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Edited by Laurence S. Lockridge, John Maynard, and Donald D. Stone

Excerpt

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1

*Biographobia: some personal reflections
on the act of biography*

MARGARET ATWOOD

My grandmother died at the impressive age of ninety-four. I knew her as an austere old lady, a Nova Scotia rural matron with stringent views on washing your hands before meals, a person you had to tiptoe around verbally; there were certain things – quite a few things – that could not be discussed in her presence. She did not smoke, drink, or swear, and she handled difficult social situations by talking about the weather. She was said, by her daughters – my mother and my aunts – to have had a sense of humour.

After she was dead, one of my aunts discovered a short diary my grandmother had kept in the summer of 1899, when she was sixteen. It was written in pencil, on cheap scribbler paper, with many abbreviations, dashes and exclamation marks. My aunt transcribed this diary and sent copies to interested relatives, myself among them.

My reaction to this act was twofold. First, horror. This was a private diary! What would my straightbacked grandmother have thought about such a violation of her privacy? But then, the question that must have occurred to every biographer who has ever set pen to paper intruded: why did my grandmother keep her diary? Why did Pepys keep his? Why do people write diaries, if they don't want people to read them, ever? Is it only to remind themselves of what they were like when they were younger? If you were the last person alive on the earth, if you were marooned on the moon with no chance of rescue, would you keep a diary?

What is it that impels people – even people like my grand-

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mother, the last sort you would expect – to so novelize their lives, to attempt to impose some sort of selection, form and meaning upon them, and then to save the results? If people do these things, don't they intend – like every other writer – to be read? Perhaps my aunt's transcription was not a violation after all, but a discovery, of a message to the future, half-mischievously hidden away by my grandmother eighty-seven years ago. Perhaps she had not been writing only to herself at all. Perhaps she had also been writing to me.

My second reaction was amazement, for when I began to read the diary – in a contest between horror and curiosity, curiosity usually wins – I discovered a person I did not realize had ever existed. On July 15, 1899, she writes – and I notice myself using the present tense, as if she is still alive, as if she is, in fact, sixteen and it is still July 15, 1899 – she writes, "I made a strawberry shortcake for tea on Monday night and it was fairly good – I put in the soda this time. Tuesday morning I started reviewing the Latin; then Abbie and I went out and walked the fence in the lane for awhile; and then we went down to the washing pool and waded – I got my underclothes soaking. *You must never tell or let on to anybody* that you know about the last two, for *it's both scandalous and ridiculous* for a great girl like me to walk fences and go wading."

Later she says, "I wish to goodness I knew when to keep my tongue still but alas, alack I do not."

And later still: "Now, mind you it's Tuesday & I haven't written oh, what a girl am I? I'm ambitious too, have never studied my Latin a bit! Oh, you lazy, lazy, lazy good-for-nothing thing!"

No one would have suspected, meeting my grandmother in her later years, that a fence-walker and pond-wader, who considered herself too talkative and lazy, was hidden somewhere within her. Yet this was the case, for do authentic manuscripts lie?

Another mystery: why did my grandmother's confession of what she considered to be her faults make me think better of her? Was it simply a little of the unattractive glee we experience at the sight of human fallibility when it doesn't happen to be our own? Or was it because I knew more of the story than the writer of the

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scribbler pages could possibly have known? I knew she was to get married, to have six children, one of whom would not survive, to outlive her husband, to become a ferocious bridge-player, and to die, finally, confused and unsure of where she was. It was my knowledge, not the writer's, that made her high-spirited jottings so poignant for me. I knew also that her sister Abbie, her fellow fence-walker and pond-wader, was to die almost blind, almost deaf, almost paralyzed, but with her mind clear and active. I knew that she would say, to my visiting aunt, "I am lying here telling myself the story of my life. When I get to the end, I will close the book." I knew that she did.

My position *vis-à-vis* my grandmother's manuscript is that of the biographer, who feels compelled to make, of other people's lives, a story. You can make a story when you know the end, and when you get to the end, you close the book. Our stories of our own lives are always incomplete; it is left to others to complete them.

My grandmother's diary ends: "Well, half the holidays are gone, never to come back, so goodbye, goodbye, goodbye books." As far as I know, these were the last words of deliberate self-revelation she was ever to write.

When I was in university, I hated biography. I hated it so much that I refused to study Wordsworth for my English Romantics examination, because the approach to Wordsworth taken by the professor had been largely biographical. I did not want to know about Dove Cottage. Dove Cottage embarrassed me. If the famous daffodils had been actual daffodils, actually glimpsed by Wordsworth in the course of an actual walk and duly recorded in Dorothy's journal, I wished to remain in ignorance of it. The only piece of Wordsworth's biography that I welcomed was the news that Lucy had never existed.

But in fact the only biographies I hated were those of writers. I read, avidly, the biographies of other people, people who, I felt, had the right to have biographies written about them; for, not being writers themselves, they had no access to the word, to the "story" part of the story of their lives, and they needed help. Also they had done real things, in the external world, whereas writers, usually, had not; all they had done was scribble,

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scribble, scribble, like Mr. Gibbon. So what was there to say about the lives of writers? I read biographies of military men such as General Rommel and Napoleon, and of politicians such as Disraeli. I read biographies of scientists and explorers, even of painters, actors, musicians and dancers. None of them gave me any qualms. But when it came to the biographies of writers – which I had to read, in the course of my studies, whether I liked it or not – I felt squirmy.

I wonder, now, what accounted for this squirminess of mine. Possibly it was that I intended to be a writer myself, and reading the biographies of writers made me self-conscious. Despite myself, I would start thinking of myself in the third person. “It is April the second, nineteen sixty one. She walks along the street, contemplating the distance between herself and the next street-car stop. She is thinking about Kafka. Her feet hurt. She is thinking she should have worn a different pair of shoes.” This sort of thing, if it went on long enough, drove me mad, partly because, in the third person, I sounded much less dramatic than I would have liked. Perhaps my uneasiness in the face of writers’ biographies was caused by the thought that my own would come out dull.

But also I didn’t want to be spied on. I knew, from reading biographies, what ragbags of conjecture could accumulate around a cryptic letter, a chance remark made by a third person, a shred of malice. Did Keats have syphilis? Did Shelley drown on purpose? Why didn’t Jane Austen ever get married? Could *Paradise Lost* be explained by blind Milton’s shoddy treatment of his stenographic daughters? Did it matter that Poe was a drunk and Pope a hunchback? If the smell of cabbage cooking was supposed to enter into the poem, which particular cabbage, cooked when, had merged itself with *The Waste Land*? What light did Tennyson’s aside about his suspenders, at the garden party, cast on *Idylls of the King*? Did Byron’s remark about the poetry of Keats – that it was “Johnny Keats’s *p-ss a bed* poetry” – illuminate the “Ode to a Nightingale”? It seemed to me that a lot got into critical biographies that, if it had been exchanged over the back fence instead of typeset and hardbound, would have been called bubbleheaded gossip. Biography seemed to me subversive, a danger to art.

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And what about me? I was, after all, a budding female writer, and such people were, at that time, rarer and therefore more subject to mythology than they are now. I had already heard some interesting rumours about myself which would have been more interesting, to me, if they had been true. What would be made of me, by the misguided, when I wasn't around to set them straight? Would someone, sometime, ever chronicle my wardrobe (scanty and, at that time, mostly black), make caustic remarks about my hairdos (dubious), try to unearth my boy-friends? I hoped not.

Every attempt I made to keep a journal was blighted by the venomous fogs of biography. "Went to Eaton's. It rained. Dinner with D." That was about all I could bring myself to squeeze out. Occasionally I tried to be more literate, and to write about what I was trying to write; but my profound literary thoughts, once I had got them down on the page, looked either too pompous or too stupid for words. My embryonic journals, which lurched between staccato and bloat, seldom survived three days. What person's life, I mused, looked at through a microscope, comes out admirable? Mankind cannot bear too much biography.

There was yet another problem. I was a budding *female* writer, and, whether I liked it or not – and I didn't – what the biographers had to say about female writers was not encouraging. This was the early sixties, when the dread hand of Togetherness lay heavy upon the land and couples prayed to Our Freud, and most biographies of woman writers were veiled warnings. Emily Dickinson was weird, skipped about in white dresses, hid in cupboards, and she never got married. Christina Rossetti looked at life through the wormholes in a shroud, and also she never got married. Charlotte Brontë died of pregnancy, they said, Emily of TB, and also *she* never got married. George Eliot looked like a horse, and although she did get married, it was awfully late in life and she never had children. Then there were Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, who had one-upped everyone else in the self-destructive department. Could it be that I wasn't gloomy or crazy enough to be an authentic female writer? There wasn't a lot of uplift in these biographies; all and all, these woman writers had not fulfilled their femininity, the way you were supposed to. Safer by far for the aspiring woman writer just

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MARGARET ATWOOD

to read their books, and to leave the stories of their warped, doomed or discouraging lives alone. And so, for a while, I did.

But not forever. I suppose I began to like the biographies of writers when I began to recognize them for what they are: the stories of lives, the *stories* of lives. They were not the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth, the bare-naked truth; they were composed of selected truths, and therefore subjective; they were not the only possible version of a given life. I didn't have to take the biographer's word for it; I could have second opinions. Maybe the women writers weren't as miserable as their biographers said they were. Maybe they liked their lives, at least some of the time, even if they never got married.

The biographer, like the novelist, is a constructor of narratives; it's just that the ground rules are a little different. Novels have to convince the reader that the imagined is true, and therefore they have to be plausible; whereas biographies, having some grounding in factuality, can cross the boundary between credibility and the totally bizarre with more impunity. All novelists know that the truth, if not stranger than fiction, is at least more unbelievable. If you were to read, in a novel, that a man had presented his son, on his twenty-first birthday, with an account for all the expenses incurred in his upbringing, including the doctor's bill for his delivery at birth, you'd think the novelist was exaggerating; but the bill really existed, and the son was Ernest Thompson Seton. (Seton paid it.)

I suppose I began to think about biographies, in their Platonic form, when I was travelling in Wales and someone told me the history of the man who had fought a successful battle to institute cremation. The Christians opposed him: what would happen to the resurrection of the body if, when the time came, there was nothing around but a pile of ashes? I'd never thought about the resurrection of the body in such concrete terms before. I began to wonder *which* body God would see fit to resurrect. If you'd died at ninety, was that the body you'd be stuck with, arthritis and all? Or would you be sixteen? If your mother had died when you were sixteen, what a shock it would be to her, and how cruel really, if you came back ninety.

I do not wish to suggest the biographers confuse themselves

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with God, but they do have a problem in common: in a nutshell, which body? Which point in time marks the real person? Which act, which detail, which comment is the most revealing, the most typical? And the biographer's solution must be to try to imitate God, and to subsume all possible incarnations in one form. The biographer stands in the place of Set, the God of the Underworld, before whom the souls of the dead must stand to have their lives weighed and judged, and who, incidentally, is shown with the head of a jackal. For – it must be admitted – there is a slight odour of scavenger about the biographer, a slight air of sniffing about among rags and shreds, a discreet crunching of bones.

No one seems to write biographies of biographers. If they did, and if they did it well, we would speculate a good deal more than we do about the motives of the biographers themselves. The lives of great men used to be presented to the reader as examples worthy of emulation, but that pretense appears to have fallen by the wayside. What now drives the biographers on? What draws them to their subjects? Is it affinity and admiration, or a desire to villify and debunk, to slay the sacred cow, to play David to the overinflated reputation of some paper Goliath, as is frequently the case? Are they riddle addicts, determined to follow the maze of a famous personality to the core of a hidden mystery which they assume is there? Do they believe in an ordered universe, are they determined to make sense of apparent contradictions? Are they novelists *manqué*? They are certainly, as a breed, more sombre than novelists, because, though a novelist may choose to end her story with a marriage, a child, a bend in the road, all biographers, unless they take the risk of embalming a living subject, must end theirs with a death. But surely their peculiar art is to raise the dead and cause them to live again among us; a good biography makes the dead feel less dead. What do they really think they're up to?

For a time I preferred the biographical style of, say, Lytton Strachey: a little caustic, a little wry, a little mean, like a strict, sarcastic nanny who sees through every subterfuge, discounts all excuses, distrusts all motives. No hiding the dirty fingernails, the smashed window. But perhaps the best biographies are written out of a more generous impulse, out of the desire to do justice to

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a life, to weigh its acts and choices, to see it whole and in its best light. I think of Margaret Drabble's biography of Arnold Bennett. Here's how she ends it, after she has described the inevitable death:

So I, too, feel depressed, unreasonably enough, by his death. He was a great writer from a stony land, and he was also one of the kindest and most unselfish of men. Many a time, re-reading a novel, reading a letter or a piece of his journal, I have wanted to shake his hand, or to thank him, to say well done. I have written this instead.

"To shake his hand." I suppose this may be what we really want, when we read biographies and when we write them: some contact, some communication, some way to know and to pay tribute. Time flows only one way, it seems: from past to future, from them to us. I can't go back to 1899, shake the hand of my dead grandmother as she existed before she had ever imagined me. Half the holidays are gone, never to return; all I have of that "great girl" with the soaking underclothes is the one small paper trace she left behind her, fragile as an eggshell. If she had re-read her own diary, much later, when she was ninety-four, would she ever have recognized it?

Such multiple versions of our multiple selves populate our lives; we play Mr. Hyde, constantly, to our various Dr. Jekylls; we supersede ourselves. We are our own broken puzzles, incomplete, scattered through time. It is up to the biographers, finally, painstakingly, imperfectly, to put us together again.

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[More information](#)

2

Shaping life in The Prelude

CARL WOODRING

In the study of English autobiographies, *The Prelude* has been awarded a place near the center. As an explorer of the heart less suspect than Rousseau, Wordsworth had a demonstrable effect on Victorian literature of childhood and growth even before *The Prelude* became known in 1850. With the availability of Wordsworth's manuscripts, the version of 1805 in thirteen books on "my earlier life or the growth of my own mind" has become a seminal document of search into origins.¹

For much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *The Prelude* was drawn upon so heavily for autobiographical fact that George W. Meyer felt it necessary to write a book on Wordsworth's childhood utilizing sources clearly distinguishable from the account in the poem.² Somewhat autobiographical in the form of its search, and containing passages of inquiry into memories and events, the poem is nonetheless not an autobiography. In all the ways of distinguishing autobiographical poetry from autobiography, *The Prelude* is a poem. Like Byron's extension of Fielding's *Tom Jones* as an "epic poem in prose" in ways that make *Don Juan* an epic poem in prose in verse, *The Prelude* can be called a *Bildungsroman* in blank verse.³ Of its relation to the facts of Wordsworth's life, one could paraphrase what he said to Isabella Fenwick concerning his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality": "I took hold of the notion of pre-existence as having sufficient foundation in humanity for authorizing me to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a Poet."⁴ Henry Nelson Coleridge, nephew and son-in-law of S.T.C., recorded in October 1829 a statement of Wordsworth's

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that “it is impossible to reconcile the exact truth with poetry,” and paraphrased further remarks from the same conversation: “He thought himself entitled to avail himself as a verseman of many notions which he was not prepared to defend literally as a proseman, and he complained of the way in which he had been made answerable for mere plays of the Imagination.”⁵

Poetry called for a higher truth than fact could provide. Coleridge, to whom the poem is addressed, would know that the “high argument” concerning an individual mind required a universalizing of personal experience. He would know that a poem needs enough originality in metaphor and the metaphorical to afford the pleasure of surprise. A poet’s contract with the reader always contains a clause authorizing “mere plays of the Imagination.” Is there in *The Prelude*, then, no reliable relation to what those who knew the poet well could regard as datable facts? Truth in the Wordsworthian sense of embodying emotion with thought in fidelity to the best moral judgment he can bring to the study of his own mind is important to his purposes and to his accomplishment. In receiving such truth, the reader is not to expect scrupulosity toward actual, accidental fact. In autobiography, Rousseau, Mill, and Newman ask their readers to believe that actual physical and mental events in the particular life at issue can bear the interpretation offered. Mill and Newman plead with the reader to get pleasure and instruction not only from asking whether the words before them persuasively interpret ascertainable facts, but also from answering Yes, this author is attempting a faithful interpretation of actual events. *The Prelude* asks the reader for no equivalent response.

The author of *The Prelude*, like the authors of *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield*, asks the reader to believe that the words chosen offer truth of value to the reader concerning a life, a representative life; if the reader asks whether this life was Charlotte Brontë’s, or that life Charles Dickens’s, evaluation of their words is unchanged whether the answer is Yes, No, or Arguably. Neither assignment to genre nor literary evaluation depends in any way on knowing how far a work of fiction under consideration is autobiographical. Newman does not wish to be called a liar, and a reader of his *Apologia* assigns a demerit for each degree of disbelief. Dickens, as the author of *Copperfield*, can