

## *Prolegomena on biography modern and ancient*

Biography lacks both an Aristotle and a Northrop Frye.  
Ira Bruce Nadel

Each chapter of this book will apply a biographical reading to selected texts of one or several Greek and Roman authors. More general aspects of biography will be discussed along the way when it seems appropriate. The purpose of these prolegomena is simply to account in briefest possible form for some of the assumptions and views that underly my study and to comment on some topics that are often discussed in connection with modern biography, but more seldom so in studies of the ancient texts. No systematic treatment of biographic theory and practice is intended, just a series of statements or comments under various catchwords, with rudimentary bibliographical references.

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*Biography and modern research.* There still exists comparatively little serious research on the literary genre of biography generally, though there are of course numerous scholarly studies of individual biographers and some of limited periods or special trends in the history of biography.<sup>1</sup> Most of the books treating biography from a more global perspective have been written by practising biographers who want to explain their own art and teach others to write (similar kinds of) Lives. The apologetic and normative aim often leads to rigid categorization in which modern biographies (all or just a particular type) constitute the norm and most ancient and medieval Lives fail to be 'true' biographies. A typical exponent of this way of looking at biography is Paul Murray Kendall's entry on 'Biographical Literature' in

<sup>1</sup> On limited periods, there is for instance Berschin 1986 (and following volumes) on biography in the Latin Middle Ages and the recent collection of Sharpe and Zwicker 2008a on biography in Early Modern England. The collection of France and St Clair 2002 contains several such period or trend studies.

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the *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*;<sup>2</sup> a recent exception to the general rule is Hermione Lee's lucid *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, which looks at biography of all ages and biography as a literary form without the usual prejudices.<sup>3</sup> Her 'Ten rules for biography', each eventually shown to be dispensable, in effect deconstruct the earlier orthodoxy.

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*Is biography a genre?* One of the reasons for the scholarly neglect of biography until quite recently may be that it seems not to form a 'genre' in the same way as, say, the novel does, in spite of its many varieties and subgenres.<sup>4</sup> Biography starts from a very simple concept, the life of an individual from cradle to death (or at least a considerable part of this time span), and is probably represented, in oral or written or visual form, in every culture and throughout history.<sup>5</sup> But even if we restrict our view to the literary variety as developed in the Western tradition, the simple basic concept allows of a multitude of forms, and they are arguably in most cases influenced more by current literary or historical or psychological trends than by earlier biographies. The structure and style of contemporary historiography and novel tend to determine the form of biographies, at least those with scholarly and literary pretensions. To some extent, of course, it is a matter of cross-fertilization, fiction and history also receiving impulses from biography; but with regard to literary form, biography has no doubt mostly been the receiving part, typically with a slight time lag: biography of today mirrors the novel of yesterday (and seldom its more extreme types). Moreover, biographies are typically ephemeral; they only rarely achieve the status of classics, but are mostly replaced by new ones if need arises.<sup>6</sup> This is true also of Graeco-Roman antiquity, the successive Lives of Pythagoras being the most prolific case and the various attempts to rewrite the Life

<sup>2</sup> Kendall 1974; see also the same author's monograph, Kendall 1985; my comments in Hägg 1991, 83–4; and below, Ch. 4.1.

<sup>3</sup> Lee 2009, with basic bibliography. Of earlier theoretically informed book-length studies of biography the following may be mentioned: Romein 1948, Shelston 1977, Madelénat 1984, Nadel 1984, Edel 1987, Parke 1996, and Backscheider 1999 (with extensive bibliography).

<sup>4</sup> Other reasons are mentioned by Lee 2009, 94, such as biography being viewed as popular, impure, conservative, and a product for consumption by the general reader, or 'insufficiently substantial and scientific to merit study or teaching'. She notes the current change, biography now beginning to be an established academic discipline. Hamilton 2007, 3–4, 280 takes a more pessimistic view of the prospects. See also the discussion of Holmes 2002.

<sup>5</sup> For a recent overview of the history of 'biography' in this global sense, see Hamilton 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Hamilton 2007, 283 describes the phenomenon in more idealistic terms as the reinterpretation of past lives on behalf of the current generation: 'Biographers accept that no single definitive account of a human life is possible.' There are of course commercial factors involved as well.

of Alexander in different registers perhaps the most intriguing.<sup>7</sup> Biography is more subject matter than form, and the ‘genre’ easily slips out of the scholarly grip.

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*Truth and creative imagination.* In criticism of biography, modern and ancient, one often finds a naive demand that it should be ‘true’, in the sense of verifiable and historically correct. Arnaldo Momigliano hides badly his irritation with fourth-century Greek biographers for not keeping ‘a constant and clear distinction between reality and imagination’, and accepts only reluctantly that ‘nobody bothered to decide whether Plato’s dialogues or Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* were faithful records of Socrates’ conversations.’<sup>8</sup> Biography is by many viewed as a sub-branch of historiography and ideals of modern historiography are applied to it, without considering the specific conditions of this artistic form. Biography, if it is to be more than a bare *curriculum vitae*, must try to gain insight into an historical person’s mind to connect and explain the person’s doings and give an impression of a living character, of a ‘life’. Such a process of course escapes scientific control.<sup>9</sup> The biographer has to rely on conjecture, interpretation, reconstruction, in the end on his or her own creative imagination. Now, ancient life-writers did not encounter among their contemporaries the same demands for documentary truth as their modern colleagues do, nor did for that matter ancient historiographers, as Momigliano knew very well. Conversations are allowed to be fictitious and insight is readily granted into the acting characters’ feelings, thoughts, and motives, as long as some kind of verisimilitude is maintained.<sup>10</sup> The establishment of any form of higher

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the contemporary (lost) histories of Alexander, Plutarch’s *Alexander* (coupled with *Caesar*), and the many versions of Pseudo-Callisthenes’ *Life of Alexander* (treated below, Ch. 3.3), there is in the Roman era in Latin Curtius Rufus’ *Historia de rebus Alexandri Magni* and in Greek Arrian’s *Anabasis Alexandrou*.

<sup>8</sup> Momigliano 1971b, 248–9 = 1993, 110. See also 1971a = 1993, 46 on the ‘infuriating’ Socratics and 56–7 for further discussion of fiction in biography. Compare also Fornara 1983, 189 who speaks of ancient biography as ‘a genre . . . dominated by alien interests and predisposed to gross characterization and fraudulent exposition’.

<sup>9</sup> André Maurois, in his Cambridge lectures of 1928, eloquently argues this case (against Nicolson 1927), speaking of the biographer ‘in pursuit of a shadow . . . flying before us – the shadow which is the truth about a man’ (Maurois 1929, 69). See also Shelston 1977, 62–73, ‘Truth of fact and truth of fiction’, and Edel 1987, 13, 16, who formulates a middle position: the biographer ‘is allowed the imagination of form but not of fact’, he is ‘an artist under oath’. For an innovative investigation of biography, autobiography, and fiction (‘auto/biografiction’) in modern literature, see Saunders 2010.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to deny that antiquity too, beginning with Aristotle, developed a theory of literary works’ relationship to historical fact, best known in the Latin terminology for the basic three modes of narration (*tria genera narrationum*): *historia*, *fabula*, *argumentum*. See, e.g., Cizek 1997, 275–87 and Hägg forthcoming a.

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truth – be it poetic, psychological, philosophical, or religious – overrules demands for the truth of facts.

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*Fiction, fact, and historicity.* If truth is an awkward concept to apply to biography, ‘historicity’ is more useful. The degree to which the creative imagination of a biographer builds on what he or she considers to be historical facts is a distinctive aspect of his or her art. Ancient biography is no different in this respect. The popular *Life of Alexander*, better known as the *Alexander Romance*, takes a more liberal view of the king’s achievements than the Alexander historians proper, mixing romantic fiction with accounts of fantastic military deeds. Some Hellenistic biographers confront divergent versions found in their sources to show their critical attitude, while others prefer to construct a coherent and seductive narrative based on documented or (if needed) invented facts. My discussion in this book of the various texts will sometimes attempt to assess their ‘historicity’ in this sense: not so much in relation to historical facts as we think we know them today, but (as far as possible) in relation to contemporary understanding and the sources the writers may have used.

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*Narrative and portrait.* Biography is typically a narrative form: it relates the history of a person from birth to death. Even when much of the material is ordered systematically rather than chronologically, most biographers prefer to start with birth, childhood, and education, before the systematic treatment by topics begins, and to end with death. ‘The structure of biography is biology’, says Terry Eagleton.<sup>11</sup> (Any exceptions, such as Porphyry beginning his *Life with Plotinus*’ death, are provocations against the expected order.) The metaphor ‘portrait’ used for biography is therefore somewhat misleading if independent Lives in full scale are meant, rather than character sketches within, for instance, historiographical works.<sup>12</sup> It does not help that practitioners like Plutarch and Boswell favour the comparison.<sup>13</sup> Portrait gives a stationary impression, while typical of biography is movement (often spatially as well, from place to place), development or (at least) change, a character confronted with a succession of events and influences.

<sup>11</sup> Eagleton 1993, also speaking of ‘the remorseless linearity of the biographical form’.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Portrait’ is one of the metaphors scrutinized by Lee 2009, 2–4. The same metaphor, specifically for ‘biographical representation’ in works other than biographies, is the title and leitmotif of Edwards and Swain 1997. On the interrelationship of verbal and visual representation, see Francis 2003.

<sup>13</sup> On Plutarch’s comparisons of biography with figural art, see below, Ch. 6.3; Boswell is quoted in Lee 2009, 3.

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This is not to deny that characterization is an essential part of the biographical art, achieved by various direct or indirect means: character revealed in action or speech, stated in authorial comments, implied through structural arrangement, and so on. A combination of the two, life story and serial portrait, may be said to constitute biography.

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*Private and public life.* A topical phenomenon of modern biography is the revelation of the person behind the public figure, of family relations and private life. While a certain species of ancient biography is as full of gossip and slander as some modern ones, it is important to realize that in most 'serious' ancient Lives the public figure is the main focus all along. Plutarch famously remarks in his *Life of Alexander* that 'often a little matter like a saying or a joke conveys a man's character more than battles where thousands fall'; yet for all his anecdotes he reveals little of his heroes' intimate life. In my investigation of the ancient specimens, special attention will be paid to what little there is to be found of references to wife and children, sexual relationships, and similar favourites of modern biography. It would be an illusion to see the dearth of private material as due just to the biographer's lack of sources; in some cases we know that such information did circulate, and if not it might easily have been fabricated, as so much else. Its absence implies that serious ancient biographers regarded it as irrelevant to their task.<sup>14</sup> Only when it becomes a central political factor through the dynasties of Imperial Rome does private life enter ancient biography massively with Suetonius.

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*Automimesis or transference.* 'Every painter paints himself', Leonardo da Vinci insisted, referring critically to painters who produce series of unwitting self-portraits: 'one recognizes the expression and figure of the artist throughout the many figures painted by him'.<sup>15</sup> *Ut pictura poesis*, literature functions like art: examples of automimesis in modern biographies are legion.<sup>16</sup> The phenomenon is in fact so common that one might argue that

<sup>14</sup> By not even mentioning the *names* of wives, mothers, and daughters of the biographees, Greek biography seems to carry on classical ideals of respectable women's anonymity in public life; see Schaps 1977, basing himself on Attic private orations.

<sup>15</sup> *Ogni dipintore dipinge se*, an aphorism often recorded in the Italian Renaissance. See Kemp 1976 and Zöllner 1992 (quotation from Leonardo p. 143).

<sup>16</sup> For examples and discussion, see Edel 1987, 65–92 on 'Transference' (a psychoanalytical term) and Clifford 1970, 99–112 on 'The Author's Involvement'. For the art-historical term 'automimesis', see Kemp 1976, 311–12.

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biographies differ only in the degree to which this happens, or is observable. One of the reasons is evidently that biographers from the start tend to choose figures that resemble themselves (in occupation, temperament, situation in life).<sup>17</sup> Novelists and poets depict great literary figures, politicians trace political careers, women prefer women. A related factor is that the biographer has to rely on introspection to reconstruct the inner life of the subject. Primarily what he or she recognizes from self-experience is likely to be included in the characterization. Sympathy and empathy are key concepts (though there are of course examples of iconoclastic biographies). The most famous instance of automimesis in ancient literature is Plato's and Xenophon's different pictures of their common master Socrates; several more will be noted in the course of the present study.

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*Gaps and the quantitative aspects of biography.* Temporal gaps in a biographical narrative may occur because the biographer has failed to find sources for a certain period of the subject's life. In particular, this is apt to happen with regard to the childhood and adolescence of the future celebrity. To avoid leaving the gap open – creating an ellipsis in narratological terms – the biographer may turn from the private to the public, directing the reader's attention to the general political or cultural development of the period. Or he or she may elaborate on the physical and social milieu in which the biographee spent the years in question.<sup>18</sup> A device favoured in ancient Lives is to provide a 'proleptic' childhood description, giving to the child the specific traits that are to characterize the subject as an adult. An encomiast may be content to state the child's superiority in all disciplines. A further, more sophisticated method to bridge such a gap is creating typical or 'emblematic' scenes, as when Luke represents Jesus in the temple of Jerusalem at the age of twelve.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> In the words of Sigmund Freud, in his biographical essay on Leonardo (1910), 'biographers are fixated on their heroes in a quite special way. In many cases they have chosen their hero as the subject of their studies because – for reasons of their personal emotional life – they have felt a special affection for him from the very first' (Freud 2001, 80). Backscheider 1999, 33, in contrast, calls it 'familiar folklore that biographers have an "affinity" for their subjects, may have long "identified" to some extent with them, and "like" them', yet her examples seem to speak in the other direction.

<sup>18</sup> The problem of temporal gaps in the biographical material, and how to bridge them, is discussed by Kendall 1985, 18–21.

<sup>19</sup> A modern example is the childhood episode in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr* (1952), in which ten-year-old Jean Genet is first branded a 'thief'. But few biographers would, like Sartre, immediately afterwards reveal the technique: 'That was how it happened, in that or some other way. In all probability, there were offenses and then punishment, solemn oaths and relapses. It does not matter.' (Quoted from Ellmann 1973, 5–6.) See also below, Ch. 1.5, on typical scenes in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*.

Now, lack of material is not the only or even most important reason for gaps to occur or threaten in biography. The problem naturally arises owing to the long time span that has to be covered in a Life (few biographees have died as young as Alexander the Great); and it is particularly accentuated in ancient biographies because of the limited textual space of most such compositions. The average for a single Plutarchan Life is just the equivalent of fifty printed pages; only a couple of extant Lives from antiquity (Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, Philostratus' *Apollonius*) approach the format of a moderate-size modern biography. Much fabula time has to be covered in little story time. Such quantitative aspects are important, and easy to overlook if one reads about literature, rather than reading the works themselves. In my presentation of the various texts, both such figures (usually printed pages of the original text) and the analytical tables of contents (with chapter numbers) are intended to help in visualizing the textual space.

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*Titles and names.* Book titles are important generic markers. With regard to biography, the matter is, or should be, rather straightforward. In his essay 'L'illusion biographique' Pierre Bourdieu elaborates on the apparently simple fact that the personal name of the biographical subject is the basic unifying factor of any biography.<sup>20</sup> It is a non-characterizing name because it is historical, in distinction to the many more or less 'telling' names of narrative fiction. If we turn from biography in a non-literary sense, any person's constructed life story, which is what Bourdieu explores from a social and existential point of view, to the art of biography and the matter of book titles, his observation remains fruitful. The historical name of the biographee is normally used as the title of the biography. It may stand alone or be used in various combinations with some word for 'Life' or more specific qualifications. The point is that an unmarked historical name as book title, say 'Napoleon', indicates biography. Something must be added to the name for us to expect another genre. What we cannot know, on the other hand, is the actual degree of historicity: it may be a research biography or a biographical novel, or something between these extremes.

All this is in principle applicable to ancient biography as well. However, scholars have paid much attention to the kind of ancient book title that begins with a preposition: 'on' or 'about' (Greek *eis*, *peri*; Latin *de*) + life (*bios*, *vita*) + name, or alternatively just preposition + name. It has been maintained that the word *bios* or *vita* must appear in the title, with or without a preposition, to make it indicate a Life; furthermore, that

<sup>20</sup> Bourdieu 1986, 70–1.

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a preposition may anyway reveal some other kind of interest than the biographical.<sup>21</sup> Still, when we can read the works themselves, it appears that such variations in the form of titles are hardly distinctive of a work's character of 'biography' (by whatever definition). Added to this comes the general uncertainty in ancient literary history whether a title transmitted in the medieval manuscripts (or found in some ancient textual reference or encyclopaedia) is really the original one. I shall regard the proper name itself as the all-important distinctive mark and be brief on interpretation of titular varieties.<sup>22</sup>

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*Some final preliminaries.* I spell Greek personal names as they appear in standard reference works like *The Oxford Classical Dictionary (OCD)* and may be most easily found on the internet, which mostly means a Latinized (occasionally Anglicized) form. So Nicolaus rather than Nicolaos or Nikolaos, Croesus rather than Kroisos; and Aesop rather than Aisopos. Roman personal names appear in their original form, with a few exceptions, as Pliny for Plinius, Jerome for Hieronymus. Analogous considerations apply to geographical names, though the Modern Greek forms are often preferred.

Greek book titles represent a similar problem which cannot be solved consistently. I mostly avoid the conventional Latin or Latinized forms in the main text, so *Eikones* rather than *Imagines* and *Deipnosophistai* rather than *Deipnosophistae*; exception is made for some titles that have become standard in English, like Xenophon's *Memorabilia* and *Cyropaedia*. When it seems more convenient (and the original title is immediately recognizable), I may prefer the translated form: *Life of Alexander* (or just *Alexander*), *On the Death of Peregrinus* (or just *Peregrinus*). This also applies to Roman book titles: *Lives of the Caesars*. In the footnotes, however, references to passages in Greek and Roman works are often given with conventional abbreviations of the Latin titles, as listed for instance in the *OCD*.

When referring (exclusively) to ancient biographers, I freely use the pronouns he/him/his, since all the names we know of biographical writers in antiquity are male. (The closest we get to a female voice in ancient biography is Satyrus in his dialogic *Life of Euripides* letting one or two of his discussants be women.)

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, the recent discussion by Mark J. Edwards 1997, 229–31.

<sup>22</sup> Titles of Platonic dialogues, such as *Phaedo* or *Meno*, are only superficially exceptions to the rule about historical names indicating biography; they are conventional catchwords rather than book titles proper.



In the main text, mostly in parenthesis in the translations, Greek words are quoted in strictly transliterated form (*hubris*, *egkōmion*, *kharis*), either in their lexical form or as they appear in the text in question (according to what seems most natural or clear at each place). The use of Greek font is reserved for quotations in the footnotes.

‘Life’ with a capital L (but without quotation marks or italics) refers to a written Life (*bios*, *vita*, biography), while ‘life’ refers to a lived life.

I use the term ‘literary biography’ in the sense reserved for it in modern literary criticism, not to denote any particularly ‘literary’ form, but simply meaning the biography of a literary figure, an author. Similarly ‘philosophical biography’ and ‘political biography’ denote the occupation of the biographee, not the character of the work. ‘Historical biography’ is occasionally used synonymously with ‘political’.

My English translations from Greek and Latin are usually based on some published translation, yet often modified, sometimes drastically so, to bring out the meaning, style, or nuances that are important for the context; or to conform to an improved original text. To indicate this state of affairs I use standard phrases of the type ‘translation based on’, ‘adapted from’, or ‘modified’.

The ‘Further Reading’ section has three main purposes. First, of course, it directs interested readers to places where more is to be found about the topics treated in the book, and where the texts discussed may be read in full. Second, it relieves the footnotes of more general references to standard works and discussions. Third, it is meant to give some impression of what sort of literary topics international research in the field has addressed, and is currently addressing. Of course, it is a subjective selection; and I only mention books and articles that I have seen myself and found of value and interest.

## CHAPTER I

*In the beginning was Xenophon*  
*Memoir, encomium, romance*

In diesem Sinne ist der ideale, ja der postexistente Sokrates der reale, und der Sokrates samt seiner Xanthippe, den etwa die photographische Kleinkunst zeigen könnte, ist bedeutungslos, ja im höheren Sinne unwirklich.

Adolf von Harnack

## I.1 GLIMPSES OF A PREHISTORY

The single most important force for the emergence of Greek biography in the fourth century BC, it has been convincingly argued, was the personal and historical impact of the figure of Socrates, as reconstructed or invented by the Socratic writers.<sup>1</sup> But the one individual writer – the creative mind – to whom Greek biography owes most is no doubt Xenophon of Athens (ca. 430–ca. 354 BC), who wrote not only a memoir of Socrates, but also a prose encomium of the Spartan king Agesilaus and a romantic Life of the Persian ruler Cyrus the Great.<sup>2</sup> Each of his three works displays a distinct biographical strategy: the privileged viewpoint at work in the *Memorabilia*, the novel literary structure of the *Agesilaus*, and the imaginative mixture of fact and fiction in the *Cyropaedia*. Xenophon accordingly provides three different literary models for future life-writers to merge and develop.

Now, interest in the character, acts, and lifespan of an important individual was of course not unknown in Greek society before the fourth century. Speculation about the identity of Homer, his birthplace, travels, and death, began early, as the many references show that we find scattered in poetry, drama, and early prose. The corresponding legends of Hesiod's life had a starting-point in first person statements in his own poems, those of Archilochus perhaps also in local tradition on his native island of Paros. Solon and Simonides are further, not so distant, figures who attracted early

<sup>1</sup> The principal argument in Dihle 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Similar views were expressed by Leo 1901, 94 and Momigliano 1993, 47. See further Reichel 2007.