PART I

OPENING REMARKS

CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION: WHAT WE MEAN BY 'CREATIVE LIVES'

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In Tom Stoppard's 1997 play *The Invention of Love*, the character of Oscar Wilde offers A.E. Housman this reflection on the power and primacy of biographical fiction:

> Art cannot be subordinate to its subject, otherwise it is not art but biography, and biography is the mesh through which our real life escapes. I was said to have walked down Piccadilly with a lily in my hand. There was no need. To do it is nothing, to be said to have done it is everything. It is the truth about me.[1]

In reimagining Housman, Wilde and their interactions, *The Invention of Love* creates and participates in the very sort of potent biographical fiction upon which 'Wilde' here reflects. This is a brand of fiction that has been in currency since antiquity: like other creative spirits, poets have always inspired their audiences to tell stories about them. But they have also long been prone to provoking especially 'creative' forms of biography – biography that takes bold and fantastical license with a life and so transforms that life into an artistic object in its own right. This volume, rather than attempt to reconstruct the 'real' lives of any ancient poets, artists or creators, takes as its subject precisely the mesh of fictional biography as described by, and exemplified through, Stoppard's Wilde. Though the barest facts about the lives of ancient artists and intellectuals may have irrevocably slipped from our grasp, each of the contributions here begins from the shared premise that fictional biographies are often themselves finely wrought, and worthy of examination as telling receptions of creative work. Our case studies here thus aim to shed light upon how, even from its earliest days, the act of producing biography

about creative individuals often constituted a self-consciously creative act in itself.[2]

In recent years the various fields of literary studies have seen an explosion of general interest in the study of biography and 'life writing' (a more comprehensive term that extends to all manner of life narratives).[3] The practice of biography is also thriving in literature, film and on the stage. Tony Harrison's *Fram* (2008) and Alan Bennett's *The Habit of Art* (2009) mark but two further examples of plays that engage in their own brands of 'creative' biography, taking dramatic impetus from the life-stories of people known for their accomplishments in art and ideas. *Fram* opens with a conversation held in the poets' corner of Westminster Abbey between the (dead) classicist Gilbert Murray and the (dead) actress Sybil Thorndike. In this scene and throughout the play, Murray speaks in the rhyming couplets that were the hallmark of his translations of classical drama: via a playful *reductio ad absurdum* Harrison dramatises the premise – a premise that shaped almost all ancient literary biography – that artists are 'like' the works which they create.

The Habit of Art, on the other hand, imagines a series of encounters between W.H. Auden, Benjamin Britten and the man who would one day write the biographies of both, Humphrey Carpenter. This play goes so far as to perform the very process and pitfalls of biography in reflectively interrogating (its own) efforts to reduce or explain the creator – to make art 'subordinate to its subject'. Although Bennett's play(-within-the-play) stages snapshots from the private lives of Auden and Britten, the futility of attempting to read art against or in the light of the artist's life is assessed and asserted time and again. In an early scene the character of Auden, in a radio interview with BBC Oxford, challenges the worth of any such interview at all: 'Why poets should be interviewed I can't think. A writer is not a man of action. His private life is or should be of no concern to anyone except himself, his family and his friends. The rest is impertinence. Yes?'[4]

Drama constitutes but one medium of contemporary creative biography with a classical pedigree, as plays that portrayed artists of the past also drew audiences in fifth- and

fourth-century Athens. The best known (and only fully extant) ancient example is Aristophanes' *Frogs* (405 BC), a comedy in which the deceased tragedians Aeschylus and Euripides appear together in the setting of the Underworld. James Porter has discussed how a play such as *The Frogs* can work towards fulfilling an audience's desire to 'feel the presence of a classical original' – after all, Porter continues, 'what better *emblem* for this desire than the live reperformance, not of tragic plays, as in the case of the theatrical revivals that would contribute to the survival of classical plays, *but of the tragedians themselves*?'[5] In antiquity this desire for the presence of the 'original' would also have informed the many attested fourth-century comedies that fancifully re-imagined the lives of archaic poets: Sappho may have expressed a longing for an epiphany of the goddess Aphrodite (fr. 1), but for later audiences who longed to see Sappho herself some gratification was available in 'her' many appearances on the stage. Today new productions continue to work towards fulfilling our own fantasies of being in the presence of artists and thinkers of the past, and at least one of these even pays explicit homage to the ancient tradition. In *The Invention of Love* the curtain rises on the recently-deceased A.E. Housman being ferried across the river Styx and so effectively retracing the journey made by the god Dionysus in an early scene of *The Frogs*.

The classical precedents for imaginative biographical drama suggest that audiences have long desired to come into contact with great creators of the past and to experience the visual fulfilment of 'seeing' those creative minds at work. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that heightened general interest in the questions, problems and possibilities of biography also currently characterises the discipline of Classics. A handful of collections have lately been dedicated to a variety of aspects of ancient biography, from its earliest signs of development (Erler and Schorn 2007) to its general evolution in antiquity (Hägg 2012) and from the parameters of the biographical genre (McGing and Mossman 2006) to the narrative importance of fictionality in Greek biography from antiquity to the present day (Borghart and de Temmerman 2010). A number of

studies in the last decade or so have also focussed explicitly on the ancient traditions for the lives of the poets: Clay (2004) gathered the evidence for ancient cults of poets; Compton (2006) read the poets' lives through a mythological and ritual lens in tracing the *topos* of the persecuted and often exiled artist; and Kivilo (2010) traced the early development of biographical tradition for a number of archaic poets. Hardie and Moore's (2010) edited volume *Classical Literary Careers and Their Literary Reception* even took up for Classics (primarily for Latin studies) the standard of 'career criticism', a branch of biographical studies that examines how artists and authors have self-consciously shaped their own creative careers, oftentimes along the templates provided by the careers of admired predecessors.[6]

The present volume, however, concentrates on a more unturned stone of ancient biography, namely the inherently creative dimension of literary, philosophical and artistic (i.e. 'creative') biographical work. In her *The Lives of the Greek Poets* (1981; 2nd, revised edn 2012) Mary Lefkowitz demonstrated that 'virtually all the material in all the lives [of Greek poets] is fiction',[7] with most of that material ultimately deriving from the poets' own verses, mediated in some cases by 'sources' such as Old Comedy. Nevertheless, she also recognised the importance of the biographical *process* as an object of study, allowing even in the original edition that 'The process of "recovery" of biographical information [i.e. by the poets' biographers] required imagination'.[8] All of the essays in the present volume are united by some form of interest in the workings and results of precisely that imagination. Here, however, we do not restrict ourselves as Lefkowitz did to the ancient poetic *vitae*, i.e. the short biographies of poets that have been transmitted alongside their works. Rather, we allow as our objects of inquiry any work of any author (or artist or thinker) whose own creativity had been provoked by the imagined figure of another – that is, by the details of and traditions about another 'creative life'. Taking for granted, moreover, that most of the material in the ancient sources for the lives of poets, and of other artists and intellectuals, has

been fabricated, the contributions here set out to ask what we might nevertheless still *do* with these *corpora* of ancient sources and testimonia.

Because one of the purposes of this volume is to explore the very fictionality of creative biographical traditions, many of the chapters also draw upon Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz's *Die Legende vom Künstler: Ein historischer Versuch* (1934), which in its (1979) English translation became *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment*. Kris and Kurz, whose work we return to later in this 'Orientation', identified a number of patterns in the stories about the lives of artists (the term 'artist' again being broadly conceived) within the Western tradition. The recurrence of 'universals' in the biographies of artists is a noteworthy phenomenon in its own right, but many of the contributions here also explore the unique expressions of those themes in particular biographies and traditions, which mark valuable evidence for perceptions of artists more firmly rooted in specific eras and places. Barbara Graziosi's (2002) *Inventing Homer* confirmed that much is to be gained from serious study of the contexts and cultures that gave rise to particular biographical fictions. With regard to the Homeric tradition, Graziosi emphasised that

> the fictionality and popularity of the ancient material on Homer's life does not warrant our 'disregard'. Precisely because they are fictional, early speculations about the author of the Homeric poems must ultimately derive from an encounter between the poems and their ancient audiences.[9]

In other words, though the biographies may preserve no factual information about any real individual 'Homer', they have much to tell us about the ancient audiences and readers of the Homeric poems. Biography, then, is always and necessarily an act or document of reception. With respect to the exceptionally rich tradition for Sappho, Glenn Most has remarked that 'no part of her reception can safely be dismissed as simply false',[10] and here we take this observation to be generally true of artists and creators. Charles Martindale, too, reminds us that 'We shall not, for example, find a "real" Sappho if by that we mean one for which there is convincing corroborating evidence from

her own time'. But, he rightly emphasises, this hardly means that we should overlook the ancient (or even the more modern) wealth of material that forms the tradition of Sappho's reception, for 'Should we give up all this richness – in exchange for little or nothing?'[11]

The title of this volume, *Creative Lives*, therefore points to creativity on two distinct but entangled levels. In the first place, each of our contributions addresses the biographical traditions (if not 'biographies' *sensu stricto*) for individuals who were creat*ors*, or whose body of thought and even – in the case of philosophers – *modus vivendi* was particularly original. In the second place, the title also gestures to the creative aspects of biographical traditions and representations themselves. In weaving together these two threads, we seek to interrogate those ancient 'creative processes' that took as their object the lives of creative people. The word *Lives* performs an important double work for us: it signifies the creative artefacts of life writing, as well as the lives of those individuals who inspired such active and varied biographical interest. In this respect, our title maps well onto the Greek word βίος, which can mean both an individual's life and a biographical work (or *Life*, in this volume).

Volume overview

The sum of this volume's parts is not a comprehensive account of our subject, but rather an exploration of the kind of results afforded and inspired by the premises that we have outlined. Together the chapters here aim to underscore that much is to be gained – and much ancient material to be salvaged from the waste-bin – from approaching antiquity's creative lives in ways that combine awareness of fictionality with reception-based interpretations. Despite the disparity of our material the reader should nonetheless encounter a number of themes which wind through multiple contributions. These include the importance of the figures of predecessors to the forging and articulation of new literary, philosophical and artistic projects; the tendentious (re)shaping of biographical material in the interest of advancing

creative, intellectual and political agendas; and the complexity of the relationship between readers (and viewers) and imagined creator-figures.

So as to foreground the role that modern scholarship and creativity has played in shaping contemporary approaches to ancient creative lives, we have paired Constanze Güthenke's contribution (Chapter 2, '"Lives" as parameter: the privileging of ancient lives as a category of research c. 1900') with this introduction in our 'Opening Remarks'. Güthenke's study establishes a critical orientation for the work of the rest of the volume, in that it elucidates how scholarly discussions of ancient biography have historically pitted '*Wissenschaft* against *Kunst*, and the scholar (*Wissenschaftler*) against the writer (*Schriftsteller*)'. Güthenke foregrounds the implications that early scholarly debates about ancient biography have for the work that we do today, arguing that the (study of the) biography of Plato in particular had a heavy hand in demarcating and defining the very field of Classics. This choice to begin the volume with a piece that overtly tackles issues of contemporary reception is programmatic: if (as we argue) all accounts of creative lives are fundamentally acts of reception, then we and our readers ought to proceed with an awareness of how modern receptions (however 'scholarly') of the ancient sources have shaped (however subtly) the parameters and approaches of the contributions made here.

What follows is a two-part overview of the volume that links the respective contributions in an order out of sequence with our own Table of Contents. Each of the sections of this book contains chapters that we intend to be read against and in the light of each other, and each of those sections sets evidence for and discussions of poets' lives against contributions centred on biographical traditions for other types of broadly 'creative' individuals (philosophers, artists, musicians, *et al.*). Here, however, and by way of introduction, we provide a brief overview of the early trajectory of the ancient fascination with poets' lives. This overview is intended as a means of contextualising those contributions which take poets as their main subjects. We then offer a discussion of the chapters which take on other sorts of

creative individuals so as to emphasise the particular characteristics and challenges of the related but different traditions for philosophers, musicians, artists and others. At the end of this volume, John Henderson's *Envoi* will provide yet another synoptic organisational framework, and it is hoped that the reader will find in these different synthesised approaches to the material (as outlined by this introduction, the *envoi* and the organisation of the Table of Contents) various prompts for seeing the value of these case studies in combination.

Lives *of the poets*

In the modern era debates about ancient biographies gave rise and shape to the discipline of Classics (as Güthenke here discusses), and the very strictures of that discipline naturally prompt us to sift through the sources for the earliest traces of conversations about ancient literary, artistic and intellectual lives. It is tempting to imagine that, whether out of admiration or envy (or both), members of the first poets' own communities invented stories about them – such as the tales of Hesiod and Archilochus' mystical initiations into poetry – to account for their 'divine' and otherwise inexplicable talents (vestiges of those stories likely survive in the ancient accounts of creativity and poetic inspiration which Mary Lefkowitz here examines in detail). Anecdotes and other information about poets would also have travelled and been transmitted along with their poetry, only to be elaborated, exaggerated and adjusted by later audiences and performers. Although we lack direct evidence for the development of these early traditions, they surely had lasting effects on the content and shape of the narratives that do survive. As Kivilo (2010) has argued, some of the commonplaces of Greek literary biography across all periods, such as the author's exile or his peculiar death at a very old age, must have originated in tales told about the first poets.[12]

An early fascination with the figures of the lyric poets is also attested by the appearance of their portraits on pottery. The earliest surviving representation of a Greek poet is a late sixth-century black-figure piece by the 'Sappho Painter'

(c. 510–500 BC), which depicts Sappho as a solitary beautiful woman playing a *barbitos*.[13] A generation later, the 'Brygos Painter' represented her in red-figure alongside her fellow Mytilenean Alcaeus, both of them holding *barbitoi* (Figure 1.1).[14] The Brygos Painter's vase marks the first example in any medium of an imagined encounter (and possibly even an agonistic one) between great poets of the past – a kind of visual predecessor of the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod* and even of Aristophanes' *Frogs*. By the same period, in the late sixth century, concerted research into the lives of poets was also apparently underway. Theagenes of Rhegium, otherwise famous for his allegorical interpretations of Homeric narratives, appears at the head of an ancient list of scholars 'who first investigated Homer's poetry and origins (γένος) and lifetime (καθ' ὃν ἤκμασεν)'.[15] Rhapsodes who performed the Homeric poems would also have been responsible for transmitting (and inventing) information about Homer; Isocrates, for example, would later attribute the story that Helen told Homer in a dream to compose a poem on the Trojan expedition to the 'Homeridae', or rhapsodes who claimed descent from Homer himself (cf. Isoc. *Helen* 10.64).[16]

Evidence from the second half of the fifth century begins to show us how the lives and figures of poets were inspiring new creative production across a variety of genres. Anna Uhlig here explores the complexities of Pindar's allusions to the figure of Homer (Chapter 5, 'A poetic possession: Pindar's *Lives* of the poets'), highlighting the significance of those allusions for Pindar's poetic self-fashioning. Uhlig discusses how even early poets referred to the figures and lives of poetic predecessors as they crafted their own lyric *persona*s.[17] From the fifth century we also have the first recorded stories about episodes in poets' lives; these are preserved in prose works such as Ion of Chios (fragmentary) *Epidemiai* and Herodotus' *Histories*.[18] Herodotus' historical narrative includes, for example, the marvellous tale of Arion's rescue by the dolphin during the reign of Periander of Corinth (1.23–24), as well as the story of how the tragedian Phrynichus was fined a thousand drachmas for reminding the Athenian people of recent disasters with his