Weems's life of Washington was substantively revised in 1806 to include two new anecdotes: the famous but unsubstantiated cherry tree anecdote involving the young Washington and his father ("I cannot tell a lie") and the story of George's father planting cabbage-seed secretly so that, when it sprouted, the letters spelling his name would appear. Weems then enlarged this short biography into the 200-plus-page *Life of George Washington; With Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honourable to Himself and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen* (1808). Weems's biography portrays an exemplary hero who converts a lie into an immediate demonstration of virtue by confessing it. This volume was edited and reprinted some eighty times between 1806 and 1927, evidence that Weems offered what readers wanted.[40] Jared Sparks, editor of Washington's letters, who improved his subject's style and grammar, also wrote a life of Gouverneur Morris (1832) and both edited and contributed to *The American Library of Biography* (25 vols., 1834–1838; 1844–1847).

By as early as the mid-nineteenth century, a secular and more skeptical consciousness began to appear in American life writing. Complexities of form, issues of evidence, and criteria for selection and discrimination of the real and important facts of a life began to be identified as problems and challenges. The following passage from an 1856 issue of *The Southern Literary Messenger* aptly illustrates this change: "A little reflection will show that half a dozen different narratives of the same life may be constructed, each of which shall contain facts and facts only, while none of them shall furnish either a true account of the man's life or a true picture of his character."[41] Even Jorge Luis Borges in his playful speculations on the various hypothetical biographies that could be written of an individual, "a history of a man's dreams . . . or of the organs of his body; or of the mistakes he has made; or of all the moments when he imagined the Pyramids; or of his traffic with night and with dawn," has only elaborated a statement that precedes him by more than a century.[42]

Another energetic questioner of the use of facts, Ralph Waldo Emerson, undertook to inform biographical theory and practice with Transcendentalist principles and methods. Emerson's profound belief in the power of biography to clear the mind of cant and demystify illusions, thus liberating spirit in earthly life, is memorably summarized in this passage from his essay, "Experience" (1844): "Let us treat the men and women . . . as if they were real; perhaps they are."[43] *Representative Men* (1850) proposes six types of greatness: Plato, the philsopher; Swedenborg, the mystic; Montaigne, the skeptic; Shakespeare, the poet; Napoleon, the man of the world; and Goethe, the writer. For Emerson these figures embody archetypal powers available to us by contemplating the significant details of their lives. Significant details do not include, for Emerson, the trivial data of birth, family, schooling, career, marriage, etc. Rather he sought symbolic facts drawn from the archetypal figure's work and ideas. Thus the materials for authentic biography reside in the spiritual autobiography of great achievements. Shakespeare's plays provide the opportunity, Emerson suggests, for readers to experience the poet's life in his own words. This encounter introduces readers not only to the poet as creative-spiritual agent, but also to Shakespearean aspects of themselves. *Representative Men*, undertaken in part as response to Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), emphasizes the importance of actively using empowering

figures in our own lives, rather than passively worshipping them from afar.

Gamaliel Bradford made distinctive contributions to the line of American biography developing from Emerson. His "psychographs" aim to identify the essential, "permanent habits of thought and action that constitute what we call character" in such a way as to suggest "all the varied and complicated stages of life and character that have preceded."[44] While interested in other people's lives in and for themselves and for the opportunity they provide to escape from "the hampering prison of the *I*," Bradford also believed that in the characters of representative men and women lay the "personal clues" at the heart of all great movements in literature, art, science, and religion.[45] During the first third of the twentieth century, he wrote a number of popular lives, Robert E. Lee, Aaron Burr, P. T. Barnum, Thomas Paine, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Charlotte Cushman, and Grover Cleveland, to name only a few.

Bradford's work shares family resemblances with the biographical experiments of his near contemporary, Gertrude Stein. Stein undertook to invigorate biography by emphasizing the genre's alliances with imaginative writing—no less playful than fiction, yet scientific, not the mere secretary to fact, yet empirically based. In *Three Lives* (1908), Stein, who had studied psychology with William James at Harvard, creates three fictional characters, "The Good Anna," "Melanctha," and "The Gentle Lena," whom she examines as case studies in trouble and unhappiness. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), written by Stein and not by Toklas, blurs the referential distinction between biography and autobiography. *Four in America* (1947) again cross-examines the notion of the simple, unitary facts of identity by reimagining George Washington as a novelist, Henry James as a general, the Wright brothers as painters, and Ulysses S. Grant as a religious leader who subsequently became a saint. Through these imaginative transformations, Stein reexamines the operations of creativity, freshly explores the relationship among personality, gifts, and genius, and applies all her findings to the question of what it means to be an American.

The innovative characteristics of American biography evident in Emerson, Bradford, and Stein continued to serve the nation's project of inventing a set of new markers of identity, grounded imaginatively in the country itself, in its distinctive psychological,

geographical, historical, and ethnographic characteristics. This movement was allied with other civic and educational projects for self-improvement and self-identification distinct from English and European forebears. The interest in biography took other forms, as well, notable among them the founding of the first academic departments of biography by Professor Ambrose White Vernon in the late nineteenth century, first at Carleton College, later at Dartmouth.

Developments in adjacent cultural contexts also profoundly influenced biography. These include the work of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and those who broke from or elaborated aspects of Freud's work, most notably Carl Jung, who developed the idea of universal archetypes, the symbol system of a collective unconscious, and Erik Erikson, who proposed a developmental model of identity that focuses on key moments of ego formation in relation to historical context as well as personal circumstances. Darwin's paradigm of natural selection and determinism, Freud's topography of the unconscious and notions of early childhood psychosexual formation, and Marx's cultural-material description of history were appropriated into the subject matter and methods of the genre. Each of these movements makes individuals paradoxically both more and less important to and central in their own lives: whether mere cogs in the great wheel of materialism and unequally distributed wealth or potential revolutionaries; whether creatures subject to unconscious drives by which they are ambushed in dreams and slips of the tongue; or heroes making a psychoanalytic descent into the underworld of unknown drives and forces. These three twentieth-century paradigms promised, each in its distinctive way, to make biography more scientific, which is to say more skeptical, secular, and objective, while at the same time creating surrogates for earlier models of heroism and the dramas of the soul and imagination.

Of these three movements depth psychology has had the most profound effects on biography. Freud's predominant legacy, the "conviction that a secret life is going on within us that is only partly under our control,"[46] focuses biographical inquiry on the private, unconscious motivational drives, particularly those imprinted in childhood, understood to shape public, conscious life. If Boswell had written his life of Johnson after Freud, John Wain proposes, "he would never have had so little to say

about Johnson's childhood."[47] He would have felt compelled to analyze the childhood drama rather than gather all available materials and present them to the reader to analyze. Lacking information about Johnson's early life equivalent to data he had collected about the last twenty years, Boswell moves through these years quickly in order to arrive at the period when anecdotal information and accounts of conversation are abundant, the biographer's personal acquaintance with his subject begins, and hence a personal portrait of Johnson can emerge to complement readers' familiarity with the author's writings.

By contrast with the multiplicity of evidence on which Boswell draws, Freud's watershed psychoanalytic study of Leonardo, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* (1910), depends heavily on a single recollected dream about a kind of bird known as a kite, though renamed by Freud a vulture, to help explain the artist's homosexuality in relation to his work.[48] (In psychoanalysis, slim evidence does not hinder interpretation.) Freud was confidently enthusiastic about the "domain of biography [becoming] ours," so he wrote in a letter to Carl Jung in 1909. He defended writing a pathography of Leonardo, Peter Gay notes in *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, "on the ground that ordinary biographers, 'fixated' on their hero, succeed only in presenting a 'cold, strange, ideal figure instead of a human being to whom we might feel ourselves distantly related.'"[49]

So profoundly did the founder of psychoanalysis influence twentieth-century notions of who we are, how we develop, our degrees of self-awareness, and the need for psychoanalytic insight to become conscious of these processes that, after Freud, no responsible biographer can justify knowing nothing about psychoanalytic interpretive methods, though like any other interpretive or investigative methods, its assets and liabilities, insights and blindnesses, even its very presence, must be consciously examined. Anthony Storr remarks that ideas and concepts originally derived from psychoanalysis have, for instance, "become so incorporated into intellectual discourse that biographers automatically employ them without always realizing whence they came." He also comments that psychoanalysis, "although liberating in some ways . . . has made us suspicious of virtue. There is little room for altruism, for self-sacrifice, for unselfishness, or for generosity in the Freudian scheme."[50]

Beginning around the turn of the twentieth century and on through the years during and following World War I, almost every complacent verity, habit of thought, and spiritual belief, public and private, was called into question. The genteel discretion of Victorian biography was thoroughly scrutinized by the self-styled "new biographers." These innovative writers brought the following tenets to their revisionist work: brevity, skepticism, a commitment to psychoanalytic notions of the unconscious, and a belief that no one is well served, neither reader nor biographical subject, by suppressing the complexities of the human psyche. These last two insights could have been learned equally well from the great Victorian novelists whose insights into the shadowiness and indecipherability of so much of human behavior Freud would have been the first to acknowledge.[51] These ideas were energetically developed and applied to life writing by Lytton Strachey, perhaps the twentieth century's most notorious biographer, and Virginia Woolf, the subject of chapter 3, arguably this century's most varied and imaginative biographer.

Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) sketches iconoclastic, yet not unadmiring portraits of four Victorian culture heroes: Florence Nightingale, Cardinal Manning, General Gordon, and Thomas Arnold. Strachey, as one reader has observed, balances "sympathy with mockery, and economy with vivid dramatic sense."[52] He "released biography from Victorian respectability and earnestness," comments biographer Michael Holroyd, "and returned it to what he saw as the Johnsonian ideal of finding private motives behind actions."[53] Strachey's poetics of biography waved off the scholarly obligation to undertake painstaking primary research and to include massive amounts of information. He took his facts from other biographers and reinstituted the principle of radical editorial exclusion, a tenet which, in the wake of Boswell's powerful example, few had been willing to accept.

Strachey distinguished his work from conventional life-and-times panegyric biography by ousting notions of the writer's and reader's dutiful responsibility to respectful decorum and plodding thoroughness, emphasizing instead pleasure and even "whimsy." He argued that only by selecting, omitting, and avoiding "the direct method of a scrupulous narration . . . row[ing] out over that great ocean of material, and lower[ing] down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of

day some characteristic" can the past be seen clearly, unclouded by intervening myths or, to use Strachey's word, "visions," which settle in between us and our predecessors.[54]

Yet in spite of his announced iconoclasm, or perhaps curiously in support of it, Strachey's poetics of the "new biography" recalls the classical idea of virtue with a modern heterodox turn: "It is perhaps as difficult to write a good life as to live one." He intended not crudely to debunk admired figures, to demonstrate that they were, after all, merely human, or to refer to them as "mere symptoms of the past." Rather he aimed to demonstrate that mere humans can become heroic and that their value is always "independent of any temporal processes" (Strachey, 10). Strachey's thoughtful distinctions have sometimes been lost on his successors who misread him as mere iconoclast or muckraker. While Strachey's work genuinely invigorated early-twentieth-century biography, after more than fifty years of weighty Victorian panegyric, it has also been misdirected to produce heavy-handed iconoclasm and crude gossip in hands less skillful than the originator's. A similar fate has sometimes overtaken Freud's insights into the dark underside of consciousness, resulting in some of the following famous critiques of biography: Oscar Wilde's witty observation that the prospect of being the subject of a biography added new terrors to death, James Joyce's reference to the *biografiend*, and Joyce Carol Oates's coinage *pathography*.

The relation between art and fact, imagination and truth, fiction and nonfiction became the preoccupying issues of the twentieth century's ways of thinking about biography. Woolf says it best: "The biographer's imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist's art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life. Yet if he carries the use of fiction too far, so that he disregards the truth, or can only introduce it with incongruity, he loses both worlds."[55] In other words, the biographer is, to use Desmond McCarthy's frequently cited phrase, an "artist on oath" who must give equal emphasis and simultaneous attention to aesthetic shaping and scholarly responsibility.[56] Woolf was as pessimistic about the possibility of truly knowing another person as she was strict about the biographer's responsibility to accuracy. She once reminded a friend of the difficulty of separating our own feelings and intentions from those of other people. More likely than not, she feared, our knowledge of others is mere "emanations of ourselves." Woolf's firm belief in

this fundamental human responsibility to treat other people as if they were real and thus separate from ourselves drew her repeatedly to the challenge of biography.

By now in this introduction it may almost go without saying, yet still be worth emphasizing, what has been implied throughout, namely that biography is not a monolithic term. There are various ways to divide up this generic territory. One way is to discriminate among (1) popular biographies narrating the lives of current celebrities—movie stars and sports heroes, for instance; (2) historical biographies emphasizing their central and influential figures' relations to and effects on their times; (3) literary biographies recreating the life and personality of artists, attempting to account for the particular bent of their talent and sometimes, as in critical biographies, interpreting and assessing their work; (4) reference biographies, also called collective biographies, consisting of alphabetically arranged, relatively brief entries on notable figures, associatively collected by several factors, such as profession, notable achievement, and geographical-historical coordinates of their lives; and (5) fictional biographies taking factual materials about real people and events and developing them by applying fictional narrative techniques.[57]

Another taxonomy, proposed by James L. Clifford, identifies categories conceived more explicitly from the writer's point of view regarding the practice of biography, including the relative proportions of attempted subjectivity and objectivity, the kinds of research involved, and the respective proportions of artful imagination and historical fact. Clifford names the following kinds of biography: (1) the "objective" biography which, though it cannot entirely omit subjective choices (even the ordering of data involves personal decisions), attempts to keep them to a minimum; (2) the "scholarly-historical" biography, characterized by the "careful use of selected facts, strung together in chronological order, with some historical background; (3) the "artistic-scholarly" biography, for which the author does all the homework required for scholarly-historical biography but presents these materials "in the liveliest and most interesting manner possible" while not altering or adding to the facts; (4) the "narrative" biography, for which the author collects all the evidence and "turns it into a running narrative, almost fictional in form," though still not adding material; and (5) "fictional" biography, for which the author relies on secondary sources and treats the life

of the historical subject as a novelist would treat a character, adding and inventing as the author sees fit for the effects she is trying to create.[58] The biographer's talents and inclinations, the imagined audience for the biography, and, to some degree, the qualities of the biographical subject all enter into the writer's choice of research methods and compositional form for a life.

If, as this introduction has suggested and the following chapters will examine in more detail, the biographer's task is complex and challenging, while the reader's engagement is intricate and demanding, there is one overarching fact about the function of this genre to which discussion must always return, namely its appeal to the imagination. Richard Ellmann, one of the twentieth century's greatest literary biographers, identifies how the collaborative work of writers and readers of biography is motivated by fundamental, life-defining urges of the imagination: "The effort . . . to make out of apparently haphazard circumstances a plotted circle, to know another person who has lived as well as we know a character in fiction, and better than we know ourselves, is not frivolous. It may even be, for readers as for writers, an essential part of experience."[59] This notion of biography being an essential part of experience is justified by its varied, durable history over many centuries, while for the individual reader, the experience of reading biography over a lifetime may serve as an analogous personal education in the genre's enduringly indispensable uses and pleasures. Such is, at least, the view under Western eyes since biography began in Western culture to satisfy curiosity about the exceptional individual and how he (usually a "he") came to be that way.[60]

This overview would be incomplete without noting explicitly, however, that biography is not a universal genre nor one whose fundamental validity has entirely gone without saying. On the latter issue, postmodern theory and critical practice date emblematically from two seminal essays by Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author" (1968) and Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" (1969), which jointly deconstructed the modern hypostatized and commercialized notion of author. Foucault's question infers readers' and writers' responsibility to "reexamine the empty space left by the author's disappearance . . . along its gaps and fault lines."[61] In spite of the profound influence of Foucault and Barthes, at least among academics, the author as a practical concept and hence literary biography as a successful commercial

genre, so Walter Kendrick notes, continue to thrive. They seem "likely to endure," Kendrick elaborates, precisely because "at their best, literary biographies never catered to a simplistic desire to ride herd on writing and rein signification in." From the genre's origin in the late eighteenth century, he concludes, "it has taken a subtler, more intelligent approach to its subject than Foucault's overbearing 'author' would sit still for."[62]

Biography has proved to be remarkably "'immune' from deconstruction," which is not to say that theory has no place in the biographer's project, since theory by default or design informs every genre.[63] Jürgen Schlaeger describes biography as "fundamentally reactionary, conservative, perpetually accommodating new models of man, new theories of the inner self, into a personality-oriented cultural mainstream, thus always helping to defuse their subversive potential." By contrast with autobiography, which Schlaeger describes as "a discourse of anxiety," biography is "a discourse of usurpation." Autobiographers take as their chief rhetorical responsibility being true to themselves and to the image they wish to present to their audience, while for biographers the "truth-criterion does not consist in the authenticity of an inside view but in the consistency of the narrative and the explanatory power of the arguments."[64] This distinction between *inside* and *outside* views correlates with the two different narrative positions of autobiography and biography, respectively, and may help us understand why minorities gravitate toward autobiography until such time as their group politics and position become, either in their own or other people's eyes, better served by the rhetoric of argument than of confession or witnessing. Such revision is not to be confused necessarily with improvement, but it almost certainly coincides with growing formal traditionalism and also perhaps political conservatism.

With regard to the Western origin of biography, it is important to underscore the fact implied in this chapter's overview of the genre, namely that life writing did not develop worldwide or transhistorically. It is indigenous to the Western world, associated developmentally with the ethos of Christianity and Renaissance humanism, with Western technologies of science and print, the new commercial world, the spread of empire, and Western class structure based on indigenous economic coordinates. Biography has been shaped by and in turn gives form to the values and perspectives of empiricism, the centrality of literacy, the romantic

revolution's invention of the individual's interior life as the new preoccupying drama of the self-examining soul, and the subsequent inventions of psychology and psychoanalysis. Biography is, in other words, culture specific. Even the Western world's aggressive exportation of its distinctive materials, methods, politics, and values to indigenous cultures both within and beyond our borders cannot infuse directly into oral cultures or into cultures where individualism is not the measure of all things the perceptions and assumptions of Western life writing.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter or this book to discuss the forms of life writing worldwide. But let me conclude with three specific instances of non-Anglo-Euramerican societies within whose cultural-historical matrices biography is not a given, where it did not precede autobiography, as it did in the West, and where stories other than the drama of "psychological man" have been more compelling to writers and readers alike.

In Japan, biography did not begin until the seventeenth century when Ohta Gyuichi's *Records of Prince Nobunaga* initiated the genre of lives of *samurai* heroes. There did exist, however, another much earlier tradition of lives, the "nikki," dating from the tenth century. Nikki, meaning diary or journal, are secular tales of romance, of marriage, of fidelity and infidelity, told by women, with an emphasis on the expression of personal emotions and the values of intimacy. In the Western tradition, by contrast, biography precedes autobiography by many centuries; St. Augustine's *Confessions* (fifth century) is usually identified as the original autobiography that started the form off on the spiritual, soul-searching path it has continued to follow.[65] In addition, in the West women did not have the first say, nor were scenes of domestic life and emotion, from a female point of view, the first subjects.[66]

In Southern Africa the historical confluence of two major cultural streams, the Euro-Africans who have sustained a dominant Eurocentric culture and the Africans and other black groups who have struggled to maintain an indigenous culture, has had profound effects on life writing. The latter group associates itself with the oral tradition that flourished before European colonization. This oral tradition, with its emphasis on the eponymous epic hero, a representative but not an individualistic culture hero, was subverted, seduced, and subdued by the intersection of colonizing ideologies of Christianity and empire which, during the

1930s, produced Western-style biographies of the elite. Black nationalistic movements of the 1950s and 1960s produced autobiography in which writers typically present themselves as representatives of their race and culture, not as figures "preoccupied only with the vicissitudes of the individual self" but as people concerned instead "with the individual *and* the historical moment" (my emphasis).[67]

The value of some books on the lives of Native Americans, Paula Gunn Allen proposes, perhaps with some extravagance, may be best appreciated by measuring the degree to which "'they make no sense'" to non-Native Americans, resisting these readers' attempts "to sag back into the usual habits of sense-making, heaving melancholy sighs and thinking knowing thoughts, forcing ourselves with sentimentally condescending appropriation into the circle of their imagination as we have forced our way otherwise into their lives."[68] On a related note, Patricia Nelson Limerick exhorts nonminority biographers of minority subjects (Limerick's instance is a life of Sitting Bull) not merely to avoid historical distortions of pointless guilt but even to minimize reflections on the possible reasons and motives for either white or Indian actions. The subjective world of Sitting Bull, Limerick observes, "what he really thought and felt," remains "well shielded from the inspection of intruders, obscured by the passage of time, the distinctiveness of his culture, and the absence of a consistent written record."[69]

Fantasies of the master race play out in all areas of culture, Ward Churchill observes, literature not exempt, even those genres, like life writing, that are primarily responsible to fact. From the outset of colonial invasions of North America, Churchill continues, "it was necessary to alter indigenous realities in order to assuage the invading colonial conscience" and subsequently "to alter these realities to assure the maintenance of empire."[70] Vine Deloria Jr. makes the case that "underneath all the conflicting images of the Indian one fundamental truth emerges: the white man knows that he is alien and he knows that North America is Indian . . . [though] he thinks that by some clever manipulation he can achieve an authenticity which can never be his."[71] From these and other cultural complications, including the fundamental fact that Anglo-European colonists arrived in the New World "burdened with the cultural baggage of the old World," which inescapably shaped and arguably distorted their view of indige-

nous culture, derives the indispensable value of autobiography taking precedence over biography in the literary history of an oppressed people.[72]

Though these issues may have particular relevance to minority biography, to which I return in more detail in chapters 4 and 5, they are also relevant, in varying degrees, to all biography. The basic requirements and extraordinary difficulties of getting the facts right, finding the appropriate form for presenting them, and understanding the significance of another person's life, even a person of the same gender, race, economic class, and historical period as both the biographer and reader, are never less than a complex challenge.

Chapter 2

Majority Biography 1: Samuel Johnson

> I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful.
>
> Johnson, *Rambler* No. 60 (1750)

Samuel Johnson, Biographer

Modern literary biography that takes as its chief aim to identify the ways a mind "negotiates with its surroundings to produce literature" begins with Samuel Johnson, who occupies this genre's original ground in several senses.[1] Johnson wrote the *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–1781), the first series of modern literary lives in the English language. Second, he is the subject of the best known and, many would say, most important literary biography in the English language, Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791), whose author acknowledged Johnson as his admired model and teacher. And third, Johnson has continued to be the subject of important biographies. These elements, combined with

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