

Biography in Theory

Biography in Theory

Key Texts with Commentaries

Edited by
Wilhelm Hemecker and Edward Saunders
With the assistance of Gregor Schima

DE GRUYTER

This volume was compiled on behalf of the Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft as part of the research programme of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History and Theory of Biography.



Ludwig Boltzmann Institute
History and Theory of Biography

ISBN 978-3-11-050161-2

e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-051667-8

e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-051669-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2017 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston

Cover image: Family pictures in Leo Tolstoy's study in Yasnaya Polyana. © SPUTNIK / Alamy Stock Photo. With kind permission of The State Memorial and Natural Preserve "Museum-estate of Leo Tolstoy Yasnaya Polyana".

Typesetting: Konvertus, Haarlem

Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

☞ Printed on acid-free paper

Printed in Germany

www.degruyter.com

Contents

Edward Saunders

Introduction: Theory of Biography or Biography in Theory? — 1

Samuel Johnson

***The Rambler* 60 (13 October 1750) — 9**

Samuel Johnson

***The Idler* 24 (24 November 1759) — 13**

Caitríona Ní Dhúill

Samuel Johnson's Advice to Biographers — 15

Johann Gottfried Herder

Fifth Letter on the Furtherance of Humanity (1793) — 19

Tobias Heinrich

The Living Memory of Biography: Johann Gottfried Herder's 'Fifth Letter on the Furtherance of Humanity' — 22

Thomas Carlyle

On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History [Extract] (1840) — 27

Caitríona Ní Dhúill

World History as Heroic Biography: Thomas Carlyle's 'Great Men' — 30

Wilhelm Dilthey

Plan for the Continuation of the Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences [Extract] [1904–10] — 35

Wilhelm Hemecker

Between Art and Academia: Wilhelm Dilthey's Theory of Biography — 41

Marcel Proust

The Method of Sainte-Beuve [Extract] [1909] — 47

Edward Saunders

Against Biographical Interpretation: Marcel Proust's Attack on Sainte-Beuve — 55

Sigmund Freud

Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood [Extract] (1910) — 61

Wilhelm Hemecker

The Riddles of Sigmund Freud's *Leonardo* – Biography, Case History, or ...? — 68

Lytton Strachey

Preface to *Eminent Victorians* (1918) — 76

Caitríona Ní Dhúill

Biography as Exposure: Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* — 78

Boris Tomashevsky

Literature and Biography (1923) — 83

Edward Saunders

**In Search of the Literary Fact: Boris Tomashevsky and the Limits
of the Biographical Approach — 91**

Sergei Tretiakov

The Biography of the Object (1929) — 97

Bernhard Fetz

**In the Name of the Collective: Sergei Tretiakov's Plea for a Biography
of the Object — 101**

Siegfried Kracauer

The Biography as an Art Form of the New Bourgeoisie (1930) — 107

Esther Marian

**How to Make Employees Matter: Siegfried Kracauer's Critique
of Biography — 112**

Virginia Woolf

The New Biography (1927) — 119

Virginia Woolf

The Art of Biography (1939) — 124

Manfred Mittermayer

**The Biographical Craft: Virginia Woolf's Contributions to the Theory of
Biography — 131**

Stefan Zweig

History as a Poetess (1943) — 136

Cornelius Mitterer

**Biography between Poetry and History: Stefan Zweig's
'History as a Poetess' — 148**

Jean-Paul Sartre

The Progressive-Regressive Method [Extract] (1957) — 155

Albert Dikovich

Tracing the '*projet original*': Jean-Paul Sartre's Biographical Hermeneutics — 166

Roland Barthes

Sade, Fourier, Loyola [Extract] (1971) — 175

David Österle

A Life in Memory Fragments: Roland Barthes's 'Biographemes' — 178

James Clifford

'Hanging Up Looking Glasses at Odd Corners': Ethnobiographical Prospects (1978) — 186

Edward Saunders

Provincializing the Biographical Subject: James Clifford's Manifesto for a 'Less Centred' Biography — 198

Carolyn Steedman

Landscape for a Good Woman [Extract] (1986) — 204

Caitríona Ní Dhúill

Intersectional Biography: Class, Gender, and Genre in Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* — 206

Pierre Bourdieu

The Biographical Illusion (1986) — 210

Marie Kolkenbrock

Life as Trajectory: Pierre Bourdieu's 'The Biographical Illusion' (1986) — 217

Gillian Beer

Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past [Extract] (1989) — 229

Katharina Prager

Things Mean Differently at Different Historical Moments: Re-thinking (Literary) History and Biography — 238

David E. Nye

Post-Thomas Edison (Recalling an Anti-Biography) (2003) — 244

Katharina Prager and Vanessa Hannesschläger

From 'Anti-Biography' to Online Biography? — 256

Graeme Turner

Approaching Celebrity Studies [Extract] (2010) — 263

Edward Saunders

Biography and Celebrity Studies — 269

List of Sources — 276

Editorial Note — 278

Select Bibliography — 279

List of Contributors — 287

Edward Saunders

Introduction

Theory of Biography or Biography in Theory?

‘Biography in Theory: Key Texts with Commentaries’ aims to introduce students, writers and researchers of biography to questions of biographical criticism with reference to historical texts, but not to define or defend any particular theory of biography. It is composed of extracts from programmatic texts by influential writers, arranged chronologically, that give a sense of the range and the development of thinking on the topic of biography. A particular emphasis is placed on texts from the continental European traditions and two texts, those by Herder and Zweig, appear here in English translation for the first time (at least to the editors’ knowledge).

The title of this present volume, ‘Biography in Theory’, does two things. Firstly, it invites comparison with its presumed opposite – biography in practice. Secondly, it implies, but also avoids, the phrase ‘theory of biography’. It does this for good reason. Most people think of biography foremost as a historical activity and, secondarily, as a literary genre. The phrase ‘theory of biography’ implies an inherent belief in the epistemological value of biography, rather than the questioning of the limits of biographical knowledge. ‘Biography in Theory’ invites a more open, and altogether more sceptical, discussion. As Alison Booth has written recently, with a deliberate measure of irony, ‘Biography must be the least interesting of genres. It seems, in any case, to have been the least studied and theorized’.¹ Yet, despite biography’s apparent neglect, the genre has been discussed more often and more critically than one might at first expect.

The notion of ‘theory’ is understood here as something useful and productive, rather than as something normative or prescriptive. In his well-known account, Jonathan Culler rejects the view of literary theory as ‘an account of the nature of literature or methods for its study’.² Instead, following Richard Rorty, Culler sees theory as a genre of writing that provides orientation both within and without the academic discipline it analyses. He defines theory as ‘accounts others can use about meaning, nature and culture, the functioning of the psyche, the relations of public to private experience and of larger historical forces to

¹ Alison Booth: ‘Prosopography and Crowded Attention in Old and New Media’. In: *On Life Writing*. Ed. Zachary Leader. Oxford, 2015, pp. 72–98 (p. 86).

² Jonathan Culler: *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, 1997, p. 3.

individual experience'.³ In this spirit, *Biography in Theory* aims to provide accounts of debates on biography that others can use in their own academic work on this topic, or related areas of literary, historical or cultural criticism.

This introduction has two aims – to contextualize the present volume and to discuss the notion of 'theory of biography' with reference to the critique of that notion, particularly inasmuch as it has been equated with the question of fictionality.

The Disputed Theory

'People sometimes talk airily about of a "theory of biography" without having any clear idea in their heads of what such an animal would look like.'⁴ In these words, from the introduction to a study of Shakespeare in biography, David Ellis makes clear that he sees the 'theory of biography' as a somewhat nebulous idea. Taken out of context, his words provoke the question of definition: what is the theory of biography? However, the question that is more frequently posed is whether there is a theory of biography at all – or, following Ellis's implication, whether having one would even be useful. Perhaps fearing prescriptive methodological interference in their work, many prominent biographers have disputed that the genre has (or needs) a theory. It may come as little surprise that the distinguished biographer Claire Tomalin states 'I have no theory of biography'.⁵ Similarly, one of the most strident critics of the notion of a 'theory of biography' is the British philosopher and biographer Ray Monk. His 2007 article, 'Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding', is a piece simultaneously sceptical of the notion that there is a theory of biography and seriously interested in the usefulness of the genre.⁶ Monk does not debunk biography in general, only the claims made about it. He gives the following account of the development of biography studies in the past three or four decades:

[...] one hears again and again the complaint that, though biography continues to be immensely popular with the book-buying public, it tends to be ignored by the academic

³ Culler: *Literary Theory*, p. 4.

⁴ David Ellis: *The Truth about William Shakespeare. Fact, Fiction, and Modern Biographies*. Edinburgh, 2012, p. ix.

⁵ Quoted in Zachary Leader: 'Introduction'. In: *On Life-Writing*. Ed. Zachary Leader. Oxford, 2015, pp. 1–6 (p. 6).

⁶ Ray Monk: 'Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding'. In: *Poetics Today* 28:3 (2007), pp. 527–570.

world and has, compared with other literary genres, inspired very little serious reflection. One also hears repeatedly that the aim of this or that conference is to begin the process of providing biography with the critical reflection, with the poetics, or – and this demand gets more strident as time goes by – with the *theory* that it has up to now been lacking.⁷

One does not have to look far to see that Monk has a point. Michael Benton has promised a ‘poetics’ of biography, in order ‘to explicate the generic principles that govern biography’s form and procedures and to ask how this particular genre achieves its effects’.⁸ Similarly, Dmitri Kalugin has described the poetics of biography as ‘underappreciated in the Anglophone study of biography’.⁹ One might even go as far as to argue that the institution from which the present volume originates, the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History and Theory of Biography in Vienna, is indicative of this idea of giving biography the theory it so sorely lacks. Founded in 2005, the Institute effectively institutionalized the notion that a theory of biography was both absent and necessary. This was followed through in practice with publications with such suggestive titles as *Die Biographie – Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie* (‘Biography – Towards the Foundation of its Theory’, 2009), edited by Bernhard Fetz, or the German-language reader which was the direct predecessor to the present volume, *Theorie der Biographie: Grundlagentexte und Kommentar* (‘Theory of Biography: Core Texts and Commentary’, 2011), edited by both Fetz and Wilhelm Hemecker.¹⁰ Similarly, the ‘Biografie Instituut’ at the University of Groningen, led by Hans Renders since 2007, has produced a volume titled *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing* (2013).¹¹ Naturally, the very existence of research institutions producing work on the theory of biography presupposes the possibility of such a thing.¹²

Such certainty is not borne out in the literature (and that includes the publications just listed), which consistently reveals a scepticism about the possibility of writing a theory of biography. In part this is due to the uncertain status

7 Monk: ‘Life without Theory’, p. 556.

8 Michael Benton: *Towards a Poetics of Literary Biography*. Basingstoke and New York, 2015, p. 4.

9 Dmitri Kalugin: ‘Soviet Theories of Biography and the Aesthetics of Personality’. In: *Biography* 38:3 (2015), pp. 343–362 (p. 343).

10 *Die Biographie – Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie*. Ed. Bernhard Fetz. Berlin and New York, 2009; *Theorie der Biographie. Grundlagentexte und Kommentar*. Ed. Bernhard Fetz and Wilhelm Hemecker. Berlin and New York, 2011.

11 *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*. Ed. Hans Renders and Binne De Haan. Lewiston, 2012.

12 It is interesting to note that specifically *theoretical* works have not been the focus of other centres for life-writing – such as the Center for Biographical Research at the University of Hawai’i (1988) or the Centre for Life Writing Research at King’s College London (2007).

of biography as a genre. A common criticism of theoretical writing on biography is, in Benton's words, that it is 'guilty of inflating common-sense principles with unwarranted significance'.¹³ It is also for this reason that Benton uses the word 'poetics' instead. An earlier commentator, Ira Bruce Nadel, saw a theory of biography in the sense of a 'systematized set of principles regarding the form and composition of the genre' as an impossibility, preferring the idea of a theory based on 'language, narration and myth'.¹⁴

Biography and Fictionality

The apparent openness of the 'theory of biography' would seem to suggest room for a broad range of approaches, but Monk does not agree. His most incisive point about the theorization of biography as practised since the 1970s, and particularly in recent years, is that there are effectively no differences in opinion between those writing on the subject. In his view, theoretical writing on biography has not been concerned about the finer points of a theory or poetics of biography, but merely the *propagation* of a uniform theory. He writes the following:

In the literature belonging to this specialism, however, one does not find a variety of *competing* theories of biography. Rather, the competition is, on the one hand, between those writers on biography who see no need for a theory and who are content to write on the genre in the spirit that guided discussion from Johnson to Maurois and, on the other hand, those who *do* see the need for a theory and who seem, for one reason or another, committed to the *same* theory of biography: the theory that it is, to a greater or lesser extent, a branch of fiction.¹⁵

To a degree, Monk is again correct in this assertion. One of the main debates in biography studies, as in autobiography studies, is indeed the problem of fictionality. More precisely, the challenge in biography is, in Zimmermann's words, 'making fictions into facts' ('Faktualisierung der Fiktionen'), how to bridge 'the fundamental rupture between the world and its description, between historical reality and the fiction of history, such that readers regard what they are presented with as being factual'.¹⁶ The metaleptic relationship between fictionality and historicity is a concern that pervades all contemporary academic consideration of

¹³ Benton: *Towards a Poetics*, p. ix.

¹⁴ Ira Bruce Nadel: *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*. London, 1984, p. 151.

¹⁵ Monk: 'Life without Theory', p. 556.

¹⁶ My translation. Christian von Zimmermann: *Biographische Anthropologie. Menschenbilder in lebensgeschichtlicher Darstellung (1830–1940)*. Berlin and New York, 2006, p. 39; p. 47.

non-fiction genres within cultural studies, and is as applicable to documentary film as it is to reportage literature.

Historically, the consideration of the boundaries and limitations of the biographical genre with regard to fiction has been a frequent topic in the discussion of biography. Of the authors featured in the present volume, the Russian constructivist Sergei Tretiakov, in his struggle against ‘the idealism of the novel’, claimed to have approached his biographee with ‘the highest possible degree of objectivity’ (p. 99), effectively in response to biography’s apparent fictionality. For Virginia Woolf, by contrast, biography existed in an ‘ambiguous world, between fact and fiction’ (p. 127), but was nevertheless capable of transmitting a kind of contingent fact ‘subject to changes of opinion’ (p. 128), which could, if treated properly, turn into something intellectually and artistically stimulating. For Stefan Zweig, well-written biography ‘*abstains* from any kind of fabulation’ (p. 143), even if truth itself is something that shifts and changes.

In more recent, academic debates, the view of biography as a kind of ‘third way’ between fact and fiction is a particularly common trope. For example, both Ira Bruce Nadel and Michael Benton focus on defending the factual basis of the liberties taken in biographical narratives. Nadel writes: ‘no life is ever lived to aesthetic proportions [...] We content ourselves with “authorized fictions”’.¹⁷ Such authorized fictions are characterized by ‘the alteration of facts into new forms’ which ‘alter the shape but not the legitimacy of fact’.¹⁸ Benton makes the complementary point that biography does not, like fiction, require ‘the willing suspension of disbelief’, rather is based ‘upon the belief that it is grounded in historical data that we can trust’.¹⁹ Such notions of ‘authorized fictions’ reflect a shared stance against the view of biography as mere fiction.

Whether this strand of academic thought has also led to fictionalized biographies becoming more mainstream (or, indeed, returning to the mainstream) cannot be causally determined. Nevertheless, one of the most widely-praised English-language biographies of 2015, Ruth Scurr’s *John Aubrey: My Own Life*, speaks directly to the notion of biography’s ‘third way’.²⁰ Scurr invents a diary for her subject, telling his biography chronologically through the first-person, filling in the historical contexts but also claiming to make nothing up. While it reads like a fictionalized *autobiography*, a first-person historical fiction based on a real life,

¹⁷ Nadel: *Biography*, p. 100.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁹ Benton: *Towards a Poetics*, p. 140.

²⁰ Ruth Scurr: *John Aubrey: My Own Life*. London, 2015.

the overwhelming feedback from critics and reviewers was that Scurr's book was a milestone historical *biography* and a remarkably successful one at that.²¹

Scurr's book is by no means an outlier. Many of the most successful book biographies of recent years experiment with genre conventions, drawing on literary techniques. Sarah Bakewell rejected the conventions of cradle-to-grave biography in her book *How to Live, or a Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* (2010), in which the table of contents repeats the question twenty times.²² Lucy Hughes-Hallett borrows liberally from the novelist's toolbox in her book *The Pike: Gabriele D'Annunzio: Poet, Seducer and Preacher of War* (2013), which switches back and forth to different periods of D'Annunzio's life.²³ Fictionality has also been a central concern of recent landmarks in the critical literature on biography and life-writing in the last decade, such as Ann Jefferson's *Biography and the Question of Literature in France* (2007), Max Saunders's *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (2010), or Michael Benton's *Towards a Poetics of Literary Biography* (2015).²⁴

Biography in Theory: An Historical and Collective Approach

Given the continuing topicality and timeliness (if not dominance) of the discourse on biography and fiction, the point of exploring 'biography in theory', might simply be to develop a vocabulary through which to talk about the genre, its history and, indeed, its fictionality. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish in this volume between the academic discussion of biography by life-writing

²¹ For example: Stuart Kelly: 'Scobberlotchers!' [Review of Ruth Scurr, *John Aubrey. My Own Life*], *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 February 2015, pp. 3–4. Kelly writes 'As an experiment in the art of biography, it illuminates both its subject, himself a biographer, and the unquestioned assumptions behind biography itself' (p. 3). Unlike older 'fictional metabiographies', such as Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), Scurr's book does not foreground its bio-fictional nature in the narrative. Cf. Ansgar Nünning: 'Fiktionale Metabiographien'. In: *Handbuch Biographie: Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien*. Ed. Christian Klein. Stuttgart and Weimar, 2009, pp. 132–136.

²² Sarah Bakewell: *How to Live: Or a Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*. London, 2010.

²³ Lucy Hughes-Hallett: *The Pike: Gabriele d'Annunzio, Poet, Seducer and Preacher of War*. London, 2013.

²⁴ Ann Jefferson: *Biography and the Question of Literature in France*. Oxford, 2007; Max Saunders: *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature*. Oxford, 2013; Benton, *Towards a Poetics*.

specialists, mostly in university jobs, and the theoretical reflection upon the nature of biography that precedes and accompanies (but never necessarily combines with) the professionalization of academia in the twentieth century. Looking at the longer tradition of biographical debate helps demonstrate that there is no simple equation between ‘biography in theory’ and the discussion of fictionality.

While the field of biography studies could be seen as being as old as the study of history itself, it is certainly also a specific interdisciplinary sub-field of literary history and the social sciences that has established itself, largely in Anglophone academia, but not only, from the 1970s onwards. Landmark studies by Helmut Scheuer (1979), Daniel Madelénat (1984) and Ira Bruce Nadel (1984) appeared in the same period, focusing on different national biographical traditions.²⁵ The journal *Biography*, published by the University of Hawai‘i Press is a case in point: founded in 1978, it started life discussing aspects of biographical methodology and the use of sources, examining the status of its research object, as well as analysing specific lives, book biographies, or theoretical approaches. Mirroring inclusive trends across the humanities, today the focus of the *Biography* journal is much broader, encompassing diverse forms of life-writing rather than just traditional book biographies, and other major journals have since expanded the field (*a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* since 1985, *Life Writing* since 2004, the *European Journal of Life Writing* since 2012).

If publications such as these represent the output of the academic study of biography, autobiography and related topics at universities, then what do the texts collected here represent? *Biography in Theory* is a collection of programmatic reflections on the genre of biography as have been made by writers, practitioners, and thinkers in the Western world – here also with a distinctly European slant – since the genre became established in its modern form. It is intended to historicize the development of the theoretical discussion of biography and to provide contextualizing commentaries on that history for students and teachers of biography studies. There is clearly a difference between the present volume (together with its German-language predecessor) and publications such as *The Routledge Auto / Biography Studies Reader* (2015), edited by Ricia A. Chansky and Emily Hipchen, which anthologize interventions from professional academic commentators on the topic.²⁶ While the more historical approach of the present volume is by no means radical, its use of primary texts demonstrate an awareness that critical accounts of life-writing are not a new phenomenon, even if they are (taking the long view)

²⁵ Daniel Madelénat: *La biographie*. Paris, 1984; Nadel: *Biography* 1984; Helmut Scheuer: *Biographie: Studien zur Funktion und zum Wandel einer literarischen Gattung vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*. Stuttgart, 1979.

²⁶ *The Routledge Auto / Biography Studies Reader*. Ed. Ricia A. Chansky and Emily Hipchen. London, 2016.

a modern one, and the accompanying commentaries help show that our current understandings are only the product of a longer tradition of biographical debate.

Biography in Theory does not seek to provide a uniform theory of biography, or even the kind of typology attempted by Christian Klein, in his useful German-language volume *Handbuch Biographie* (2009).²⁷ The chronological presentation of programmatic texts from the genre's dedicated 'history of thought', combined with commentaries, is intended to historicize and orientate. As a publication that has been produced by a network of current and former colleagues, to a certain degree our understanding of this history is a shared one, although it would be going too far to say that all the authors are 'committed to the *same* theory' (cf. Monk). It is the editors' sincere hope that the volume will help readers to trace the questions and discussions that have accompanied biography's development as a genre, and, ideally, to use these insights to move the discussion of biography forward.

The remit of a book like this is, almost by definition, an impossible one. Many readers will think of texts they consider to be missing, or perhaps argue that its conclusions fall short of 'making progress' in the field. Its unanswered dilemmas and biography's 'missing theory' will continue to be discussed by biographers and academics alike. But at a time when biography studies is no longer an academic newcomer, eclipsed by the brighter lights of celebrity studies and autobiography, it also serves as a reminder of important and enduring debates concerning one of the most popular and accessible of literary-historical genres.

The form and contents of this volume are the product of more than ten years of discussion at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History and Theory of Biography in Vienna, to which I have only latterly been privileged to contribute. It combines a selection of some of the key critical viewpoints on biography with responses written by current and former researchers of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute. It is predominantly based on *Theorie der Biographie* (2011), edited by Bernhard Fetz and Wilhelm Hemecker, who developed the idea of a volume in this form. Nevertheless, it could also be seen as a collective and collaborative effort by the Institute's researchers, past and present. Its latest, English-language incarnation is in part a translation and revision of the older work, and in part a continuation of it, featuring new primary texts and commentaries. This work of translation is crucial to its current form, presenting work in English which would otherwise remain inaccessible beyond national research cultures and their often narrow expectations. Ideally, it will serve to help future students of biography develop their own vocabulary and theoretical positions on the genre of biography.

²⁷ *Handbuch Biographie: Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien*. Ed. Christian Klein. Stuttgart and Weimar, 2009.

Samuel Johnson

***The Rambler* 60 (13 October 1750)**

*Quid sit pulcrum, quid turpe, quid utile, quid non,
Plenius ac melius Chrysippo et Crantore dicit.*¹

Horace

Whose works the beautiful and base contain,
Of vice and virtue more instructive rules
Than all the sober sages of the schools.

Francis

All joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others is produced by an act of the imagination, that realizes the event however fictitious, or approximates it however remote, by placing us, for a time, in the condition of him whose fortunes we contemplate; so that we feel, while the deception lasts, whatever emotions would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves.

Our passions are therefore more strongly moved, in proportion as we can more readily adopt the pains or pleasure proposed to our minds, by recognizing them as once our own, or considering them as naturally incident to our state of life. It is not easy for the most artful writer to give us an interest in happiness or misery, which we think ourselves never likely to feel, and with which we have never yet been made acquainted. Histories of the downfall of kingdoms, and revolutions of empires, are read with great tranquillity: the imperial tragedy pleases common auditors only by its pomp of ornaments and grandeur of ideas; and the man whose faculties have been engrossed by business, and whose heart never fluttered but at the rise or fall of stocks, wonders how the attention can be seized or the affection agitated by a tale of love.

Those parallel circumstances and kindred images to which we readily conform our minds are, above all other writings, to be found in the 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.

¹ 'Tells us what is fair, what is foul, what is helpful what is not, more plainly and better than Chrysippus or Crantor.' Horace: *Epistles*. London, 1926, p. 262. [Via Loeb Classical Library Online (DOI: 10.4159/DLCL.horace-epistles.1926) – eds].

The general and rapid narratives of history, which involve a thousand fortunes in the business of a day, and complicate innumerable incidents in one great transaction, afford few lessons applicable to private life, which derives its comforts and its wretchedness from the right or wrong management of things, which nothing but their frequency makes considerable. *Parva si non fiunt quotidie*,² says Pliny, and which can have no place in those relations which never descend below the consultations of senates, the motions of armies, and the schemes of conspirators.

I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful; for not only every man has, in the mighty mass of the world, great numbers in the same condition with himself, to whom his mistakes and miscarriages, escapes and expedients, would be of immediate and apparent use; but there is such a uniformity in the state of man, considered apart from adventitious and separable decorations and disguises, that there is scarce any possibility of good or ill, but is common to human kind. A great part of the time of those who are placed at the greatest distance by fortune, or by temper, must unavoidably pass in the same manner; and though, when the claims of nature are satisfied, caprice, and vanity, and accident, begin to produce discriminations and peculiarities, yet the eye is not very heedful or quick which cannot discover the same causes still terminating their influence in the same effects, though sometimes accelerated, sometimes retarded, or perplexed by multiplied combinations. We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure.

It is frequently objected to relations of particular lives, that they are not distinguished by any striking or wonderful vicissitudes. The scholar, who passed his life among his books, the merchant, who conducted only his own affairs, the priest, whose sphere of action was not extended beyond that of his duty, are considered as no proper objects of public regard, however they might have excelled in their several stations, whatever might have been their learning, integrity, and piety. But this notion arises from false measures of excellence and dignity, and must be eradicated by considering that, in the esteem of uncorrupted reason, what is of most use is of most value.

It is, indeed, not improper to take honest advantages of prejudice, and to gain attention by a celebrated name; but the business of the biographer is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents, which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestic privacies, and display the minute details of

2 Literally, 'small if it does not happen daily' [eds].

daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue. The account of Thuanus is, with great propriety, said by its author to have been written, that it might lay open to posterity the private and familiar character of that man, *cujus ingenium et candorem ex ipsius scriptis sunt olim semper miraturi*, whose candour and genius will to the end of time be by his writings preserved in admiration.

There are many invisible circumstances which, whether we read as inquirers after natural or moral knowledge, whether we intend to enlarge our science or increase our virtue, are more important than public occurrences. Thus Sallust, the great master of nature, has not forgot, in his account of Catiline, to remark that *his walk has now gone quick, and again slow*, as an indication of a mind revolving something with violent commotion. Thus the story of Melanchthon affords a striking lecture on the value of time, by informing us that, when he made an appointment, he expected not only the hour but the minute to be fixed, that the day might not run out in the idleness of suspense: and all the plans and enterprises of De Wit are now of less importance to the world than that part of his personal character which represents him as *careful of his health, and negligent of his life*.

But biography has often been allotted to writers who seem very little acquainted with the nature of their task, or very negligent about the performance. They rarely afford any other account than might be collected from public papers, but imagine themselves writing a life when they exhibit a chronological series of actions or preferments; and so little regard the manners or behaviour of their heroes 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.

If, now and then, they condescend to inform the world of particular facts, they are not always so happy as to select the most important. I know not well what advantage posterity can receive from the only circumstance by which Tickell has distinguished Addison from the rest of mankind, the *irregularity of the pulse*: nor can I think myself overpaid for the time spent in reading Malherbe, by being enabled to relate, after the learned biographer, that Malherbe had two predominant opinions; one, that the looseness of a single woman might destroy all her boast of ancient descent; the other, that the French beggars made use very improperly and barbarously of the phrase *noble Gentleman*, because either word included the sense of both.

There are, indeed, some natural reasons why these narratives are often written by such as were not likely to give much instruction or delight, and why most accounts of particular persons are barren and useless. If a life be delayed till interest and envy are at an end, we may hope for impartiality, but must expect little intelligence; for the incidents which give excellence to biography are of a

volatile and evanescent kind, such as soon escape the memory, and are rarely transmitted by tradition. We know how few can portray a living acquaintance, except by his most prominent and observable peculiarities, and the grosser features of his mind; and it may be easily imagined how much of this little knowledge may be lost in imparting it, and how soon a succession of copies will lose all resemblance of the original.

If the biographer writes from personal knowledge, and makes haste to gratify the public curiosity, there is danger lest his interest, his fear, his gratitude, or his tenderness overpower his fidelity, and tempt him to conceal, if not to invent. There are many who think it an act of piety to hide the faults or failings of their friends, even when they can no longer suffer by their detection; we therefore see whole ranks of characters adorned with uniform panegyric, and not to be known from one another but by extrinsic and casual circumstances. ‘Let me remember’, says Hale, ‘when I find myself inclined to pity a criminal, that there is likewise a pity due to the country.’ If we owe regard to the memory of the dead, there is yet more respect to be paid to knowledge, to virtue, and to truth.

Copyright: Samuel Johnson: *The Rambler*, No. 60 (October 13, 1750). Reproduced here from *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* Vol. 4. London, 1820, pp. 381–6.

Samuel Johnson

***The Idler* 24 (24 November 1759)**

Biography is, of the various kinds of narrative writing, that which is most eagerly read, and most easily applied to the purposes of life.

In romances, when the wide field of possibility lies open to invention, the incidents may easily be made more numerous, the vicissitudes more sudden, and the events more wonderful; but from the time of life when fancy begins to be overruled by reason and corrected by experience, the most artful tale raises little curiosity when it is known to be false; though it may, perhaps, be sometimes read as a model of a neat or elegant style, not for the sake of knowing what it contains, but how it is written; or those that are weary of themselves, may have recourse to it as a pleasing dream, of which, when they awake, they voluntarily dismiss the images from their minds.

The examples and events of history press, indeed, upon the mind with the weight of truth; but when they are repositied in the memory, they are oftener employed for show than use, and rather diversify conversation than regulate life. Few are engaged in such scenes as give them opportunities of growing wiser by the downfall of statesmen or the defeat of generals. The stratagems of war, and the intrigues of courts, are read, by far the greater part of mankind, with the same indifference as the adventures of fabled heroes, or the revolutions of a fairy region. Between falsehood and useless truth there is little difference. As gold which he cannot spend will make no man rich, so knowledge which he cannot apply will make no man wise.

The mischievous consequences of vice and folly, of irregular desires and predominant passions, are best discovered by those relations which are levelled with the general surface of life, which tell not how any man became great, but how he was made happy; not how he lost the favour of his prince, but how he became discontented with himself.

Those relations are therefore commonly of most value in which the writer tells his own story. He that recounts the life of another, commonly dwells most upon conspicuous events, lessens the familiarity of his tale to increase its dignity, shows his favourite at a distance, decorated and magnified like the ancient actors in their tragic dress, and endeavours to hide the man that he may produce a hero.

But if it be true, which was said by a French prince, ‘that no man was a hero to the servants of his chamber’, it is equally true, that every man is yet less a hero to himself. He that is most elevated above the crowd, by the importance of his employments, or the reputation of his genius, feels himself affected by fame or

business, but as they influence his domestic life. The high and low, as they have the same faculties and the same senses, have no less similitude in their pains and pleasures. The sensations are the same in all, though produced by very different occasions. The prince feels the same pain, when an invader seizes a province, as the farmer when a thief drives away his cow. Men, thus equal in themselves, will appear equal in honest and impartial biography; and those whom fortune or nature places at the greatest distance may afford instruction to each other.

The writer of his own life has, at least, the first qualification of an historian, the knowledge of the truth; and though it may be plausibly objected that his temptations to disguise it are equal to his opportunities of knowing it, yet I cannot but think that impartiality may be expected with equal confidence from him that relates the passages of his own life, as from him that delivers the transactions of another.

Certainty of knowledge, not only excludes mistake, but fortifies veracity. What we collect by conjecture, and by conjecture only can one man judge of another's motives or sentiments, is easily modified by fancy or by desire; as objects imperfectly discerned take forms from the hope or fear of the beholder. But that which is fully known, cannot be falsified but with reluctance of understanding, and alarm of conscience: of understanding, the lover of truth; of conscience, the sentinel of virtue.

He that writes the life of another is either his friend or his enemy, and wishes either to exalt his praise, or aggravate his infamy; many temptations to falsehood will occur in the disguise of passions, too specious to fear much resistance. Love of virtue will animate panegyric, and hatred of wickedness embitter censure. The zeal of gratitude, the ardour of patriotism, fondness for an opinion, or fidelity to a party, may easily overpower the vigilance of a mind habitually well disposed, and prevail over unassisted and unfriended veracity.

But he that speaks of himself, has no motive to falsehood or partiality except self-love, by which all have so often been betrayed, that all are on the watch against its artifices. He that writes an apology for a single action, to confute an accusation, to recommend himself to favour, is indeed always to be suspected of favouring his own cause; but he that sits down calmly and voluntarily to review his life for the admonition of posterity, or to amuse himself, and leaves this account unpublished, may be commonly presumed to tell truth, since falsehood cannot appease his own mind, and fame will not be heard beneath the tomb.

Copyright: Samuel Johnson: *The Idler*, No. 84 (November 24, 1759). Reproduced here from the *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* Vol. 7. London, 1810, pp. 339–42.

Caitríona Ní Dhúill

Samuel Johnson's Advice to Biographers

Samuel Johnson's role in the history of biography is threefold: practitioner, theorist, and biographical subject.¹ Through his own biographical writings, he made significant contributions to the development of modern biography in English.² His *Lives of the Poets* (1779–81) are, according to one critic, 'among the first biographies in English literature to have stripped themselves of medieval hagiographic overtones'.³ His *Life of Savage* (1744) demonstrated a view expressed repeatedly in his theoretical discussions of biography: namely that *every* life is worth telling, even a life marked by personal and artistic failure, poverty and criminality. The biography of Johnson written by his friend and amanuensis James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1791), not only confirmed Johnson's reputation, it went on to become the 'paradigmatic example of biography' in English.⁴ Boswell's *Johnson* established the comprehensive, chronological, documented account of a life as a genre that would rival the novel in terms of literary significance and cultural centrality for well over a century. Boswell's *magnum opus* is itself prefaced by a discussion of biographical method that quotes at length from one of the essays by Johnson printed here, the *Rambler* essay of 1750.

Both the *Rambler* essay and its companion piece of nine years later from the *Idler* clearly demonstrate that Johnson's thinking on biography is part of his moral philosophy. In laying out his understandings of the genre's purpose and function and setting forth what constitutes sound biographical practice, he centres the discussion on the ethical categories of truth, empathy, and usefulness. Biographies are more instructive than novels because they are true, and more engaging than historical narratives on a grand scale because they deal with personal and everyday life. If – and here Johnson seems to anticipate George Eliot – the purpose of reading is to enlarge one's capacity for empathy,⁵ then biography is the genre best

1 See Jack Lynch: 'The Life of Johnson, *The Life of Johnson*, the *Lives of Johnson*'. In: *Johnson after 300 Years*. Ed. Greg Clingham and Philip Smallwood. Cambridge, 2009, pp. 131–44.

2 Murray Pittock: 'Johnson, Boswell, and Their Circle'. In: *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740–1830*. Ed. Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee. Cambridge, 2004, pp. 157–72.

3 Greg Clingham: 'Life and Literature in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*'. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*. Ed. Greg Clingham. Cambridge, 1997, pp. 161–91 (p. 186).

4 Lynch: 'The Life of Johnson', p. 132.

5 'If Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally.' George Eliot: 'Letter to Charles Bray (5 July 1859)'. In: *The George Eliot Letters*. Ed. Gordon S. Haight. New Haven, 1954, p. 111.

suited to this task. This is because the reader can both believe biography as the verifiable narrative of an individual life, and relate to the personal circumstances and daily experiences it portrays.

At the heart of the claims Johnson makes for biography's importance and usefulness lies the reader's empathic identification with the biographical subject. It is this, in Johnson's view, that is unique to biography. The imaginative act of empathy proceeds through identification: placed in the position of the biographical subject, the reader gains access to valuable vicarious experience, participating in the 'happiness or calamities' of another. It is precisely the mundane – 'things which nothing but their frequency makes considerable' – that allows the reader of biography to enter into the experience of the subject and to relate this back to his own experience. The 'business of the biographer' is to facilitate this process by leading the reader into the private, 'familiar' world of the subject, into 'domestic privacies' and 'the minute details of daily life'.

Johnson's vision of biography as a school of both empathy and self-knowledge emerges through comparisons with other forms of writing – the novel, historiography, autobiography and memoir. This emphasis on comparison across genres is no doubt due to the sheer diversity, in generic terms, of Johnson's own literary output, which encompassed poetry, criticism, fiction, sermons, biography, letters and lexicography. The 1750 essay contrasts biography favourably with more broad-ranging, impersonal narratives such as 'histories of the downfall of kingdoms and revolutions of empires', arguing that the latter may leave the reader unmoved, while the former resonates with the reader's own life and is thus more likely to 'enchain the heart by irresistible interest'. By contrast, in historical narratives which describe events that are remote and to which the reader is unlikely to relate personally, the reading experience is marked by detachment, even indifference. A balance of pleasure and worth, of the 'delightful' and the 'useful', is evidently crucial here: biographies offer not just a richer and more rewarding reading experience than more sweeping historical narratives, but also lessons from which the reader can profit. One senses Johnson's own capacity for empathy and self-recognition in the assertion that private life 'derives its comforts and its wretchedness from the right or wrong management of things'. Biography's value dwells in the fact that it details how individuals have 'managed things', for better or worse, depicting the 'comforts and wretchedness' that have ensued from such management.

As the *Rambler* essay proceeds, the concerns of the moral philosopher become interwoven with the judgements of the literary critic. Johnson identifies a perennial challenge for biographers: that of 'selection', of knowing what to include and what to leave out. While some details enliven a biographical narrative, imparting to the reader a sense of intimacy with the subject's reality, others are redundant. The examples offered are weighed against each other in terms of

knowledge gain: where Sallust on Catiline is lauded for the detail of the subject's irregular walk, Thomas Tickell on Joseph Addison is censured for the inclusion of trivia concerning an irregular pulse that according to Johnson does little to illuminate. The difference lies not primarily in the historical gulf separating these two cases, but rather in the access biographical detail grants – or fails to grant – to the inner life and character of the subject. In the former case, the walk is 'an indication of a mind revolving something with violent commotion': biography, in Johnson's view, is of value precisely to the extent to which it enables us to follow, and thus empathize with, the workings of another's mind. (Interestingly, the examples relate to a bodily aspect of the subject in each case.)

Having identified selection of material as a key challenge, Johnson moves to a diagnosis of the unsatisfactory quality of much biography. Biographical knowledge is at its fullest and most lively where it arises from direct acquaintance, but the closer the relationship between biographer and subject, the greater the risk of partiality. The result: 'whole ranks of characters' become 'adorned with uniform panegyric'. Johnson's ideal biographer manages to transcend this tension, combining close personal knowledge of the subject with a commitment to 'knowledge, virtue, and truth'. When properly executed, the genre demonstrates Johnson's moral philosophy in action. The moral-philosophical quandary of how to think self-determination in a world of contingency can be helpfully addressed, if not resolved, by 'thinking biographically'.⁶ Hence, perhaps, the resounding endorsement of the genre: 'No species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography.'

Underpinning Johnson's vision of biography as a locus of identification, empathy and vicarious experience is a commitment to a concept of universal humanity which may seem at odds with the author's received image as a conservative, counter-Enlightenment thinker.⁷ Politically conservative he undoubtedly was, but the arguments he advances in favour of biography are in some ways strikingly egalitarian. Far from serving to create a pantheon of exemplary cultural heroes, biographical narratives underline rather what is 'common to human kind' and reveal a 'uniformity in the state of man'. The very mundanity of biography, its concern with the domestic and the private, has a levelling effect which serves to downplay differences of status and foreground the routine processes of living shared by all. Of course, this levelling effect is itself politically problematic where

⁶ Catherine N. Parke: *Samuel Johnson and Biographical Thinking*. Columbia/MO, 1991; Fred Parker: "'We are perpetually moralists': Johnson and Moral Philosophy". In: *Samuel Johnson after 300 Years*. Ed. Greg Clingham and Philip Smallwood. Cambridge, 2009, pp. 15–32.

⁷ See Clingham and Smallwood: 'Introduction: Johnson Now and In Time'. In: *Johnson after 300 Years*, pp. 1–14.

it glosses over social and class differences, most obviously in Johnson's assertion in the *Idler* essay that 'The prince feels the same pain when an invader seizes a province, as the farmer when a thief drives away his cow'. Nevertheless, this essay propounds a vision of biography as a means through which identification and empathy may be experienced despite and across social divides, in a sort of two-way traffic upwards and downwards through the social hierarchy: 'those whom fortune or nature place at the greatest distance may afford instruction to each other.' Similarly, Johnson's claims in the *Rambler* concerning the usefulness of biography extend to all sorts of lives, rather than being limited to the biographies of some exemplary or heroic elite: 'There has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful'.

The *Idler* piece of 1759 takes up the themes of the *Rambler*, focusing first on the distinction between biography and the novel, and then on autobiography as the standard towards which biography should aspire. Biography, argues Johnson in the later essay, appeals to a more mature sensibility than fiction. The only justifications Johnson advances for reading fiction are its amusement value and its stylistic qualities, whereas a written life is, in his view, both true and useful, or more precisely, useful to the extent that it is true. What distinguishes the *Idler* essay most clearly from the earlier piece (apart from its greater concentration and the more marked cadences and symmetries of its sentences) is the role it accords to autobiography as a kind of ideal standard for biography – an idea that anticipates similar arguments of Wilhelm Dilthey over a century and a half later.⁸ As biographers, when writing the lives of others, are prone to bias and must rely on speculation in their reconstruction of the subject's inner life, it is not biography but autobiography – 'those relations [...] in which the writer tells his own story' – which represents for Johnson the ideal of reliable life depiction. Of course, Johnson himself was a prolific biographer, not only of personal acquaintances and contemporaries (as in his *Life of Savage*), but also of figures remote from him in time (as in his *Lives of the Poets*). This being the case, his reflections on biography's inferiority to autobiography in the 1759 essay are best read as an implicit manifesto of *biographical* standards. His image of the perfect memoirist – 'he that sits down calmly and voluntarily to review his life for the admonition of posterity, or to amuse himself, and leaves this account unpublished' – is an indirect appeal to biographers to become aware of their positive or negative bias, to avoid making heroes of their subjects, to resist the temptation to speculate about 'motives and sentiments', and to adhere at all times as closely as possible to the truth.

⁸ Cf. Wilhelm Dilthey: 'Plan for the Continuation of the Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences', pp. 35–40 in the present volume.

Johann Gottfried Herder

Fifth Letter on the Furtherance of Humanity (1793)

The melancholy which befell you during the *Nekrolog* [by Schlichtegroll] is not without cause; but let us consider this more closely. Should the place of burial itself, being sited here, not also share the blame?

The name 'register of the dead' is certainly a sad name. *Let the dead bury the dead*. We want to see the deceased as living beings, to rejoice in their lives, including their lives as they continue after their demise, and for this same reason we gratefully record their enduring contribution for posterity. Thus the obituary is transformed into an *Athanasium* [Athanasian Creed], into a *Mnemeion* [memorial or sepulchre]. *They are not dead*, our benefactors and friends: for their souls, their contributions to the human race, their memories live on.

The design of this book [the register of the dead] would also change therewith, and certainly for the better, if the design could even be executed another way.

Only the lives of those would belong in this collection *who really contributed to the best of humanity*; and it would be the narrator's focus how they accomplished this? How they became the people they were? What they battled with, what they had to overcome? How far they came and what they left for others to complete? Finally how they themselves saw their business, the work of their life? A true narration of this, if possible based on the words, or the writings of the departed, or of those who knew and observed them closely, would be like a voice from the grave, like a testament of the deceased concerning his most personal property, concerning his most noble legacy.

It would follow from this that for men of learning one would have to engage *with the value and the impact of their writings*, for active men of business with the *profession with which they served mankind*. For *Crugot*, for example, the *Predigten vom Verfasser des Christen in der Einsamkeit* ['Sermons by the Author of *Christ in Solitude*'] are not mentioned, although with them he was, at least in the second part, well ahead of his contemporaries. *Crugot's* few writings deserve to endure as long as the German language endures. And it was an agreeable circumstance here to find that *Carmer* had supported the printing of *Christ in der Einsamkeit*. How now? Should the clear-thinking, agreeable man, whose morality breathes the pure humanity of Christ, have died without leaving writings worthy of print? And should *Carmer*, should the two princes and the princess, who, as the biography says, honoured and loved in him their worthy teacher, should the friends who knew him more intimately, have allowed this gift for the world and future

generations to disappear? I hope not: for alongside *Sack* and *Spalding*, *Crugot* was one of the foremost propagators of good taste and of a lucid philosophy in his professional circle, not only in those parts, but in Germany in general. He does not have to be dead; rather he lives!

As almost nothing can be more tedious than an indeterminate funeral oration: so, it seems to me, the tenderest strings of the human heart are to be plucked most gently here. Familial, amicable and private settings, so long as they are not based on an insightful detail, rarely stand extended praise in general expression; either one goes too far or one wears them out. In general, that which the teacher of man said of the inner side of morality is also true of his representation: 'what belongs to the eye of the Almighty alone and was done before him, does not want to be prominently displayed before the eyes of all men, even if it were revealed to the truest friend of the deceased.' It is different with certain facts; they speak of themselves, they warn, teach, console.

Beginning a life description with a generalization [*Allgemeinsatz*] is highly unfortunate. Which generalization can exhaust a human life? Which does not mislead more often than it shows the way? In the Latin *memoriis* such common-places are customary. Here one wishes that the remark would grow out of its natural place in the progress of the narration, or that it would seal finally the impression of the whole. About some of these lives stronger things could have been said, now with a stern gaze, now with a heart-breaking sigh.

For indeed, my friend, it is true: *Germany cries for several of its children*. It calls: *they are no more*, they perished aggrieved, without succour or solace. Thus here, on the grave of the deceased, as if in a holy sanctuary, truth and humanity, the former gentle and touching, the latter impartial and stern, raise their voices and say: 'this man was oppressed, that one abused, this one tempted and stolen. Without law and judgement he languished many years in a deep castle dungeon. The eye of his lord master gloated over him. His late release was mercy, and he never learned the cause of his imprisonment until his dying day.'¹ True occurrences of this sort had to be transmitted from mouth to mouth, from diary to diary: for when the living stay silent, the dead are able to rise from their graves and testify.

Conducted in this manner, what would be more edifying and useful than such a register of the dead? There is no miscreant on earth who, if his innocent or even noble opponent lay there with outstretched arms and the death knell rang above him, whose heart would not be pierced and gnawed at by the ways he had

¹ A very well-known German story, about which more information can be found in the second part of *Schubart's* self-written life. [Bernhard Suphan]

hurt him [the opponent] in life. The serpents of rage, of jealousy and ungratefulness, pass away at the grave of the deceased and turn against the living criminal. Sit here, therefore, Virtue and Human Dignity, like there on Ajax's grave, and weigh and judge.

I know well how difficult it would be to carry all this out, at least in Germany. But precisely because Möser's patriotic fantasy *Aufmunterung und Vorschlag zu einer westphälischen Biographie* ['Encouragement and Proposal for a Westphalian Biography'] could be fulfilled here to a great extent, because if nowhere else, the deserving men of many and all German provinces could at least meet on God's Acre [i.e. a burial ground], and thus in the earth at last recognize each other as fellow countrymen, as brothers, as labourers on a work of the human profession; this alone should already encourage each well-disposed person to contribute, from *his* district, according to his knowledge and ability, to the perfect completion of the whole.

Above all things, though, I would wish for *individual biographies of selected remarkable people*. How far we Germans lag behind other nations, French, English, Italian! We lived, thought, exerted ourselves, but we could not write. The rough or tired hand that bore the sword, the sceptre, the tool and instrument, that wielded too the chancellor's quill, mostly disdained the ruling pen of laborious self-description. The domestic and family feeling to live for one's own and to live on with them largely met its end with the time of chronicles of old. Whatever remarkable old self-descriptions can be saved, whatever new ones can be discovered here or there, should be saved and used, until (I know for certain the time will come) remarkable dealings will awaken freer dispositions and these the spirit of a noble public [*Publicität*], in which all ranks will *walk in the light*. Praecipuum munus annalium, ne virtutes sileantur; vtque pravis dictis factisque ex posteritate et infamia metus sit [Tacitus, *Annales*, 3:65. 'the first duty of history – to ensure that merit shall not lack its record and to hold before the vicious word and deed the terrors of posterity and infamy'].²

Copyright: Translation by Edward Saunders. Original appeared as: Johann Gottfried Herder: 'Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität'. Herder: *Sämmtliche Werke*, Vol. 17. Ed. Bernhard Suphan. Berlin 1881, pp. 19–22.

² English version taken from Tacitus: *Histories. Books 4–5. Annals. Books 1–3*. Trans. Clifford H. Moore and John Jackson. Loeb Classical Library 249. Cambridge/MA, 1931, pp. 624–5 – ES.

Tobias Heinrich

The Living Memory of Biography: Johann Gottfried Herder's 'Fifth Letter on the Furtherance of Humanity'

'Let the dead bury the dead. We want to see the deceased as living beings [...]': with this brief imperative, Johann Gottfried Herder captures the essence of his ideas on the reappraisal of biographical writing around 1800.¹ In the course of the eighteenth century, interest in biographical genres grew continually. Herder's 'Fifth Letter', with its nuanced approach to the forms and possibilities of biography, reveals some of the causes and contexts of this development. At the same time, the text shows Herder posing fundamental questions about the epistemological preconditions of biography and its political role within society before the boom in biographical writing in the nineteenth century.

Herder's point of reference for the fifth of his *Letters on the Furtherance of Humanity*, published from 1793 onwards, was Friedrich Schlichtegroll's *Nekrolog* ('Necrology', 1791–1806).² Schlichtegroll was a philologist and a teacher at the *Gymnasium* in Gotha, who later became the general secretary of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences. In 1790, he began to publish 'news of the lives of persons this year deceased', as the work's subtitle proclaimed. Schlichtegroll's collection of life stories, which also included the first biographical account of Mozart, did not limit itself in terms of class or gender. Alongside the biography of ordinary carpenters and educated shepherds, it included the exceptional life of the soldier Johanna Sophia Kettner, who, disguised as a man, had served in the Austrian army.³ Schlichtegroll's *Nekrolog* was only one of numerous biographical

1 Examples include the following texts by Herder: 'Ueber Thomas Abbt's Schriften' (On Thomas Abbt's Writings, 1768), 'Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele' ('On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul', 1778). In: *Herder: Philosophical Writings*. Ed. and trans. Michael N. Forster. Cambridge, 2002, pp. 187–244; 'Denkmal Johann Winkelmanns' (Johann Winkelmann's Memorial, 1778), and 'Vier einleitende Briefe zu G. Müllers *Bekenntnisse merkwürdiger Männer von sich selbst*' (Four Introductory Letters on G. Müller's *Confessions of Remarkable Men About Themselves*, 1793). All German texts are included in the *Sämmtliche Werke* Ed. Bernhard Suphan. Berlin, 1877–1908.

2 *Nekrolog auf das Jahr 1790. Enthaltend Nachrichten von dem Leben merkwürdiger in diesem Jahr verstorbener Personen*. Ed. Friedrich Schlichtegroll. Gotha, 1791.

3 Friedrich Schlichtegroll: 'Geuß, ein Schreiner im Koburgischen' [Geuß, a Carpenter in Coburg]. In: *Nekrolog auf das Jahr 1799. Enthaltend Nachrichten von dem Leben in diesem Jahr*