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THE EMBARRASSMENT OF LITERARY BIOGRAPHY: FORM AND AFFECT

FROM DICKENS TO WOOLF

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Embarrassment of Literary Biography: Form and Affect from Dickens to Woolf

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This dissertation argues that the embarrassments associated with literary biography in the nineteenth century should be understood as productive confrontations between affect and analysis. By definition, "embarrassment" can refer to the uncomfortable self-exposure one experiences from unanticipated social interactions, but it can also refer to the kind of confusion and perplexity that obscures meaning. I examine intellectually generative relationships in late nineteenth-century biographical writing—including those between friends, critics, readers, and admirers—to show how these relationships inform twentieth-century theories of authorship that otherwise reject biography for its potentially embarrassing combination of commemoration and criticism.

In the first chapter, I explore how in the *Life of Charles Dickens*, John Forster transforms the definitive moment of embarrassment in the novelist's life—the period in which the young Dickens worked in a factory to support his family—into evidence for the critical claim that Dickens's novels draw on personal circumstances to move beyond the individual life as a model for fiction. Chapter two situates the embarrassing relationship between biography and realist fiction in the literary culture of the late

nineteenth century. I argue that the writings of George Gissing suggest how novelists critical of biography as a moneymaking venture might make exceptions to convert their biographical work into cultural capital.

Whereas the first two chapters focus on the use of biography to evaluate fictional representations of real life, the second half of the project turns from social and cultural forms of embarrassment towards the critical and interpretive embarrassments that concern the literary artist. Chapter three examines how the 1895 trials of Oscar Wilde perpetuate the idea of biography as consisting of what I call "debased intentionalism." The fourth chapter analyzes early twentieth century studies of biography that seek to define its relationship to aesthetic form; I argue that these studies propose ways in which biography can adapt to an increasingly specialized culture of knowledge. My dissertation demonstrates how the creative negotiations of embarrassment in late nineteenth-century biographical writing continue to shape reading practices that are marked by the affective tension between literary lives and literary interpretation, within and outside of institutions.

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I have written a dissertation on that topic.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is concerned with the awkward self-consciousness biography can engender in its writers, readers, and subjects. It argues that the attitudes and responses to biography over the course of the nineteenth century—the ways biography was simultaneously celebrated and devalued, regarded both as an imaginative force and a sign of creative inhibition—inform the ongoing discussion about affective experiences of reading. In the chapters that follow, I discuss literary biographies, fictionalized aspects of authors' biographies in novels, and critical essays that address biography as a form. I draw on these various forms of biographical writing to distinguish the array of roles biography made it possible to sustain. The roles of friend, critic, and admirer seldom overlap comfortably in contemporary literary criticism; critics may reference the author's life for historical purposes, but the life otherwise represents a limited interpretive approach premised on the author's intentions and affective disposition. The late nineteenth and early-twentieth century texts addressed in this dissertation anticipate the kind of limitation associated with biography in contemporary literary studies, while they also imagine ways of moving past it. I situate embarrassment as the salient feature of these biographical texts to illustrate how the various affective roles they encompass work together, sometimes counterintuitively, to imagine critical effects—such as the theorization of new genres, identities, and readerships—beyond those they are able to achieve in their own moment.

My study contributes to the discussion of biography's place in nineteenth century culture by identifying proleptic moments in biographical texts—particularly those that join an analysis of the author's personal character with an analysis of the author's work—

that have been overshadowed by Anglo-American literary criticism. This dissertation is not a work of biography, nor does it make the case for reinstating biographical criticism as an inherently value-laden enterprise. Rather, it claims a specific value in recognizing the attractions and repulsions of biography, especially as they figure in nineteenth-century accounts of the literary past that look towards the future. In this sense, my work is in dialogue with that of scholars who have explored belatedness as an aspect of biography's place in literary history. Deidre Lynch writes about the belatedness of biography in the Romantic period, noting that biographers tended to regard their subjects as living a posthumous existence, the necessary qualification for the subject's future commemoration once the past became part of history. James Boswell viewed Samuel Johnson in this way, recognizing him as a ghostly figure on their first meeting. It was Boswell's belief in Johnson's presence, Lynch argues, that endowed Boswell with the force of feeling which distinguishes *The Life of Samuel Johnson* from Johnson's own celebrated but more affectively distanced *Lives of the Poets*.¹ The story Lynch tells claims a very specific role for biography in the formation of an English canon, where literary biography in particular gave eighteenth-century readers "the sense of a passionate human presence, a supererogatory something lying behind certain books that made them something more than repositories of disembodied words."² In her formulation, the poetic miscellany of the early modern period, with its attendant practices of list-making and imitative modeling, gave way to collections of poets' lives, in which readers could feel ethically and emotionally invested.

¹ See "Making it Personal" in Deidre Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 21-61.

² *Ibid.*, 22.

Like Lynch, I am interested in the discomfiture that can attend the personalization of literary biography. However, whereas she situates this discomfiture primarily within the context of literary appreciation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when literary biography emerged as an object of cultural fascination in marked ways, I ask what happens in a period when biography itself could be said to be living a posthumous life. Indeed, it is this Victorian attitude towards literary biography as living in two worlds, one dead and another powerless to be born, that underlies its cultural importance. Towards the end of the century especially, biography came to occupy a divided position in the literary field. The 1870s saw an increase in hybrid forms of life writing, an indication of the experimental opportunities writers found in biography, while biographies continued to commemorate the achievements of individuals in more traditional forms, including series of brief lives and collective works such as *The Dictionary of National Biography*.³ Canonical biographies of literary figures also held favor, sometimes superseding the works themselves. Such was the case, as Lynch points out, with Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, which retained its popularity—and its status as a biography of literary merit—throughout the nineteenth century, while no new editions of Johnson's collected works appeared between 1825 and the early twentieth century.⁴ The sense of the admired author's inner life that characterized Romantic biography remained paradigmatic among writers on the form, while the variety within biographical writing at

³ On the late-century increase in hybrid forms of life writing, see Max Saunders, *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiographical Fiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Saunders's study charts "the disintegration...of what might be called (by analogy) auto/biographical realism—narratives confident they could deliver objective truths in narrating a life" (11). On the lingering didactic and popular appeal of biography in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as biography came to be less valued as a tool for analysis, see Scott Casper, *Constructing American Lives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). Casper's study focuses on biography in nineteenth-century American history, but he notes that "biography remained a transatlantic genre at century's end" and that "the discourse about biography also remained transatlantic" (320).

⁴ Lynch, 248.

late century enabled readers to approach biography as both a practical reference source and a repository for unmitigated desire.

Two principal characteristics of biography's affective afterlife in the late nineteenth century are developed in my dissertation: one is the sense that biography might be the object of bad reading, and the other is that biography is the waste material of expressive theory. Both ideas are firmly entrenched in the work of twentieth-century literary critics: the New Critical focus on the text as an autonomous object to be read without recourse to the author's life details, and the Poststructuralist notion of the Death of the Author, which regards the text as disconnected from its original moment of production, its meaning to be determined according to its immanent principles.⁵ The emphasis on Foucault's and Barthes's theories of authorship has, to some extent, obscured—or at least made more diffuse—other perspectives on biography in twentieth century criticism, which convey the legacy of biography's embarrassing relationship to criticism that I examine in this project. In *Theory of Literature*, René Wellek and Austin Warren refer to biography as "one of the oldest and best-established methods of literary study."⁶ They outline several areas where biography remains useful to literary critics: in the exegetical sense (it may serve to explain place names or words), as a means of understanding the arc of a career, and as a means of establishing a writer's place in

⁵ See William K. Wimsatt & Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1954); Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977). For an extended discussion of the influence of these theories of the author on twentieth-century literary criticism, see Benjamin Widiss, *Obscure Invitations: The Persistence of the Author in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁶ René Wellek and Austin Warren. *Theory of Literature: New Revised Edition* (New York: Harcourt, 1984), 75.

literary history and tradition. Nonetheless, they caution against ascribing "any specifically *critical* importance" to biography, and continue in the New Critical method with the assertion that "There is no relation between 'sincerity' and value as art."⁷ Because they cannot ascribe any specifically critical importance to biography, Wellek and Warren ultimately undercut their claim that biography is an "established" method. This is perhaps why, despite their cautious recommendations, Pierre Bourdieu attacks Wellek and Warren for "accept[ing] the ideology of the man of genius."⁸ Bourdieu proposes that the life of the writer is only important insofar as it helps determine the "'space' of authors in which each cultural enterprise is constituted."

These twentieth century critics regard biography as embarrassing; they focus on the ends biography cannot accomplish in order to emphasize methods that might take its place. But biography never quite disappears. It lingers at the edges of what emerges in its stead—Foucault's and Barthes's textually and linguistically situated modes of reading, Bourdieu's sociological focus on the literary field. These critics, despite their differences, respond to the author as a nineteenth-century invention. Bourdieu and Barthes both recognize that the author was already regarded by writers in the late nineteenth century as a phenomenon produced by the work itself. Foucault also acknowledges this textually-centered view of the author, but asks what becomes of everything else that might be said to constitute an *oeuvre*: "But what if, in a notebook filled with aphorisms, we find a reference, a reminder of an appointment, an address, or a laundry bill, should this be included in his works? Why not?"⁹ Items like these—letters, newspaper clippings, and

⁷ Ibid., 80.

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, "Flaubert's Point of View," *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 192.

⁹ Foucault, "What is an Author?" 118, 119.

personal effects—make up what Virginia Woolf called "biography in the raw."¹⁰ Woolf's phrase is helpful here, since these features of authorial identification, questioned by Barthes and Foucault as necessary determinants of authorship, are exactly what they seem to be: they are raw materials, as yet unintegrated into the biography of the individual who left them to be discovered. They are of no greater necessity to the process of understanding a life than they are to understanding the texts produced over the course of that life, but they retain a raw possibility that threatens to become a kind of waste when biography is defined as everything which falls outside of the text itself.

The very critics who call for the death of the author cannot quite bear to make good on this threat, in part because nineteenth century biography has made the dead author's personal traces desirable. For Foucault, personal materials lose none of their allure; they simply become a matter of secondary importance to the literary work. Even Barthes maintains a place for the accoutrements of biography, among which he includes "interviews, magazines....diaries and memoirs."¹¹ In a later set of lectures on the novel, he returns to this excess material, referring to it as a collection of "*biographical nebulae*," and admits that in doing so he has allowed "'psychological' affectivity back into intellectual production."¹² The relationship between authorship and death in these twentieth-century essays is not the Romantic relationship between biography and death, which makes belief in the author the condition for the posthumous life of the works (this is, perhaps, why so many biographers describe their fundamental task as a matter of bringing the subject to life). Rather, a work of writing has the power to murder its author.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Morag Shiach (Oxford University Press, 2008), 323.

¹¹ Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 143.

¹² Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 208.

And yet, responding as they do to the invention of authorship as a nineteenth-century phenomenon, Foucault and Barthes indicate that the relationship between lives and works over the course of the nineteenth century was more varied and shifting than the central claims of their essays allow.

This dissertation explores one such shift between lives and works as it occurs in the novel. Nineteenth-century novels record the lives of individuals who are typically left out of biographies, but they remain vessels for authorial presence. On the one hand, using the structure of biography to create the boundaries of fictional worlds enables novelists to render their own biographical identities ambiguous, exposing them as fictions before they are known as anything else (I discuss this topic more extensively in Chapter one by focusing on Dickens's autobiographical fragment in *David Copperfield*). On the other, novels might evoke the reader's affinity for authors as part of the larger project of enlisting biographical form for the purpose of sympathetic historical connection. The finale of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, through the narrator's well-known comparison of the lives of St. Theresa of Avila and Dorothea Brooke, provides an antitype of literary pilgrimage to remind readers of their own contributions to the novel's history. We are told of Dorothea that "the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."¹³ Although Dorothea's story is a story of personal, not literary pilgrimage, Eliot's emphasis on "unvisited" tombs reminds readers of other tombs—such as those of famous authors—that *are* visited, while drawing attention to the role literary biography plays in the fantasy

¹³ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 838.

that begins *Middlemarch*. Early in the novel, Dorothea is a reader who believes in the transmission of literary genius through works, but her regard for Mr. Casaubon as a Miltonic figure turns out to be a poor foundation for marriage. By the end, her focus has turned towards the unhistorical acts that make an art of everyday life, the kind that would fail to attract the younger Dorothea, but which ultimately define her place in the world of the novel.

George Eliot draws attention to the capacity for moral influence in biography and the novel by alluding to biographical fame within the *Middlemarch* narrator's celebration of unhistorical acts. *Middlemarch*, in this way, participates in the culture of domesticity that popularized the biographies of famous and obscure individuals alike.¹⁴ But Eliot's narrator also muses on the theoretical relationship between biography and the novel in this passage. Dorothea's life reminds us that there is much which cannot be captured about an individual's experience in the world. The postscript to her life story makes biography a necessary limitation of the novel's form, and it positions the novel as an attempt to exceed that formal limitation through historical sympathy. In the *bildungsroman* structure that Eliot incorporates (and distends) within *Middlemarch*, the limiting function of biography makes it useful.¹⁵ The engagement with biography in

¹⁴ See Julian North, *The Domestication of Genius: Biography and the Romantic Poet* (Oxford University Press, 2009). North argues that "Biography in practice and theory claimed that to domesticate was to democratize, to question the exclusivity of cultural production that withholds itself from general consumption, and to insist upon the connection between the public/historical and the private/domestic worlds. For many, this is the enduring pleasure of literary biography—its capacity to make this connection—to bring genius home to the reader" (6).

¹⁵ See Georg Lukács on the limiting function of biography in the novel form: "The outward form of a novel is essentially biographical." For Lukács, "The novel overcomes its 'bad' infinity by recourse to the biographical form." That is, biography gives the novel a central problem on which to focus, providing it with an immanent sense of meaning it would otherwise lack (but which is characterized by the earlier form of the epic). *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 77-83. On biography and the form of the *bildungsroman*, see Elinor S. Shaffer, "Shaping Victorian Biography" in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, eds. Peter France and William St. Clair (Oxford University Press,

Eliot's novel is a reckoning with the literary-cultural past as well as a reflection on one of the forms that culture has produced, the realist novel, in its own moment.

By late century, the relationship between biography and the novel had grown more fractured. The formal limitations of biography continued to shape works of fiction, but these limitations also incited generic experimentation that served to question the boundaries of the biographical self. Recent work on "autobiografiction"—a term coined by Stephen Reynolds in 1906 for hybrid forms of life writing that included biography, autobiography, and fiction—has proved especially fruitful in illuminating the formal aspects of such works, which appeared with great frequency between the 1870s and 1930s.¹⁶ My dissertation acknowledges the phenomenon of autobiografiction, particularly as works in this category facilitated the creation of a "posthumous existence" for writers whose attitudes toward the Romantic sense of a literary afterlife were chastened by skepticism and distrust. However, I spend less time in the chapters to come on the formal aspects of autobiografiction than I do on the way such generic experimentation contributes to a broader critical conversation about biography. The work of Thomas Carlyle had much to do with inaugurating this conversation, and his *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4) is an early example of autobiografiction, one that, with Carlyle's other writings on biography, enables the shift from Romantic biography towards the more

2002). Shaffer discusses how Carlyle, as well as George Henry Lewes & George Eliot, absorbed the German biographical ideal through their studies of Goethe.

¹⁶ See Saunders, *Self-Impression*, 1-26. Ira Nadel's *Biography: Fiction, Fact, and Form* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984) looks at the narrative and rhetorical structures of biography in relation to fiction, but falls short of the scope of Saunders's study. Nadel also implies that biography needs to be treated like fiction in order to be read as literature ("The employment of facts, their representation as certain forms of plot structures in a biography, transforms them from chronicle to 'story' and involves theories of language and narrative form. Together, language, narration and myth establish configurations in biography recognized if no experienced by readers," 205), an analysis that does not open itself as much to the possibility of biography having a various set of critical functions produced in response to its formal limitations.

fractured and multifarious position of biography in nineteenth century culture. Charged with the task of editing the papers of Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, the editor of *Sartor Resartus* finds himself in difficulties, until he receives a letter from one of Teufelsdröckh's former acquaintances, offering materials that will furnish the basis for a biography of the professor. The chapters of the book constitute the editor's attempt to make Teufelsdröckh's biography legible, yet the result is something more like a spiritual autobiography interspersed with philosophy, history, and social satire. The editor has inherited the principles of Romantic biography, letting his subject's character emerge through the writings. But if literary biography is marked by the reader's belief in the subject's spectral presence, *Sartor Resartus* troubles this notion, too. In the chapter titled "Farewell," the editor asks, "Seems it not conceivable that, in a life like our Professor's where so much bountifully given by Nature had in Practice failed and misgone, Literature also would never rightly prosper: that striving with his characteristic vehemence to paint this and the other Picture, and ever without success, he at least desperately dashes his brush, full of all colours, against the canvass, to try whether it will paint Foam?"¹⁷

Carlyle is partly having fun at his own expense here, making a mockery of his failure to produce a successful novel. But the lack of success in literature he ascribes to the professor in this passage befalls the editor's biographical project as well. Faced with a subject whose inability to make use of nature's gifts leaves him desperately trying to "paint foam," the editor must end the book before it ever really begins, "So that Teufelsdröckh's public History were not done, then, or reduced to an even, unromantic tenor; nay perhaps, the better part thereof were only beginning? We stand in a region of

¹⁷ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, eds. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford World's Classics, 2008), 333.

conjectures, where substance has melted into shadow, and one cannot be distinguished from the other."¹⁸ Instead of giving substance to shadows, Carlyle's thwarted biographer is faced with a lack of distinction between the two. The experimental arrangement of *Sartor Resartus* manages both to assert the cultural importance of biography and the *bildungsroman* and to gesture towards the limits of these forms. Carlyle ultimately forecasts a future for biography where belief in literary figures might be superseded by texts that have their own lives (not only does *Sartor Resartus* reject the organization of authorship according to the unity of an author's *oeuvre*, but it presents itself as a multiple-authored text, containing the work of the professor, the editor, and Hofrath Heuschrecke, the professor's acquaintance).

The doubts *Sartor Resartus* raises about capturing the significance of a literary figure's life—or, indeed, the life of any individual—are difficult to reconcile with the claims Carlyle made a year before its publication in "Biography" (1832). In this brief essay, Carlyle valorizes biography over fiction for its power to compel the reader's belief. In the course of the argument, biography is identified as the underlying principle of human expression: "Not only in the common Speech of men; but in all Art, too, which is or should be the concentrated and conserved essence of what men can speak and shew, Biography is almost the one thing needful."¹⁹ Invoking the opinion of a mysterious professor (and testing out the fictional device that would be used in the frame chapters of *Sartor Resartus*), Carlyle mounts a complaint against novels, or "fictitious biographies." The difference between actual biographies and fictitious biographies, he suggests, lies in

¹⁸ *Sartor Resartus*, 225.

¹⁹ Thomas Carlyle, "Biography," *Fraser's Magazine* 5, 27 (April 1832): 253-60, 255; facsimile reprinted in *Victorian Biography: A Collection of Essays from the Period*, ed. Ira Bruce Nadel (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986), 254.

the quality of self-knowledge they instill: novels provide evidence of human folly without tracing it to its source, while the failures and missteps in biographies bear the stamp of authentic suffering. Readers of biography can experience others' trials and tribulations in their own lives, and even, perhaps, through their surroundings, as Londoners who read Boswell's *Life of Johnson* might do.²⁰ The success of biography lies in its ability to actualize what is already in readers' minds: "Half the effect, we already perceive, depends on the object; on its being *real*, on its being really *seen*. The other half will depend on the observer; and the question now is: How are real objects to be *so* seen; on what quality of observing, or of style in describing, does this intense pictorial power depend?"²¹ Carlyle anticipates George Eliot here, as her novels make the case for a kind of compatibility between human suffering and sympathy from which this passage deviates only through its reference to biography as the superior source. Even so, the dark confusion at the end of *Sartor Resartus* places significantly less faith in the potential for biography to solicit sympathy from its readers, despite the emergence from spiritual crisis in Teufelsdröckh's "Everlasting Yea." By attending to the relationship between biography and fiction in Carlyle's writings, one sees the parameters of human life as a structuring principle easily disturbed; these parameters must be continually reinscribed to retain their value. In this sense, Carlyle's celebration of belief, even when that belief is inflected with doubt, works to venerate the author as a cultural institution. Yet his work

²⁰ Carlyle adapts Johnson's own claims about biography in *Rambler* 60: "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." *Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism*, ed. R.D. Stock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), 40-41. Biography has this effect "by placing us, for a time, in the condition of him whose fortune we contemplate, so that we feel, while the deception lasts, whatever motions would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves." Lynch recognizes "enchainment" in this essay as an expression of Johnson's qualms about personalizing literary experience (*Loving Literature*, 45). Johnson, of course, is the exemplary figure in Carlyle's "The Hero as Man of Letters."

²¹ Carlyle, "Biography," 259.

also raises a question that would become significantly more important in the decades to come: are we to believe in the artist, or the object?

The act of judging whether the personal elements of a biographical subject's life should be exposed to the public stands in a complicated and dynamic relationship with the critical conversation about what aspects of the literary subject's work matter for celebrating the writer's accomplishments, or for attempting to assure the writer a future place in the literary canon. In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), Elizabeth Gaskell writes of *Jane Eyre*, "I am not going to write an analysis of a book with which every one who reads this biography is sure to be acquainted; much less a criticism upon a work, which the great flood of public opinion has lifted up from the obscurity in which it first appeared, and laid high and safe on the everlasting hills of fame."²² Gaskell's determination not to criticize *Jane Eyre* does not apply to her total assessment of Charlotte Brontë's life and career; several paragraphs later, she suggests that the Brontës "might err in writing at all, when their afflictions were so great that they could not write otherwise than they did of life."²³ Gaskell refuses to let criticism of *Jane Eyre* into her biographical account of Charlotte Brontë, only to deflect criticism of the Brontë sisters' novels onto the circumstances of their lives.²⁴ Whether or not biography could accommodate literary criticism apart from personal character became a matter of even greater contestation as the century progressed. In "The Ethics of Biography" (1883), Margaret Oliphant writes of the importance of biographers ceding authority to the "first speaker"—that is, the subject's own writings and words.²⁵ Oliphant's essay is a response

²² Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Alan Shelston (London: Penguin, 1975), 335.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Gaskell, 326.

²⁵ M.O.W. Oliphant, "The Ethics of Biography," *The Contemporary Review* 44 (July 1883), 76-93, 88.

to the furor provoked by James Anthony Froude's *Life of Carlyle*, and the revelations about the Carlyles' difficult marriage that the biography contained. "The Ethics of Biography" is not exclusively about the perils of literary fame, but in addressing the concerns of anyone who lives a public life, Oliphant manages to simultaneously celebrate Carlyle and to call into question the interweaving of character and literary criticism he attempted with *Sartor Resartus*. A good biographer, according to Oliphant, must possess "sympathy, imagination, genius, all in one"—all of the qualities Carlyle associated with biography, but which he also predicted would fall to doubt and uncertainty.²⁶

My dissertation focuses on the later years of the nineteenth century, because it is during this time that two distinct but related issues reinvigorate the conversation about literary biography. One is the emergence of hybrid fictional forms of biography that, together with a growing critical attention to the novel, upend the notion of biography's superiority to fiction. The other is the shift in interpretation from locating the author's persona in the writings towards regarding the writings as a manifestation of personality and psychology.²⁷ I suggest that it is at the intersection of the biographical subject's social self with the figure of the author in the literary text where embarrassment coalesces. The familiar definition of embarrassment is "A person or thing which causes someone to experience feelings of awkwardness, self-consciousness, or intense emotional or social discomfort."²⁸ But the *OED* lists an array of contradictory meanings. To be in a

²⁶ Oliphant, 89.

²⁷ See epilogue to Suzy Anger, *Victorian Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 166-171. Pater, whose work does not figure specifically in this project, belongs to this conversation with his *Imaginary Portraits* and his essay "Style," with its refrain from Sainte-Beuve (following Buffon) that the style is the man. See also Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (1908-09). Proust condemns Sainte-Beuve for a "system which consists of not separating the man and his work" and claims "it is the secretion of one's innermost life, written in solitude and for oneself alone, that one gives to the public." *Marcel Proust on Art and Literature*, trans. Sylvia Townsend Warner (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1984), 99, 104.

²⁸ "embarrassment, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 28 March 2015.

state of embarrassment can mean that someone is over-endowed with wealth, as in “an embarrassment of riches,” or it can signify complete penuriousness. The primary definition of embarrassment, although now less common, refers to “Something (material or immaterial) which is a hindrance or encumbrance; an impediment, obstruction, or obstacle; a difficulty, a problem.” Further on, we find it is “The fact or condition of being perplexed or confused; hesitation in judgement or action; confusion; uncertainty.” The meanings of the word that refer to social conditions coexist with those which deal with the inability to think or act. Embarrassment might stand for the space of hesitation a person inhabits before attaining full comprehension, or it can shut down comprehension altogether. Literary biography has the potential to activate the multiple meanings of embarrassment, especially when the particulars of an author’s life threaten distraction from the independent qualities of the work.

Henry James titled his 1896 collection *Embarrassments*, but the intersection of embarrassment as social humiliation with embarrassment as a form of textual perplexity is a characteristic element in much of his fiction. Still, the title of this collection, like its stories, quite transparently suggests the humiliating convergence of public and private selves. James's title reflects the double connotation Christopher Ricks observes in the late nineteenth century usage, whereby the noun and verb forms of embarrassment—that is, the social state and its physical expression, the blush—had become inextricably linked.²⁹ Ricks claims that previous uses of the word to refer to obstruction and perplexity are “dubious,” but James's title manages to cover obstructions and perplexities through interpretive difficulties as well as social gaffes, sometimes making the former the cause of the latter. James cannily evokes the embarrassment felt by writers when their

²⁹ Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford University Press, 1974), 4.

private lives are made public, by readers who yearn for unattainable connections with authors, and by critics who fumble with their interpretations of texts. The leading story in *Embarrassments*, "The Figure in the Carpet," brings together all of these embarrassing aspects of biography. Before examining the timely senses of embarrassment in this story about literary biography, however, I want to turn for a moment to "The Aspern Papers" (1888), an earlier text that demonstrates the powerful hold that the notion of authorship instilled by Romantic biography maintained even late in the century. The story positions literary genius as central to the formation of a canon, but the narrator's desire to commune with something beyond words takes a duplicitous direction. The narrator's embarrassment concerns more than his personalization of a great literary figure's work, for his obsession with biography prevents him from identifying a clear objective for his own reading and research.

"The Aspern Papers" illustrates the relationship between life and work in Romantic biography through the figure of an intermediary, someone who keeps the biographer from forming as complete a version of his subject's life as he would wish by controlling access to the subject's papers and refusing to disclose the unrecorded aspects of the subject's story. The story positions the Romantic artist of literary biography against later attempts to come to grips with this figure through autobiography: James based the character of Juliana Bordereau on Claire Clairmont, mother of Byron's daughter and sister-in-law of Percy Shelley. The tale as a whole draws on the story of Shelley devotee Edward Silsbee's conniving efforts to extract Shelley's papers from Clairmont in her old age. Determined to possess the papers of American poet Jeffrey Aspern, the narrator travels to Venice, where he secures lodgings in the home that Juliana, Aspern's

former lover, shares with Miss Tita, her niece. As Juliana edges closer to death, Miss Tita secretly agrees to help the narrator obtain Aspern's papers on the condition that the two marry. The narrator, embarrassed by Miss Tita's advances, refuses—only to learn after Juliana's death that her niece has destroyed the papers. Deprived of his main goal, he departs, empty-handed. He later sends Miss Tita a large sum of money, claiming he has sold Aspern's portrait, the one relic she allows him to keep. But he admits that he has kept the portrait for himself, and that "When I look at it my chagrin at the loss of the letters becomes almost intolerable."³⁰ The narrator's "chagrin" identifies an embarrassment that is experienced on multiple levels, as he has spent his savings on the portrait, allowed Miss Tita to humiliate him, and become more perplexed than ever about Aspern's life.

Each of the nine occurrences of the word "embarrassment" in "The Aspern Papers" takes place in relation to the narrator's exchanges with Miss Bordereau or her niece, except for one: "It is embarrassing for me to relate it" (116). In this parenthetical moment, the narrator's embarrassment moves beyond that which he feels for concealing his true motives from his hostesses, and becomes a *mea culpa* addressed to readers of the story, who have been co-opted in his search for the papers and the insights they might contain. There is not a single sample of Aspern's poetry in the story, no text to interpret except the story itself, which leaves "The Aspern Papers," like "The Figure in the Carpet" after it, to function as a self-enclosed meditation on the search for literary meaning without access to a text, and ultimately with little of the artist's life. It is the narrator's

³⁰ "The Aspern Papers" in *Tales of Henry James*, eds. Christof Wegelin and Henry B. Wonham. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984 [2003]), 131. Subsequent citations of "The Aspern Papers" are from this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

object to find material for a biography, but the failed quest opens up the question of what one looks for from literary biography in the first place.

Francis O'Gorman observes that in spite of the theme of biographical treachery on its surface, "The Aspern Papers" "proposes a way in which a writer's personality might successfully live beyond his death as an aura, an engaging, enduring, but inviolable mystery."³¹ This proposition is not actually separate from the tale's biographical plotline. The narrator, too, believes in the inviolable mystery of Aspern's personality, to the point where he thinks his research will matter for how Aspern's poems are read in the future—which, of course, it will not. The more personal his obsession with the poet becomes, the greater is the narrator's embarrassment at pretending it *isn't* personal, that it is instead a matter of service to the literary community. At one point, convinced that Aspern's "bright ghost had returned to earth" to tell him to treat Juliana Bordereau kindly, the narrator feels that he is "a part of the general romance and the general glory—I felt even a mystic companionship, a moral fraternity with all those who in the past had been in the service of art. They had worked for beauty, for a devotion; and what else was I doing?" (76) Later, however, he becomes defensive when explaining the nature of his work to Miss Tita, claiming that his contributions will be more than merely self-serving: "There is no personal avidity in my desire. It is simply that [the papers] would be of such immense interest to the public, such immeasurable importance as a contribution to Jeffrey Aspern's history" (97). The narrator tries to make the case for his research by referring to Aspern's history as the history of his work. "We are terribly in the dark, I know," he tells Juliana, "but if we give up trying what becomes of all the fine things? What becomes of the work

³¹ "Fabulous and illusive: Giorgione and Henry James's 'The Aspern Papers'." *The Henry James Review*, 27:2 (Spring 2006): 175-187.

I just mentioned, that of the great philosophers and poets? It is all vain words if there is nothing to measure it by" (101-2). The narrator takes pains not to identify himself as a biographer to Miss Tita. "I'm a critic," he says, someone who writes "about the books of other people." His embarrassment prevents him from admitting what he really is—what Juliana Bordereau melodramatically calls a "publishing scoundrel"—but in refusing to admit it, he acknowledges the difference between a version of biographical criticism that is reductive, scandalous, and myopic, and one that performs valuable criticism, using the individual life as a means of access to many, and making fragments, silences, and missed opportunities into the material of art. To be embarrassed in "The Aspern Papers" is to be unwilling to admit the coexistence of these two modes.

James's stories configure biography as an embarrassing form of criticism, one that privileges feeling over form. Where the narrator of "The Aspern Papers" is a biographer masquerading as a critic, the narrator of "The Figure in the Carpet"—the first of the four stories that make up *Embarrassments*—is a critic enamored with biography. The narrator of "The Figure" belongs to a circle of admirers of the novelist Hugh Vereker. When he is given the task of reviewing Vereker's latest novel (for a publication aptly titled "The Middle,") the narrator eagerly accepts. After learning that Vereker has referred to the review as "the usual twaddle," however, the narrator becomes determined to find the secret behind Vereker's work that he is convinced must exist.³² This preoccupation causes the narrator to make Vereker's acquaintance, and over the course of their conversation he realizes that the key to the novelist's work remains "a secret in spite of itself" (21). The only "tip" that Vereker can offer is that his life and his work are one and

³² James, "The Figure in the Carpet," *Embarrassments*, (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd, 1896), 12. Subsequent citations of "The Figure in the Carpet" are from this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.

the same: "He called it letters, he called it life—it was all one thing" (35). A series of deaths—Vereker's, that of the narrator's rival, Corvick, and of Corvick's wife, Gwendolen (both of whom claim to have knowledge of Vereker's secret)—leaves the narrator unable to pursue intermediary forms of contact with the author he admires. Like the narrator of "The Aspern Papers," he is stuck in the same place he began. The story puts its trick in plain view: there may *be* no figure in the carpet, and if there is, biography is its decoy, rather than the key to its realization.

Although one might identify the embarrassment of "The Figure in the Carpet" with Vereker's untold secret, it is in the persistence of the narrative after the moment in which the narrator accepts the truth as inaccessible that biography embarrasses most. E.S. Burt describes embarrassment as "punctual, tied to a specific moment when a capable individual, feeling itself on display, momentarily lacks the human capacity for responsive speech."³³ Burt's analysis, which highlights embarrassment as a moment of obstruction and limitation brought about through a confrontation with the other, leaves open the possibility that an individual might use silent reflection to move beyond what seems to be an impasse. To move past the moment of embarrassment in ways the narrator of "The Figure in the Carpet" is never able to do would be to evidence a kind of reflective mastery. Burt's sense of embarrassment can tell us something about the forward motion of James's story after Vereker disappears. The "Figure" narrator's predicament is a perverse realization of the fantasy motivating the narrator of "The Aspern Papers." If Jeffrey Aspern were present, the narrator might know all, and he might fulfill his desire for communion with the dead poet. But the narrator of "The

³³ *Regarding the Other: Autothanatography in Rousseau, De Quincey, Baudelaire, & Wilde* (Fordham University Press, 2009), 64-5.

"Figure in the Carpet" knows that the author's presence does not deliver any guarantees, even when he finds that he likes Vereker better than his books. When the narrator asks, "Don't you think you ought—just a trifle—to assist the critic?" Vereker laughs, "Assist him? What else have I done with every stroke of my pen? I've shouted my intention in his great blank face!" (20) This exchange occurs in the middle of the story; the second half follows the narrator's efforts to get Vereker's secret from Corvick, all the while trying to pretend he is not really interested in what Corvick has found out. Readers of the story know what Corvick does not: that the narrator still finds Vereker's secret irresistible, and that he still believes his exchanges with Vereker have value even if they do not result in a definitive interpretation.

In James's stories, embarrassment throws into relief the uncomfortable but mutually constitutive roles of biographer and critic during the late nineteenth century. The dynamic of self-deception that enables the narrator of "The Aspern Papers" to pretend to be a critic, and the narrator of "The Figure in the Carpet" to pretend he is not a biographer, recurs in the texts I examine in this project. Attending to this presence of self-deception helps define what biography is for, and in what ways biography's function as a narrative account of an individual life begins to detach from its purpose as a vessel for the transmission of critical posterity. The kind of embarrassment experienced by the James's narrators suggests that "biography" can be many things, and that it can actually illuminate critical concepts from which it otherwise might be disassociated. "The Figure in the Carpet" imagines several critical approaches to a text: the determination of an author's intentions, the focus on how the text configures the relationship between authors and readers, the possibility of autobiography as *oeuvre*. In the course of laying out this

range of possibilities, James anticipates the suspicious literary critical perspectives about biography that emerged in the twentieth century. As Max Saunders writes, "for an author jealous of his privacy, like James (or Vereker), biographical readings are not only intrusive, but also appear to negate genuine creativity—the creation of the authentically other." He continues, "one can see the idea of looking for a biographical figure in the literary carpet as, conversely, a reconfiguring of the idea of biography itself: instead of finding the salient elements of an author's life in the visible traces of his lived existence, they can be sought elsewhere, in works of art."³⁴ While James's stories do illustrate the idea of biography as needing reconfiguration through the work of art, I want to argue that "visible traces of lived existence" are equally important in his work, and that of many of his contemporaries. The intermediary figures who have had physical contact with the poet or author are not merely the subjects of subplots in James's work; they often force the narrator into an admission of his objectives. Such intermediary figures in literary biographies contemporary with *Embarrassments* and after show how the critical embarrassment of biography emerges from the challenge of sorting out multiple incompatible roles, including those of author, reader, and critic, and of exposing them at the moments they come to impersonate each other.

By "critical embarrassment" I mean to reference both the sense of what biography provokes in the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century texts discussed in this dissertation, and the sense of what it is as an object of inquiry in current literary criticism. James's work, as Nick Salvato helpfully observes, could be said to "anatomize" the contemporary critical significance of embarrassment. Of the narrator in "The Figure in the Carpet," he writes:

³⁴ Saunders, *Self-Impression*, 258.

If only he were smarter, the narrator thinks, he would discover what the figure in the carpet is. If only he were smarter, we ought to think, the narrator would not discover what the figure in the carpet is, *per se*, but would rather find just as dazzling a way to write or converse about not finding the figure in the carpet—and perhaps even refuting the existence of the figure in the carpet—as he would if he had the (impossible) key to reveal that figure. In other words, he would find a way to push through the embarrassment that hounds him in almost every interaction, that impedes him at almost every turn, and with which his yoked stupidity obstructs or damages his social and professional relations.³⁵

Salvato takes up several elements of Erving Goffman's thinking about embarrassment in the latter's seminal essay "Embarrassment and Social Organization." In Goffman's construction, embarrassment carries with it the potential for redemption—because it can be felt on another's behalf, it is a moment of discomfort that may allow for social adjustment, and perhaps improvement, in the future. Embarrassment is a fundamentally extrinsic feeling, and an indicator of what Goffman calls role segregation.

Embarrassment in this sense occurs "when the self projected is somehow confronted with another self which, though valid in other contexts, cannot be here sustained in harmony with the first."³⁶ For Salvato, role segregation affects critics when an object of personal interest does not hold the same amount of intellectual interest for their associates. Such critics might find themselves embarrassed to make this object the focus of serious inquiry. But Salvato suggests that overcoming role segregation could be a way for critical embarrassment to generate positive effects, allowing previously rejected areas of inquiry to be explored and seemingly incompatible aspects of the critic's inquiries to merge with the material of his chosen subject. Thinking about the critical embarrassment biography produces, and how critics work through that embarrassment, can assist critics

³⁵ Nick Salvato, "Cringe Criticism: On Embarrassment and Tori Amos." *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Summer 2013): 676-702.

³⁶ Erving Goffman, "Embarrassment and Social Organization," *American Journal of Sociology* 62 (Nov. 1956): 264-271.

reluctant to embrace the idea that biography defines what actually stimulates their interest.

The connection between embarrassment and shame is an intimate one, and perhaps for this reason it is not always fully clear where one begins and the other ends. Like embarrassment, shame may afford individuals the opportunity to work through a humiliating experience and find value where it otherwise might not be thought to exist. There is some disagreement on whether the extrinsic quality of embarrassment differentiates it from shame.³⁷ However, the kind of critical embarrassment associated with biography in this project depends on the confluence of social humiliation with interpretive perplexity that the title of James's collection makes transparent, and the etymological history of shame lacks such a connection.³⁸ Still, I see a relationship between embarrassment and shame where they merge in the critic's contemplation of what may be regarded as ephemeral and anachronistic. Several of the biographical texts I discuss in the pages to follow are embarrassing, in whole or in part, because they are anachronistic when they are read from a contemporary perspective; they are the first (or among the first) lives to be written after the subject's death, and thus they skim over important facets of personality, they leave out decisive episodes, and they tend to include more fawning remembrances than would characterize any active friendship—all potential sources of shame for the individual that become embarrassing for the critic. The case of Oscar Wilde is more complicated than the others, and rightfully so: as a celebrated queer

³⁷ On the relationship of shame to embarrassment, see Thomas J. Scheff, "Shame in Self and Society." *Symbolic Interaction* 26:2 (2003): 239-262; Tangney, Mashek, Stuewig, "Shame, Guilt, and Embarrassment: Will the Real Emotion Please Stand Up?" *Psychological Inquiry*, 16:1 (2005): 44-48.

³⁸ While it lacks the sense of interpretive obstruction carried by embarrassment, the Germanic roots of "shame" do connote public humiliation, as seen in the Old English *scand*, which becomes "scandal." See *OED* etymology for "shame, n."

figure who both does and does not authorize modern ideas of queer identity, Wilde now figures in the work of critics who find redemption in shame (as Wilde himself did in *De Profundis*), but he also never quite fulfills the expectations that critics place on his work. To point to an example that will resurface in the third chapter, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes note of the "philosophically embarrassing, because narratively so compelling, biographical entanglements with the most mangling as well as the most influential of the modern machineries of male sexual definition" that characterize Wilde's writing in *De Profundis*. Wilde's impersonal aesthetic philosophy, for Sedgwick, clashes with the biographical narrative that Wilde cannot abandon in *De Profundis*, one which paints his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas—and his queerness—as both triumph and tragedy.³⁹ Heather Love takes Sedgwick's critical embarrassment a step further by suggesting that the embarrassment which Walter Pater's queer biography instils in critics is a matter of interest in its own right. Pater's participation in older, more secretive forms of homosexual culture as modern homosexual identity emerged as a category, Love observes, functions as a kind of double displacement, but "Pater's break with the future and with the hard revolutionism of the modernists has made him the source of some embarrassment."⁴⁰ Love argues that instead of seeing Pater's embrace of social exclusion as apolitical, critics might find an alternative in his self-marginalization. Wilde's and Pater's shame are a source of critical embarrassment because they deviate from the contemporary critic's desire to read their work either as a site of social and sexual liberation, or as a philosophical system that readily embraces the contraries it creates. Embarrassment becomes a means for the critic to work through the biographical subject's

³⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990 [2008]), 132.

⁴⁰ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 58.

shame, and to see the work as embedded within the social and cultural determinants of biography—but not bound to them in the same way through each generation.

The critical embarrassment described by Sedgwick and Love comes from the merging of the biographical subject's historical presence with the position of the subject's biography in contemporary criticism. In this case, embarrassment comes about through anachronism—politics and identity imposed upon the practices of the past. But the past might also impose itself on the present, and recognizing the ways that it does so has allowed biographers and critics to desegregate their roles as seekers of pleasure and analytical thinkers, as Salvato suggests critical embarrassment might do for those who focus on overlooked objects of inquiry. Recent work on style by critics in nineteenth-century studies has created a provocative place for biography. When D.A. Miller writes on the style of Jane Austen, he relies upon the most salient facts about Austen's life—that she was a spinster, and that she wrote about social institutions she never experienced with a peculiar wit and verve—to make an argument about her writing. Austen's narration, Miller writes, "does not itself experience what it nonetheless knows with all the authority of experience."⁴¹ Miller uses these biographical facts as the basis for a study that makes Austen's style especially significant for marginalized sexual subjects. In turn, Miller's own biography, as a gay male reader of Austen, shapes his analysis of style. The biography of the writer and the critic come together to determine the form of the criticism; it is analytical, and it is appreciative.⁴² Andrew Miller calls this type of criticism "implicative": it shows the mind of the critic at work, rather than laying out a set

⁴¹ D.A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 32.

⁴² Ellis Hanson writes on "languorous criticism" as "aesthetically generative" rather than a "failure of critical mastery." "The Languorous Critic." *New Literary History* 44:3 (Summer 2013): 547-564.

of conclusions that has already been reached.⁴³ Biography, in this case, draws attention to the critic's writing process as it unfolds. The result is an "impersonal intimacy" that rejects the sense that biography is inherently subject to suspicion, for it embraces the overlay of biographical roles and writerly voices.

Biographers, too, have turned towards the writer's process to overcome the critical embarrassment of their medium. The surge in popularity of the book biography indicates a renewed faith in the relationship between writers' lives and their works. In a book biography, a writer (usually an academic or journalist) discusses the circumstances of an author's life during the composition of a particular work (often a classic novel). Writers of book biographies may choose to present themselves as figures in the narrative, claiming a personal relationship with the work under discussion, or their presence may be barely traceable.⁴⁴ The great variety within the genre may be accounted for by the different approaches writers take towards biography as a critical embarrassment. Perhaps it is unsurprising that the Jamesian form of embarrassment has taken on a life of its own, to the point where it barely needs to be acknowledged. This is the approach taken by Michael Gorra in *Portrait of a Novel*. Gorra interweaves vignettes from James's life between chapters that analyze definitive scenes from *The Portrait of a Lady*, providing commentary on James's relationships, writing process, and theoretical perspectives. The single warning on biography in the book is cursory, as if to remind readers that James's

⁴³ Andrew H. Miller, "Implicative Criticism, or The Display of Thinking." *New Literary History* 44:3 (Summer 2013): 345-360.

⁴⁴ I use the term "book biography" to emphasize the critical reassessment of canonical literary works at the heart of such projects, whether they are biographical or autobiographical in their approach. In this sense, I differ from critics such as Joyce Carol Oates, whose primary emphasis in discussing the genre is on the pitfalls of the first-person perspective. Oates prefers the term "bibliomemoir," as in: "Rarely attempted, and still more rarely successful, is the bibliomemoir—a subspecies of literature combining criticism and biography with the intimate, confessional tone of autobiography." See Oates, "Deep Reader: Rebecca Mead's *My Life in Middlemarch*." *New York Times Book Review*, 23 January 2014.

work is warning enough: "It's always dangerous to draw inferences about a writer's life from his fiction, his fiction from his life."⁴⁵ Instead of drawing inferences of this kind, Gorra focuses on the importance, both figural and personal, of other writers to James, such as Turgenev and George Eliot.

Portrait of a Novel forestalls the critical embarrassment associated with biography by maintaining an impersonal intimacy with its authorial subject. The embarrassments are all James's, and they are always ambiguous and never definitive. Most importantly, they are identified as part of the novelist's development as it is evidenced in the production of the book that marked a turning point in his career. Book biographies that interweave this kind of theoretical work with more subjective insights have a different relationship with embarrassment, because the idea of "reading for love" can come into conflict with the critical process. In *My Life in Middlemarch*, for example, Rebecca Mead's critical embarrassment emerges as she attempts to write about her own life in relation to George Eliot's without appearing solipsistic. At the end of a chapter that puts Mead's experiences as an Oxford student alongside an analysis of Dorothea Brooke's marriage to Mr. Casaubon, Mead observes, "Identification with character is one way in which most ordinary readers do engage with a book, even if it is not where a reader's engagement ends...Even the most sophisticated readers read novels in the light of their own experience, and in such recognition, sympathy may begin."⁴⁶ Although she writes about the beginnings of sympathy in this passage, Mead implies that a book biography such as *My Life in Middlemarch* might be a reified version of the solipsism one ostensibly avoids by turning to the life of someone else.

⁴⁵ Michael Gorra, *Portrait of a Novel: Henry James and the Making of an American Masterpiece* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 81.

⁴⁶ Rebecca Mead, *My Life in Middlemarch* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2014), 172-3.

Mead's embarrassment is most palpable when she considers her position against that of Alexander de Main, compiler of *Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings, in Prose, and Verse, Selected from the Works of George Eliot* (1872), and Eliot's fawning, opportunistic acolyte. "Main's assumption of intimacy with Eliot made me cringe," Mead writes,

And yet I recognized in his enthusiasm for her works enough of my own admiration for her to feel an awkward fellowship with him. Main is the naïve reader writ large—the kind of reader who approaches a book not with an academic's theoretical apparatus or the scope of a professional critic, but who reads with commitment and intelligence, and with a conviction that there is something worth learning from a book.⁴⁷

Nowhere in Gorra's book on James does he claim a kinship with the narrator of "The Aspern Papers" or "The Figure in the Carpet," as Mead does here with a man who could be their real-life equivalent. The signal of embarrassment—her "cringe"—registers Mead's discomfort with the realization that she is no less a "naïve reader" than Main, as does her recognition that all of us may be unsophisticated readers on the road to becoming sympathetic beings. Here, then, are two inverse approaches to biography as a critical embarrassment—one (Gorra's) where the association of biography with naïve reading is a foregone conclusion, and another (Mead's) where it is an open question, caught in the book biographer's unease with impersonating the role of the critic.

In order to point the way towards the many guises the relationship between biographer and critic assumes, each chapter of this dissertation focuses on a particular iteration of biography as a critical embarrassment. The first two chapters situate the nineteenth century fascination with biography within the discourse of realism and the realist novel. Chapter one argues that John Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-4) defines Dickensian realism as a negotiation between Dickens's use of biography in his

⁴⁷ Ibid., 241.

fiction and the novelist's imagination of the world through the fictional biographies of characters. In response to critiques of Dickens's imaginative powers, Forster uses the *Life* to show how Dickens drew on his biographical circumstances to move beyond the individual life as a model for fiction. Forster, in turn, develops his dual role as biographer and critic by claiming a share in the exposure of his friend's greatest embarrassment—the period during which the young Dickens worked at Warren's Blacking Factory to support his family. The fragment Dickens wrote about this time in his life is initially introduced as a confession to Forster, but Forster returns to the fragment later in the *Life* during his discussion of the artistry of *David Copperfield*. Forster moves towards a critical position that acknowledges the powerful impact Dickens made on his readers as an embodiment of the characters in his novels, while he insists that the author and his creations must remain separate if Dickens's art is to be sufficiently appreciated.

Whereas the first chapter looks at the criticism of realist fiction in biography, Chapter two turns to the idea of biography in realist fiction. George Gissing's realist novels *The Unclassed* and *New Grub Street* portray biography as drudgery—as an embarrassment in the financial as well as social sense. For Gissing's struggling writers, biography can refer to a supplementary periodical assignment taken on by a would-be novelist, or a form of fiction so faithful to the details of everyday existence that it leaves scant room for art. Gissing's critical writing, I suggest, may be understood as a self-conscious effort to convert the public's fascination with biography into a form of cultural capital for novelists. I read *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (1898) as a work that takes

advantage of the series biography format to further the discussion of realism initiated in one of Gissing's favorite books: Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens*.

The relationship between Gissing's fiction and his critical work sets the stage for the second half of the project, which turns from the social and cultural implications of biography in fiction towards the interpretive embarrassments that concern the critic as artist. The third chapter looks at the 1895 trials of Oscar Wilde to show how they worked to perpetuate an understanding of biography as a form of what I call "debased intentionalism." While arriving at a sense of the author's intentions was a goal of interpretation throughout the nineteenth century, Wilde's case took intentionalism to its limits, as details from his life were read against his texts in court. In *De Profundis*, I argue, Wilde seeks an alternative to debased intentionalism by opposing the details of his life to Christ's, whose biography, as Wilde would have it, is a series of instances in which the pleasurable contact between artist and audience is continually refashioned. The second half of this chapter shows how Wilde's earliest biographers responded to the imperative to read Wilde's work biographically. These friends and acquaintances worked to create a critical future for Wilde by keeping his intentions separate from his art.

If Wilde's life and art became almost impossible to separate at the height of his fame, after his trials and imprisonment, nothing seemed more artless than biography. The fourth and final chapter examines "The Art of Biography" as a topic of critical discourse in early twentieth-century essays and histories of the form. The central figure in this chapter is Virginia Woolf, whose attitude towards biography as an embarrassment can be traced through all of the genres in which she worked. I show how Woolf and her contemporaries—including Lytton Strachey, Harold Nicolson, and André Maurois—use

biography as a tool for engaging common readers in conversations about the formal function of art and the transparency of knowledge in an age of disciplinary specialization. Woolf's efforts to address common readers allowed her great flexibility as she moved among her roles as writer, reader, and critic. They also allowed her to move freely and imaginatively between past and present, imagining a future where the embarrassments of Victorian biography might give way to a variety of creative and critical possibilities. Nonetheless, these possibilities can only be realized by recognizing biography as a form that moves uncomfortably between academic and popular readerships, an issue that Woolf grappled with as she worked on her life of Roger Fry.

It would be erroneous to suggest that biography has no place in literary criticism. But if this dissertation ends where such assumptions begin, it also questions the values that have helped perpetuate them. After all, those who are for biography have been just as responsible for making it an embarrassing object of criticism as those who are against it, by pitting it against theories and institutions. Benjamin Disraeli's description of biography as consisting of "life without theory" has been taken literally by a great many practitioners of the form.⁴⁸ What is so interesting about many of these defenses of biography is that even those who are willing to concede the toil and drudgery that go into

⁴⁸ The Disraeli quote, originally from *Contarini Fleming* (1832), appears in David Ellis, *Literary Lives and the Search for Understanding* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 1. On biography as a "maverick" genre, see Paula Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford University Press, 1999). Backscheider observes that "the last literary genre to be read by a very wide cross-section of people is biography" (xiii) but that biography is typically bypassed "by traditional genre critics and by the trendy theorists" (xiv). Melville biographer Hershel Parker fiercely criticizes theorists' neglect of the information made available by biographers in a chapter called "Biographical Scholars and Recidivist Critics" in *Melville Biography: An Inside Narrative* (Northwestern University Press, 2012). In fiction, the novelist A.S. Byatt makes the love of biography the antidote to literary theory (even if they both end up equally frustrating) in *The Biographer's Tale* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001). Hermione Lee has also discussed the relationship between biography and the academy. When asked about her position as president of Wolfson College, Oxford, where she presides over a Center for Life Writing, "Is life writing frowned upon biography in the academy there?" Lee acknowledged, "biography has been seen as a slightly maverick, perhaps too popular, perhaps not sufficiently serious genre." (Hermione Lee in conversation with Gary Giddins, The Graduate Center, CUNY, 18 March 2013)

producing one would like to claim biography itself as a "maverick" genre, a labor of love, a tangle of passion and precision. I return to Lynch's study here, which ends, as it begins, with a discussion of biography as the genre perhaps most emblematic of the relationship between the love of literature and literature's imminent demise (often spoken of, but not yet realized). Instead of trying to force biography out of that position, by eliminating the contributions it might offer to critical inquiry or insisting that such contributions can be only be made by amateurs, it may be time to confront the embarrassment both positions provoke, so as to discern the uses it has offered all along.

CHAPTER ONE

Biography's "Proper Place":
Character and Fiction in Forster's *Life of Dickens*

People in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed. And this is why they often seem more definite than characters in history, or even our own friends; we have been told all about them that can be told; even if they are imperfect or unreal they do not contain any secrets, whereas our friends do and must, mutual secrecy being one of the conditions of life upon this globe.⁴⁹

—E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*

Characters' peculiar affective force, I propose, is generated by the mutual implication of their unreal knowability and their apparent depth, the link between their real nonexistence and the reader's experience of them as deeply and impossibly familiar.⁵⁰

—Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality"

He was among the truest of men; but he had been balancing in his mind, much to its distress, whether his volunteering to tell these two fragments of truth, at this time, would not be tantamount to a piecing together of falsehood in the place of truth.⁵¹

—Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

John Forster did not suffer the same compunction during the preparation of *The Life of Charles Dickens* as *Edwin Drood*'s Mr. Crisparkle when he weighed the value of silence against disclosure. Nothing as urgent as a murder case loomed over his arrangements, and yet the death of the novelist, Forster's longtime friend and client, brought with it the necessity of considering how many partial truths Forster might divulge before they began to cancel each other out—and before his own death prevented him from orchestrating any further interventions. This chapter centers on one particular

⁴⁹ E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harcourt, 1927), 47.

⁵⁰ Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel: Vol. 2—Forms and Themes*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton University Press, 2006), 356.

⁵¹ Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 182.

intervention of Forster's: the revelation of the autobiographical fragment Dickens included in *David Copperfield*. It argues that Forster's discussion of the author and his characters in the *Life* instantiates a shift in biography's literary-critical status during the later decades of the nineteenth century. The phrase "literary biography" carries with it a number of expectations, not all of which may be given equal space. Does it refer to the everyday life of a literary figure, or a biography interspersed with moments of critical analysis of the writing that defines a life? Is the "literary" half of the phrase applicable to the style of the writer whose life the biography treats, or that of the biographer? Can it be all of these things at once, or must it be a few?

The question that underscores all of the above is that of why biography gets written and read in the first place. One possible response can be found in the opening line of *David Copperfield*, where the adult narrator, settling in to record his life from the moment of his birth, wonders "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else."⁵² David's question carries with it a certain air of predictability, and yet it also supposes that the act of retelling a life will inevitably be purposeful, whether the process is undertaken by oneself or by someone else. As much as *David Copperfield* conforms to the autobiographical mode, it is also a novel that worries about what it might be like to have one's life written by another, and about what becomes of "heroes" when their activities are recorded by the people who know them best. In the *Life*, Forster makes available his own feelings for Dickens as well as the feelings he perceives readers felt towards Dickens and his characters. As he does

⁵² Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Jeremy Tambling (London: Penguin, 2004), 13. All in-text citations refer to this edition.

so, he contends with biography's status as a chronologically-driven, didactic form that must compete with fiction's self-contained and yet continually generative capabilities.

Forster's *Life of Dickens* thus engages in a conversation about the representative status of real life in the nineteenth century, and the ways in which it held the imaginative qualities of biography up against those of fiction. The writings of the nonconformist preacher Edwin Paxton Hood indicate the changing status of biography over the course of the century, from a genre that triumphed over fiction to one that required the strange qualities of fiction to make it interesting. The first of Hood's volumes, *The Uses of Biography* (1852), opens with a chapter that discusses biography as a museum of human life, drawing on Carlyle's conviction that biography is the stuff of history. Hood writes, "Man is compelled to have a regard for his brother man," adding, "Sometimes he shows it by reading light and frivolous tales, and sometimes highly wrought fiction, and sometimes dramatic exhibition, and sometimes poetic narration, sometimes historic development, and sometimes philosophic speculation; but every where the subject of most interest to man, is man himself."⁵³ In 1876, Hood published another volume titled *The Romance of Biography*. The latter volume maintains its debts to Carlyle (and to Emerson), arguing for biography's potential to free the human soul, but Hood's primary motive is to enable readers to find strangeness and wonder in ordinary life. The book opens with a parable of a student who falls in love with a beautiful woman in a mirror, only to request for the mirror to be shattered when the woman emerges from the mirror into the room. Hood goes on to argue that the ideal and the real may coexist, as long as imaginary narratives do not detract from the value of everyday experiences.

⁵³ *The Uses of Biography*, (London: Partridge & Oakey, 1852), 11.

Even if those like Hood remained unwaveringly invested in the didactic value of biography, the movement from "use" to "romance" in his titles indicates a broader shift in emphasis towards biography as a form that could entertain and divert through the use of fictional techniques, innovations belied by the uniformity of the numerous "life and letters" volumes that appeared throughout the nineteenth century. Forster's *Life* has not been typically recognized for its formal innovation, and with good reason; its three volumes, published between 1871 and 1874, are characteristic of the capacious Victorian biography, brimming over with anecdotes, facts, and plenty of the subject's own (carefully pruned) correspondence.⁵⁴ However, the *Life* still makes an important contribution to the debate over what the purpose of biography should be—whether it should be primarily useful to its readers, or whether it should fulfill the desire for pleasure that the memorable characters of Dickens's own novels afforded.

The central relationship I explore in the *Life* occurs between the affective force generated by characters in a novel and the author as a figure who is paradoxically most interesting for what he does not write. Dickens never wrote his fragment of autobiography to be read as such; he incorporated it into *David Copperfield*, and left Forster to present it unmediated by fiction in the biography. Roland Barthes explores the concept of "life writing" as it pertains to the overlap between biography and autobiography in a lecture postdating his influential "Death of the Author" essay, and his surprising reconsideration of the author figure helps make sense of the overlapping voices Forster's *Life* records. Through the idea of life writing, Barthes locates a typology of

⁵⁴ In *The Development of English Biography*, for example, Harold Nicolson refers to Forster's work as "highly competent," but he adds, "I do not pretend that all this has had any very enduring influence on the evolution of biography as a branch of English literature" (Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography* [New York: Harcourt, 1928], 127).

roles the first person "I" performs in a novel. Barthes contends that the role of *persona*, "the everyday, empirical, private individual who 'lives' without writing" is that which invests life writing with a specific creative value.⁵⁵ Taking a cue from Proust's writing on Sainte-Beuve, Barthes observes that the book is a creative product precisely because it is *not* a record of the author's social self—it is a transcription of private thoughts, feelings, and ideas which will never be fully replicated in written discourse. Barthes's reversal of his position in "The Death of the Author" accounts for the series of roles a writer performs, and the variety of desires readers feel when they sense the author's presence. In Forster's *Life*, Dickens's *persona* intersects with another main role, that of *scriptor*, which Barthes defines as "the writer as social image, the one who gets talked about, who gets discussed, who gets classified according to school, or genre, in manuals, etc."⁵⁶ The intersection of these two roles in the *Life* constitutes Forster's unique contribution as one of Dickens's first biographers, but it also opens up the question of whether Forster's work interferes with the indefiniteness that would otherwise provide pleasure for Dickens's readers.

The pleasures of biography in the later nineteenth century are defined by this indefinite knowledge of the biographical subject, the unattainable contact with the author which Deidre Lynch associates with the posthumousness of the genre.⁵⁷ As I suggest, accompanying these pleasures is embarrassment, which emerges through the recognition that the character in a novel one loves is not, after all, an extension of its author. If it seems like an easy enough task to distinguish between the way readers identify with

⁵⁵ See the sections titled "Return to Biography" and "Life Writing" in Session of January 19, 1980, *The Preparation of the Novel*, trans. Kate Briggs (Columbia University Press, 2011), 208-211.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁵⁷ See Introduction, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History*, 13-17.

authors and with characters (not all readers of Dickens imagined they were communing with the novelist himself, while others maintained a strong sense of his creative presence) accounting for the embarrassment that can accompany these related processes of self-gratification is a less straightforward endeavor.⁵⁸ Certain authors invite a greater degree of intimacy with readers than others, and for such authors, distinctions between author and character affinity do not hold; it is more useful to explore how biography merges these two objects of readers' desires.⁵⁹ Consider, for instance, the novelist E.M. Forster's discussion of "people in a novel" as they compare to "characters in history, or even our own friends." This Forster (not to be confused with Dickens's biographer) confers personality upon fictional creations, leaving historical people who actually lived to be recognized as "characters," rather than the other way around. It is to these shadowy historical personages that he links "our own friends," with an added emphasis—"even our own friends"—which suggests surprise. The assertion works almost like a parlor game or informal questionnaire (*if you could have dinner with any historical figure, who would it be, and what would you ask?*). What the historical record does not contain might once have been available through a direct connection with the actual person, but how can this be supposed when our own relationships are always defined by a lack of information? As Forster suggests, people in a novel live in a more comprehensible world, because even if

⁵⁸ Jonathan Rose documents working-class readers' responses to Dickens's characters, whose lives they sometimes took as models for their own, in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 111-15. These responses belie the assumption that Dickens's work fell out of favor in the decades after his death, although the presence of this assumption in itself suggests embarrassment at the novels' continuing appeal.

⁵⁹ Jane Austen is a case in point. Katie Halsey identifies three categories of Austen readers throughout the nineteenth century: those who considered themselves friends of the author, those who wished to befriend Austen's characters, and those who approached Austen's work as a moral guide ("Gossip' and 'Twaddle': Nineteenth-Century Readers Make Sense of Jane Austen," in *A Return to the Common Reader: Print Culture and the Novel, 1850-1900*, eds. Beth Palmer and Arlene Buckland [Surrey: Ashgate, 2011], 69-85). Austen's private life and anonymous publication practices are distinctly different from Dickens's love of public spectacle, but these categories are loosely applicable to readings of his work, particularly in the eulogies and obituary notices that appeared alongside Forster's *Life*.

readers might wish to know more about them, the parameters of that world are, in a purely informational sense, finite.

E.M. Forster does not address biography directly, but his remarks imply that the desire for biographical knowledge comprises some portion of fictional characters' appeal. Catherine Gallagher identifies biography as one of the forms appropriated by eighteenth-century novelists for the task of making their stories appear more real to potential readers. The appearance of the realist novel, Gallagher argues, did away with the necessity for such mechanisms (one thinks of the disappearance of the subtitle "An Autobiography" from later editions of *Jane Eyre*). The novel "liberated" fictionality, giving readers the opportunity to indulge in narratives of lives that seemed *more* real because they did not call attention to themselves as realistic. Yet there are places in Gallagher's argument that suggest this development may have left in its wake a residual guilt over the knowledge that fictional characters could provide gratification precisely because they never were, or would never be, "actual" biographical subjects: "We already know...that all of our fictional emotions are by their nature excessive because they are emotions about nobody, and yet the knowledge does not reform us. Our imagination of characters is, in this sense, absurd and (perhaps) legitimately embarrassing."⁶⁰ Later, discussing Bentham's concept of character as an "imaginary nonentity," Gallagher adds, "If such a person did exist, the usual boundary of personhood would be in place, and the reality created by the fiction would disintegrate. Then there would be no inviting openness, which is always, to some extent, pathetic."⁶¹ Gallagher's argument depends on character as a nonreferential entity, and thus leaves no room for the kind of embarrassment, or even the kind of

⁶⁰ "The Rise of Fictionality," 352.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 357.

pathetic longing, that might emerge when the reader imagines the author. Her discussion of character makes one wonder: is it less embarrassing or pathetic when the person on whom a character is based is actually the author? Forster's claim in *Aspects of the Novel* that we can never know anyone fully in real life suggests that it is not. What, then, can character tell us about biography in fiction? Following the claim in *Aspects*, it is perhaps embarrassing that we know characters better than we know our own intimates. The open invitation to connect with fictional entities depends on a failure in our personal relations, one that the act of reading fiction might put us on a track to mend, if embarrassment can first be faced. Identifying with biographically based characters might be one such way of facing this embarrassment head on, and even taking some pleasure in it.

David Copperfield falls somewhere between the developments Gallagher describes, for even as it invokes the eighteenth-century novels that Dickens enjoyed (not least through its title), it registers the transition from a more artificial form of realistic fiction towards a newly self-conscious model through a character whose biographical impulses can surely be described as pathetic. David's aunt, Betsey Trotwood, lives with Mr. Dick, a good-natured, mentally troubled man she has taken in to protect from institutionalization. Throughout the novel, Mr. Dick works on a memoir about himself, but he is constantly delayed because he is unable to stop inserting references to King Charles I into its pages. As Betsey Trotwood explains to her nephew, "That's his allegorical way of expressing it. He connects his illness with great disturbance and agitation, naturally, and that's the figure, or the simile, or whatever it's called, which he chooses to use. And why shouldn't he, if he thinks proper!" (215) Mr. Dick's memorializing is an act of self-conscious fictionalization presented under the guise of

history. He cannot keep King Charles's execution out of his story, despite Betsey's recognition that the "figure" or "simile" is exactly what gives the memorial a more fictional quality than its historical associations might suggest. Mr. Dick writes his memoirs by *not* writing them, a choice, John Forster explains early in the *Life*, that Dickens also made when he arrived at the idea of *David Copperfield*: "It had all been written, as fact, before he thought of any other use for it; and it was not until several months later, when the fancy of *David Copperfield*, itself suggested by what he had so written of his early troubles, began to take shape in his mind, that he abandoned his first intention of writing his own life."⁶²

Rosemarie Bodenheimer has discussed the autobiographical fragment as "an eternally present experience that would resist integration with a full-life narrative," and thus, she explains, it seems to *require* fictionalization to fall under a degree of narrative control.⁶³ Mr. Dick's obsessive work on the memorial preserves this resistance of integration within a narrative that ultimately surpasses the autobiographical origins of its main character's experiences. In Forster's *Life*, as we will see, moments of potential embarrassment emerge not only when David turns out *not* to be like Dickens, but when Dickens effectively becomes his characters. The *Life* offers an account of biography and character that substantiates Gallagher's claim that the novel gradually depended less on overt associations with historical forms of life writing. However, it challenges Gallagher's sense that the nonreferentiality of character is the primary source of

⁶² John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, ed. A.J. Hoppé, (1872-74; London: J.M. Dent, 1966), 2 vols, I:20. My argument concerns the original three-volume version of Forster's *Life*; the Dent edition contains all three volumes but condenses them into two. Thus, I refer to the third volume of the *Life* in my discussion, even though the citations refer to the third volume as it appears in the second volume of the Dent edition. All remaining citations for *The Life of Charles Dickens* will appear in the text.

⁶³ *Knowing Dickens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 70.

embarrassment for readers, not by making Dickens into the prototype for his creations, but by showing that his characters actually stand for the aspects of his life that would remain in perpetual uncertainty—failures and fragmentations that lie outside the scope of the sort of life narrative approximated by both biographies and novels. "Given what one knows," Dickens says at one point to Forster, "What one does not know springs up," and this could be a guiding principle for the relationship between reality and fiction in the *Life*, as Forster ensures that readers never find out about his friend what they are not entitled to discover, while making "not knowing" a condition for enjoying Dickens's fiction (I.296).

Although the autobiographical fragment made its first appearance in *David Copperfield*, it was only revealed as a piece of Dickens's actual childhood with the publication of Forster's *Life*. Forster emphasizes his biography as the best place to distinguish between the modes of self-exploration the novel brings together, taking pains to make readers believe that Dickens's fragment is, in fact, a confession, a product of a friendship that "remained unweakened till death came" (I.67). By the time the third volume of the *Life* was published, however, such effusions of the bond between Forster and Dickens had given way to discussions of the novelist's compositional process. Here, Forster acquiesces to Dickens's desire that his memorial would be his work. But if this was to be so, Forster would have to face the charges by critics such as Hippolyte Taine and George Henry Lewes that Dickens's characters were deficient, more the product of hallucination than a truly creative mind. Forster inverts this charge as he makes the deficiency in Dickens's characters into the thing that allows him to be understood best as a biographical subject.

Forster's *Life* thus illustrates how the embarrassment that accompanies readers' enjoyment of fictional characters is rooted in the persistent feeling that these characters might have biographical origins, whether or not readers are familiar with the author's actual life story. Forster presents Dickens as a figure whose public persona develops alongside the creation of his characters, continually vacillating between the facts of the novelist's writing life and the fictional world in which they are rendered. He provides readers of the *Life* with the opportunity to transcend their potentially embarrassing relationships with Dickens's characters by revealing their real-life origins. At the same time, he endeavors to protect Dickens from posthumous embarrassment by making Dickens's life into an agglomerate of characterization; the *Life* is ultimately a biography about the fictions that create the author, beginning with Dickens's enthusiastic reading of eighteenth-century novels during his youth. As Forster shares the secrets of Dickens's process to defend his late friend's creative powers, he also risks fixing fiction as fact, a gesture that both idealizes Dickens the individual and threatens a serious critical future for the novels.⁶⁴ I suggest that Forster's gradual movement towards character as the focus of criticism in the third volume of the *Life* is an attempt to protect this future. His

⁶⁴ Although it may not seem novel to discuss Dickens's personality as an extension of his writing, Forster's biography reminds us that paying attention to the role of affect in criticism of the novelist's work can help forestall infelicities of research. Forster encourages readers to understand Dickens's characters as imaginative inventions, even after the biographical disclosure in Volume I, because he is wary that Dickens's life may become a vessel for imagined connections that may not exist. Yet such imagined connections persist, such as the story of an alleged encounter between Dickens and Dostoevsky in 1862, which gained widespread attention with the publication of Claire Tomalin's Dickens biography in 2011. In the letter Tomalin quotes, Dostoevsky writes of his encounter with Dickens: "There were two people in him, he told me: one who feels as he ought to feel and one who feels the opposite. From the one who feels the opposite I make my evil characters, from the one who feels as a man ought to feel I try to live my life. 'Only two people?' I asked." An international community of scholars was unable to trace the provenance of such a letter, and Tomalin admitted that she had been unable to resist including the anecdote in spite of its murky origins, such was the appeal of Dickens saying about himself what his critics had long asserted of his characters. See Eric Naiman's fascinating account in *The Times Literary Supplement* of the origins of the hoax, tracing the letter to a group of rogue scholars and a pseudonymous 2002 article in the *Dickensian* ("When Dickens met Dostoevsky," *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 April 2013).

disclosure of the great embarrassment of Dickens's early life recedes into a focus on what Gallagher calls the "unreal knowability" of character; Forster recognizes that Dickens's characters maintain their wide appeal because they lack real life referents. Yet the *Life* is also the story of Dickens coming into an awareness of himself as the subject of a literary biography. If we think of biography's dual purpose, as a source of "use" and an object of "romance," we can better understand the convergence of Dickens's *persona* and *scriptor* roles in the *Life*. Attending to how these roles overlap in the *Life*—and where they diverge—reveals that the embarrassing affinity one feels for a character is not mutually exclusive of the embarrassment one feels for wanting to know the author better through biography. Indeed, the intertwining of these embarrassments suggests that biography had become a site for examining the critical relationship between readers' responses to fictional characters and their desire for knowledge about the author's personal life.

I. The Personal History of Charles Dickens, Written by his Characters

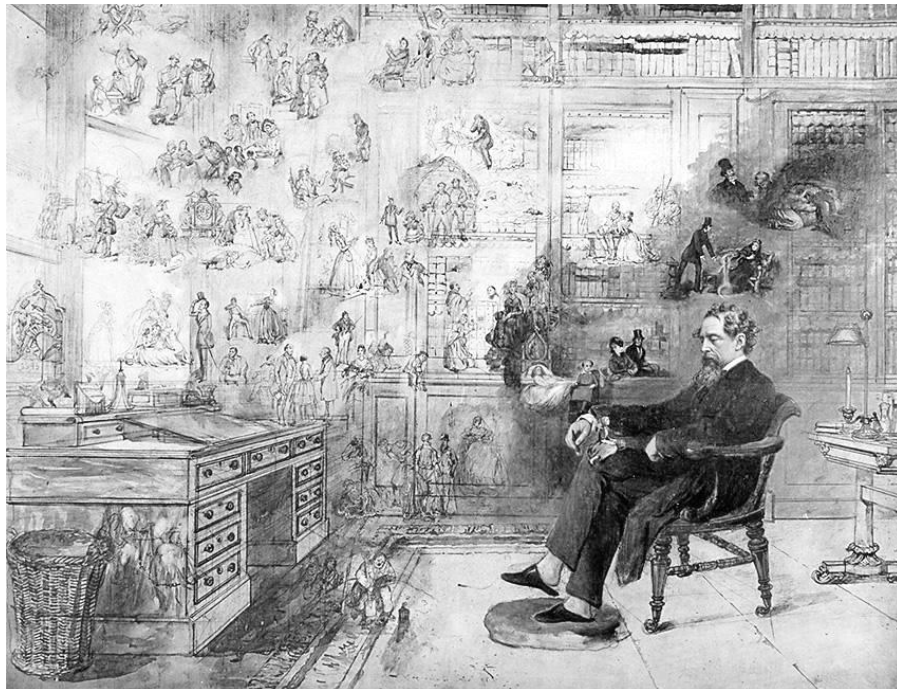


Fig.1: Robert William Buss, *Dickens's Dream* (1875)

Robert William Buss's unfinished painting, "Dickens's Dream," depicts the author surrounded by his characters. They do not address Dickens directly but stay suspended in air, displacing Dickens himself from the center of the portrait but remaining very much an extension of his consciousness. An earlier caricature featuring Dickens as his characters is less subtle; several Dickenses appear holding signs inscribed with his characters' names, including Mr. Pickwick, David Copperfield, and Little Nell. While each version of Dickens boasts "the same prolific head," they are differentiated by some character trait that appears as if it were a part of Dickens's own body or clothing—the "Sam Weller" Dickens wears striped trousers, while Dickens as Little Nell is represented at approximately the height of a child. All of these versions of Dickens stand on a stage—most of them are grotesquely large. One, however—the Dickens holding the sign which reads "David Copperfield"—looks as though he might be the height of an average man.

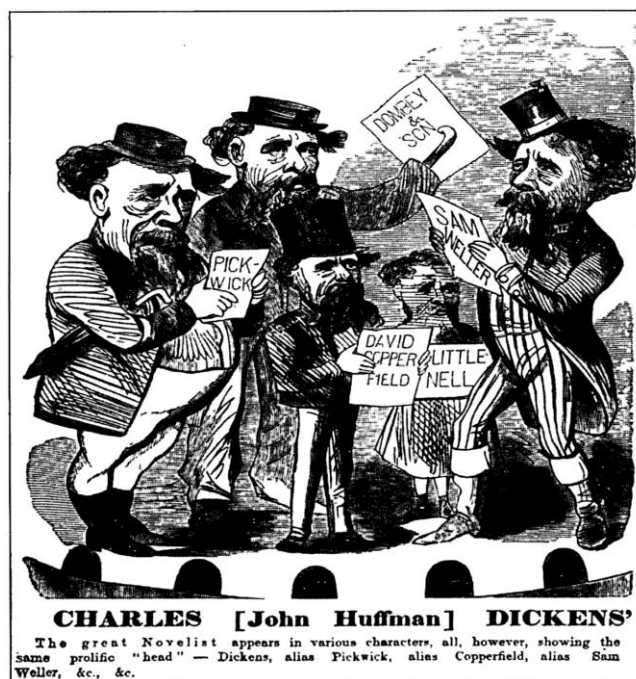


Fig. 2: Dickens as His Characters

The newest edition of Forster's *Life of Dickens* continues this long visual history of showing Dickens as an intimate associate of his characters. Published to mark the bicentennial celebration of Dickens's birth, the specially abridged and illustrated edition saves its images of Dickens for the inside. On the spine and inner jacket folds are instead written the names of Dickens's characters in alphabetical order. The transition is complete: the Dickens whose fame springs up through his captivating characters becomes in death a Dickens memorialized and revered with them, and thereafter a Dickens whose characters have authored him.

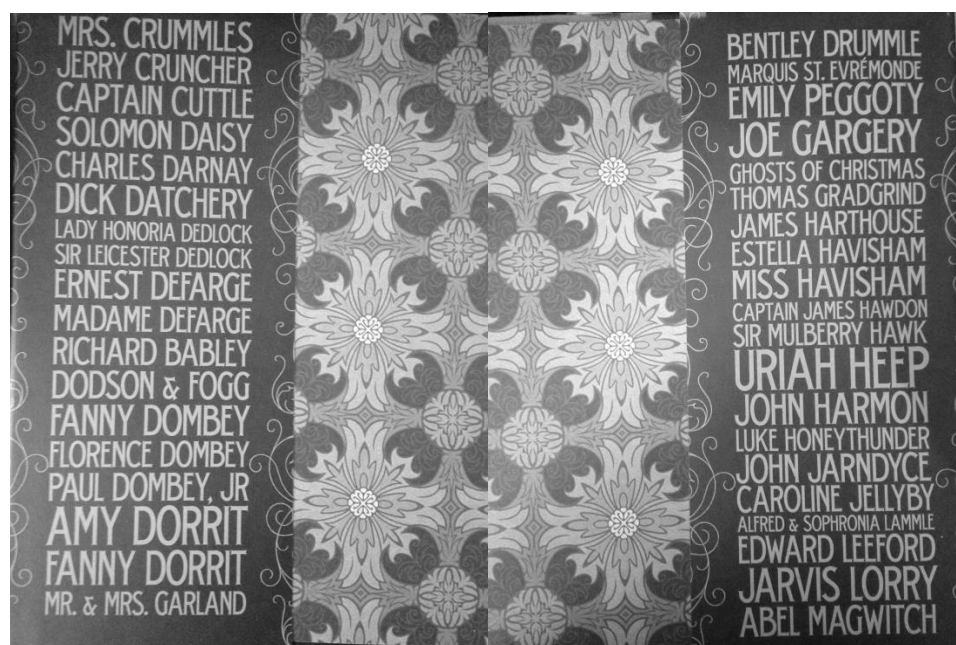


Fig. 3: Jacket Design, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (2011)

Forster anticipates the author-character reversal evidenced by this visual history in the opening pages of the *Life*, where he brings together Charles Dickens the eminent author and David Copperfield, one of his most famous characters. Forster begins Dickens's life at the beginning—at birth, as David does his. David, however, is positioned in the novel as a figure whose story has yet to unfold, while Dickens's fame is

clear at the outset of Forster's biography. A comparison between the first lines of *David Copperfield* and the first line of the *Life* illustrates two ways of engaging with character, the novel offering a relatively anonymous life whose course readers must decide, and the biography portraying an admired public figure whose characters have made him who he is:

- 1) Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously. (13)
- 2) Charles Dickens, the most popular novelist of the century, and one of the greatest humorists that England has produced, was born at Landport, in Portsea, on Friday, the seventh of February, 1812. (I.3)

Forster's beginning squarely establishes Dickens's popularity and greatness as heroic characteristics, and gives his actual birthdate on a particular Friday, in contrast to the relative timelessness of David's birth on what might be any Friday of the year. The beginning of the novel leaves the possibility open for David to become the hero of his own life, while suggesting that the heroism of his life might depend on the judgment of somebody else, such as the reader who has taken up his book. Forster's beginning looks like a bare statement of fact next to the opening of the novel, yet it also offers readers of the biography a touch of the unfamiliar within an assertion of collective regard.

Everyone knows one of England's greatest humorists; no one knows the child born on Friday the seventh of February. What is otherwise a rather typical beginning for a biography is followed by an excursion into David Copperfield's fictional consciousness. Readers are invited to subjoin their existing knowledge of the character to the names, dates, and places that give Forster's *Life* the stamp of reality.

With the entry of David Copperfield into the biography, Forster establishes fiction as a category of experience that fits within a factual life narrative. Tellingly, Forster first compares David not to Dickens, but to another famous novelist, who also happened to be the subject of one of the century's most celebrated biographies: Walter Scott. After a brief paragraph naming Dickens's parents and siblings, Forster turns to material from Lockhart's *Life of Scott* to describe Dickens's childhood from David Copperfield's perspective:

Walter Scott tells us, in his fragment of autobiography, speaking of the strange remedies applied to his lameness, that he remembered lying on the floor in the parlour of his grandfather's farmhouse, swathed up in a sheepskin warm from the body of the sheep, being not then three years old. David Copperfield's memory goes beyond this. He represents himself seeing so far back into the blank of his infancy as to discern therein his mother and her servant, dwarfed to his sight by stooping down or kneeling on the floor, and himself going unsteadily from the one to the other. He admits this may be fancy, though he believes the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy, and thinks that the recollection of most of us can go farther back into such times than many of us suppose. But what he adds is certainly not fancy. "If it should appear from anything I may set down in this narrative that I was a child of close observation, or that as a man I have a strong memory of my childhood, I undoubtedly lay claim to both of these characteristics." Applicable as it might be to David Copperfield, this was unaffectedly true of Charles Dickens. (I.3-4)

The narrative then moves into a series of reminiscences from Dickens's youth, leaving the greatest of these—the fragment which worked its way into *David Copperfield*—for the chapter that follows.

In this section, Forster refers to David Copperfield unequivocally, as if he were an intimate of Dickens or a second subject of the biography (he "represents himself" rather than being represented). This approach follows Dickens's own in the Preface to the 1867 edition of the novel, where he writes, "It will be easily believed that I am a fond parent to every child of my fancy, and that no one can ever love that family as dearly as I love

them. But, like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is DAVID COPPERFIELD." Here, Dickens claims David Copperfield as his offspring. But in Forster's arrangement, the character is the father of the author, as the child is of the man; David's memory goes beyond even Walter Scott's, instantiating the idea of recollection found in Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode.⁶⁵ The "characteristics" David Copperfield speaks of belong to a character, but they also describe Dickens's character as a biographical subject, for David's capacity to extract detail from observation is the same quality that drives Dickens to write novels.

Forster had re-read Lockhart's *Life of Scott* prior to beginning work on his biography of Dickens, and there is, perhaps, a hint of competition with his predecessor in these opening pages, with Forster choosing only to refer to Scott's fragment of autobiography rather than the biographer who made the fragment publicly accessible. Yet he refers to Lockhart in passing elsewhere in the *Life*, so there is more at stake than a purely personal sense of envy or indebtedness. Lockhart and Forster both brought fragments of their subjects' early lives to light, but Forster must work explicitly to introduce a work previously known to be fiction as having factual origins. The Scott fragment was more of a serendipitous discovery for Lockhart, who had been named as Scott's official biographer in his will. Lockhart found the fragment after he had already written several chapters on the *Waverley* author's early life, and he ultimately decided to publish the fragment alongside these chapters, explaining that he felt "the author's modesty had prevented him from telling the story of his youth with that fullness of detail

⁶⁵ *David Copperfield* is often in dialogue with Wordsworth, and the "Intimations" ode is directly quoted in Chapter 44: "When I walked alone in the fine weather, and thought of the summer days when all the air had been filled with my boyish enchantment, I did miss something of the realisation of my dreams; but I thought it was a *softened glory of the Past*, which nothing could have thrown upon the present time" (653, emphasis added).

which would now satisfy the public. I have therefore recast my own collections as to the period in question, and presented the substance of them, in five succeeding chapters, as *illustrations* of his too brief autobiography."⁶⁶

Scott himself offers a different perspective on the "modesty" that Lockhart attributes to him in the fragment:

The present age has discovered a desire, or rather a rage, for literary anecdote and private history, that may be well permitted to alarm one who has engaged in a certain degree the attention of the public. That I have had more than my own share of popularity, my contemporaries will be as ready to admit, as I am to confess that its measure has exceeded not only my hopes, but my merits, and even wishes. I may be therefore permitted, without an extraordinary degree of vanity, to take the precaution of recording a few leading circumstances (they do not merit the name of events) of a very quiet and uniform life—that, should my literary reputation survive my temporal existence, the public may know from good authority all that they are entitled to know of an individual who has contributed to their amusement. [...] Although I cannot tell of difficulties vanquished, and distance of rank annihilated by the strength of genius, those who shall hereafter read this little Memoir may find in it some hints to be improved, for the regulation of their own minds, or the training those of others.⁶⁷

The appetite for "literary anecdote" that Scott describes was to persist throughout the century, along with the "alarm" felt by various authors in response to the public demand for their life stories. What is notable about Scott's disclaimer is the way it compares the desire for biographical knowledge with the example Scott's life actually provides. He diverges from the narrative of genius associated with poets such as Chatterton and Burns and claims for himself instead "a very quiet and uniform life," which stands in stark contrast to the "desires" and "rages" of those wishing to know more about it. Scott offers

⁶⁶ John Gibson Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott* (Paris: Baudry's European Library, 1837), I: vii.

⁶⁷ Lockhart, 1-2.

himself as an example of humility and self-improvement, beginning with the condition that readers recognize that "My birth was neither distinguished nor sordid."⁶⁸

The incorporation of the Scott fragment with David Copperfield's meditations on memory and fancy underwrites the relationship between biological and characterological birth in the first chapter of Forster's *Life of Dickens*. It is worth noting that Scott's fragment is dated April 26th, 1808, around the time he composed *Marmion*; in terms of the wider spectrum of Scott's career, the fragment falls approximately between his early career as a poet and his emergence as a novelist. Scott is thus "born" as a novelist when he abandons autobiography, and David Copperfield is born when Dickens does the same. Dickens's abandonment of autobiography gives Forster the opportunity to introduce correlations between the novelist's fictive and actual birth as the privileged knowledge of the biographer. Scott's cognizance of the tendency for readers to seek out biographical details about authors is embedded in the work of Lockhart, a biographer who presents these details appropriately. Forster wants readers to see that he, too, can present biographical revelations with the requisite taste, and referencing a predecessor who successfully incorporated a fragment into his text lent him greater credence as he assembled a series of recollections shared between Dickens and himself, generated through conversation as well as writing. It is a testimony to his success that scholars widely refer to the autobiographical portions of *David Copperfield* as a fragment, using Forster's own term, even though it exists nowhere else outside the novel and the *Life*. When Forster introduces these passages, he writes, "I learnt in all their detail the incidents that had been so painful to him, and what then was said to me or written respecting them revealed the story of his boyhood" (I.19). What was said *or* written—

⁶⁸ Lockhart, 4.

Forster makes no distinction between Dickens's confession and its appearance in novel form. Sharing in Dickens's embarrassment, his private pain and his public display of its effects, enables Forster to distract from embarrassment of another kind—his inability as a biographer to determine whether the fictional version or the actual, spoken version of Dickens's story is more truthful.

Prior to the disclosure of the fragment outside of its place in *David Copperfield*, Forster emphasizes Dickens's own identification with fictional characters during his youth, returning three times to a core group of novels that gave Dickens his imaginative spark. Following Rosemarie Bodenheimer, who reads three different kinds of narrative moods in Dickens's autobiographical fragment, I propose three different attitudes towards biographical detail that Forster inserts in the passages which lead up to it.⁶⁹ Firstly, Forster gestures towards instances of what he calls "literal" truth that have been displaced by fiction; secondly, he identifies partial truths about Dickens's life and work that require further elaboration in order to be recognized as facts; and thirdly, he points to previously unavailable truths that must be revealed. These attitudes reinforce the knowledge that readers have presumably acquired through their own reading of *David Copperfield*, and they gradually elevate Forster as the true possessor of intimate knowledge about the biographical subject.

Forster begins the buildup to the fragment by evoking the knowledge of Dickens's life which readers have been previously aware of through fiction, even if they have not

⁶⁹ See Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens*, 68-73, for a discussion of the fragment. "What Dickens wrote for Forster is just one of many stages in his attempt to take rhetorical command of those memories and feelings that had attached to them over the course of twenty-four years. It is composed of three prominent kinds of writing: first, highly detailed memories of places, food, and people; second, moments of spectacular drama when the narrator in the present watches the child being watched by others in the past; and, finally, the interpolated passages of anger and outrage in which the present narrator heats up the emotional temperature of the piece" (69).

been fully able to ascertain it. Narrative motifs become shared experiences of feeling between the author and his readers, each protected from embarrassment by the withholding of the full truth in fiction. The gradualness of Forster's revelation eases these feelings into the open, and he offers himself as the singular authority that can bear the fullness of disclosure:

Many guesses have been made since [Dickens's] death, connecting David's autobiography with his own; accounting, by means of such actual experiences, for the so frequent recurrence in his writings of the prison-life, its humour and pathos, described in them with such wonderful reality... There is not only truth in all this, but it will very shortly be seen that the identity went deeper than any had supposed, and covered experiences not less startling in the reality than they appear to be in the fiction.

Of the "readings" and "imaginings" which he describes as brought away from Chatham, this authority can tell us. It is one of the many passages in *Copperfield* which are literally true, and its proper place is here [in the *Life*]. (I.7)

The "authority" Forster refers to here is Dickens himself, but like the introduction of the fragment as "said or written," the *telling* of the authority is left ambiguous; the text can speak for itself because Forster has put it "here," in a place where it can do so. Dickens's own words follow: "From that blessed little room, *Roderick Random*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphrey Clinker*, *Tom Jones*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas* and *Robinson Crusoe* came out, a glorious host, to keep me company.'" In addressing whether *David Copperfield* contains pieces of Dickens's own autobiography, Forster invokes one of the standards of Christian exegesis that Foucault identifies with the author figure: an unknown author can be identified through "the presence of certain events within a text, as well as their transformations, distortions, and their various modifications."⁷⁰ In Dickens's case, the repeated references to prison life and the sense of humor, pathos, and "actual experience" conveyed through these creates a pattern

⁷⁰ Foucault, "What is an Author?" 128.

within his writings that readers learn to associate with the man himself. Forster encourages readers to recall these motifs in *David Copperfield* and Dickens's other novels, but he also implies that the authority derived from reading fiction is not enough to apprehend the full value of Dickens's disclosures. His assertion that the account of Dickens's early reading is "literally true, and its proper place is here" affirms the *Life* as the prevailing authority for distinguishing between fiction and truth.

The next iteration of the reading list takes Forster's claim to "literal truth" beyond assertion and allows him to exercise his editorial authority. Here, Forster lays out Dickens's youthful affinity for novelistic characters as a means of showing readers how they have been accustomed to reading Dickens. When debt forces the Dickens family to leave Chatham and relocate to Camden Town, Dickens's reading becomes the only constant in his life:

He was not much over nine years old when his father was recalled from Chatham to Somerset House, and he had to leave this good master, and the old place endeared to him by recollections that clung to him afterwards all his life long. It was here he had made the acquaintance not only of the famous books that David Copperfield specially names, of *Roderick Random*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphrey Clinker*, *Tom Jones*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Arabian Nights*, and the *Tales of the Genii*, but also of the *Tatler*, *The Spectator*, *The Idler*, the *Citizen of the World*, and Mrs. Inchbald's *Collection of Farces*. [...] They were a host of friends when he had no single friend; and, in leaving the place, he has been often heard to say he seemed to be leaving them too, and everything that had given his ailing little life its picturesqueness or sunshine. It was the birthplace of his fancy; and he hardly knew what store he had set by its busy varieties of change and scene, until he saw the falling cloud that was to hide its picture from him for ever. (I.11)

In this repetition of the reading passage, Forster adds his own authority to David Copperfield's, expanding the list to include periodical writing and Elizabeth Inchbald's farces, and alluding to what Dickens "has been often heard to say," presumably to Forster himself, and to others who might have inquired about his influences. Notably, the "they"

in the clause “They were a host of friends” does not discriminate between titles which present themselves as first-person autobiographical fictions and those which stand for collections of tales or moral essays (with the exception of *Inchbald*). Even as Forster begins to emphasize the divisions between David Copperfield and Dickens that he is able to make as the novelist’s biographer, he is aware of the tendency of readers to “befriend” written works. The “they,” in this case, works mutually to sustain readers’ imaginative investment in David Copperfield the character and Forster’s ability to produce literal truths.

The third mention of the reading passage, and the final one before the introduction of the fragment itself, makes a short leap from Dickens’s relationship with his fictional “friends” to Forster’s special claims towards the kind of knowledge to which his own friendship with the novelist has entitled him. It is marked by another change in location: John Dickens’s removal to the Marshalsea prison. Forster turns again to David Copperfield the character to account for the young Dickens’s feelings when forced to part from his favorite books:

Almost everything by degrees was sold or pawned, little Charles being the principal agent in those sorrowful transactions. Such of the books as had been brought from Chatham, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Roderick Random*, *Tom Jones*, *Humphrey Clinker*, and all the rest, went first. They were carried off from the little chiffonier, which his father called the library, to a bookseller in the Hampstead Road, the same that David Copperfield describes as in the City Road; and the account of the sales, as they actually occurred and were told to me long before David was born, was reproduced word for word in his imaginary narrative. (I.17).

In this passage, Forster’s emphasis is on the revelation of personal experience as fact, both in the form of Dickens’s childhood recollection and the way it later came to be told to his biographer. Here, Forster is not drawing readers’ attention to literal truth, or

adding to what they might already have suspected to be the truth, but he is revealing things which “were told to me.” Just a few paragraphs prior to this assertion, Forster cites Dickens’s autobiographical account of his first visit to his father at the Marshalsea, explaining that readers will take “curious interest” in it, since it is “written as a personal experience of fact two or three years before the fiction had even entered his thoughts” (I.16).

There is a discernible echo between the sentences’ descriptions: Dickens’s “personal experience of fact...before the fiction” and what “actually occurred...long before David was born.” It serves as an illustration of the complicated relationship between author and character affinity that modulates Forster’s narration throughout the rest of the *Life*. In each case, “fact” is positioned in contrast to “fiction,” but “fiction” is also a category of experience that falls on a factual spectrum. David Copperfield’s birth is a fact in the experience of reading fiction at the same time it is a product of Dickens’s fictionalization of fact. Forster’s attempt to prioritize the order in which these processes occur in his biography speaks to the difficulty of writing about a figure whose public persona was so deeply entrenched with the development of characters in his fiction. Forster’s ownership of facts “told to me long before David was born” is quite a different assertion from the one offered in the context of Walter Scott’s fragment (“David Copperfield’s memory goes beyond this”). Forster subtly acquits himself of the absence of a material document outside the novel itself to substantiate his private knowledge of Dickens’s affairs, putting himself in a position to tell readers about a crucial moment of character formation before the character David Copperfield was actually formed. However, relying on the novel as the only concrete source for a fragment that was once

private information passed between friends enables Forster to present Dickens as an author who thrives on a surfeit of public knowledge about his life. The revelation of the fragment as a fact within the fiction is also a reminder to readers that Dickens experienced grief, trauma, and loss that he often attempted to process through the very public presentations which would look to later generations like acts of self-suppression.

What these repeated examples of Dickens's early reading imply, along with the different frames of reference Forster gives to them, is that Forster acknowledged the kinship readers might feel with a character like David Copperfield, even as he made it the task of the biographer to draw the line between the fictional product and its factual basis. Yet Forster also seems to be aware of the adverse effects of his attempts to discriminate between the two, as evidenced by the numerous justifications he makes. When he asserts that the fragment is "literally true" and its "proper place" is in the biography, he provides an example of the very aspect of biography which makes it the embarrassing counterpart to readers' experience of character in fiction. The assertion that a piece of fiction is really a part of the author's biography legitimates readers' suspicions, but it is also a closed statement that produces an impact while necessarily shutting down speculation.

When Forster finally arrives at the fragment itself, the terms he uses to describe Dickens's confession are burdened with biographical embarrassment, particularly the word "intention."⁷¹ Forster introduces the fragment by recalling an occasion when he asked Dickens if he had ever known a mutual acquaintance during childhood:

I asked if he remembered ever having seen in his boyhood our friend the elder Mr. Dilke, his father's acquaintance and contemporary, who had been a clerk in the same office in Somerset House to which Mr. John Dickens belonged. Yes, he said, he recollected seeing him at a house in Gerrard Street, where his uncle

⁷¹ The association of "intention" with biography is the subject of Chapter 3, although this scene clearly implicates intention as a matter of central concern for embarrassing biographical disclosures.

Barrow lodged during an illness, and Mr. Dilke had visited him. Never at any other time. Upon which I told him that someone else had been intended in the mention made to me, for that the reference implied not merely his being met accidentally, but his having had some juvenile employment in a warehouse near the Strand; at which place Mr. Dilke, being with the elder Dickens one day, had noticed him, and received, in return for the gift of a half-crown, a very low bow. He was silent for several minutes; I felt that I had unintentionally touched a painful place in his memory; and to Mr. Dilke I never spoke of the subject again. It was not, however, then, but some weeks later, that Dickens made further allusion to my thus having struck unconsciously upon a time of which he never could lose the remembrance while he remembered anything, and the recollection of which, at intervals, haunted him and made him miserable, even to that hour. (I.19)

Forster sets the scene with a number of descriptive qualifiers which reactivate his personal inquiry every time it seems on the verge of shutting down: “accidentally,” “unintentionally,” “unconsciously.” The past function of these qualifiers is at odds with Forster's use of them in the narrative present of the *Life*. The “accident” of Mr. Dilke meeting the young Dickens is conveyed as “not merely” an accident, but Forster's implication is that it was no accident at all if Dickens had really been employed in the area, which he turns out to have been.

Similarly, although Forster may have felt that he had no intention of turning up an incident in Dickens's past, the presentation of the episode in the *Life* is far from unintentional, and the “unconscious” nature of Forster's inquiry turns out to be his very conscious introduction of the pattern of experience Dickens was afterward unable to shake from his mind as well as his writings. The uncertain valence of these terms has as much to do with the instability of the autobiographical recollections by Dickens that follow as it does with Forster's desire to portray his inquiries as leading up to a special act of disclosure. Dickens's true intentions remain untraceable, and yet Forster's narrative rendering of the confession ultimately strives to confirm Dickens's decision to

turn autobiographical material into a novel: “It had all been written, as fact, before he thought of any other use for it; and it was not until several months later, when the fancy of *David Copperfield*, itself suggested by what he had so written of his early troubles, began to take shape in his mind, that he abandoned his first intention of writing his own life” (I.20). Through his personal relationship with his subject, Forster claims for himself the intuition that he denies readers of *David Copperfield*, and in doing so implicitly acknowledges the imaginative compulsion to associate the character with his creator which makes writing his biography of Dickens such a conflicted process.

This acknowledgement becomes more explicit after the chapter which contains the fragment, “Hard Experiences in Boyhood,” as Forster includes a number of self-reflexive commentaries on the process of writing biography. Forster initially makes much of the author-character intimacy between Dickens and David, but it is not completely transportable to other characters. Increasingly, Forster turns to Dickens’s literary production as a means of reflecting on the challenges this intimacy posed to the author’s private life, even as it became a crucial element of his popularity. An early biographical assignment of Dickens’s brings these issues to the surface. Shortly after the appearance of *Sketches by Boz* and *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens was asked to write the life of Joseph Grimaldi the stage clown, who left behind a collection of unsorted personal material following his death. According to Forster, this project was “not remotely bearing on the stage”—a remark that reveals a critical attitude towards Dickens’s increased immersion in public performance, since the project would have interested Dickens specifically because of its connections to the history of the stage. Forster professes that the project smacked of opportunism and relied too much on Grimaldi’s

fame and public persona to be a truly successful biography.⁷² He also claims that none of Dickens's creative powers went into the book:

Except the preface, he did not write a line of this biography, such modifications or additions as he made having been dictated to him by his father; whom I found often in exalted enjoyment of the office of amanuensis. [...] A great many critical faults were found; and one point in particular was urged against his handling such a subject, that he could never himself even have seen Grimaldi (I.80).

To the last charge Dickens responded, "I don't think that to edit a man's biography from his own notes it is essential you should have known him, and I don't believe that Lord Braybrooke had more than the very slightest acquaintance with Mr. Pepys, whose memoirs he edited two centuries after he died" (I.81).

This mention of the Grimaldi biography, and Dickens's fascination with a performer who he had allegedly never seen, calls attention to Dickens as a figure who will never again be seen, although he has become so well known that to read of his characters is to feel as if one *has* seen him. The Grimaldi anecdote occurs among a mounting series of remarks on the physical recognizability of Dickens, and Forster uses these remarks to illustrate the power of character over the authorial image: "Very different was his face in those days from that which photography has made familiar to the present generation," Forster writes. "But there was that in the face as I first recollect it which no time could change, and which remained implanted on it unalterably to the last" (I.65). The unalterable quality of Dickens's features suggests the staying power of his characters and the vastness of their appeal. Leigh Hunt, Forster adds, wrote that Dickens's face had "the life and soul in it of fifty human beings," and it is this multiplicity

⁷² Grimaldi, nonetheless, was just the figure for Dickens to write about, given his enthusiasm for the stage. Jonathan Buckmaster explores how Dickens made Grimaldi into a model of himself in "'A Man of Great Feeling and Sensibility': *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* and the Tears of a Clown," *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 14 (2012): 1-20.

of character—the same feature which distinguishes portraits and caricatures of the novelist—which Forster uses to modulate the various shifts between fact and fiction in the *Life*.

The nuanced relationship between David Copperfield and his creator that distinguishes the opening chapters of the *Life* thus gives way to an emphasis on Dickens's production of his characters, with Forster working to address the desire and curiosity that fictional characters and authorial personae both invite. Forster initially asserts that his discussion of Dickens's work in the *Life* is "biographical rather than critical" (I.98). Yet his disclosure of the fragment is weighted with anxieties about material proof and intention which suggest that his approach to Dickens's characterization cannot remain supported by biographical material alone. It is Forster's constant challenge to anticipate the ways the biographical might enter into the critical—how Dickens's writings depend in some way on a vision of the author that appears to be of a piece with the work he produces. The inability of the *Copperfield* fragment to provide an all-encompassing lens through which to view Dickens's life can be felt in scenes where Dickens attempts to balance the task of writing with the haphazardness of domestic life. Biographical events and the emergence of the works begin to parallel one another. Props of the fiction appear in the Dickens household, such as the raven that provided the model for Grip in *Barnaby Rudge* (this raven suffered the unfortunate fate of death by ingestion of lead paint, ultimately becoming a taxidermy specimen in the family parlor). The births of Dickens's children, too, accompany the births of novels; if, as Terry Eagleton claims, "the structure of biography is biology," then Forster's *Life* makes some delightfully bizarre deviations from the standard cradle to grave life narrative by bringing his "contemporaries"—or

characters in novels—into the world simultaneously with Dickens’s growing family. These moments remind readers that their desire to know Dickens intimately was in part constituted by the identification with fictional characters whose ongoing existence in time made their own personal tragedies more bearable.⁷³ That these children did not always survive—a daughter born to the Dickenses named Dora, who shared the name of David Copperfield’s “child-wife,” died in infancy—only makes the parallel between life and work more poignant.

Forster provides the following account of the writing of *Oliver Twist*, for example, in Dickens’s own words: “I was thinking about *Oliver* till dinner-time yesterday...and, just as I had fallen upon him tooth and nail, was called away to sit with Kate. I did eight slips, however, and hope to make them fifteen this morning” (I.85). Dickens transfers his annoyance at being asked to be present for his daughter’s birth to his frustration with writing: “sitting patiently at home waiting for *Oliver Twist*, who has not yet arrived.” A similar construction occurs during the account of *Barnaby Rudge*, where it is Forster who positions novel writing as a kind of birth. Dickens complains of difficulty writing—“I didn’t stir out yesterday, but sat and *thought* all day, not writing a line”—but assures Forster that he still looks forward to his friend’s company: “Don’t engage yourself otherwise than to me for Sunday week, because it’s my birthday. I have no doubt we shall have got over our troubles here by that time, and I purpose having a snug dinner in the study.” Following this, Forster remarks, “We had the dinner, though the troubles were not over; but the next day another son was born to him” (I.138). The “troubles” in question refer to Catherine Dickens’s confinement as well as her husband’s

⁷³ Terry Eagleton, “Buried in the Life: Thomas Hardy and the limits of biographies.” *Harper’s Magazine* 315, 1890 (November 2007): 89-94.

writer's block, a commonplace occurrence that he often attempted to alleviate by long walks through the city and dinners out with friends. Though Dickens is portrayed throughout the *Life* as a loving patriarch (in spite of his negligence as a husband), the real emphasis is on his relationships with his novels, inseparable from any defining moment in his biography—an interpretation he personally encouraged when he claimed David Copperfield as his “favourite child.”

Forster's attention to the more endearing side of Dickens's overwork early in the *Life* reflects Dickens's own belief that “when I know all the foibles a man has, I begin to think he is worth liking” (I.136). Yet as the *Life* progressed, Forster's methods began to focus on the virtues of knowing less. Where the first and second volumes rely heavily on letters exchanged between the two men, the third volume relies more on secondary material, in part because of the lapse in Forster's friendship with Dickens following the novelist's separation from his wife. The *Life* makes a decided turn towards the works, referring less frequently to possible links between Dickens and his characters.⁷⁴ Forster also retracted his emphasis on David Copperfield as the referent for Dickens's authorial persona: “Too much has been assumed,” he admitted, “of a full identity of Dickens with his hero, and of a supposed intention that his own character as well as parts of his career should be expressed in the narrative” (II.105). The *Life*'s most significant revelation, in the end, could not balance the knowledge readers could take away from Dickens's work for the very fact of its indeterminate representation of the novelist's life with the knowledge Forster claimed to be unique to the resources he had accrued from actual

⁷⁴ On the relationship between life and work in biography, see Annette Wheeler Cafarelli, *Prose in the Age of Poets*: “In the wake of Johnson,” she observes, “biographical texts are critical texts, inscribing methodologies for reading other works of literature, and reading themselves as works of literature” (28). Forster's *Life* fits this paradigm, and yet it is also aware of novel criticism as an emerging strand of biography.

friendship. Forster's exposure of Dickens's great embarrassment of youth, in other words, made biography itself the source of embarrassment behind readers' imaginative affinity for literary character. Forster would be forced to recognize the consequences of this outcome as critics of the *Life* called his methods into question, some expressing that the biography might be read as "the autobiography of John Forster, with recollections of Charles Dickens."⁷⁵ Moreover, he realized that readers' experiences of the novels would be just as important as his own knowledge about the circumstances of their composition in defending Dickens's approach to representing reality.

I. "Biographical rather than Critical"?

Forster biographer James A. Davies describes *The Life of Charles Dickens* as a portrait of "the composite literary man." As Davies explains, for Forster, Dickens's works reflect "that inner life which essentially constituted the man," exemplifying the Romantic idea of inviolate genius. The portrait of Dickens is a composite since the novelist also emerges as a "hearty extrovert," a family man and friend.⁷⁶ Davies adds that the critical reception of the *Life* reveals a divide between critics who found Forster's portrait to be too idealistic, and those who regarded it as an admirable approximation of truth. His own analysis suggests that Forster aimed both to protect Dickens and to be truthful. In Forster's previous biographies of dead men whom he had never known personally, such as Goldsmith, he could "impose ideas (about biography, literary men, personality) upon all his material," while "the immediacy of [Dickens's life] drew him towards honest revelation." It is more accurate to say, however, that the imposition of ideas about biography and the production of honest revelation were two complementary

⁷⁵ George Ford, *Saturday Review*, xxxiv (1872), 668.

⁷⁶ James A. Davies, *John Forster: A Literary Life* (Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1983), 251.

endeavors for Forster. Ira B. Nadel's formal reading of the *Life* finds in it such a complementary strain: "The life of Dickens," he writes, "is a biography of process revealing how fiction unites with fact and the ways fiction can illuminate the experience of the author."⁷⁷ My discussion of the *Life of Dickens* follows Nadel's to the extent that it argues for the fictions as the basis for the biography. However, his account claims that the *Life*'s particular attention to the intensity of Dickens's writing process works primarily as a license for Forster's digressive tendencies. It favors the claim that Forster fundamentally cultivates a Boswellian relationship with his subject and adheres to the correspondence between life and work characteristic of Romantic biography.

However, Forster's conception of Dickens's personality as inseparable from his characters' existence in the minds of readers is not so much a late-Victorian re-appropriation of poetic genius as it is an answer to what certain critics construed as Dickens's failed realism. The urge to think of Dickens's characters as contemporaries or friends initially joins with the impulse to know more about the author, as Volume One of the *Life* makes clear, but these two commemorative desires begin to run on separate tracks with every year that Dickens's image fades from memory. By Volume Three, Forster begins to answer the reader-critics whose opinions on Dickens's career came through in their reviews of Volume One of the *Life*, as well as others who commented more generally on Dickens's powers as a novelist. The critique of Dickens as an author who could not produce realistic characters because they were too embedded in his individualized way of seeing the world is never very far from the charge that Forster cannot fulfill his duties as a biographer because his memories of Dickens occupy too prominent a place in his narrative of the novelist's life.

⁷⁷ Nadel, *Biography: Fact, Fiction, and Form*, 92.

Forster's discussion of Dickens's characterization in the third volume of the *Life* owes much to the numerous eulogies and obituaries that were written for Dickens, many of which make the notion of biography practically redundant by emphasizing how the novelist's characters had already insinuated their language, mannerisms, and images into the fabric of everyday life. "What need can there be to tell the history of Charles Dickens?" asked a writer in *The Sunday Times*. "[His] creations have an actual life of their own. They, too, have warm breath and radiant vitality. They have been our sweet familiar companions—dear to our hearts themselves, and making their parent dearer for the elevated pleasures they have afforded us."⁷⁸ An unsigned article in *The Saturday Review* also notes the biographical dimension of Dickens's characters in contemporary life: "the characters of Mr. Dickens are a portion of our contemporaries...they were not studies of persons, but persons."⁷⁹ "When the sad news was made public it fell with the shock of a personal loss on the hearts of countless millions, to whom the name of the famous author was like that of an intimate and dear friend" wrote a commentator in *Fraser's Magazine*.⁸⁰

Other eulogists were more particular. R.H. Hutton, who would also review Forster's biography in *The Spectator*, remarked that

His power is like that of a moral kaleidoscope, all the various fragments of colour being supplied by actual experience, so that when you turn and turn it and get ever new combinations, you never seem to get away from actual life, but always to be concerned with the most common-place of common-place realities. All the while, however, you are really running the changes on a single conception, but with so

⁷⁸ Unsigned article, *The Sunday Times* (12 June 1870). Reprinted in *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins (London: Routledge, 1971 [1986]), 512.

⁷⁹ Unsigned article, "The Death of Mr. Dickens," *Saturday Review* xxix (11 June 1870), pp. 760-1. Reprinted in *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, 509.

⁸⁰ Unsigned article, "Charles Dickens," *Fraser's Magazine* (July 1870), pp. 130-4. Reprinted in *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, 526.

vast a power of illustration from the minutest experience, that you are deceived into thinking that you are dealing with a real being.⁸¹

According to Hutton, Dickens's greatest strength is also his greatest weakness; his ability to convey the "minutest experience" through fragments of color recalls the application of the phrase "word-painting" to Dickens's style. This minuteness not only refers to Dickens's deceiving his readers into believing they are reading about "actual experience," but to a personal quality as well—the pettiness of a character unable to suppress itself. The irony of Dickens's work as well as his position as a biographical subject is that he is most open to his readers when he is most self-indulgent. It is their own need for self-indulgence, their need to see themselves through Dickens's characters (and Dickens himself as the conduit for those characters), which makes them complicit in the deception Hutton describes. If it were otherwise, as Hutton explains in the same paragraph, it would be easy to recognize Dickens's attempts to illustrate ordinary men and women as "deplorable failures." Several other notices follow a similar pattern of celebrating the singularity of Dickens's abilities while drawing a line at their efficacy. *The Saturday Review* writer, for instance, notes that "After he was thirty-five he published nothing of first-rate excellence except *David Copperfield*."⁸²

Reviews of the *Life* often distinguished between the tone of the first and third volumes, in the way obituaries of Dickens tended to contrast the sparkling wit of his earlier novels with the graver, more skeptical voice of later works such as *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*. A review of Volume One from *The Examiner*, for example, generally praiseful in tone, notes that "the three chapters in which Mr. Forster recounts

⁸¹ R.H. Hutton, "The Genius of Dickens," *Spectator* xliii (18 June 1870), pp. 749-51. Reprinted in *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, 521-22.

⁸² "The Death of Mr. Dickens" in *The Critical Heritage*, 510.

the early life of his hero—far more of a hero than his heartiest admirers ever supposed him to be—contain, indeed, as pathetic a narrative of child-life as is to be found in *The Old Curiosity Shop* or in *Oliver Twist*—and what more can be said than that?”⁸³ When the same periodical reviewed Volume Three in 1874, the reviewer wearily acknowledged that “[the present volume] will be read without that keen edge of curiosity which it would have encountered two or three years ago...the dead man has lost the prominent position which he held in our memories at the time when the first volume was published.”⁸⁴ At the same time, the review also notes that “In no respect is Mr. Forster’s narrative more attractive than when he describes the conception, preparation, and progressive completion of his hero’s best-known fictions.”

The obituaries and reviews indicate that the posthumous discourse surrounding Dickens's career involved a negotiation between the novelist's authorial persona and the fictional characters that the public associated with his name, a discourse in which Forster's *Life* also participates. They also make clear that in the third volume, Forster had turned from what he describes in volume one as a distinction between "literal truth" and fiction towards a critical discussion of the novels. There is only one exclusive study of criticism within the *Life*, a brief article published by Dickens critic Sylèvre Monod in 1966 titled "John Forster's *Life of Dickens* and Literary Criticism." According to Monod, "Forster was probably not a really great biographer, because he was neither a powerful

⁸³ Unsigned review, "Mr. Forster's *Life of Dickens*," *The Examiner* (9 December, 1871), p. 1217.

⁸⁴ Herbert Wilson, "The Life of Dickens," *The Examiner* (14 February, 1874), p. 161. An article on Mudie's Circulating Library published in *The Leisure Hour* gives a sense of the ephemeral attractions of biography: "A visitor may learn much at Mudie's. Among other things, that Hamlet's statement that a 'great man's memory may outlive his life half a year' is not so cynical as it looks at first blush." (*The Leisure Hour: an Illustrated Magazine for Home Reading* [London: Stevens & Co., 1886]: XXXV: 187-89.) The article notes that the temporary surge of interest in Froude's *Life of Carlyle* and Cross's *Life of George Eliot* when they were first published quickly tapered off. Forster's *Life of Dickens* could just as well be included in this list, while Dickens's novels, meanwhile, are mentioned as perennial favorites of subscribers.

thinker, nor an evenly gifted writer. Yet he did not lack insight and competence, and his *Life of Dickens* contributes to literary history and literary criticism an original document: the inside view of literary creation."⁸⁵ Monod concurs with the reviewers who praised Forster's capacity for bringing "his hero's best-known fictions" to life," but his critique of Forster's style ultimately leads him to ask, "Should there be literary criticism in literary biography?" This was the exact question that preoccupied many of the *Life's* earliest critics. The review from *The Examiner* praising Forster's descriptive skill is something of an anomaly; emphasis on the way he made Dickens's writing process visible tended to be overshadowed by the information about Dickens's private life that Forster might otherwise have provided. Most critics agreed that Forster did the best he could with the brief account of Dickens's separation from his wife, the most personal disclosure of Volume Three. But this blemish on Dickens's character was not news to the public, and it did not provide an insight to his works as did the autobiographical fragment of the first volume. Where one critic remarked of Volume One that "the biography is a very curious handbook to the novels," reviewers of the later volumes bemoaned the distinct lack of new information surrounding Dickens and his career.⁸⁶ "In the third and last volume of Dickens's *Life* his biography (strictly speaking) is combined with long and elaborate criticisms on his works," *The Athenaeum* observed.⁸⁷ A reviewer for *Chambers's Journal*, meanwhile, frankly remarked that "Mr. Forster, we think, dwells too much on what this and that critic has said of Dickens's works."⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Sylvère Monod, "John Forster's *Life of Dickens* and Literary Criticism." *English Studies Today*, fourth series (Rome, 1966), 371.

⁸⁶ "The Life of Charles Dickens," unsigned, *The British Quarterly Review* 55, 109 (January 1872), p. 230.

⁸⁷ "The Life of Charles Dickens," unsigned, *The Athenaeum* 2415 (7 February 1874), p. 185.

⁸⁸ "Dickens's *Life*: Conclusion," unsigned, *Chambers's Journal* 534 (21 March 1874), p. 177.

The focus on criticism in the *Life's* later volumes emphasizes what its earlier references to *David Copperfield* only suggest—that the novel grew from Dickens's decision not to write autobiography. With this shift in focus, Forster begins to emphasize Dickens's choice to have his life written by somebody else. The impact of this choice on Forster's treatment of the relationship between Dickens's personal character and his fictional creations is especially apparent in two passages. One of these consists of an unpublished anecdote written in support of the Guild of Literature and Art (Forster and Dickens were both active members of the Guild and participants in its amateur theatricals). In it, Dickens speaks in the voice of Mrs. Gamp, the popular character from *Martin Chuzzlewit*; she describes her visit to one of the Guild's performances, where she is asked by Mr. Wilson, the Guild's theatrical hairdresser, "Would you like to see your beeograffer's moustache and whiskers, ma'am? I've got 'em in this box" (II.10). Mrs. Gamp replies, "Drat my beeograffer, sir. He has given me no region to wish to know anythink about him."

These humorous lines present one of Dickens's own characters renouncing her "beeograffer." Dickens gets to inhabit the fictional world and the real world simultaneously, by ventriloquizing Mrs. Gamp and revealing his disguise—"the beeograffer's moustache and whiskers"—without actually having to wear it. The novelist's personal life fades into the space between character and reader, and Forster, no less a "beeograffer" himself, is complicit in this act of self-removal as he recounts the efforts to raise awareness of literature as an art that he and Dickens undertook together. In later passages, however, Forster begins to retract when Dickens starts to invest just as much of his energy in the performance of his work as he does in his solitary writing exertions.

Forster develops a disapproval of Dickens's self-promotion; the Dickens who pushes off his biographer's impingements through the character of Mrs. Gamp becomes just as likely to insist, "Remember that for my biography!" as he practices the polka in the middle of the night with his daughters, who hope to dance with their father at their brother's birthday party the next day (II.82). While Dickens could satirize the author who would do everything to *avoid* biography by impersonating one of his own characters, this anecdote, like many of his public readings, caters to the sentimental portrait of the author as a family man in a way that belied Forster's more serious concerns (On Dickens's enthusiasm for the readings, Forster later writes, "He was never unprepared to lavish freely for others the reserved strength that should have been kept for himself" (II.357).

Dickens never performed any of the autobiographical passages from *David Copperfield*.⁸⁹ On a practical level, this might have been simply because the novel's final passages were the best suited for reading aloud ; even critics who did not think much of the novel praised the description of the storm at sea from the "Tempest" chapter as a masterful example of sublime prose.⁹⁰ Readers were thus left to detect the relationship between David and Dickens without an aural overlay of fictional and autobiographical passages to suggest it. In place of this performance that never occurred, Forster provides a textual correspondence between the voices of character and author in the early passages of his biography. When he recounts Dickens's process of writing the novel in the later volumes, however, moments such as the Mrs. Gamp vignette disrupt this correspondence, reminding readers of Dickens's resistance to a fixed autobiographical identity.

⁸⁹ For a list of Dickens's public readings and the sections of his works from which they were taken, see Malcolm Andrews, *Dickens and His Performing Selves* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹⁰ See Ruskin: "There is nothing in sea-description, detailed, like Dickens' storm at the death of Ham, in *David Copperfield*." *Fronde Agrestes: Readings in 'Modern Painters.'* 1875. Ninth Edition. (Kent: George Allen, 1889), 73.

The movement from Dickens's self-conscious avoidance of autobiography to the imperative "put that in my biography" facilitates Forster's critical discussion of characterization in the novels, in which he finds that similar principles of discretion and deliberateness underlie Dickens's aesthetic choices. On Dickens's tendency towards self-abnegation when choosing a name for *David Copperfield*, Forster writes in Volume Three: "It is singular that it should never have occurred to him, while the name was thus strangely as by accident bringing itself together, that the initials were but his own reversed. He was much startled when I pointed this out, and protested it was just in keeping with the fates and chances which were always befalling him" (II.78). Dickens's curious opposition of "fate" and "chance" recalls Forster's own slippery rhetoric of accidents, intentions, and unconscious decisions around the fragment. Dickens's six different titles for the novel evoke a similarly speculative mood. Their variations suggest he was toying with the notion of his novel as a record of the author's direct speech and as a found document brought to the public by a third party: "1) *The Copperfield Disclosures* 2) *The Copperfield Records* 3) *The Last Living Speech and Confession of David Copperfield, Junior* 4) *The Copperfield Survey of the World as it Rolled* 5) *The Last Will and Testament of Mr. David Copperfield* 6) *Copperfield, Complete*." Ultimately, he went with a variation of number 6: *The Personal History, Adventures, Experience and Observation of David Copperfield the Younger, of Blunderstone Rookery, which he never meant to be published on any account*." The final title speaks to the position of Dickens's autobiographical fragment within the novel as well as within Forster's biography. When Dickens decided not to pursue an autobiography, *David Copperfield* was written instead. In turn, the revelation of Dickens's childhood in Forster's biography

was made possible. In both the fiction and the biography, Dickens avoids speaking directly to his readers. He holds to his decision not to publish personal material by allowing David Copperfield and John Forster to do it for him, in effect having it both ways.

There are no celebrated comparisons between David and Dickens in the third volume of the *Life*. Instead, Forster compares *David Copperfield* to Dickens's other novels as a means of distinguishing between the novelist's successful transpositions of reality into fiction and his lesser forays into caricature. He begins this critical section by stating that "Dickens never stood so high in reputation as at the completion of *Copperfield*" (II.98). He adds that the novel's sales did not quite match its popularity, an indication that Dickens was beginning to be more of a household name than a presence in the household library. Even so, Forster finds the tone of the novel to be "healthful and manly"; its style is "free and cheery." On the whole, it exemplifies a "completeness of effect and uniform pleasantness of tone" (II.104-5). Nowhere else, he concludes, had Dickens given "such variety of play to his invention" (II.105). It was this variety, according to Forster, which allowed readers of the *Life* to be shocked at the discovery that Mr. Micawber's traits were derived from Dickens's own impecunious father. Readers of *Bleak House*, however, did not have to work as hard to recognize Leigh Hunt as the model for Skimpole. "It is genuine humor against personal satire," remarks Forster of the difference between the two (II.104).

Forster ultimately goes on to argue that even the flattest and most morally ineffective characters may nonetheless be traced back through the process by which Dickens converted his impressions into narrative. Then, he makes a statement which

directly addresses the shifting significance of the autobiographical fragment and its use in *Copperfield* within the *Life*:

The *Copperfield* disclosures formerly made will for ever connect the book with the author's individual story; but too much has been assumed, from those revelations, of a full identity of Dickens with his hero, and of a supposed intention that his own character as well as parts of his career should be expressed in the narrative. It is right to warn the reader as to this. (II.105)

There was no room for such a warning in the first volume of the *Life*. It is significant that Forster brings it out at this particular moment, not simply because it follows criticisms of the *Life* to which he was responding, but because it points the conversation about Dickens's characterization in a new direction. By making the comparison between *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*, Forster suggests that Dickens's depictions of literary acquaintances in his fiction were less successful than the childhood narrative he had imagined for himself and so carefully integrated (Forster used Leigh Hunt to make his point, but he could just as easily have referred to his own appearance as the loud-mouthed and imperious Podsnap in *Our Mutual Friend*). Few readers could disagree with him on this account, which was precisely the point: the warning about *Copperfield* is not only a warning about the potential excesses of the kind of biographical reading which uses one major correspondence between life and work to give license to many more improbable assumptions, but a declaration that Dickens's creative powers went beyond the simple transcription of his own experiences.

In the section that follows, called "Author," Forster gives his emphatic assent to the question "Should there be criticism in literary biography?" The subheading to the section is "Dickens as a Novelist: 1836-1870." While it was not uncommon for literary biographies to contain a separate section devoted to the works after the main narrative of

the life, Forster recognizes that turning to write about Dickens's novels more than halfway through the biography is somewhat redundant, since the entire *Life* is effectively given over to that purpose. He explains, however, that “[Dickens’s] literary work was so intensely one with his nature that he is not separable from it, and the man and the method throw a singular light on each other” (II.263). Forster defends his earlier disclosure of the *Copperfield* fragment in this section, as well as provides a much more particularized account of Dickens's methods in response to critiques by Hippolyte Taine and George Henry Lewes.

Taine’s two main contentions, as reiterated by Forster, were that Dickens’s fanciful exaggerations were monomaniacal, and that the lack of passion in his writing betrayed the dominance of morality and the regulatory force of social norms endemic to English culture. Lewes’s argument, published originally in an article entitled “Dickens in relation to Criticism,” drew significantly from Taine’s. Lewes’s terminology differed, however; where Taine charged Dickens with monomania, Lewes chose “hallucination”—if not an inherently more pathological term, it was made so by Lewes’s failure to distinguish between a physiologist’s metaphor and a rival’s cutting remark (his preference for George Eliot does not need to be stressed here). “When one thinks of the ‘catchwords’ personified as characters,” Lewes wrote, “one is reminded of the frogs whose brains have been taken out for physiological purposes, and whose actions henceforth want the distinctive peculiarity of organic action, that of fluctuating spontaneity” (II.271).

If this kind of description upset Forster, however, he was even more irritated by Lewes’s free use of personal anecdote as a diagnosis for Dickens’s supposed

hallucinatory tendencies, referring to it as “the bold stroke...of bringing forward Dickens himself.” Bringing forward Dickens’s own voice to give the *Life* “something of the value of autobiography” could, after all, describe Forster’s own method. Lewes recalls the conversation he had with Dickens which prompted him to make this assessment of the author:

Dickens once declared to me that every word said by his characters was distinctly *heard* by him; I was at first not a little puzzled to account for the fact that he could hear language so utterly unlike the language of real feeling, and not be aware of its preposterousness; but the surprise vanished when I thought of the phenomena of hallucination. (II.271)

Forster’s response to this anecdote is twofold. He argues that Lewes undoes his own argument by going on to validate the very sense of personal feeling in Dickens’s characters he found wanting by describing the effect of these characters on readers: “in the impartial critic’s eagerness to discredit even the value of the emotion awakened in such men as Jeffrey by such creations as Little Nell, he reverses all he has been saying about the cultivated and the uncultivated, and presents to us a cultivated philosopher, in his ignorance of the stage, applauding an actor whom every uncultivated playgoing apprentice despises as stagey.”⁹¹

From this very public playgoing metaphor, Forster turns to his second point, which has a more private focus: Dickens’s account of conversing with his characters takes on a different context when it appears in his letters, which make up large portions

⁹¹ II.271. Forster answers Lewes here with his own metaphor, which could do with some unpacking, since it does not impart the same visual impact as Lewes’s flailing brainless frogs. Lord Francis Jeffrey (1773-1850) did not approve of the poetry of Keats and Shelley, but he did find potential in Carlyle, and supported him in the early stages of his career. Even so, according to Froude, he was perhaps put off by Carlyle’s “fundamental unsoundness of mind” (Froude, *Life of Carlyle*). Forster’s reference to Jeffrey draws attention to Dickens’s ability to move even those readers who would not ordinarily respond with emotion to novels. He compares Lewes’s failure to take an emotional response at face value to an overly cultivated playgoer who can only respond to gestures that look exactly like what they are meant to represent.

of the *Life*. In the anecdote from Lewes's article, Lewes makes his conclusion without soliciting Dickens's response, while Forster makes clear that his dual role as biographer and critic emerged from many a verbal exchange with the novelist. As Forster continues, he references the same novelists that preceded Dickens and shaped his early reading (Scott, Fielding, Smollett). He points out that all of these novelists limited their dimensions of character in order to create space for their own observations of life. This serves as a parallel description of Forster's project—to limit Dickens's character primarily to his characterization in order to make space for the enduring popularity of his works through their resonance with individual lives. If a critic is “of the school burlesqued by Mr. Lewes” and claims Dickens characters are abstract types rather than “individual or special men and women,” Forster explains,

Well, what can be rejoined to this, but that the poverty or richness of any territory worth survey will for the most part lie in the kind of observation brought to it. There was no finer observer than Johnson of the manners of his time, and he protested of their greatest delineator that he knew only the shell of life. (II.275)

Johnson's protest to Boswell (his "greatest delineator") substitutes humility for Dickens's self-aggrandizement, while leaving intact Forster's message about the poverty and richness of observation. Forster does not present Dickens as a figure for Johnson elsewhere in the *Life*; he is more interested in comparing Dickens with Scott as a biographical subject. Still, if Johnson and Boswell are understood as conduits for Dickens and Forster, the reference suggests that the best kind of knowledge comes from admitting what one doesn't know. The passage stages a smaller scale version of Forster's greater effort in the *Life*, which is to make readers recognize that the embarrassing biographical fantasies they entertain of fictional characters are not empty affectations, but reflections of the novelist's intellectual activity.

II. Biography and *David Copperfield*

As Barbara Hardy observes, *David Copperfield* is not only a novel about a novelist telling his own story, but about the novelist-as-narrator, learning to reconstruct the life stories of those around him as an artist.⁹² Still, a persistent feature of *Copperfield* criticism has been the lack of access to the novels David actually writes.⁹³ There is no reason to assume that Dickens's own body of work stands in for David's, and *David Copperfield* itself is excluded as an example of David's novelistic writing by virtue of its title; it is a "personal history...never to be published on any account." Yet Dickens's personal history was to be published fragmentarily in the novel, at the same time these fragments were entrusted to Forster as what would become the major disclosure of the biography. In this way, *David Copperfield* looks forward as well as back; it examines the writing of autobiography as a kind of self-exorcism while imagining the posterity of that self in the minds of readers. As Max Saunders points out, "Dickens's awareness of the possibilities of autobiographical form as a fictional resource is what energizes the writing."⁹⁴

David's quiet transformation into a professional author towards the end of *David Copperfield* foreshadows not only the publication of Dickens's fragment in Forster's biography, but the shift in the fragment's use from the biography's first to final volume. The disclosure of the character's origins in the *Life* becomes a meditation on characterization itself and the way tensions between life and work can shape the imaginative responses of readers. Those reading *David Copperfield* may have sensed its

⁹² *Dickens and Creativity* (London: Continuum, 2008), 45-59.

⁹³ See for example Mary Poovey, "The Man-of-Letters Hero: *David Copperfield* and the Professional Writer" in *Uneven Developments* (1988) and Jennifer Ruth, "Mental Capital, Industrial Time, and the Professional in *David Copperfield*." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 1999 Summer; 32 (3): 303-30.

⁹⁴ *Self-Impression*, 135.

connection to Dickens's own life, but until Forster's biography was published they could do no more than identify the author in their own experiences, as David and Dickens do with the eighteenth-century novels so influential to the growth of character and author alike. Several of the novel's minor characters issue reprimands that appear to be addressed simultaneously to the author and the reader, as if to remind Dickens that his methods of characterization impact their existence and his own credibility as a documenter of real life. On another level, these characters remind readers that they will never know the real story of the author, to whatever degree they form it as a composite of their own affective responses. These reprimands are more often than not issued by female characters that drift throughout the novel unmoored by marriage, but withheld from death. Thus David's admission to the dwarf Miss Mowcher when she accuses him of his failure to see "natural feeling" in someone of her size: "Perhaps I ought not to be at all surprised to see you as you are now: *I know so little of you*" (468, emphasis added)."⁹⁵ Later in the novel, the scarred woman Rosa Dartle, whose passion for Steerforth reflects David's own, charges David and Steerforth's mother with the failure to legitimize her capacity for memory: "I have been a mere disfigured piece of furniture between you both; having no eyes, no ears, no feelings, no remembrances" (807). By contrast, David thrives on the remembrances found in the journal of Julia Mills, Dora Spenlow's companion, before his marriage, but mostly because Miss Mills shadows his courtship of Dora with her careful notes on the latter's easily afflicted constitution. One of the entries, however,

⁹⁵ David appears to have his foot in his mouth here, admitting he knows "little" of a little person. This scene, however, can also be construed as a sincere gesture on Dickens's part, as it was added when the original of Miss Mowcher—Catherine Dickens's hairdresser, Mrs. Seymour Hill—objected to her grotesque appearance and behavior earlier in the earlier numbers of *David Copperfield*. For a reading that thinks more about the significance of Miss Mowcher as a character who registers shifting attitudes to middle class ideology in *David Copperfield*, see Gareth Cordery, "Remaking Miss Mowcher's Acquaintance." *Dickens Quarterly* 29, 1 (March 2012): 11-31.

ends with an invitation to David (who Miss Mills knows will be reading the entry): "Must not D.C. confide himself to the broad pinions of Time?" (567)

Miss Mills's autobiographical writing tempts David to think about how he might turn to autobiographical writing himself, but her remark gets swept up in his reading of her journal entries as evidence of a romance unfolding, instead of as a life defining moment that should be confided to time. The question stands out in the journal as a reminder of the novel's unfinished project, as it remains for David in the opening lines that find him wondering whether he will turn out to be the hero of his own life. The novel is never sure whether it *is* David's autobiography. What it does seem to be sure of is that autobiography is never fixed, and that it is prone to assume other forms, including characters in fiction and subjects of biography. Mr. Dick's Memorial reminds us that the writing of autobiography can be a form of refusal, an act that makes it easy for writers to mix fact with fiction because they are not committed to separating the two to produce a wholly verifiable account of a life. Mr. Dick's preferred metaphor for the relationship between fact and fiction in the Memorial involves a kite: "'There's plenty of string,' said Mr. Dick, 'and when it flies high, it takes the facts a long way. That's my manner of diffusing 'em. I don't know where they may come down. It's according to circumstances, and the wind, and so forth; but I take my chances of that'" (213).

Mr. Dick appears as an autobiographer here, letting facts diffuse themselves according to the imperfections of his memory—they “come down” where they will and still remain part of his own story, irrespective of what Betsey Trotwood calls his “allegorical way of expressing it.” But the passage is also about the vagaries of history and reception. The Memorial is about the contingencies of recollection, how time can

wedge itself between facts and their origins, inevitably causing distortion. Several chapters later, Mr. Dick says to David, “I suppose history never lies, does it?” to which David responds, ““Oh dear, no, sir!”” adding to himself, “I was ingenuous and young, and I thought so” (259).

How is it that David, through his conversations with Mr. Dick, accepts the manipulation of facts as the province of the autobiographer but wonders why historical truth—that quality which most distinguishes biography from fiction—should be unstable? “Because he was a novelist rather than an autobiographer,” observes one critic, “Charles Dickens could, through formal control, convert the energies of his obsession into expressive metaphors—and thereby celebrate his past by re-creating it.”⁹⁶ Mr. Dick’s inability to express his past in anything other than fragments makes his work an apt placeholder for Dickens’s curtailed autobiography, but the significance of his character reaches further. A reassessment of the passage where Betsey Trotwood explains the Memorial to her nephew reveals a strange disjunction between David’s question and Miss Betsey’s answer:

“Is it a Memorial about his own history that he is writing, aunt?”
 “Yes, child,” said my aunt, rubbing her nose again. “He is memorialising the Lord Chancellor, or the Lord Somebody or other—one of those people, at all events, who are paid to *be* memorialized—about his affairs. I suppose it will go in, one of these days. He hasn’t been able to draw it up yet, without introducing that mode of expressing himself; but it don’t signify; it keeps him employed” (215).

Betsey Trotwood’s “yes” assures David that Mr. Dick is writing about himself, whether or not he intends to do so. But what gets lost in this assurance is that Mr. Dick is actually supposed to be writing a biography, of “one of those people who are paid to be memorialised.”

⁹⁶ Stanley Tick, “The Memorializing of Mr. Dick.” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 24, 2 (Sep. 1969): 142-53.

There are two claims about biography in Betsey Trotwood's answer. One is that biography only chronicles "great" (and often boring) men; the other is that biographers have become a professional class of writers who cannot keep their own ideologies and motivations from penetrating the narratives of their subject's lives. But Betsey's statement also recognizes that biographers do this out of necessity, providing a sense of perspective that is unavailable to their subjects. An article published the year of Dickens's death suggests that good biographers may turn their subjects' egoism (or perhaps their fractured self-absorption) into a more broadly applicable kind of admiration. Commenting on Goethe's and Rousseau's autobiographies, the author observes,

These two great hands have opened the kingdom of biography...and though all do not finish their work with the same skill, yet the fundamental lesson has at least been learned. What in an autobiography looks egotistical, in a biography is of course mere portraiture; only the biographer now has learned to portray with that single attention to his subject, with that admiration of it in itself and for itself, which was at first secured only in a few exceptional cases by the strong grasp of self-love.⁹⁷

According to these standards, *David Copperfield* might be read as the result of an imperfect or foreclosed attempt at autobiography which lays the groundwork for the biographer's task. The *Life of Dickens* failed to convince many critics that Forster's was an unqualified admiration. Yet his attention to the autobiographical aspect of Dickens's work as it manifests in the novelist's characterization reveals a more critical approach. The reality that Dickens's work represented might rest on a fragment. But by reinserting that fragment into the fictional world of *David Copperfield* in which it first appeared,

⁹⁷ Robert Goodbrand, "A Suggestion for a New Kind of Biography." *The Contemporary Review* 14 (1870): 20-28, 21.

Forster emphasizes the imaginative capacity instilled in Dickens by his audiences, and the novelist's eagerness to confer this capacity upon them in return.

CHAPTER TWO

George Gissing and the Fictional Work of Biography

"My book was written to be read, not to help another book be read."

—George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man* (1886)

Are biographies written to be read, or to help other books be read? George Moore rejects the notion that books containing elements of writers' lives (such as *Confessions of a Young Man*) must be supplementary, that they must tend towards the explanation of specific works or entire careers.⁹⁸ Moore's declaration asks readers to suspend any preconceived ideas they might have about the author's presence in fiction, while inviting them to dwell on a particular period of the author's life as it is put to fictional use (in this case, the time Moore spent among Parisian artists and bohemians during the 1870s). The statement does not so much advocate a wholesale exclusion of the author's biography, as it suggests the paradox that biographical details should ultimately point to an appreciation of the literary artwork for its own sake.

Matthew Arnold makes a complementary claim in his preface to a selection of Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, offering that the best of Johnson's *Lives* can serve as pedagogical tools, what the French term *points de repère*—places that can lead readers back to universal centers, "by returning to which we can always find our way again, if we

⁹⁸ See Max Saunders's discussion of autobiography and the supplement in *Self-Impression*, 516-520. Saunders draws on the work of theorists including Derrida, De Man, and Said to summarize the ways autobiography explains outside texts as it stands simultaneously as a text within an author's *oeuvre*. Moore's statement—which comes from an autobiographical work of fiction that saw several editions—refers to the autobiographer's prerogative to update their own work repeatedly and hence undo, or at least complicate, this explanatory function. Autobiography may work as a supplement to *preempt* biography. I read Moore's statement as a comment on what happens when the biography of a writer is inevitably published by someone else. "The life of a writer" can stand as its own story without delving deeply into an analysis of the writers' works, but it always exists *because* of the writing—a kind of reverse supplement that must be justified by either telling a good story or providing fresh insight into the *oeuvre*.

are embarrassed."⁹⁹ Arnold initially identifies biographies as books that help other books to be read, given that "We have not the time or strength to deal with half of the matters which are thrown upon our minds."¹⁰⁰ But he ultimately moves to a different claim: that biography, instead of fostering intellectual dependence, can function as a means of providing the kind of critical focus which breaks through embarrassment. For Arnold, embarrassment can refer to a vast, overwhelming feeling, the consequence of being confronted with centuries' worth of English literature and criticism. But this type of embarrassment has its correlative in limitation—one might turn to biography to emerge from a confusion of details, only to face a different form of embarrassment that characterizes biography as an object of study. After observing that readers of Johnson's best lives can "get a sense of what the real men were" as well as "a sense of the power of their works," Arnold admits, "This will seem to most people a very unambitious discipline."¹⁰¹ To prove the critical utility of biography—for ideally, Arnold argues, it will send readers directly to the works of Pope, Addison, and Milton—he must acknowledge that biography is embarrassing because it has become associated with unambitious reading, a dalliance with personal facts rather than an encounter with ideas.

A novelist-aesthete and a cultural critic reflect on the utility of biographical reading from different ends of the spectrum; Moore does not want biographical details to outweigh the aesthetic impact of his work, and Arnold proposes that the staggering amount of knowledge available to absorb over the course of a single lifetime must be conveyed through the best and most enduring of details, which he finds biography

⁹⁹ *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's 'Lives of the Poets,'* edited with a preface and notes by Matthew Arnold, (London: Macmillan & Co., 1878), xi.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, vii

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, xiii

particularly suited to provide. Moore's book will be interesting as long as it does not make readers feel that they need to know more about him to understand or enjoy it, and Arnold's selection of Johnson's *Lives* will be effective on the condition that it enriches reader's knowledge of Johnson's corpus, or invites comprehension of a poet whose work may be venerable but unfamiliar. If this pairing seems strange, it is because it presents biography as both problem and solution, an embarrassment to both writers. This ambivalence characterizes biography's relationship to criticism as it figures in the conversation about realist fiction at late century: a conversation in which biography might otherwise be assumed not to have an especially significant part.

In the 1880s and 1890s, the status of literary biography as a critical object became marked in ways it had not been before. The debates over the status of biography as a literary art in earlier decades tended not to associate authors' life details with the dilution of effective critical practice. Information about a literary figure's life might be suppressed on account of its scandalous nature, but it was just as likely to be rejected on the grounds of obscurity. While Boswell's *Life of Johnson* exemplified Johnson's belief that biographers should be familiar with their subjects, over time, readers could not be expected to be familiar with the subject in the same way. This problem was recognized in the 1830s by the editor of Boswell's *Life*, John Wilson Croker. Croker justified his elaborate emendations to Boswell's text by emphasizing the difficulty readers would have recognizing eighteenth-century names and events a generation after they occurred.

"Though every year thus adds to the interest and instruction which this work affords," Croker explained in his preface,

Something is, on the other hand, deducted from the amusement which it gives, by the gradual obscurity that time throws over the persons and incidents of private

life: many circumstances known to all the world when Mr. Boswell wrote are already obscure to the best informed, and wholly forgotten by the rest of mankind.¹⁰²

Croker's approach makes a shift from the relationship between biographer and subject towards the relationship between subject and reader. His edition of Boswell turns the biography into a work of reference as much as a work of literary art. The tension between the utility of biography and its status as a creative undertaking in its own right emerges through Croker's suggestion that some biographies simply need to be rewritten for new generations. But the minutiae of the subject's day-to-day life, with the proliferation of references it required, could also cause the kind of embarrassment Arnold worried about fifty years later.

Croker's meticulous editorship became a touchstone for debates about how best to present a familiar biographical subject to a new generation, and more broadly, about what the purpose of biography should be. When George Henry Lewes published an essay on Shelley for the *Westminster Review* in 1841, intended as a sketch for a biography that was ultimately never written, John Stuart Mill cautioned in response:

I think you should have begun by determining whether you were writing for those who required a *vindication* of Shelley or for those who wanted a *criticism* of his poems or for those who wanted a biographic Carlylian analysis of him as a *man*. I doubt if it is possible to combine all these things but I am sure at all events that the unity necessary in an essay of any kind as a work of art requires at least that one of these should be the predominant purpose & the others only incidental to it.¹⁰³

Mill's words recall the detached form of those innumerable nineteenth-century biographies that set critical assessments of an author's work apart from the main narrative of the life. But rather than suggest that Lewes replicate the form of these unruly volumes,

¹⁰² *Boswell's Life of Johnson: Including their Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. John Wilson Croker, 5 vols. (London: John Murray, Albemarle-Street, 1831), vi.

¹⁰³ Qtd. in Nancy Henry, *The Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 4.

Mill proposes writing about Shelley in observance of a unified set of artistic principles. For a biography—or a biographical essay—to be shaped according to such principles, criticism must have its own place.¹⁰⁴

The later decades of the century saw criticism beginning to occupy a more distinct place in biography, particularly in biographies issued as part of a series. Series biographies touted the collective accomplishments of the nation through the lives of eminent individuals, literary figures among them. By the 1870s, a biographer writing on a well-known author such as Samuel Johnson or Sir Walter Scott had the option of condensing and providing a gloss on the lives that already existed, or contributing new critical commentary in the place of biography (Sir Leslie Stephen's *Samuel Johnson* and Richard H. Hutton's *Sir Walter Scott*, both published in 1878, had looming predecessors in Boswell and Lockhart).¹⁰⁵ The biographies in John Morley's first *English Men of Letters* series, which ran from 1878 to 1892, all contain some combination of both, but several make a more pointed effort to address the place of criticism in biography. The very first sentence of Henry James's remarkable *Hawthorne* (1879), for example, asserts that "it will be necessary...to give this short sketch the form rather of a critical essay than

¹⁰⁴ It is worth thinking about how the phrase "critical biography" has emerged as a distinct kind of project in response to the question of utility. Blackwell Publishing, for example, offers a series of critical biographies which provide "informative and durable biographies of important British, European, and North-American authors, including substantial critical discussion of their works, providing intelligent criticism within a well-researched biographical context." <<http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-398191.html>> Accessed February 13, 2014. This is the present version of the company's mission statement, which was formally to "re-establish that books are written by people who lived in particular times and places." The earlier version of the statement adds that "This objective is pursued not by programmatic assertions or strenuous point-making, but through the practical persuasion of volumes which offer intelligent criticism within a well-researched biographical context." <<http://blackwellpublishing.com/seriesbyseries.asp?ref=BCB>> Accessed Jun 21, 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Walter Scott made his own contribution to series biography with *Lives of the Novelists*, issued between 1821 and 1824.

a biography."¹⁰⁶ Trollope, writing on Thackeray for the same series in 1879, promises to "give such incidents and anecdotes of his life as will tell the reader perhaps all about him that a reader is entitled to ask"; the rest of the book is devoted to Thackeray's writings and his style.¹⁰⁷

These prefatory acknowledgements are pragmatic choices rather than anti-biographical statements—which makes them all the more worth noting, as they occurred at a moment when writers' attitudes towards biography were frequently inflected with disdain. George Eliot referred to biography as "a disease of English literature"; Oscar Wilde offered the playfully contemptuous declaration that "Every great man has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography."¹⁰⁸ Such sentiments were not limited to direct statements. Suspicious of posterity, Thomas Hardy would orchestrate the writing of his own biography under the name of his wife, Florence. James's ambivalent attitude towards biography, meanwhile, can be traced across his stories of writers and artists, as well as the sprawling *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* (1903). Perhaps not coincidentally, this antagonistic feeling towards biography became pronounced as a generation of Victorian novelists passed and their lives entered into written form (Dickens died in 1870, George Eliot in 1880, and Trollope in 1883). Despite the truth-to-life aesthetic typical of novelists writing from mid-to-late century, the act of writing biography itself was seldom regarded by fiction writers with

¹⁰⁶ Henry James, *Hawthorne* (New York: Harper, 1879), 1. James observes that the work of an earlier Hawthorne biographer, George Parsons Lathrop, is "not to my sense the truly critical one" (perhaps because Lathrop was Hawthorne's son-in-law).

¹⁰⁷ Anthony Trollope, *Thackeray* (New York: Harper, 1879), 2. For Trollope, the turn to criticism was a matter of necessity, for "Of Thackeray no life has been written...there has been no memoir of his life sufficient to supply the wants of even so small a work as this purports to be." Trollope faced a direct familial impasse in Thackeray's daughters, who had ordered their fathers' papers burned.

¹⁰⁸ George Eliot to Mrs. Thomas Adolphus Trollope, 19 December 1879, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955) 7:231; Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *Oscar Wilde: The Major Works*, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford University Press, 1989), 242.

unequivocal approval. Biography emphasized the author's life details, rather than the details the author had worked so assiduously to render through fiction.

Biography and the realist novel had a complementary relationship, harnessing the idea of *bildung* to the details of ordinary life, but by late century, biography had become a byword for imaginative constraints. The voice of the narrator within the world of the novel risked being conflated with the voice of the living writer, and novelistic events could be reduced to mere transcriptions of biographical reality. A figure like George Eliot might have conquered these dangers, as her sage persona in life (partially constructed through her critical writing) blended seamlessly with the authoritative voice of her novels. For a new generation of realists, making a firm distinction between the author's life and work was a definitive principle of their craft. Writers of fiction who also participated in biographical projects, from volumes in a biographical series to their own self-referential fictions, fed off the interest in personal experience that biographies and novels offered to the public. The turn to criticism in such projects, however, could also function as a means of avoiding biography. In this sense, the imaginative constraints identified with biography had a critical value in the discourse of realism; they tested the durability of the realist novel's features, particularly the efficacy of its narrative voice and the frankness of its subject matter.¹⁰⁹ Rachel Bowlby notes that "Throughout the

¹⁰⁹Biographers and novelists were both taken to task for revealing undesirable qualities in their subjects. On Froude's *Life of Carlyle*, for example, Frederic Harrison wrote that "Foul odors, as from a charnel-house, have been opened to us," and he advised that readers make use of biography, "the human microscope," with caution ("Froude's *Life of Carlyle*," *The North American Review* 140, 338 (Jan. 1885): 9-10). The "human microscope" sounds like a phrase that could be applied to naturalist writers such as Émile Zola, who defended his work against criticism with the caveat that "Literature, in spite of all that can be said, does not depend merely upon the author; it is influenced by the nature it depicts and by the man whom it studies" (*The Experimental Novel and Other Essays* [New York: Haskell House, 1964], 54). Gissing's early attempts to define his aesthetic are clearly influenced by Zola, though he does not cite Zola in his brief essay, "The Place of Realism in Fiction," nor does he subscribe to an "experimental" program for literature. See W.C. Frierson's "The English Controversy over Realism in Fiction, 1885-1895," *PMLA*

nineteenth century, we find realist novels peppered with internal polemics that set out their own projects in contrast to the kinds of literature they are rejecting."¹¹⁰ Her example is from Gissing's *The Odd Women*: "What is more vulgar than the ideal of novelists? They won't represent the actual world; it would be too dull for their readers. In real life, how many men and women *fall in love*?" The ideal world of fiction gets exposed through biographical events that occur in "real life": love plots become messy affairs, and success stories constitute the spaces between failures. Per Bowlby's formulation, the realist novel defines itself against biography, but biography is also the type of literature that the realist novel rejects.

In the discourse of realism, biography in Arnold's sense contrasts with biography as an inherently limiting form. The structure of biography leads readers back to the universal center of "real life," but in the process, it exposes realist fiction as less ambitious than it looks, while biography maintains its place as the less imaginative of the two forms. No wonder that biography became a point of critical interest for the very writers who purported to reject its uses. For realist writers working to prove that their art involved more than the transcription of external life details, pointing to the limits of biography became a means asserting the value of subjective impressions in fiction.

Stanley Fish has used the phrase "minutiae without meaning" to describe biography, a

43, 2 (June 1928): 533-50 for a description of the legacy of French naturalism as less a direct influence on the content of English fiction than a critical one, and the prevailing idea of Gissing as a realist continues to turn on his position within contemporary debates about English fiction rather than on any self-identifying statement in his writings. See Aaron Matz, "George Gissing's Ambivalent Realism," *NCF* 59, 2 (September 2004): 212-48 for an assessment of Gissing's vacillating commitment to the term "realism" in contrast to the tendencies of nineteenth-century critics to associate his work with the term. See also Constance Harsh, "Gissing's *The Unclassed* and the Perils of Naturalism," *ELH* 59, 4 (Winter 1992): 911-38.

¹¹⁰ Foreword to *Adventures in Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Blackwell, 2007), xv. Note the similarity of this discussion in *The Odd Women* to the one between Amy Reardon and Mrs. Carter on biography in *New Grub Street*.

phrase that could all too easily apply to the realist novel at its limits.¹¹¹ Yet the critical nexus between biography and realism is precisely where meaning might be found.

* * *

George Gissing has long been recognized as one of the most staunchly committed English realists, but his distinction as a novelist tends to be acknowledged in spite of biography, rather than because of it.¹¹² In an essay revised for her second *Common Reader* series, Virginia Woolf wrote that "Gissing is one of those imperfect novelists through whose books we establish a personal rather than an artistic relationship. We approach them through their lives as much as through their work."¹¹³ Woolf's sentiment has been echoed over the years, each time with the same result: there is something *unusual* about the way Gissing's life gets in the way of his work, because well-written novels should ultimately have some effect other than making us wonder about the person who wrote them. At the same time, there is the possibility that biography might be just as interesting as fiction, enough to draw our attention to a piece of writing that would otherwise seem dull, or to let us stop at the life altogether if we choose.

It is a truism of Gissing criticism that his biography clings to his fiction with a peculiar tenacity.¹¹⁴ While a student of classics at Owens College, Manchester, Gissing

¹¹¹ "Just Published: Minutiae without Meaning," *The New York Times*, 7 September 1999, 19.

¹¹² See Russell Kirk, "Who Knows George Gissing?" in *Collected Articles on George Gissing*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968) 3-13, Aaron Matz, review of *The Fiction of George Gissing: A Critical Analysis* by Lewis D. Moore and *George Gissing: A Life* by Paul Delany, *NCF* 65, 1 (June 2010): 122-6. Both of these essays acknowledge the place of the personal in Gissing's work.

¹¹³ Woolf, introduction to *Selections Autobiographical and Imaginative from the Works of George Gissing, with Biographical and Critical Notes by His Son*, ed. Alfred Charles Gissing (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), 9-16, 9.

¹¹⁴ Gissing criticism in the twentieth century has traded on the supposed indivisibility between the novelist's life and work noted by Woolf. John Halperin argues that "To read [Gissing's] books without a detailed knowledge of his biography is to read blind-folded" ("How to Read Gissing," *ELT* 20, 4 [1977]:188 AND Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1982]); David Grylls points out that such an approach shortchanges Gissing's novels, whereas projecting the content of the novels back onto Gissing's life leaves the biography undisturbed ("The Teller Not the Tale: George Gissing and

infamously stole money from the pockets of his fellow undergraduates in the hopes of lifting a young woman, Nell Harrison, from prostitution. His imprisonment did not deter their eventual marriage, which was plagued by Nell's alcoholism, Gissing's mounting debts, and his inability to fully understand the conditions that prevented the course of self-betterment he attempted to enforce upon his wife. In *The Political Unconscious*, Frederic Jameson shows how the transition in style and characterization from Gissing's early to later novels may be traced through the concept of *ressentiment*. Jameson's analysis examines the conditions of Gissing's biography—the novelist's "personal nightmare of a marriage across class borders"—as the material for a narrative motif.¹¹⁵ Gissing's *ressentiment* functions as an attraction and repulsion towards the working classes, which causes him to regard his own social position with futility. For Jameson, Gissing's biography goes hand-in-hand with the problem of narrative totality in the novels; meaningful social connections are thwarted by the reality of class conditions and the disaster of the cross-class marriage, and finally turned into a wry stylistic expression of unattainable desire in late novels including *The Odd Women* and *New Grub Street*. Jameson does not discuss *The Unclassed*, the novel in which Gissing's relationship with Nell Harrison might be said to figure most prominently in fictional form, but Osmond Waymark's admission in that novel lays the groundwork of *ressentiment* as a narrative expression of Gissing's biographical frustrations: "I identified myself with the poor and

Biographical Criticism," *ELT* 32, 4 [1989]: 454-70). Studies that situate Gissing "in context," including Jacob Korg's *George Gissing: A Critical Biography* (Seattle: University Of Washington Press, 1963), Adrian Poole's *Gissing in Context* (Totowa NJ: Rowan and Littlefield, 1975), Halperin's *Gissing: A Life in Books*, Grylls, *The Paradox of Gissing* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986), and Lewis D. Moore's *The Fiction of George Gissing: A Critical Analysis* (Jefferson NC: McFarland and Company, 2008), acknowledge that reading the novels biographically is not enough, but they nonetheless continue the effort to prove Gissing's work as deserving of a context that exceeds his personal circumstances.

¹¹⁵ *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 188-89.

ignorant; I did not make their cause my own, but my own cause theirs. I raved for freedom because I was myself in the bondage of unsatisfiable longing."¹¹⁶ Because the frustrated writer in Gissing cannot rise above his situation, he inflicts imaginary vengeance on the characters that embody his foreclosed ambitions.

We might differentiate the place of biography in Jameson's analysis from the place of biography in assessments of Gissing's work that position his life as an interference with fictional narrative (like Woolf's), rather than an expression of the socially embedded elements they share. Gissing anticipated the latter sense of the relationship between his personal history and stylistic development. When *The Unclassed* was reissued in October 1895, more than ten years after its initial publication and after the success of *New Grub Street*, he identified the novel as an "early effort" that appeared "a long, long time ago," noting that it would "be recognised as the work of a very young man, who dealt in a romantic spirit with the gloomier facts of life."¹¹⁷ An echo of the equivocation between romanticism and realism that Dickens makes in his preface to *Bleak House* ("the romantic side of familiar things") can be heard in Gissing's later estimate. Where Dickens's formulation gestures towards the triumph of the marriage plot over the novel's social concerns, Gissing's version reflects back upon the author, whose life is "romantic" insofar as it is lived in pursuit of "real" or authentic experience (the kind of experience that would never come to fruition in the Dickensian vision of marriage). In Gissing's fiction, the unachievable desire that Jameson identifies as a main feature of the novelist's work is distinguished by the presence of biography.

The self-reflexive commentary that Gissing's writer-characters offer about their own lives

¹¹⁶ *The Unclassed: The 1884 Text*, eds. Paul Delany and Collette Colligan (Victoria: ELS editions, 2010), 259. All in-text references to the novel are from this edition.

¹¹⁷ Preface to the 1895 edition of *The Unclassed*, printed in *The 1884 Text*, 393.

coexists with their discussions of "biography" as a measure of style and development—a test of writerly efficacy that disrupts the commitment to realism with the recourse to real life.

In Gissing's writing, the critical value of biography comes from its function as material object and abstract concept, something critics dealing with Gissing's actual biography have not fully appreciated. The novels I will discuss in this chapter, *The Unclassed* and *New Grub Street*, emphasize the multifaceted place of biography in the process of literary production, one which it shares with the realist novel. One sees it reflected in the form of the biography by Gissing scholar Pierre Coustillas: the biography's three volumes recall the soon-to-be-outmoded publishing system that Gissing grappled with throughout his career. Coustillas's life of the novelist also reflects a titular relationship between biographies and novels in the literary marketplace. Whereas the biography's original title, *George Gissing: The Dynamics of Frustration*, puts the novelist's life before his work, the biography's published title, *The Heroic Life of George Gissing*, sounds like the realist novel as object: the published "life" of an individual.¹¹⁸ These not-quite-coincidences suggest that in Gissing's work, biography might have to do with more than the immediate circumstances of his life. Indeed, the relationship between biography and the realist novel in Gissing's fiction is central to his depiction of professional authorship, wherein the life of the author has an ambiguous value. To understand the critical value of biography in Gissing's work—and the broader implications of biography's embarrassments for many writers in the late nineteenth century—one might begin with Gissing's own mediations of the form.

¹¹⁸ See Coustillas, *The Heroic Life of George Gissing*, 3 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011). The earlier title is noted by Grylls ("The Teller Not the Tale": 466).

* * *

An early chapter of *The Unclassed* examines the embarrassing associations of biography with self-directed learning, within a form that is, in itself, a potentially embarrassing source of social exposure: the advertisement. Given the advertiser's livelihood—for it is Osmond Waymark, classicist, teacher, and writer of fiction, who publishes it—the narrator's comments differentiate between literature as work and the pleasures of literary discourse. The chapter, simply titled "Advertising Agency," opens with this meditation on the value of personal exchange in an age of struggle and competition: "The advertisement columns of the newspaper press present us with a ready-made index to the social history of the time" (43). After describing human existence as a survival of the fittest (one of several references to contemporary science that was removed from the later edition of the novel, where the title of the chapter is "The Advertisement"), the narrator continues: "Once and again, in glancing over these columns, you come across an announcement which strikes you with a sense of incongruity, some appeal to the world at large for something not statable in terms of cash or credit, the utterance of one whose needs do not in any way connect themselves with salary." The advertisement follows:

WANTED, human companionship. A young man of four-and-twenty wishes to find a congenial associate of about his own age. He is a student of ancient and modern literatures, a free-thinker in religion, a lover of art in all its forms, a hater of conventionalism. Would like to correspond in the first instance. Address o.W.—News Rooms.

Here is Waymark's biography—made anonymous (save for his initials and address) through the figure of "a young man," and inviting a "congenial associate" to unite with him in the pursuit of mutual interests. Waymark's advertisement stands out among other

solicitations in the paper looking for more material forms of compensation. There is something embarrassing about a hater of conventionalism publishing his needs in such a conspicuous place, as the advertisement's "incongruity" suggests. It is unclear, the narrator explains, whether Waymark gives in to an "idle whim" or "the despairing cry of a hungry heart." The narrator's comments tempt us with ambiguous meaning. Waymark himself regards the advertisement as a "queer idea" (47) and this queerness is a subtext of his relationship with Julian Casti, the Keatsian poet who answers the ad and becomes his confidante. The advertisement is a curious form of biographical writing that regulates Waymark's desires while drawing attention to their dwelling-place at the social periphery; it offers facts while assuming their capacity to attract particular impressions of who the writer is, and what he may want (the narrator offers only that it "might mean much or little").¹¹⁹

Whatever Waymark *does* want, this moment in the novel provides a piece of biographical writing that suggests personalities are always more various than the facts which are published about them. And yet, those facts can also gesture towards sameness, since they "mean much" to those who wish to see themselves reflected in their presentation. Casti admits to Waymark that he was motivated to answer the advertisement because it seemed to him the written manifestation of his own thoughts. The extent to which the artist can identify with the "facts" of his fiction becomes a common topic of conversation between the two men. When Waymark completes the manuscript of a novel, for instance, he is concerned that his loss of interest in social

¹¹⁹Gissing's narrator seems to know that everyone possesses the same biographical facts in different forms: the most petty and bureaucratic details, such as an address, allow them to be identified in one context, while what Erving Goffman calls "identity pegs"—physical and behavioral traits—give them their social identity (see *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963, 57]).

situations has impacted the artistic value of his work, and he solicits Casti's opinion, explaining that "Art is all I now care for, and as art I wish my work to be judged." Casti responds, "It would change if you became yourself a part of such wretchedness. Imagine yourself in my position. Could you appreciate the artistic effect of your own circumstances?" to which Waymark answers, "Probably not" (259).

Waymark and Casti's relationship portrays the desire to know someone else's biography while withholding the particulars of one's own biography, a predicament familiar to Gissing as he struggled to articulate his evolving aesthetic principles. The letters Gissing wrote as he composed *The Unclassed* reveal a growing commitment to discouraging direct biographical readings of his work. Even as his personal life grew more complicated, his desire to distinguish himself from the subjects whose lives he represented constituted a critical moment in his artistic development, as a letter to his brother Algernon indicates:

In the midst of the most serious complications of life, I find myself suddenly possessed with a great calm, withdrawn, as it were, from the immediate interests of the moment, & able to regard everything as a picture. I watch & observe myself just as much as others. The impulse to regard every juncture as a "situation" becomes stronger & stronger. In the midst of desperate misfortune I can pause to make a note for future use, & the afflictions of others are to me materials for observation. This, I rather think, is at last the final stage of my development, coming after so many & various phases. Brutal & egoistic it would be called by most people. What has that to do with me, if it is a fact? ¹²⁰

Gissing maintains that "the afflictions of others" must be faced as a fact of life. But Gissing also shows his reluctance to acknowledge impressions and facts as one and the same when he asks, "What has that to do with me?" As he voices his freshly realized

¹²⁰ To Algernon Gissing, 18 July 1883, in *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, ed. Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, and Coustillas, 9 vols. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990-97), 2:146. Compare to Henry James's preface to *The Princess Casamassima*: "My vision of the aspects I more or less fortunately rendered was, exactly, my knowledge. If I made my appearances live, what was this but the utmost one could do with them?" (ed. Derek Brewer, [London: Penguin, 1987, 33-48, 48).

attitude towards observation, Gissing emphasizes that facts in fiction impress themselves upon readers because of the way they are rendered, not because of their connection to the novelist's personal life. These thoughts would later culminate in a short essay, "The Place of Realism in Fiction" (1895) in which Gissing discusses realism as both "craftsmanlike" and "sincere," and claims that it should combine technical skill with personality. In a new climate of publication that found novelists including Hardy, Meredith, and Moore exploring franker subject matter, Gissing determined that it would be a "matter for [the novelist's] private decision whether he will write as the old law dictates or to show life its image as he beholds it."¹²¹

When Gissing was given the opportunity to edit *The Unclassed* for reissue in 1895, he removed most of the narrator's interjections to improve the flow of the story, and to distance his biographical presence from the lives of his characters. One of the excised passages concerns the use of real life as the material for fiction: "Life is an incomplete novel, consisting, for the most part, of blurred and fragmentary chapters. It interests us, doubtless, as each new situation shadows itself forth; but, as we see these successively come to nothing, we smile, if we are wise, and wonder sadly what the author was about" (186-7). This novel-as-biography conceit had been a point of contention for reviewers of the book, several of whom implied that Gissing's desire to cultivate objectivity had the exact opposite effect. As one of them suggested, "to come near to success the author needs an attentive study of the structural elements of fiction, and should exercise the virtue of self-repression."¹²² Although other reviewers regarded the absence of this virtue more favorably (one observed that "Mr. Gissing is thoroughly

¹²¹ "The Place of Realism in Fiction," in *Selections Autobiographical*, 221.

¹²² Unsigned review, *The Athenaeum*, 28 June 1844, in *The Unclassed*, 397.

acquainted with the main subject on which he writes"¹²³), such remarks brought style and personal circumstance uncomfortably close together for Gissing. In another letter to Algernon, he took a more measured approach to his theories: "If my own ideas are to be found anywhere," he wrote, "it is in the practical course of events in the story; my characters must speak as they would actually, & I cannot be responsible for what they say."¹²⁴ To his mentor Frederic Harrison, Gissing insisted that "the book & its author must stand independently."¹²⁵ Gissing's use of the realist novel as a vehicle for the biographies of everyday people and their failings made him increasingly aware that "what the author was about" could refer to his life as well as his meaning.

In his private communications, Gissing carefully separates the development of his authorial persona from the details of his personal life, taking the discourse of realism that critics were applying to his work and using it to oppose biography and literary creativity. In *The Unclassed*, biography functions even more directly as a placeholder for failed aesthetic ambitions. While the exchanges between Waymark and Casti evoke Gissing's own ambivalence about using his life experiences in fiction, Waymark's varied literary career adds another dimension to the relationship between biography and fiction writing in the novel. At first, the narrator explains that the only kind of writing Waymark is able to publish is "the kind of thing known as 'padding'; his two published articles were more or less pleasantly patched-up essays on popular authors, but he was well aware that criticism was not his direction" (68). The suggestion is that "padding" does not allow for the creativity of criticism. Instead, it consists of biographical essays that focus on the

¹²³ Unsigned review, *Evening News*, 25 June 1884, in *Gissing: The Critical Heritage*, eds. Coustillas and Colin Partridge (London: Routledge, 1972), 68.

¹²⁴ To Algernon Gissing, 23 June 1884, in *The Collected Letters*, 2:228.

¹²⁵ To Frederic Harrison, 24 June 1884, in *The Collected Letters*, 2:231.

work of already well-known authors, relying on their material, and even material that has already been written about them, to attract readers with anecdotes.

At the end of the novel, however, Waymark makes a comment which situates the anecdote within the all-encompassing life of a book—its composition, publication, critical reception, and even its abridgement. He jovially observes that "If I am left alone, I shall probably become a sort of elder Disraeli, and continue the 'Curiosities of Literature'—do you know the book? It's capital reading" (361). Waymark's allusion to Isaac D'Israeli's literary miscellany brings out the "strain of pedantry" in his character, but it is more than a dismissive joke; it is an acknowledgment of how narrow the separation between obscure and popular writers can become in readers' minds through their reading of biography. *Curiosities of Literature* (1791-1823) treats obscure and popular writers with equal interest. In keeping with D'Israeli's other literary histories, the book is addressed to the scholar as well as to the general reader, as indicated by one of his prefaces to the ever-expanding volume:

The design of this work is to stimulate the literary curiosity of those, who, with a taste for its tranquil pursuits, are impeded in their acquirement. The characters, the events, and the singularities of modern literature, are not always familiar even to those who excel in classical studies. But a more numerous part of mankind, by their occupations, or their indolence, both unfavorable causes to literary improvement, require to obtain the materials for thinking, by the easiest and readiest means.¹²⁶

D'Israeli addresses the classical scholar, who may not have time for popular literature, and the common reader, whose curiosity may be piqued through short accounts of

¹²⁶ Isaac D'Israeli, *Curiosities of Literature: A New Edition in Three Volumes*, 7th edn. (London, John Murray, 1824), v-vii. Numerous editions of the *Curiosities* appeared over the course of the century. The edition of *Curiosities* closest to the publication of *The Unclassed* appeared in 1881, as part of a multivolume collection edited by his son (*Curiosities of Literature*, vols. 1-3 of *Disraeli's Complete Works*, ed. Benjamin Disraeli, 6 vols. [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1881]). On the changing significance of the life of the artist throughout the various editions of D'Israeli's works on literary character and genius, see Jonah Siegel, *Desire and Excess: The Nineteenth-Century Culture of Art* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 98-100.

authors' lives. Gissing's reference to this volume implicates readers and writers of biographical anecdote who fail to gain any kind of intellectual payoff from it. A *Temple Bar* article on biography (published a year after *New Grub Street*) gives a sense of the lasting popularity of biographical anecdotes and the ambivalence they could provoke. The author specifically attacks D'Israeli's series as an example of "the most vacuous pabulum," warning that "while the biographer must be careful to avoid the Scylla of anecdote, he must be no less careful to avoid the opposite danger—of setting out with a too definite conception of a man's life, into which all the facts, known and unknown, must be made to fit."¹²⁷ In Gissing's early work, biography troubles the successful implementation of the realist perspective. If realism ultimately relies on artifice, it should not be the type of artifice that merely serves to conceal an author's individual experiences. But including "all the facts" about a fictional subject's life could be just as detrimental as hinting at a few aspects of the author's life. As Gissing continued to distinguish between writers' lives in fiction and the life of the writer as a source for fiction, this distinction would assume a more concrete relationship to the realist novel itself.

* * *

The debates about realism in *New Grub Street* concern not only the late-century status of a particular category of fiction, but the degree to which writers saw themselves transcribing personal experience. With his most successful novel, Gissing gave the idea of biography a distinctly critical function when made it refer to the life (and possible death) of a genre. The first chapter lays the groundwork for this discussion of biography's relationship to criticism. The chapter title, "A Man of His Day," recalls the

¹²⁷ George Smith, "On Biography and Biographies," *Temple Bar* 94, 377 (April 1892): 578-83.

"life and times" model of Victorian biography, but it is also an ambiguous reference to two characters whose genres of choice offer them no guarantee of a memorable career.¹²⁸ During a breakfast conversation with his mother and sisters, the periodical writer Jasper Milvain compares himself with Edwin Reardon, one of the two realist novelists whose lives *New Grub Street* details. "He is the old type of unpractical artist," Milvain explains. "I am the literary man of 1882."¹²⁹ Milvain is one of the few non-fiction writers in the novel; like Osmond Waymark in *The Unclassed*, he is a producer of padding.

New Grub Street positions biography as a commercially motivated pursuit propelled by the recovery of literary figures, both formerly popular and persistently obscure. Reardon muses on the relationship between lives and works over time when he imagines himself as an object of inquiry inseparable from the future reputation of his books. As he says to his wife:

What is reputation? If it is deserved, it originates with a few score of people among the many millions who would never have recognised the merit they at last applaud. [...] A year after I have published my last book, I shall be practically forgotten; ten years later, I shall be as absolutely forgotten as one of those novelists of the early part of this century, whose names one doesn't even recognise. (53)

¹²⁸ In his *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry on biography, Edmund Gosse spells out what Gissing, through Milvain, implies: "There is perhaps no greater literary mistake than to attempt what is called the 'Life and Times' of a man. In an adequate record of the 'times,' the man is bound to sink into insignificance" ("Biography" in *The Encyclopedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information*, 11th ed. [Cambridge University Press, 1910], 2: 953.) Milvain disabuses himself of any illusion that a man can stand above the currents of his age. Since he does not harbor any suppressed desires about his writing—he does not "really" want to be a fiction writer, as Waymark, Reardon, and Biffen do—he is particularly suited to writing about the careers who do wish for careers as novelists, and to seizing on how these writers' attempts to write against type end up making them more easily typified as subjects of criticism.

¹²⁹ George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. John Goode (Oxford University Press, 1993 [2008]), 8. Subsequent references to this edition are cited in the text.

Reardon measures out his life in terms of his books because he believes their existence will justify his presence in the literary history of the age, even if the cost of his work may be averageness or lack of recognition altogether. There is a comfort in this outcome that Reardon learns to prefer, in part because he realizes that becoming the obscure type of an age is not so different from becoming one of its most celebrated figures. The famous authors within the world of Gissing's novel tend not to have names, including the one to whom Reardon appeals for a ticket to the British Museum Reading Room. Those that are mentioned by name, such as Dickens and George Eliot, belong to an earlier generation, and these novelists' importance derives less from individual influence than from the metonymic connection between their names and published works. It is not to them that Reardon refers when he speaks of the novelists "of the early part of the century," but they are clearly an important part of *New Grub Street*'s literary critical subtext, and we might wonder why the novel tempts us to substitute these well-known names for those that time has forgotten. A potential answer lies in the echo of Waymark's self-conscious antiquarianism in this passage, which indicates a shift from literary biography as "curiosity" towards the critical relationship between biography and realism that Gissing explores throughout *New Grub Street*.

"Biography" first arises as a topic in connection with the realist novel during a conversation between Reardon's wife, Amy, and her friend Mrs. Carter, whose husband has agreed to give Reardon a clerkship to help him refocus his energies on writing. Amy explains to Mrs. Carter why she believes in the potential of a novel without a love plot:

Think of the biographies of men and women; how many pages are devoted to their love affairs? Compare those books with novels which profess to be biographies, and you see how false such pictures are. Think of the very words

“novel,” “romance”—what do they mean but exaggeration of one bit of life?
(359)

Biography next surfaces when Harold Biffen publishes his example of “absolute realism in the sphere of the ignobly decent”—the novel he calls *Mr. Bailey, Grocer*, based on the eponymous individual who lives in his neighborhood (144). The reviews he faces for his effort are scathing. As Gissing's narrator explains, “Biffen only offered a slice of biography, and it was found to lack flavor” (486).

If one were to stop at the first of Amy Reardon's two queries—“how many pages are devoted to their love affairs”—the answer would be uncertain, since these supposedly private aspects of life were the basis for debating the uses of biography. When she speaks of the novel as an exaggeration of life, however, she implies that “real” biographies, if they serve their purpose, do not put as much weight on affairs of the heart as their counterparts in realist fiction. The problem with *Mr. Bailey* is that it does the work of both kinds of biography and succeeds at neither one. When Biffen initially describes the plan for his novel to Reardon, he promises that it will chronicle “the true story of Mr. Bailey’s marriage and of his progress as a grocer. It’ll be a great book—a great book!” (211) But *Mr. Bailey*'s reception proves that not everything “based on a true story” will interest readers, and Biffen’s enthusiasm is a comical reminder that the grocer’s life is of interest to nobody else except him.

In these scenes, Gissing invests biography with a critical potential that supersedes its association with the lackluster transcription of life details. Biography exercises a leveling function in Amy Reardon’s dialogue. Instead of standing for the mimetic ideal to which realist fiction can only aspire, biography becomes a concept through which different versions of realism can be assessed and debated; the writer’s life becomes a

vehicle for these debates rather than a necessary end in itself. After Reardon's death, Milvain prepares an article titled "The Works of Edwin Reardon," exploiting his friend's obscure status, but also using Reardon's works to give shape to his life. Biffen, meanwhile, commits suicide in a scene which rejects the linear confines of "novels which profess to be biographies." He reclines beneath the moon on Putney Hill, where "Only thoughts of beautiful things came into his mind; he had reverted to an earlier life, when as yet no mission of literary realism had been imposed upon him, and when his passions were still soothed by natural hope" (493). Pushing against the idea of biography without dismissing it, Gissing's writers posthumously assert their realist aesthetic, wherein life and literature intersect for critically regenerative purposes. Gissing's Dickens criticism enlarges upon the latter idea, reorienting the novelist's personal history towards a critique of his process and style.

* * *

In 1897, Gissing was offered the chance to write a book about Dickens by his former college friend J.H. Rose, and he welcomed the opportunity as "a change from fiction-grinding" (recalling Osmond Waymark's contemplation of an antiquarian biographical project as a relief from fiction towards the end of *The Unclassed*).¹³⁰ Yet it is difficult to think of Gissing's volume as "essentially a pot-boiler," as Morley Roberts would describe it in his fictionalized biography of his friend.¹³¹ It has been observed that Gissing's critical work on Dickens should not be viewed as merely "a form of Gissingian 'self scrutiny' in a biographical or artistic sense."¹³² But this portion of Gissing's criticism

¹³⁰ Qtd. in Delany, *George Gissing: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 256.

¹³¹ *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, ed. Morchard Bishop. (London: The Richards Press, 1958), 113.

¹³² Michael Cronin, "Gissing's Criticism of Dickens," in *A Garland for Gissing*, ed. Bouwe Postmus (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 23-31.

contains a distinct element of biographical scrutiny, one that constitutes a significant part of his thinking about the challenges biography poses to the writing and reception of realist fiction. As Coustillas observes, "With the literary criticism of his day he was dissatisfied and it was tempting to try one's hand at a genre whose specimens often proved jejune and unstimulating."¹³³ *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* was well received, and it initiated a steady supply of Dickens criticism from Gissing, which culminated in his abridgement of Forster's biography in 1901. With this volume, Gissing turned from the problem of biography in fiction to criticism as an alternative course for biography. His critical work would later help him justify his abridgement of Forster's *Life*, a process Gissing initially regarded as an act of "philistinism."¹³⁴

Charles Dickens: A Critical Study is best understood as a critically-minded adaptation of a conventional genre. It appeared as part of Blackie and Son's "Victorian Era" series, which was "designed to form a record of the great movements and developments of the age, in politics, economics, religion, industry, literature, science, and art, and the life-work of its typical and influential men."¹³⁵ The firm's statement indicates the tendency for series biographies to direct readers towards established works of literature, or to condense existing biographies of authors whose influence was perceived to have lasting potential.¹³⁶ Gissing relied less on Dickens's biography for his own volume, however, than he did on his experiences reading Dickens's novels. Rather than discuss the life and work in sequence, Gissing arranged the study according to specific

¹³³ Gissing's *Writings on Dickens: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1969), 2.

¹³⁴ Gissing to Eduard Bertz, 26 October 1902, in *The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz (1887-1903)*, ed. Young (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 312.

¹³⁵ The firm's own statement appears inside the volume *Victorian Novelists* by James Oliphant (London: Blackie and Son, 1899).

¹³⁶ For a discussion of the cultural politics of reading series biography, see John L. Kijinski, "John Morley's 'English Men of Letters' Series and the Politics of Reading," *Victorian Studies* 34, 2 (Winter 1991): 205-25.

areas of focus including characterization, style, and the portrayal of women and children. Several critics found this arrangement tautological, and looked instead for a more biographical approach. As one reviewer from the *Daily Chronicle* proposed, "A chronological exposition of the development of Dickens's mind and art from book to book would surely have been simpler and not less interesting. What one chiefly misses in Mr. Gissing's criticism, indeed, is sustained psychological study."¹³⁷ Another review from *The Academy* raises the issue of biography in relation to criticism: "Subject to the general plan of the 'Victorian Era Series'...it was probably open to Mr. Gissing to deal with his subject much as he pleased: and he has chosen to treat it mainly after the fashion of a 'critical study,' subordinating biography, except in so far as biography was necessary to formulate the conditions under which Dickens worked." Although this comment seems to approve of Gissing's decision to subordinate biography, the reviewer goes on to suggest that the book would have fared better as "a study in development."¹³⁸

These reviews make evident Gissing's efforts to detach his study from the "life-work" model of biography that he might have been expected to undertake as a contributor to the "Victorian Era" series. Rather than emphasize the more exemplary aspects of biography, those individualized characteristics which allow readers to see the traits of the literary artist they admire in themselves, Gissing's study offered a direct treatment of Dickens's work, with infrequent references to psychology or personal development. Gissing's volume was useful in its illumination of Dickens's style, but its readers still wanted evidence of stylistic progression to parallel the personal progress associated with the self-help paradigm which made Dickens's story so typical and widely celebrated.

¹³⁷ William Archer, *Daily Chronicle*, 23 February 1898: 3 in *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, 250.

¹³⁸ Unsigned review, *The Academy*, 12 March 1898: 280-1 in *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, 261.

For Gissing, however, discussing the mechanisms of Dickens's realism was necessary for understanding him as "a man of his time" and as a novelist who was "antiquated" compared with those writing in the 1890s. These poles of judgment, which underwrite the portrait of the novelist Gissing offers in *New Grub Street*, make his study of Dickens accommodate biography and criticism without submitting to the standard arrangement—the one preceding the other—which tended to dominate single-author volumes in a series. The first paragraph of the *Critical Study* conveys Gissing's need to reconceive the literary-critical importance of Dickens's biographical narrative in historical terms:

More than thirty years have elapsed since the death of Charles Dickens. The time which shaped him and sent him forth is so far behind us, as to have become a matter of historical study for the present generation; the time which knew him as one of its foremost figures, and owed so much to the influences of his wondrous personality, is already made remote by a social revolution of which he watched the mere beginning. It seems possible to regard Dickens from the stand-point of posterity; to consider his career, to review his literary work, and to estimate his total activity, as belonging to an age clearly distinguishable from our own.¹³⁹

Gissing's description of Dickens as a figure who belongs to the past functions partially as a critique of the middle-class values associated with the celebrated novelist, but it is also a comment on how authors' interactions with the public shape their biographical identity, and how the critical rewriting of that identity is shaped by changing public regard. Mass readership forms no small part of the social revolution Gissing refers to in this passage, and because of Dickens's widespread popularity, which lingers on in his "wondrous personality," it is possible for Gissing to write a life out of novels without the pandering effect attached to Jasper Milvain's assessment of Reardon's career. It will not be

¹³⁹ Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, vol. 2 of *Collected Works of George Gissing on Charles Dickens*, ed. Simon J. James, 3 vols. (Grayswood, Surrey: Grayswood Press, 2004), 17.

Gissing's task to "shape" Dickens and "send him forth"; his task is that of a critic who wants to make sense of the novelist's "total activity."

Gissing's prefatory remarks on the historical position of Dickens's career reflect his desire to have his study categorized as critical rather than biographical. His response to an article that appeared during the composition of the *Critical Study* rejects the notion that he might be working on a biography: "The *Bookbuyer* article is evidently based upon certain autobiographical brevities supplied by me, two years or more ago, to an American journalist. Where the supplementary details came from (unless they are purely imaginary) I know not...I am not working 'on a new novel of London life'; and I never 'tried my hand at biography.'" ¹⁴⁰ Gissing's phrasing is revealing. He expresses his annoyance at the misrepresentation of the *Critical Study* in terms that reflect his descriptions of Dickens's realism in the study itself. In the study, it matters to Gissing whether a writer's "supplementary details" are "purely imaginary," as when he proposes that Dickens might be considered a realist because of "the absolute reality of everything he pictured forth" and points out that Dickens "does not deem himself the creator of a world, but the laboriously faithful painter of that about him." ¹⁴¹ The language of imaginatively generated details that Gissing uses to discuss Dickens's widely praised powers of imagination becomes, in his response, a way of deflating the journalist's biographical speculation, and drawing attention to the goals of the *Critical Study* that fall outside the usual scope of biographical narrative.

In the *Critical Study*, Gissing is concerned with what he deems a more useful distinction between supplementary details and imaginary ones in Dickens's work than a

¹⁴⁰ "Mr. George Gissing at Home," letter to the editor, *The Academy* 53, 1350 (19 March 1898): 334.

¹⁴¹ Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, 67.

biographically-driven approach would have allowed him to make. The section on characterization, for example, claims that Dickens's characters seem less than real because their lives are controlled by plot. However, the result of portraying them in grim detail would be as unbearable as staring at Hogarth's engravings for hours on end: "Is not the fact in itself very remarkable, that by dint (it seems) of *omitting* those very features which in life most strongly impress us, an artist in fiction can produce something which we applaud as an inimitable portrait?"¹⁴² In the process of evaluating the effects of Dickensian realism, Gissing offers a self-reflexive comment on the place of realism in his own study. The critical discussion of realism replaces the biographical model that realism both adheres to and pushes against in Gissing's fiction, producing "the fact in itself" that neither biography or the novel can produce alone. The "inimitable portrait" of Dickens's creativity in the *Critical Study* results from the creative process made visible to readers when they step back from the details of the novelist's life, just as the success of Dickens's characterization depends on their willingness to accept the omission of life details that might otherwise be required for credibility.

Gissing's remarks on realism and biography culminate in a particular act of omission that suggests his desire for biography to function as more than an outmoded, supplementary literary form which impedes the development of the realist aesthetic. When he received an offer to abridge Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens*, he stated the terms of his participation explicitly to his agent, James B. Pinker:

I shall have (if I do this book) to write a Preface disclaiming any pretence to original investigation. [...] An *abridgement* of Forster I could do quickly; but you see this is a different thing. It would manifestly be absurd to put forth a book in which one page was the style of Forster, & the next the style of G.G.—the thing

¹⁴²Ibid., 78-79.

would be worthless. I must write it all—of course with large quotations: letters & so on. But most serious is the annotating and bringing up to date.¹⁴³

When the proposal for an abridgement was accepted, Gissing set to work; a subsequent letter to Pinker contains a request for a paper copy of Forster to “*cut up* (literally).” Here, more than ever, with the violent image of “cut[ting] up” a book and pasting it back together, Gissing seems to be engaged in the creation of “padding.” Just as evident, however, is his commitment to making a critical contribution by “bringing [Forster] up to date.”

What Gissing effectively brings up to date with his omissions—which become literal excisions during the abridgement process—is the critical relationship between biography and realism. Gissing’s excisions allowed him to remove some of the more digressive letters that Forster originally included, as well as the critical attacks on Dickens by Taine and Lewes in the final section entitled “Dickens as Novelist.” These two critics had charged Dickens with “monomania” and “hallucination,” suggesting that Dickens’s characterization was so particular to his personal vision that it failed to make his creations resemble anything from real life. Forster’s response to Taine and Lewes emphasized the realness of feeling these characters elicited from Dickens’s readers, as well as the novelist’s own imaginative connection to his creations.¹⁴⁴

Gissing’s description of Dickens’s realism in the *Critical Study* matches Forster’s defense in substance. What is different about it is its critical context. Forster’s critical remarks on Dickens’s novels in the *Life* failed to stand out in what was primarily a portrait of the man behind the artist—one that Forster, as Dickens’s close friend and

¹⁴³ Gissing to James Pinker, 13 October 1901, in *The Collected Letters*, 8:261-262.

¹⁴⁴ See J.K. Fielding, “Forster: Critic of Fiction,” *Dickensian* 70, 374 (1974): 159-170.

literary executor, felt himself especially suited to provide. Gissing, by contrast, seizes his position as a historically distanced critic to make the case for the effectiveness of Dickensian realism through the example of his own reading, observing that it is the “disinterested artist” who stands to learn most from Forster’s biography (the most noticeable change in the abridgement apart from the excisions is Gissing’s alteration of Forster’s pronouns from the first to the third person).¹⁴⁵ Gissing’s removal of Forster’s subjective critique works in the abridgement of the *Life* as an act of homage and a corrective gesture. It illustrates his recognition that although personal investment in the biographical subject was inseparable from an investment in the subject’s work, such critiques could be reformulated to reflect new critical developments rather than remain a mere curiosity or means to an end.

One such development was the formal experiment of “autobiografiction,” which blended autobiography, third-person biographical narrative, and fictional content.¹⁴⁶ Works of autobiografiction could serve as critical gestures in their own right, as they tended to push against the linear chronology and objective aspirations of more straightforward works of life writing. Gissing’s own foray into autobiografiction also turned out to be the last book of his career: *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* was published posthumously in 1903. Following his fruitful contributions to Dickens criticism, *Ryecroft* is Gissing’s final turn to biography as a venue for critical debate. While Gissing previously evaluated the uses of biography within his fiction, or looked to

¹⁴⁵ Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, 62.

¹⁴⁶ The term “autobiografiction” was first used by Stephen Reynolds in a 1906 essay of the same name. Works in this hybrid genre existed prior to Reynolds’s use of the term—Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* and Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* might both be considered works of autobiografiction. Saunders recognizes the earlier history of the genre but argues that “the energy of autobiografictional experiment abates for most of the nineteenth century” and returns in its later decades (*Self-Impression*, 10).

the fiction of other novelists to do the same, *Henry Ryecroft* found him creating a fictional set of "papers" purportedly written by Ryecroft and edited by a friend with the initials "G.G." Divided into four sections, one for each season of the year, the book is a miscellaneous meditation on culture (and its decay), the writing life, spirituality, and the pleasures of retirement. Ryecroft is a cantankerous man of about fifty years of age, an amateur classical scholar with a career's worth of experience publishing everything from "mere hack work" in literary journals to individual volumes bearing his own name. He is, in other words, not so different from Gissing himself, although he might more accurately be described as an aged Waymark or Milvain (the editor tells us that Ryecroft is a widower with a married daughter; for this reason, he can afford to retreat into the countryside). The editor offers this information in a preface, as "a word or two of biographical complement, just so much personal detail as may point the significance of the self-revelation here made."¹⁴⁷

The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft had been in Gissing's mind for ten years when he finally completed the project and proposed it to his agent in 1900. As with his Dickens material, he appears to have thought of the project as something less lucrative, and thus less worthy of his immediate attention, than novel-writing. Even so, he mentions in several letters that *Ryecroft* was "the best thing I have yet done," despite admitting that it was "not for the multitude." Gissing conceived of the book as a "miscellany," but his supposition that the book would not have much public appeal had as much to do with Ryecroft's sentiments—Ryecroft proclaims himself "no friend of the people"—as with its form. Nevertheless, reviewers embraced the book when it was published, and it became an occasion for reflecting on Gissing's career. "Often enough a

¹⁴⁷ Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (New York: Signet Classics, 1961), xvii.

work has to be noticed for the importance of its subject, or for the popular notoriety of its author," wrote W.L. Courteney of the *Daily Telegraph*. "But Mr. Gissing has never sought the bubble reputation."¹⁴⁸

Gissing's sense of the critical potential of biographical writing echoes in the assessments of his career that *Henry Ryecroft* brought forth. If the book was not explicitly about Gissing's own life, it still challenged readers to identify their reasons for reading his books. Reviewers noted that *Henry Ryecroft* appealed to readers because of his self-suppressive narrative style, which prevented him from catering to any particular expectations. To become a follower of Gissing's did not entail joining a cult of personality; instead, it meant finding meaning in one's own life through the writing of someone who made the refusal of explicit biographical meaning an essential condition of reading novels. An anonymous reviewer from the *Academy* described how Gissing's refusal to seek reputation had turned into a reason for seeking Gissing's work:

Mr. Gissing's 'public' may not be large, but each one of his adherents had been individually won, not hustled into the ranks by a craze or coterie. The career of no living novelist has been more individual. Year by year there has grown up a band of readers who, though they have never used the name (or invented a hymnology of discipleship), are sworn Gissingites. Some one said of a book, 'If Daudet wrote it, I want it,' and to-day there are those who say, 'I will read anything of Gissing's.' This is literary success: terms like fame and genius may wait.¹⁴⁹

The idea that Gissing was a novelist "part born and part made," as another reviewer put it, is reflected in Gissing's own ambivalence towards biography. For him, the delays of success make it all the more possible to hold a writer's personal circumstances apart from the things the writer has made—the life is passed in relative obscurity so that the works may take precedent over the life.

¹⁴⁸ *Gissing: The Critical Heritage*, 66.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 420.

Max Saunders calls *Henry Ryecroft* "a book trying to be a life rather than a life trying to be a book."¹⁵⁰ Formally, *Henry Ryecroft* may present less as a "life" than a "book," especially with its fictional framing device, the editor's preface. Yet Gissing did not, as with the case of William Hale White's *Mark Rutherford* books, allow his readers to think that Ryecroft had an actual existence; his own life was readily available to those wondering just how "G.G." had come to acquire such detailed information about his "friend." Still, reviewers by and large stayed away from such comparisons between Gissing and Ryecroft. The book thus enacts the self-distancing objectivity that characterizes Gissing's other discussions of biography and its uses. In the book, however, Ryecroft remains skeptical that audiences can treat an author's work objectively over time, and almost presciently so—Gissing's friend Morley Roberts would emerge a few years later with *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, a fictionalized biography of Gissing that made little effort to distinguish between Maitland and the writer for whose identity his name stood.

Henry Ryecroft regards the biographers of his own age as unscrupulous, but he esteems the work of canonical biographers, including Walton, Gibbon, and Johnson, as examples of knowledge wrought through industry. These examples make up Ryecroft's pastoral program of reading; his years as a struggling London writer have earned him the hours to contemplate the lives before him while elegizing his own: "Me? My very self? No, no! He has been dead these thirty years" he muses, recalling Edwin Reardon's admission in *New Grub Street* that "the man Edwin Reardon...is really and actually dead."¹⁵¹ Ryecroft's ruminations are as much about the future as they are about the past,

¹⁵⁰ Saunders, *Self-Impression*, 131

¹⁵¹ *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, 51; *New Grub Street*, 437

and they illustrate the potential for autobiography to work doubly as an unburdening of the soul and an act of control. He has little faith that the forces at work in modern society will preserve unencumbered access to what no longer retains its original meaning, and the biographer figures in a list of society's worst offenders: "A man may be a fine archaeologist, and yet have no sympathy with human ideals. The historian, the biographer, even the poet, may be a money-market gambler, a social toady, a clamorous Chauvinist, or an unscrupulous wire-puller." The social archeologist's motivations for chronicling the past, Gissing implies through Ryecroft, may be purely venal, and readers may be none the wiser for it: "Oh, the reading public! Hardly will a prudent statistician venture to declare that one in every score of those who actually read sterling books do so with comprehension of their author."¹⁵²

Ryecroft's assertion that readers *should* approach books "with comprehension of their author" may seem strange, given Gissing's disassociation of the author's life with the realistic details of fiction. But Ryecroft's disdain for the reading public's neglect of biography is an extension of Gissing's determination to make biography critically useful, an ultimately valuable form of literary labor that grants readers cultural knowledge. While in Gissing's novels, his writer figures learn to manipulate biography for the benefit of their floundering careers, Ryecroft insinuates that the biographer is a corrupt social archaeologist because a poorly arranged biography trivializes the literary labor undertaken by both biographer and subject. When reading Walton, he exclaims, "Oh, why has it not been granted me in all my long years of pen-labour to write something

¹⁵² *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, 60.

small and perfect, even as one of these lives of honest Izaak! Here is literature, look you—not 'literary work.' Let me be thankful that I have the mind to enjoy it."¹⁵³

Ryecroft can claim that Walton's lives are "literature" and not "literary work" because he can discern their honesty as someone who has also made "pen-labour" his livelihood. The compact perfection of Walton's *Lives* betrays the insubstantial smallness of the contemporary bits of biography that Ryecroft sees in the papers: "Many biographical sketches have I read, during the last decade, making personal introduction of young Mr. This or young Miss That, whose book was—as the sweet language of the day would have it—'booming'; but never one in which there was a hint of stern struggle... I surmise that the path of 'literature' is being made too easy." Here, the idea of struggle moves from the realm of literary comprehension and readers who scarcely comprehend "sterling" books to the professional practice of writing itself. Ryecroft wonders whether these two aims of biography can really serve the same end, asking "whether it be really true, as I have more than once seen suggested, that the publication of Anthony Trollope's autobiography in some degree accounts for the neglect into which he and his works fell so soon after his death." He compares Trollope's disclosures of his ruthlessly timed fifteen-minute blocks of composition to Forster's descriptions of Dickens's working habits, concluding that the tone used to describe one's literary labors makes all the difference for "those who understand." Ryecroft's worries over the relationship between artistic discretion and a writer's practical need for output recall Gissing's concerns over the practicality of "padding," and his need to undertake biographical projects that would make critical contributions rather than retreading others' steps. Using Ryecroft as a mouthpiece, Gissing argues that as long as readers desire to use biography as a means of

¹⁵³ Ibid., 67

entry into a writer's canon, they must prepare to delve deeply, to distinguish between the anecdotes that lead to a life's work and the works the life in question has spent itself writing.

Appearing almost ten years after *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* (1912) echoes the title of the book that Gissing believed was his finest, but does little else to address Gissing's complex approach to biography. Morley Roberts, afraid of offending members of Gissing's family and his partner, Gabrielle Fleury, used a preface similar to the one Gissing used for Ryecroft's papers. Gissing would be Maitland; Roberts would be the editor, supposedly presenting a series of dictations taken by Maitland's friend, "J.H." "No doubt Henry Maitland is not famous," he writes, "though since his death a great deal has been written of him. Much of it, outside of literary criticism, has been futile, false, and uninstructed. But J.H. really knew the man."¹⁵⁴ Saunders points out that if *Henry Maitland* is read as a biographical account of Gissing, Roberts's preface is an act of bad faith, for what should function as a device of concealment works only to attract readers seeking prurient disclosures about a figure they already knew, and the reviews of *Henry Maitland* suggest that everyone knew Roberts's book was about Gissing.¹⁵⁵ But he also acknowledges that Roberts's fictional claim to taking dictation responds to the strictures of contemporary biographical practice. Indeed, Roberts expresses his frustration with biographical conventions throughout *Henry Maitland*, explaining that biographies are like "a mausoleum which is, as a rule, about as

¹⁵⁴ Roberts, *Henry Maitland*, 245.

¹⁵⁵ *Self-Impression*, 124-29.

high a work of art as the angels on tombstones in an early Victorian cemetery."¹⁵⁶

Because it presents itself as both a biography and a novel, *Henry Maitland* is perhaps best understood in light of the ambivalence accorded to biography in *New Grub Street*, where "biography" has more to do with details that are either too exaggerated or too plain than with a writer's actual life, or the imaginative record of someone else's life that the writer has tried to reproduce.

It is simple to dismiss *Henry Maitland* as a tawdry cover-up, particularly because it helped to perpetuate the tragic vision of Gissing's life that has had such an influence on the reception of his fiction. Roberts is uninterested in making any parallels between Gissing's work on Dickensian realism and his own efforts as the writer of a biographical work composed of impressions that he believes deserve to be given the weight of facts. He refers to *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* as a "pot-boiler," and he does not offer any substantial discussion of Gissing's well-received volume. Instead, he identifies "two classes of Maitland's readers, those who understand the man and love his really characteristic work, and those who have no understanding of him at all, or any deep appreciation, but profess a great admiration for this book." It is difficult to read *Henry Maitland* as a rallying cry against the conventions of biography when Roberts overlooks biography as an unlikely source of artistic and critical growth in Gissing's career. But Roberts makes his message clear: he refuses any claim to writing criticism in his own book. He instead reserves a certain amount of trust for literary critics, even if they did not "know the man." The achievement of *Henry Maitland*—if the book can be credited with such—is that Roberts consciously separates "literary criticism" from "the man,"

¹⁵⁶ Roberts, *Henry Maitland*, 22. Circa 1900, funerary tropes were frequently associated with tired biographical conventions. See Alison Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 237.

acknowledging these as two currents of a writer's posthumous reputation that may be better left apart, for a time, if they cannot be handled productively together. In this respect, Roberts continued the conversation about biography and real life in Gissing's fiction. Leaving Gissing's work in the hands of literary critics was the best gesture he could make, as his own method of remembering Gissing would ensure a need for the novelist's work to be explored on its own terms. Roberts's book on Gissing might seem merely to be a case of gossip vying for control over fact, but it is more useful to think of it as part of an effort to ensure a critical future for the novelist, particularly in light of a more highly charged effort to designate the proper applications of biographical and critical writing that occurred during the same set of decades—that attached to the appearance of a meticulously-edited volume titled *De Profundis*.

CHAPTER THREE

Narrating Narcissus: Oscar Wilde, Biography, and Debased Intentionalism

“If the heart of a broken man shows at all in this book, it must be looked for between the lines.”

—Unsigned [E.V. Lucas], *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 February 1905¹⁵⁷

“Don’t write what you don’t mean; that is all.”

—Wilde, *Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis*¹⁵⁸

I. “Let us go over the thing phrase by phrase.”

The most urgent interpretive problem faced by Oscar Wilde in the tumultuous five years before his death emerged from the embarrassing relationship between his life and work. More was at stake in this fundamental issue than the measures authors might take to preserve their critical reputations at turning points in their careers, or even the set of critical concerns that preoccupied Wilde throughout his own. What kind of evidence from the life was acceptable to read into the work? And just how much of this evidence could be construed as intentional without resort to the basest of biographical facts?

During the first of the three trials which led to his imprisonment for "gross indecency," Wilde was asked to back up the meaning of his words with evidence from his own life.¹⁵⁹ Prompted by Edward Carson, the Marquess of Queensberry’s lawyer, Wilde responds to a passage from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where the painter Basil Hallward confesses the “idolatry” he feels towards Dorian, and acknowledges that “every flake and

¹⁵⁷ In *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* ed. Karl Beckson (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), 244-248.

¹⁵⁸ *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Vol. 2: *De Profundis*/ “Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis,” ed. Ian Small (Oxford University Press, 2005), 154.

¹⁵⁹ This ambiguous phrase appeared in section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment of 1885. Ed Cohen notes that the Wilde’s conviction “provided a singular opportunity for consolidating the social, sexual, and somatic meanings” of “gross indecency,” which did not actually refer to a specific sexual offense (sodomy). See *Talk on the Wilde Side: Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 205, 103-125.

film of colour” in the portrait “seemed to me to reveal my secret.”¹⁶⁰ The following exchange ensues:

CARSON: May I take it that you yourself as an artist have never known the feeling towards a younger man that is described there?

WILDE: I don’t know whether you wish to pin me down to the actual words.

CARSON: I don’t wish to pin you to anything. I only want to know.

WILDE: Then, I shall have to read the passage again. No, I have never allowed any personality to dominate my art, which is the second part of the passage that you read out. I say no, certainly not.

CARSON: Then, you have never known the feeling that you describe?

WILDE: No.

CARSON: What?

WILDE: No, it is a work of fiction I am describing.

CARSON: So far as you are personally concerned, you have no experience of its being a natural feeling from one man towards a younger man?

WILDE: I think it is perfectly natural for any artist to intensely admire and to love a younger man. I think it is an incident in the life of almost every artist. But let us go over the thing phrase by phrase.

CARSON: Is it an incident in your life?

WILDE: Let us go over the thing phrase by phrase.

CARSON: Is it an incident in your life?

WILDE: I will not answer about an entire passage. Pick out each sentence and ask me what I mean.¹⁶¹

Carson’s repetition of the question “Is it an incident in your own life?” as it is printed in the trial transcript—on either side of Wilde’s refusal to answer except on a “phrase by phrase” basis—emphasizes the frictions of the literary interpretive process he

¹⁶⁰ Qtd. in Merlin Holland, *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 89.

¹⁶¹ Holland, *Real Trial*, 90.

asks Wilde to undertake. The prosecutor's questions pertain to feelings and incidents, while Wilde's answers focus on "actual words," phrases, and sentences. The confrontation between the two men is fueled by the possibility of agreement: both believe that the experience of a feeling can impact the shape of a work of art. Carson, however, operates with the understanding that feelings must necessarily translate into specific incidents in a particular artist's life, while Wilde maintains that words can take on meanings in art that have no definitive connection to the life of the artist, who merely assembles them for the purposes of description. At the same time, he offers to explain his intentions to Carson, prompting him to "ask me what I mean," in preference to being "pinned down" by his own words (the suggestiveness of the phrase noticeably disturbs the prosecutor, who immediately answers that he does not want to "pin" Wilde to anything).

The trial scene pits artistic intention against biographical revelation. Where the former constitutes a legitimate if slippery strand of Wildean aesthetics, biographical disclosure that does not contribute to an understanding of the artist's work may contribute to intentionalism's debasement. If it were simply a matter of two individuals engaged in a debate, Carson might be asking Wilde whether *The Picture of Dorian Gray* measures up to his standards of aesthetic expression. Yet Carson requires evidence of Wilde's sexuality to achieve Queensberry's desired verdict, and so the content of his queries is explicitly biographical. Wilde's answers, in turn, function as dismissals of biographical content. He externalizes the novel, referring to it as "a work of fiction I am describing," and to Basil's feelings as "an incident in the life of every artist" rather than an incident in his own. The exchange between Carson and Wilde on the one hand resembles one of

Wilde's critical dialogues, and on the other reveals the potentially pernicious use of biographical information to unravel the artist's intentions. As prosecutor and defendant goad one another, they show that personal experience might be transmitted to the work of art in a range of ways, such as through the reimagining of specific life incidents, the processing of feelings suggested by everyday encounters, or the adaptation of other artworks. However, the form of their questions also creates a clear opposition: one must read "an incident in your life" separately from "let us read the thing phrase by phrase." With this separation, Carson and Wilde effectively perform the disengagement of biographical incident from formal analysis that modern literary critics have tended to take for granted.¹⁶²

¹⁶² I refer to the tendency to conflate "intention" with "biography," when the two terms are distinct and not as opposed as they might seem. Intentionalism has a rich and varied critical background in philosophy and aesthetics as well as literary studies, which tends to be overlooked in favor of a more rigid interpretation of the New Critical focus on the text. But intentionalist arguments are seldom interested in applying definitive details about the author's life to specific moments in the text; this matter constitutes a very small part of exercises that might be more accurately described as searching for the plausible limits of meaning in art and language. In fact, an acknowledgement of biography as something more capacious and interesting than can be contained by discussions of authorial intention occurs in essays both for and against the search for intention. Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy," for example—an "anti-intentionalist" essay and one of the defining works of the New Critical canon—calls literary biography "a legitimate and attractive study in itself." The main effect of their argument falls on "in itself," suggesting that biography may be interesting though it does not belong in poetic analysis, but elsewhere in the essay they accept that biographical evidence may constitute one kind of meaning that is not always easily discernible from other kinds. Stanley Fish's "intentionalist" essay, "Biography and Intention," invokes the "so-called problem of biography" only to imply that biography really isn't a problem at all, but a condition of reading. The "anti-intentionalist" position affiliated with the New Critics marks one end of the spectrum, while Fish derives his "extreme" intentionalist position from Stephen Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, who provocatively asserted that "there is no intentionless meaning" ("Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 8, 4 [Summer 1982]: 723-42). *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992) collects a range of responses to intentionalism in literature and philosophy. See also Mary Sirridge, "Artistic Intention and Critical Prerogative," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 18 (1978), 137-154, Jerrold Levinson, "Intention and Interpretation in Literature" in *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), and Paisley Livingston, "Intentionalism in Aesthetics," *New Literary History* 29 (1998), 831-846. Levinson's and Livingston's work pursues a middle ground between anti-intentionalist and extreme intentionalist perspectives. Sirridge's essay, meanwhile, offers a claim which, while it cannot be fully explored here, is particularly suggestive for a discussion of Wilde: "Intentionalism is most convincing when we sympathize with the artist, anti-intentionalism when we sympathize with the critic" (141).

Nonetheless, the exchange rehearses a paradox that has plagued the study of Wilde's work ever since the series of events that marked a major turning point in his life. How can there be any interpretation that exists independently of the trials' outcome? How, in other words, to reconcile the Wilde whose brash charm delighted the courtroom as it had the London theater, and the Wilde whose life, even as it came to emblemize modern homosexual identity, gave the lie to every quip about artistic autonomy and critical disinterestedness in his arsenal?¹⁶³ Because it is all but impossible to read Wilde's corpus without connecting it to his fate, studies of Wilde's work, even those which attempt to work out the relationship between "critic" and "artist" in his celebrated dialogues, tend to obviate any discussion of Wilde as the figure most representative of the modern critical conflict between biography and literary interpretation.¹⁶⁴ While one

¹⁶³ Critics considering the reconcilability of Wilde's rhetorical posturing with his public self-presentation have long puzzled over the degree to which Wilde may be seen as an anachronistic embodiment of a more modern type of sexual identity, a subversive figure within his own age, or something in between. Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) is perhaps the most influential study of the first kind, as it examines how male homosexuality became identifiable with effeminacy in a fashion that would not necessarily have been so before the Wilde trials. Following Sinfield, Joseph Bristow's *Effeminate England: Homoerotic Writing after 1885* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) reads a fatalistic current through Wilde's work, one that subverts by reacting against (rather than in opposition to) the bourgeois order of masculinity (19, 22). For a more radicalized account of Wilde's aesthetic transgression (the more theoretical predecessor to Sinfield, which nonetheless anticipates Sinfield's project by locating a history of perversion from a decidedly postmodern present), see Jonathan Dollimore's *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). Linda Dowling's *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) argues that *De Profundis* is "a moral epistle or essay on male friendship in the classical tradition" (146).

¹⁶⁴ See Jonathan Loesberg, "Kant's Aesthetics and Wilde Form." *Victoriographies* 1, 1 (2011) 79-95. Loesberg performs a nuanced reading of the trials and a number of Wilde's texts to account for the unresolvable nature of Wilde's persecution. He notes that the literary evidence of Wilde's perversity all but disappeared from the cross examination by the third trial, and yet critics have ever since wanted to read Wilde's literary transgressions in terms of the cultural significance they took on in the courtroom. Loesberg argues that such critical impulses are correct, but reading Wilde's texts in terms of the trials makes available a more complex aesthetic inheritance than most arguments about Wilde's cultural significance acknowledge. This would be what Loesberg describes as Wilde's queering of Kantian paradox. Loesberg finds that Kant's analysis of the beautiful object in *The Critique of Judgment* ultimately results in nature being viewed in terms of art. Thus, one must relearn how to see nature and art, a perversion of aesthetics that runs through Wilde's paradoxes (84). In Loesberg's reading, perversion and paradox are versions of each other, and "the question of historical dating of the linkages between aesthetic theory, personal style, and sexual choice seems less telling than the way these categories work together...once they are in place"

strand of thinking to emerge from readings of Wilde (as from analyses of Henry James) has found meaning in the unspeakable, the dissonance between intention and biographical fact—the problem at the heart of the exchange between Wilde and Carson—remains to be teased out.¹⁶⁵ While biographical criticism and intentionalism are not the same (the former uncovers events in the life by means of their presence in the work, the latter approximates design through execution), Wilde's interrogation demonstrates the surprisingly thin line separating the two. The concepts become practically identical in their capacity to debase meaning, with intention amounting to persecutory biographical information rather than a kind of interpretive potential energized by the experiences in an artist's life (the idea of biography preferred by Wilde). The most important work Wilde produced in the aftermath of his trials was marked by this crisis of interpretive principles. If biography becomes an embarrassing object of critical inquiry for Wilde, it is this very configuration—biography as a critical embarrassment—that energizes *De Profundis*, the record of Wilde's relationship with Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas. In *De Profundis*, biography becomes a form of debased intentionalism associated with shame and self-blame. Yet it is also the form of self-expression best suited to the relationship between "feeling" and "knowledge," the very concepts which become opposed during the libel trial. To account for these contrary impulses within *De Profundis* is to restore to intention the interpretive valence it held for Wilde in his earlier criticism, and to find in

(93). Loesberg does not explicitly state that Wilde's cultural (or biographical) status exempts his work from more rigorous formal readings—rather, he wants to read Wilde's cultural significance and the forms of his paradox as mutually constitutive—but he does gesture towards "the twentieth-century formalist expulsion of Wilde to create a straight formalism" (94).

¹⁶⁵Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991) most famously argues for the performativity of silence and the unspeakable. William Cohen argues that "Wilde's career forms the horizon for a specifically literary practice of rendering sex unspeakable," and suggests that for James, sexual unspeakability is absorbed by literary unspeakability (*Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1996] 192, 235).

biography a greater range of possibilities for representing the relationship between life and work than the sort which would inevitably tend towards the devaluation of literary meaning.

* * *

The biographical film *Wilde* depicts an imaginative version of how Wilde's prison manuscript, originally titled *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis*, came to be known as *De Profundis*. The scene in question shows Wilde, portrayed by Stephen Fry, leaving Reading Gaol with a manuscript clutched underneath his arm. Wilde's friend Ada Leverson (known affectionately as The Sphinx) receives him, and the following exchange ensues:

SPHINX: What is it?

WILDE: It's a letter to Bosie, telling him how I love him but can never see him again. I mean to ask Robbie to have it copied out before I send it. I rather fear Bosie might throw it on the fire. I call it *De Profundis*—it comes from the very depths.¹⁶⁶

The scene in the film concurs with Richard Ellmann's observation that "The most important thing about *De Profundis* is that it is a love letter."¹⁶⁷ But to think of the work this way is to avoid the Sphinx's question: "What is it?" There is a certain sense of triumph in understanding *De Profundis* to be a defense of what Lord Alfred Douglas declared as "the love that dare not speak its name," but this vindication is a complicated one, given that the name *De Profundis* has nothing explicitly to do with Wilde's lover. It was the title Robert Ross gave to the version of the manuscript he dutifully arranged as Wilde's executor, and it bore a distinctly confessional connotation, linking Wilde's literary achievement to that of works such as De Quincey's *Suspiria De Profundis* (1845).

¹⁶⁶ *Wilde*, dir. Brian Gilbert. Sony Pictures, 1998.

¹⁶⁷ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 515.

Wilde did in fact take the manuscript with him upon his release from prison on May 19th, 1897. Prison regulations forbade any material written by inmates to be sent outside prison walls, and so Wilde was prevented from sending it to Robert Ross directly. From there, however, the story of the manuscript grows more complicated. Wilde attached a letter to Ross explaining his wish to have the letter forwarded to Bosie. Wilde's libel action against Queensberry, Bosie's father and one of England's most pugnacious and irascible noblemen, led to the investigations that brought on the two additional trials, Wilde's conviction, and ultimately his prison sentence of two years with hard labor. Although Wilde reunited with Bosie after his release, the two never fully reconciled, and after Wilde's death in 1900 (the same year as Queensberry) Douglas embarked upon what he called a "litigious career," beginning with several attempts to block Wilde's other friends from addressing their relationship.¹⁶⁸ The *De Profundis* manuscript played no small part in these battles, since Douglas claimed he was not aware of any letter written by Wilde in prison and addressed to him until Arthur Ransome published passages from it in his critical study of Wilde's writings. He recalls throwing *something* in the fire, but there is no way of knowing if it was the typescript that Wilde instructed Ross to forward to him.¹⁶⁹ Ultimately, Ross published *De Profundis* with the Bosie passages excised, and he sent reading copies to men of letters whose reviews would help Wilde's literary work attract the kind of critical plaudits which his infamy had overshadowed.

De Profundis should therefore be understood as an instance of the very ideas which preoccupy Wilde throughout its passages: the troubled relationship between

¹⁶⁸ Douglas Murray, *Bosie: A Biography of Lord Alfred Douglas* (New York: Hyperion, 2002), 152.

¹⁶⁹ Lord Alfred Douglas, *Oscar Wilde and Myself* (New York: AMS Press, 1977), 147.

biography and literary criticism, and the comparative value of these genres. In allowing Ross to circulate an expurgated text, Wilde was aware of the contrast between the passages he specifically directed at Bosie and those that he designed to read as an artistic apologia. In fact, when he wrote to Ross before leaving prison, Wilde not only asked that two carbon copies of the manuscript be made for both of them to keep, he also asked for several typewritten copies, giving Ross leeway to choose from a number of preselected passages and any others that appeared “good and nice in intention.”¹⁷⁰ Wilde’s request opens the word “intention” to its associations with contemplation in a fashion which recalls the title of his 1891 collection of essays, *Intentions*. “Intention” may potentially refer to volition, as in the case of an author’s purpose or design, but the essays in Wilde’s volume have more to do with the word’s expanded definition: “The act of straining or directing the mind or attention to something; mental application or effort; attention, intent observation or regard; endeavor.”¹⁷¹ The definition of “intention” suggests a momentary fixedness containing the potential to stretch out into other possibilities, including other meanings.

Wilde’s instructions to Ross express a desire that readers might find his final prose work “good” and “nice” to contemplate, but they also veil the biographical origins of the document, by hinting that the “bad” or “nasty” passages ought to be removed.

Ross was a dutiful executor, and as a result of his efforts, the 1905 edition of *De*

Profundis highlights Wilde’s sense of suffering rather than the troubled relationship that

¹⁷⁰ All references to Wilde’s letter are from Volume 2 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Ian Small (2005). This edition includes both the full-length manuscript *Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis* (which corresponds closely to the *De Profundis* published by Wilde’s son, Vyvyan Holland, in 1949) and Robert Ross’s edited version. I rely on the title *De Profundis* throughout, in keeping with the practice of most critics, but my citations all refer to the *Epistola* manuscript, which includes the passages addressed to Lord Alfred Douglas. All in-text citations refer to the *Complete Works* edition of *Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis*.

¹⁷¹ Intention, n. *OED*.

most directly contributed to his distress. If, as several critics have noted, perversion and paradox are versions of each other for Wilde, the excised passages of *De Profundis* reveal as much as they conceal; they become a substitution for the silence for which Wilde constantly rebukes Bosie in the lengthier manuscript, leaving Wilde's grander aesthetic gestures to stand in for the truths which could not be exposed to a public still reeling from the after-effects of his scandal.¹⁷² For a number of early reviewers in Wilde's circle, it was their generation's loss that the entire letter could not be printed. "I hope," Laurence Housman wrote to Ross, "provision is made to publish the work complete after this generation's nerves are laid in dust." But this was also beside the point, for Wilde's recriminations—against Society no less than against Bosie—allowed him to showcase the style that made him an artist. This was what caused George Bernard Shaw to declare *De Profundis* a comedy, rather than the sentimental tragedy other commentators were finding it to be.¹⁷³

These sympathetic criticisms add a dimension perhaps truer to Wilde's own aesthetic than the "nice" intention he hoped the public would find in the more spiritual passages of *De Profundis*, since they suggest that through the artifice of style, Wilde expressed a real concern over the future of his letter as a work of literary value. The Bosie passages add another dimension entirely to the spiritual abasement of the reformed prisoner, as Wilde describes feeling spurned by a sexual and romantic partner. Douglas himself speculated in his memoirs about the effect the passages addressed to him might have on the literary afterlife of *De Profundis*, claiming that "Oscar Wilde [would be] finished" upon their publication. Moreover, he complained of Ross's version, "it is still

¹⁷² See Dollimore, Loesberg.

¹⁷³ In *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), 243-244.

preserved, as though it were a literary gem of the first water instead of something which mankind at large would be quite willing to let die.”¹⁷⁴ Douglas's distinction between the gemlike qualities of *De Profundis* carefully polished by those most invested in securing Wilde's artistic reputation and the manuscript's more personal, slanderous passages did not "finish" Wilde's literary future. Rather, it foresaw that biography as a form of debased intentionalism was to be one of its most persistent elements.

II. Out of the Depths: The Embarrassments of *De Profundis*

That contemporary readers may choose to read *De Profundis* as either a personal letter or an artistic treatise perpetuates Wilde's struggle with biography as a form of debased intentionalism, for to think about its reception is to think about the force of embarrassment at the intersection of biography and literary criticism. With its appearance in both the scholarly edition of Wilde's letters (1962) and complete works (2005), readers are invited to understand *De Profundis* as either a private document or as one intended for a wider audience, with the likelihood that Wilde conceived of it as both.¹⁷⁵ As we will see, Wilde took both audiences into account when he considered the impact of biography upon literary value in the work. For him, biography provided an occasion to argue for the literary importance of his art—it was not something that he could dismiss altogether. Yet critics have not necessarily seen the productive force of biographical embarrassment in *De Profundis*. Josephine Guy and Ian Small have suggested that the biographical significance of the manuscript contributes to a false estimate of its literary value. They argue that in its entirety, *De Profundis* reveals two

¹⁷⁴ *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, 237-239.

¹⁷⁵ Ross gave the original manuscript to the British Museum, with the proviso that it should remain locked up for sixty years to guarantee that the persons mentioned in it would be dead upon its release. Two excised versions were released by Ross in 1905 and 1908. Wilde's son Vyvyan Holland released a version based on the British Manuscript in 1949.

different types of intellectual activity, one associated with meaning-making (the aesthetic autobiography) and the other with meaninglessness (the biographical Bosie passages). Ross's version, they contend, is a greater literary success insofar as it responds to Wilde's wishes to have the manuscript edited for the public, and that the question of whether his prose style succeeds cannot be resolved "by appealing to biography, but by making literary critical judgments."¹⁷⁶ This analysis nonetheless misses how biography enabled Wilde to initiate literary critical judgments. Faced with "evidence of his own life," Wilde responded to the expectation that every artist's life should be reducible to events and not words whose meanings were susceptible to change. It is impossible to imagine *De Profundis* as an effective piece of prose without acknowledging that Wilde turned to specific life events in the Bosie passages in order to present himself as an arbiter of literary significance in the others.

If *De Profundis* already treats biography as a critical embarrassment, why have critics continued to be embarrassed by it? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example, describes *De Profundis* as "squeam-inducing," a reaction that she attributes to the sentimental register of Wilde's text, particularly as it compares to the passages where Wilde elevates Christ as an artist and poet. She further acknowledges Wilde's "philosophically embarrassing, because narratively so compelling, biographical entanglements with the most mangling as well as the most influential of the modern machineries of male sexual definition."¹⁷⁷ Sedgwick's terms, "entanglements" and "mangling," are appropriate responses to the juxtaposition of Wilde's sorrow with the

¹⁷⁶ Josephine Guy and Ian Small, "Reading *De Profundis*." *English Literature in Transition* 49, 2 (2006):123-149.

¹⁷⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1991. Reprint, University of California Press, 2008), 132.

Man of Sorrows, but they also speak to the interpretive problems biography poses within *De Profundis* itself. Biography is embarrassing for its potential to entangle *and* to mangle—for the ways it illustrates how the articulation of an aesthetic philosophy can be simultaneously defined against and corrupted by the narrative allure (which Sedgwick acknowledges) of specific life events.

More than this, however, biography is embarrassing for the way it tempts the critic into feeling instead of thinking, an effect so strong that it not only produces a physical response (the induced "squeam") but instills a sense of mutual mortification with the author, whose true intentions are never fully knowable.¹⁷⁸ The latter effect is conveyed through the title of Henry James's 1896 collection *Embarrassments*, and its standout piece, "The Figure in the Carpet." James's story narrates the experience of interpretive frustration, obfuscating the object of the critic's pursuit by putting it in plain sight. To paraphrase William Cohen on Wilde's own tale of critical frustration, "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," James's story produces a state of "permanent indeterminacy."¹⁷⁹ By the time James's collection was published—and Wilde was sent to prison—embarrassment could refer to this critical state and all of its attendant perplexities and confusions, but also to the self-consciousness that comes from the failure to present one's best self to a real or imagined audience at a given moment. A story like "The Figure in the Carpet," as Nick Salvato points out, plays an important part in embarrassment's critical history because the narrator's frustrations tell readers something about themselves. The message to which they gain access, Salvato suggests, is that the roles of critic and admirer are not so easily segregated. This is no less true for Wilde in *De Profundis* than

¹⁷⁸ The characteristic physical feature of embarrassment is the blush; see Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment*.

¹⁷⁹ Cohen, *Sex Scandal*, 196.

it is for critics writing about Wilde, who may feel embarrassed both because he has failed to live up to his own expectations, and because he never quite conforms to theirs.

Embarrassment is not Wilde's own word—it is shame he invokes, and frequently—yet it is embarrassment that most often registers the effect of the seemingly incongruous parts of *De Profundis*. If to be embarrassed is, as in Erving Goffman's formulation, to face an untimely convergence of selves, then Wilde's expressions of shame as he struggles to weave together a biography and an aesthetic treatise are verbal cringes that register the dissonance of appealing to a divided audience: those who already championed him, and those to whom he still had everything to prove.¹⁸⁰ In this sense, we might harness the inherently more positive associations embarrassment bears in comparison to shame when thinking about Wilde's turn to Christ's life as a symbol of the artist's personality. While the Bosie passages give Wilde the occasion to rail against the limitations of biography, dealing with the emotional turmoil he provoked enables Wilde to imagine the project of writing a biography of Christ without actually committing to it (this is one of two projects Wilde envisions completing after prison—the other is, unsurprisingly, a meditation on the artist's conduct in relation to his life).¹⁸¹ Christ's life retains its symbolic force for Wilde, and therefore it demands interpretation—it is everything that Bosie's life, as Wilde wrote it, could not become because of its associations with debased intentionalism in *De Profundis*. These passages, then, are not

¹⁸⁰ See Goffmann, "Embarrassment and Social Organization." *American Journal of Sociology*, 62:3 (Nov. 1956): 264-271.

¹⁸¹ In this sense, Wilde's allegorization of Christ has very much to do with the versions of the critical future he imagines for himself, one debased by biography and one made more rich by its associations with a biography that everyone can identify with through its symbolic value. Compare to Heather Love's reading of the coming of Christ in Pater's essay on Botticelli. For Love, Pater's Madonna is burdened by the future deification the virgin birth confers upon her, which Love reads as an allegory of Pater's "resistance of his own exaltation"—his ambivalent feeling towards the new modern identity that became available to him at a moment when he was not in a position to embrace it (*Feeling Backward*, 66). Wilde does not resist his own exaltation, but he demands a renegotiation of its terms.

simply an exercise in spiritual autobiography, but a move made by Wilde towards envisioning a new relationship between his life and work. During the trials, Wilde answers his interlocutor by offering to interpret particular lines and phrases of his work. In *De Profundis*, he accepts that his life and work will inevitably be read against one another, and so he distinguishes between the aspects of biography that detract from the process of literary interpretation and those that amplify its possibilities.

Wilde's aversion to the writing of biography is palpable throughout the extended *De Profundis* manuscript. If few readers have pinpointed embarrassment as a distinct feature of the text, it may be because of the way Ross arranged the earliest available edition to resemble a spiritual autobiography, a project that would look, in accordance with Wilde's wishes, "good and nice in intention." Such an arrangement necessarily marks the Bosie passages as a debasement of intentionalism. Yet as Regenia Gagnier points out, "Wilde used Douglas to fill the place of the absent audience, writing a self-serving biography of Douglas in order to write an autobiography that explained Wilde to the world."¹⁸² Gagnier's observation that Bosie's biography forms a significant part of *De Profundis* is suggestive, but she does not consider that Wilde's alignment of Bosie with "realism" versus of Christ with "romance" might be a response to biography's constraints. Gagnier argues that Douglas allows Wilde to revisit his past in order to assure himself a future, and that recording the recurrent patterns in their relationship enables Wilde to defeat the monotony of prison life. But in remarking that Christ's life becomes, in Wilde's rendering, "fully aestheticized and autonomous," she misses the opportunity to

¹⁸² Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford University Press, 1986), 180.

plumb the ways Bosie's biography is not.¹⁸³ Since his relationship with Douglas is the thing that threatens the aesthetic autonomy of his work, it makes sense to look at the ways Wilde positions Bosie's biography against the critical future he imagines for himself. Doing so not only enables us to see the considerable stakes Wilde invested in biography even as he purported to dismiss its uses; it puts into productive play the aspects of embarrassment that the trial drove apart, as the physical indicators of embarrassment in the manuscript—such as the moment when Wilde envisions Bosie's face "scorched as by a furnace blast"—give way to the critical perplexities of the artist's work that Wilde accuses him of obscuring.

Wilde's biographical embarrassment emerges most pointedly when he considers the kinds of knowledge his relationship with Bosie causes him to accrue or forego. As in the trial scene, his frustrations are especially detectable at moments when the wastes of their life together prevent Wilde's aesthetic theories and achievements from being recognized. While the prosecution considered sexual encounters alongside examples from his work during the trials, Wilde takes the opposite tactic in the letter, instructing Bosie in the differences between physically and intellectually stimulating companionship, and explaining to him, "You see that I have to write your life to you and you have to realise it" (70). Wilde's Bosie is a figure who is as ignorant of his own past as he is about his impact on Wilde's intellectual and emotional life. Wilde uses the vocabulary of literary analysis to describe Bosie's activities: "With very swift and running feet you had passed from Romance to Realism," describes Bosie's pursuit of "rough trade" and his neglect of their relationship. With these accusations, Wilde creates a parallel between the artistic error of deliberate representation and the "deliberate pursuit of experience," of

¹⁸³ Ibid., 190.

sexual gratification for its own sake rather than as part of an artistic relationship given over to the ideal of beauty. These errors become central instances in the account of intentionalism Wilde provides over the course of the letter. To go looking for something that is already there in order to attain the desires one has already determined to be satisfying, in life or in writing, is to commit an interpretive indiscretion, because experiences that do not result in the examination and development of critical responses inhibit personal growth. Writing a life of Bosie allows Wilde to make biography the locus of debased intentionalism in *De Profundis*, setting the stage for the arguments that have been made about Wilde's final prose work ever since. If critics cannot agree whether to read the manuscript for biographical or literary value, these modes of value are no less confounded for Wilde himself.

The "biographical" passages of *De Profundis* consume two-thirds of the entire manuscript, engulfing the "literary" portion so that Wilde's frustration with the biographical is accompanied by an inability to let it go. The length is in part due to repetitions; Wilde returns repeatedly to a group of occurrences: Bosie's departure from Oxford and his subsequent trip to Cairo—both inseparable from his dealings with blackmailers and thoughtless courting of homosexual scandal—his lack of regard for Wilde's health during a trip the two took to Brighton ("When you are not on your pedestal you are not interesting. The next time you are ill I will go away at once," 56), Bosie's attempts to promote his poetry by publishing it with some of Wilde's correspondence in the *Mercure de France*, and numerous occurrences within the tumultuous history of the Douglas family. The disorder of these events as Wilde recalls them contrasts with Wilde's attempt to defend his artistic legacy, and so they cluster

together according to several ideas that set up biography as a hindrance to interpretation: Wilde claims that his “unintellectual friendship” with Bosie has had a negative impact on his art, he warns Bosie about the effects of scandal on published writing, and he discusses the interpretive harm that can emerge from the misappropriation of texts for personal use. One of the most frequent charges Wilde levels against Bosie throughout the letter is his “lack of imagination.” If, as Heather Marcovitch has suggested, the Bosie of *De Profundis* is a figure for the Philistine culture that feted Wilde as a celebrity and then rejected him, reading too biographically emerges as one of Philistinism’s lazy practices.¹⁸⁴ At the same time, Wilde will go on to associate love with literary tact, suggesting that to write his life in the correct way would mean legitimizing his relationship with Bosie as a component of his artistry that the letter itself could never realize.

Typically, at moments in which Wilde accuses Bosie of hindering his artistic productivity, “fact,” the province of biography, intrudes upon the critical reflection that he perceives to be necessary for understanding the artist’s work. One such instance at the beginning of the letter is worth quoting at length:

I blame myself for allowing an unintellectual friendship, a friendship whose primary aim was not the creation and contemplation of beautiful things, entirely to dominate my life. From the very first there was too wide a gap between us. You had been idle at your school, worse than idle at your university. You did not realise that an artist, and especially such an artist as I am, one, that is to say, the quality of whose work depends on the intensification of personality, requires for the development of his art the companionship of ideas, and intellectual atmosphere, quiet, peace and solitude. You admired my work when it was finished: you enjoyed the brilliant successes of my first nights, and the brilliant banquets that followed them; you were proud, and quite naturally so, of being the intimate friend of an artist so distinguished; but you could not understand the conditions requisite for the production of artistic work. I am not speaking in

¹⁸⁴ Marcovitch, *The Art of the Pose: Oscar Wilde’s Performance Theory* (Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 198.

phrases of rhetorical exaggeration but in terms of absolute truth to actual fact when I remind you that during the whole time we were together I never wrote one single line. Whether at Torquay, Goring, London, Florence, or elsewhere, my life, as long as you were by my side, was entirely sterile and uncreative. And with but few intervals you were, I regret to say, by my side always. (38-9)

Wilde's claim that Bosie's presence made him "sterile and uncreative" is something of an exaggeration, since their time together coincided with the efflorescence of Wilde's career as a dramatist.¹⁸⁵ More pertinent, however, is the way Wilde holds "truth" above "lying" in this passage, a striking turn from his previous championing of lying as the approach most conducive to creating art.¹⁸⁶ When Wilde insists that he is speaking "in terms of absolute truth to actual fact," he indicates that elements in his life—particularly those which become the stuff of biography—have caused his work's value to depreciate. Wilde positions his relationship with Bosie as the unproductive counterpart to artistic creativity, revealing his shame at having to turn to biography as a premise for justifying the true ends of his art. He blames himself four separate times over the course of the paragraph, setting off an increased opposition between life and art, until he finally says that Bosie's domination makes his life "sterile and uncreative."¹⁸⁷ No longer do life and art complement one another. Instead, the life begins to encroach upon the art, as Wilde suggests when he points out that it is finished work that Bosie admires most. He can only recognize the value of Wilde's productions when critical success is bestowed upon them by others, rather than regard them as ever-evolving creations containing evidence of the artistic process.

¹⁸⁵ See Marcovitch, 197.

¹⁸⁶ See Wilde, "The Decay of Lying" in *The Major Works*, 215-39.

¹⁸⁷ "I will begin by telling you that I blame myself terribly. As I sit here in this dark cell in convict clothes, a disgraced and ruined man, I blame myself. In the perturbed and fitful nights of anguish, in the long monotonous days of pain, it is myself I blame. I blame myself for allowing an unintellectual friendship...entirely to dominate my life" (*Epistola*, 38).

Because Bosie has made an embarrassment of them both by failing to acknowledge the true value of Wilde's art, Wilde implies, restoring their correspondence to the realm of art can potentially prevent biography from encroaching upon his literary achievements. In a rare turn to the present tense, he recounts one of their first exchanges:

You send me a very nice poem of the undergraduate school of verse for my approval: I reply by a letter of fantastic literary conceits: I compare you to Hylas, or Hyacinth, Jonquil or Narcisse or some one whom the great God of Poetry favoured, and honoured with his life. The letter is like a passage from one of Shakespeare's sonnets transposed to a minor key. It can be understood only by those who had read the *Symposium* of Plato, or caught the spirit of a certain grave mood made beautiful for us in Greek marbles. (59)

Wilde follows this description of his intentions with an exclamatory remark: "Look at the history of that letter!" He then goes on to describe how the letter was used to blackmail him and ultimately to put him in prison. When Wilde enjoins Bosie to "Look at the history" of the letter, his injunction brings together the literary history to which he imagines the letter belonging, which includes Hellenic poetry and philosophy, and the history that it falls into as part of a biographical scandal. The difference in reading the letter for its historical conceits is the difference between acknowledging that "sins of the flesh are nothing," as Wilde does in the space of a few paragraphs near to this same passage, and describing the publication of the letters as evidence of the "pathological phenomenon" of his sexuality.¹⁸⁸

While Wilde is keen to defend the literary value of his own letters against biographical reductionism, he is more than willing to serve as biographer of the Douglas family. On several occasions he refers to the hapless interventions of Bosie's mother in her son's affairs, and he cruelly compares Bosie to his brother, Francis, a suspected

¹⁸⁸ *Epistola*, 74, 79. The distinction between the literary and biographical value of letters is a theme Wilde returns to later in the manuscript when he reproduces several lines from his early sonnet on Keats: "I think they love not art/Who break the crystal of a poet's heart/That small sickly eyes may glare and gloat" (78).

suicide. The family's history of mental illness and misfortune is the type of subject that would make for a sensational biography; Wilde's references to his own parents, by contrast, are designed to inflate Wilde's literary pedigree. Nevertheless, Wilde's assumption of the biographer's position allows him to leverage his critique of biographically-oriented intentionalism. Wilde's description of the hostile correspondence between Bosie and his father allows him to distinguish between written material that gains false importance from its links to specific actions and the conditionality and uncertainty that feature as part of an artistic work's openness to interpretation. The letters and telegrams Bosie and Queensberry send to each other are "foolish and vulgar" because they are calculated only to elicit a particular response and incite further provocation. Wilde faults Bosie for failing to realize that it is one particularly explosive telegram that "conditioned the whole of your subsequent relations with your father, and consequently the whole of my life" (67). When Wilde traces his imprisonment to the telegram, he is also expressing the frustration of having one moment in someone else's life define his own. Moreover, his mention of Queensberry's plans to confront him in the theater at the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest* makes especial note of the Marquess's attempt to "attack [him] through [his] art." In Wilde's convoluted account of his dealings with Queensberry, the two things are related. For Wilde, an "attack through art" carries a particular viciousness because of the way it forces the many potential conditions under which art may be experienced into a specific moment—a moment which ultimately can have lasting effects on the way an artist's entire life is understood. Wilde may have made his career by creating a persona dependent on the permeable boundaries between the life that he lived and his lived example as an artist, but

the biographical elements of *De Profundis* develop around a personal recognition that such boundaries are themselves provisional.

The tension between biography as an element of interpretation and as a reflection of the artistic persona continues throughout the manuscript as Wilde distinguishes the difference between relationships based on intellectual value and those structured around the temporary gratification of emotional attachment. In addition to his complaints about having to describe Bosie's relationship with his father, Wilde notes that the telegrams Queensberry and his son send to each other feature a "strange mixture of romance and finance" (80). Although Wilde begins by discussing his relationship with Bosie in terms of the transition from Romance to Realism, he too obsesses over romance and finance, putting a price to various hotel bills, meals, and excursions that the two took together. He contrasts these occasions with the kinds of exchanges enjoyed with his more intellectually-focused friendships, claiming that these are more conducive to artistic production. Robbie Ross's letters, for example, show the "tact of love as well as the tact of literature" with their "clever concentrated criticism." Ross reminds Wilde of his unfulfilled potential by carrying on at the level of private conversation the dialogue between the artist and his audience that Wilde's prison sentence interrupts, and showing him what would have been possible "had I not let myself be lured into the imperfect world of coarse uncompleted passion, of appetite without distinction, desire without limit, and formless greed" (90). Critical and economical valuations are closely related for Wilde so that the question of literary value becomes embedded in the possible uses of biography, which can reinforce the value of art or detract from its qualities. When Wilde refers to the effects of the scandal on his artistic legacy, his wording is inflected with this

discourse of value, as well as “spending” in the erotic sense: “I became the spendthrift of my own genius,” “I spent on you my art, my life, my name...” etc.¹⁸⁹ As it turns out, the relationship founded on intellectual value pays for itself, while “uncompleted desires” create a surplus that must be paid for.

Wilde uses his relationship with Bosie to develop an additional metaphor of economic valuation centered on the public’s fickle tastes:

The intellectual and emotional life of ordinary people is a very contemptible affair. Just as they borrow their ideas from a sort of circulating library of thought—the *Zeitgeist* of an age that has no soul and send them back soiled at the end of each week—so they always try to get their emotions on credit, or refuse to pay the bill when it comes in. We must pass out of that conception of life; as soon as we have to pay for an emotion we shall know its quality and be the better for such knowledge. (144)

The critique of biography as a debased form of intentionalism is more than a personal matter in this passage. When Wilde turns to the reading public, his idea of a “circulating library of thought” describes the moralizing tendencies that can govern a work of art’s reception: people may be entranced by the artist “on his pedestal,” but when the circumstances of the artist’s life change, their emotions towards the art itself are tested and must be “paid for.” When the public will not pay for their experience of a work of art by identifying with the artist’s sorrow—so that the emotion gets “sent back” to the library—it disinvests itself from the very experience that causes the artist to be put on a pedestal in the first place. Oliver S. Buckton observes that the effect of Wilde’s address to Bosie is “not to differentiate between the ‘writing’ and ‘reading’ functions of the text—to distinguish the creative, morally purposeful author from the sterile, indolent consumer—but to connect them by invoking the autobiographical figure of the ‘turning

¹⁸⁹ *Epistola* 95, 147

point'.¹⁹⁰ Where Buckton highlights the "shared subjectivity" of author and reader, my emphasis is on the inevitable momentariness of this relationship. Wilde's metaphor of the "circulating library of thought" emphasizes the contingency of literary value. Biography is part of the trajectory of an artwork's consumption, and it may take value away as easily as it may confer it through the fascination the artist's life provides.

It is the life of Christ that enables Wilde to move beyond the debased intentionalism which underwrites his partial account of the Douglas family, providing him with the imaginative solution his own work needs. Wilde connects the poetry of Christ's life with the continual reinterpretation of it over time through the life experiences of others. Along with the beauty of suffering it exemplifies, a distinguishing aspect of Wilde's assessment of Christ's life is its interpretive potential. Wilde's assertion that "My letter has its definite meaning behind every phrase" recognizes that his writing cannot remain under his control, subject to the more open definition of intentionalism his work espouses before the trials irrevocably associate it with his biography. In Christ, Wilde finds a figure whose intentions cannot be debased through biography, because to write Christ's biography is to witness facts in a constant state of transformation, where through his example, every life has the potential to become a type: "At every single moment of one's life one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been. Art is a symbol, because man is a symbol" (109). The combination of material abjection and redemptive symbolism in the life of Christ is particularly compelling to Wilde because it allows him to imagine life and art as engaged in a mutual process of revision instead of opposition;

¹⁹⁰ Buckton, 'Desire Without Limit': Dissident Confession in Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*," in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 171-90.

Christ is not only a figure who ranks with the poets, "But his entire life is also the most wonderful of poems."

Wilde's treatment of Christ's life is energized by his affinity for what he referred to as the "fifth Gospel" of *De Profundis*: Renan's *Life of Jesus*, which he read before and during his time in prison. The main difference between Renan and Wilde, who both believed in Christ's humanity, is that Wilde's Christ is entirely self-fashioned out of his own supreme individuality and artistic self-imagination, rather than from the historical conditions that laid the groundwork for the religion of Christianity. As Jennifer Stevens has noted, a crucial factor in Renan's success with the *Life of Jesus* was his "willingness to treat the canonical Gospels as biographical works," a method that moved away from the dense scholarship of Strauss to embrace more novelistic techniques.¹⁹¹ Renan's treatment of biography as providing a basis for interpretation, rather than an inhibition of it, gives Wilde a model that he can turn to as he ponders the interpretive possibilities of biography over its limitations. Renan's account of the gospel writers emphasizes biography as a structuring principle for a variety of sources working together. The formulae "according to [Matthew, Mark, Luke and John]," he writes, "do not imply that, in the most ancient opinion, these recitals were written from beginning to end by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; they merely signify that these were the traditions proceeding from each of these Apostles and claiming their authority."¹⁹²

If Wilde begins his letter to Bosie by examining the consequences of biographical evidence on his own career, the turn to the life of Christ in *De Profundis* shows his inclination to embrace a comparative model of biography, where the subject of a life

¹⁹¹ *The Historical Jesus and the Literary Imagination, 1860-1920* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 41.

¹⁹² Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (1863. Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1991), 6-7.

must be understood in relation to his works, and where those works are interpreted anew through the shared experience of human suffering. Renan's assessment of the gospel writers produces a Christ firmly situated in his own time, while Wilde's envisions a Christ whose influence is most significant in the future. When Wilde speculates about writing an essay on "the artistic life considered in its relation to conduct" after leaving prison, he reflects on a more evolved relationship between life and conduct than the one that determined his life's outcome. According to Wilde, Christ is the ideal model for this project because he believed that "life was changeful, fluid, active, and that to allow it to be stereotyped into any form was death" (120). It is the stereotyping of life—and work—that Wilde seeks to overcome in *De Profundis* as he interweaves a "changeful, fluid, active" life with one that, as far as he was concerned, was the very opposite of these terms.

III. The Naïve Pose: Writing Wilde's Biography

Wilde's earliest biographers were not only confronted with the task of turning living speech and actions into text, but, like the gospel writers, with that of making sense of a career which ended in abject humiliation.¹⁹³ These biographies have served a dual function for decades, as disreputable sources and as indicators of what may or may not be required for future generations to interpret Wilde's work. They are examples of what Laurel Brake refers to as "the ephemeral life writing which constitutes the biographies of the future."¹⁹⁴ They combine all that is embarrassing about literary biography more generally—its potential to become anachronistic, its indulgence in speculation about the

¹⁹³ See Stephen Arata, "Oscar Wilde and Jesus Christ" in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, ed. Joseph Bristow (University of Toronto Press, 1993), 254-274.

¹⁹⁴ Laurel Brake, "The Deaths of Heroes: Biography, Obits, and the Discourse of the Press, 1890-1900" in *Life Writing and Victorian Culture*, ed. David Amigoni (Ashgate, 2006), 165-193.

author's motives and social behaviors, and its cultivation of an affect which allows readers to "know" the subject—into a prescription for re-reading and reinterpretation.

The peculiarity of Wilde's fame made it difficult to designate the aspects of his career that would be most suitable for commemoration.¹⁹⁵ The early publications about Wilde by his friends Robert Sherard and Frank Harris tend to focus less on the formation of a Wilde canon and more on his cultural relevance, the significance of which depended more on his speech and his performance in society than on anything he published during his lifetime. They assume an unsophisticated attitude toward his sexuality and a generally loose approach to facts, but they also employ the candor associated with Lytton Strachey's "new biography." Recent critical effort to assess these biographies in the context of aural culture and new media has only begun to provide the tools necessary for acknowledging their importance rather than dismissing them for their shortcomings.¹⁹⁶ Given Wilde's celebrated conversational wit, it makes sense to pay attention to Wilde's speech as it is transmitted to text. And yet it is significant that Sherard's and Harris's biographies have very little to say about the things Wilde wrote. The trials pitted Wilde's published texts against biographical evidence from his life, resulting in the debased intentionalism that Wilde critiques in *De Profundis*. By refusing to perform sustained readings of Wilde's work that rely on their personal knowledge of his private affairs, Sherard and Harris defer to Wilde's distaste for biographical criticism (if not for

¹⁹⁵ While I am not specifically concerned with Wilde's celebrity here, it helps to keep in mind Sharon Marcus's observation that the experience of modern celebrity as Wilde embodied it was defined by a reciprocal exchange of distance and proximity between the admirer and public figure. The earliest biographies of Wilde must contend with his distance from present and future readers, while conveying for them just what it was like to know Wilde and to hear him speak. See Sharon Marcus, "Salomé!! Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, and the Drama of Celebrity," *PMLA* 126, 4 (October 2011): 999-1021. See also D.A. Miller's *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) in which Miller invokes Wilde in his own reflections on the need to connect with a critic as a speaking presence.

¹⁹⁶ See, for instance, Ellen Crowell, "Posthumous Playback: Oscar Wilde and the Phonographic Logic of Modern Biography," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 59, 3 (Fall 2013): 480-500.

biography in general). The difficulty of reading Wilde critically, particularly in England, shows in these biographical memoirs; Arthur Ransome's *Critical Study* was the sole English work of criticism to attempt to address the works on their own terms.¹⁹⁷

However, it is possible to read even the most sensational scenes in Sherard's and Harris's books as attempts to find a balance between Wilde's physical and textual lives.¹⁹⁸ Each time they arrive at a moment where Wilde's fate seems determined by a particular life event, they also enact a self-conscious display of their methods as biographers, Sherard drawing attention to his realist perspective and Harris his journalistic embellishment. These self-reflexive moments emphasize the tragic fascination of the life, but they also ask readers to consider the cost of neglecting Wilde's accomplishments as a literary artist. In this respect, they are early indicators of the unstable position Wilde still occupies between popular and academic culture.¹⁹⁹

"Sympathy for the Teller of the Story": Robert Sherard

Robert Harborough Sherard wrote two biographies of Wilde. For the first and more personal of these, *The Story of an Unhappy Friendship* (1902), he took as his model the naturalist fiction that Wilde had criticized in "the Decay of Lying."²⁰⁰ The

¹⁹⁷ As Sherard's *Oscar Wilde* suggests, there were efforts to read Wilde more critically on the continent.

¹⁹⁸ See Jane Gallop, *The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time* (Duke University Press, 2011), for an exploration of the personal as well as theoretical dimensions of authorship and the kinds of questions that arise when an author "becomes a text," as Wilde does when his friends are forced to argue for Wilde's written as well as spoken legacy. Gallop finds no place for biography itself in her reconceptualization of the death of the author, even the author-reader connections she discovers through her close readings of theorists could also described several aspects of the ambivalent interpretive space biography occupies as a result of the late-nineteenth century turn from intentionalism.

¹⁹⁹ Wilde's status as a subject of critical inquiry has not always coincided with his position as a figure of biographical interest: "The dominance in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s of New Criticism and structuralism made the writing of biography a less respectable academic pursuit; certainly, it is significant that none of the biographies of Wilde published in Britain in the 1970s was written by an academic." Josephine Guy and Ian Small, "Lives of Wilde." *Studying Wilde: History, Criticism and Myth*. (ELT Press, 2006), 14.

²⁰⁰ Other publications by Sherard include *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1905), a supplementary volume to accompany it, and two separate refutations directed at Andre Gide's, Frank Harris's, and George Bernard

resemblance of *The Story of an Unhappy Friendship* to a naturalist novel is evident in several respects. Much of it is set in Paris, where Sherard and Wilde first met; it speculates on the role substance abuse and heredity played in Wilde's downfall; it meditates on suicide and fatalism, and it includes descriptions of material indulgence and urban seaminess. Even so, Sherard's treatment of Wilde's life ultimately furthers Wilde's claim that there can be no literary approximation of "the real," because life always imitates art. However, Sherard does not use this claim merely to elevate Wilde. Over the course of Sherard's account, the realism of Paris that he experienced with Wilde begins to look more like the realism Wilde contrasts with romance in *De Profundis* to punish Lord Alfred Douglas for his unwholesome and unartistic connections with other men. Sherard's shift between realisms is most evident when he focuses on the relationship between bodily and textual corruption, illustrating the problem that prompted Wilde to take on his own critique of biography in his letter to Douglas.

Wilde's contrast of the aesthetic rewards of friendship with the intellectual lassitude of his relationship with Bosie in *De Profundis* is anticipated in a definition of friendship he offered to Sherard in a letter, describing it as "the ideal of lives linked together not by affection merely, or the pleasantness of companionship, but by the capacity of being stirred by the same noble things in art and song."²⁰¹ Sherard's ultimate view of the friendship as "unhappy," then, needs to be assessed in terms of what it meant for him to experience art with Wilde only to have to divorce himself from the immediacy of that experience as a biographer. In the original prefatory note for *The Story of an*

Shaw's accounts of Wilde, *Oscar Wilde Twice Defended* (1934) and *Bernard Shaw, Frank Harris, and Oscar Wilde* (1937).

²⁰¹ Wilde to R.H. Sherard, Postmark 17 May 1883, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 210.

Unhappy Friendship, Sherard recasts Wilde's words to him in the form of an address to potential readers of his account. Sherard presents Wilde's aesthetic definition of friendship as a disclaimer against the scandalmongering reading in which curiosity seekers might be tempted to indulge, conveying his own sense of a shared noble purpose in art.²⁰² "In this note," he writes, "I wish to point out that my plea for the fairer consideration of my friend—one of the brightest geniuses of the last century—is delivered *à huis-clos*—so that none but those invited need listen to it. If any eavesdropper cry 'Scandal,' he himself will be the cause of it."²⁰³ Sherard's dedication of the biography to Robert Ross, who arranged Wilde's work to appeal to literary audiences, is a gesture towards the ideal type of friend he was inviting behind the "closed door."

Recognizing that the burden of revealing scandal usually falls on the biographer, Sherard confers it upon readers instead. His admonishment to "eavesdroppers" separates friends from detractors, and identifies two ways to read Wilde—for the scandal of his life or the interpretive pleasures of his work. The separation between those behind the closed door and those with their ear pressed up against it suggests a difference between those prepared to receive Wilde's work with a friendly openness and those predisposed to seek out scandal. The true friend of Wilde's work, Sherard offers, is ultimately the scholar. "In years to come," he writes, "people reading [Wilde's] works will want to know more about him than the evil tradition which his name will evoke; and the student of literature, amazed at the splendor of his art, may be glad that at least one of those who were his friends thought fit [to put his story on record]" (10).

²⁰² All this despite the fact that *The Story of an Unhappy Friendship* had to be sold at a shop known for selling pornography (see Crowell, "Phonographic Logic").

²⁰³ Robert Sherard, *The Story of an Unhappy Friendship* (1902. London: Greening & Co., Ltd., 1905), 8. All in-text citations are from this edition.

Here, Sherard appears to have no difficulty moving from personal reflection to critical judgment, but the earliest chapters of *An Unhappy Friendship* suggest that he initially found it difficult to recognize Wilde's brilliance because of his tendency towards "dissimulation." In these early scenes, Sherard skirts the idea of discussing Wilde's work directly while indicating that Wilde's literary status is something that needs to be secured by the enterprising readers and students he addresses in his preface. Initially, Wilde is a celebrity without any substantial literary success. Later, he is a figure whose captivating presence needs to be downplayed—or shown to be unadmirably corrupt—in order for his achievements to be recognized on their own terms. Wilde's "dissimulation" assumes an immediately ambiguous quality. In a room full of writers who have made dissimulation their trade, Wilde's dissimulation presents something more difficult for Sherard to apprehend.²⁰⁴ Sherard recalls Wilde standing in the middle of an "eager" group at Victor Hugo's house leading a discussion of Swinburne's poetry, observing that Wilde "forced the note, overvaulted himself, and left an impression of insincerity" (17). Initially, Sherard writes off this insincerity as a reflection of his own hostility towards Wilde as a potential competitor on the literary scene: "I considered that his reputation and success had been won by unworthy artifices, although in my heart of hearts I longed for the ingeniousness and the daring to force attention to myself by similar methods" (20). However, he is eventually captivated by Wilde's presence, first "by the beauty in the blazing intelligence of his fine eyes," then his conversation, "exhilarating as wine," his "stimulating presence," and his "joyous enthusiasms."

Sherard's early encounters with Wilde exhibit the apparent ease with which Wilde's appeal as a conversationalist allowed him to make his dissimulative public

²⁰⁴ Sherard revisits these initial encounters with Wilde in his memoir *Twenty Years in Paris* (1905).

performances into a template for artistic success. Sherard is initially drawn in by Wilde's pose, but he also intimates that Wilde's compelling presence has the potential to compromise the value of his words, a problem that eventually moves beyond the circumstances of their friendship to constitute the fundamental difficulty Sherard faces as he writes Wilde's biography. In one particular scene, Wilde and Sherard discover that they are both assuming poses. During a dinner conversation, Sherard responds to Wilde's effusive discussion of the Louvre by admitting that the name makes him think not of the venerable institution, but "of the Grands Magasins du Louvre, where I can get the cheapest ties in Paris" (23). Delighted, Wilde later tells Sherard, "when you bluntly disclaimed all artistic interests, I discovered that you had scientifically thought out a pose that interested me" (24). Wilde finds more than Sherard intends in his blunt admission of philistinism, but it manages to satisfy Wilde all the same because of its seemingly deliberate artificiality. In fact, Sherard is mocking Wilde's fixation on material objects (beautiful statues, clothing, décor). Sherard's failure to explain his actual meaning registers his sense that the intent behind an artist's words may be altered in response to the effects of his performance. This realization seals his friendship with Wilde, but it will also become increasingly troublesome for Sherard as Wilde's pose begins to betray more secrets than it conceals in the name of art.

Nevertheless, Wilde was partially accurate in suggesting that Sherard had chosen a "scientific pose" as the basis for their friendship, since Sherard uses novelistic details throughout *An Unhappy Friendship* to give his more personal observations objective value. The same gravitation towards detail, however, allows Sherard to critique Wilde's materialism. Although such passages illustrate Wilde's adaptation of other artists' habits

of self-fashioning for his own use, Sherard presents them in a fashion that warns readers of overvaluing the public image of the artist—with all of its trappings—in place of the work of art. Shortly after describing their first meeting, for example, Sherard mentions that Wilde began to model himself after Balzac:

In the daytime, when he was at work, he dressed in a white dressing-gown fashioned after the monkish cowl that Balzac used to wear at his writing-table. At that time he was modeling himself on Balzac. Besides the dressing-gown, he had acquired an ivory cane with a head of turquoises—turkis stones we used to call them—which was a replica of the mouse walking-stick Honoré de Balzac used to carry...

Amongst the books strewed about the room on the Quai d'Orsay were biographies of Balzac, books of the gossipy class, full of personalia, "Balzac in Slippers," and so forth—text-books with which to study a part (26-29).²⁰⁵

In a strange juxtaposition, Wilde emulates his ideal of the literary worker through the study of "gossipy" biographies. His guise is part Balzac the man, part Balzac the author, with little distinction between the two. Just as Sherard distinguishes his writing about Wilde from "gossip," however, Wilde distinguishes his performance from mere material affectation, since the same room strewn with Balzac "personalia" is anchored by the presence of Carlyle's writing-table, one of Wilde's most treasured possessions.²⁰⁶ Both biographer and subject demand to be regarded seriously through the comparatively

²⁰⁵ Sherard refers here to the French edition of *Balzac in Slippers*. An English translation appeared in 1929. A *Bookman* review of the translation finds it journalistic and cartoonish, but notes also that the place of "the real" is in Balzac's novels, not his life. See Clifton P. Fadiman, "Balzac in Slippers, by Leon Gozlan." *The Bookman* (September 1929), p. 103.

²⁰⁶ Carlyle's table was one of the first items sold at the sale of Wilde's estate following his imprisonment. In a later passage (70), Sherard mentions that copies of Wilde's early poetry book, which he signed and gifted to several Parisian authors and artists, were made available for sale as "curios of actuality" at literary salons following his arrest. Sherard suggests that Wilde initially offered these gifts for the purposes of social advancement, but after his arrest they turned into evidence of his "mismanagement." It seems likely that Sherard is referring to the personal content of Wilde's correspondence included with several of the gifted books in this passage, but he is also commenting on Wilde's tendency to give himself away, so to speak, without thinking of the consequences. His homage to Balzac and Carlyle throws an unfortunate irony over the use his casual acquaintances made of these "curios" after Wilde's arrest.

greater value of another literary object (the writing table of a Victorian sage) or enterprise (biography that is not mere “gossip”).

Sherard intimates that Wilde’s various phases of self-fashioning are as literarily allusive as they are materially affected. By showing that Wilde kept his interest in figures like Balzac and Carlyle active through a simulation of their work habits, Sherard suggests that Wilde is doing meaningful literary work, even during a period of his career when his status as a writer was less recognized than his social persona. The “scientific pose” that Wilde takes as his basis for friendship with Sherard, however, eventually becomes supplanted by suicide. The artist’s self-annihilation turns the focus of Sherard’s narrative towards a realism that is more about fatalistic reading than it is about the sense of artifice shared by biographer and subject. The suicide scene is, for Sherard, a means of illustrating how body and text can corrupt one another. As Sherard reminds his readers, Wilde was fascinated with Baudelaire’s “slow self-destruction,” a phrase which calls to mind Wilde’s description of the artistic life as “a long and lovely suicide.”²⁰⁷ In a particularly vivid moment, the two friends host the Parisian poet Maurice Rollinat for dinner:

The joy that Oscar Wilde took in the ravaged personality of [Rollinat], who at that time seemed to be tottering, like a man on a tight-rope, between lunacy on one side and death on the other, seemed to me sincere, and mingled with admiration rather than pity. He invited him to dinner at the Hotel Voltaire, and entertained him royally, and after dinner prayed of him to recite certain of his verses.

Rollinat obliged, supplying his listeners with “a gruesome and terrifying poem, to which the nervous excitement of his author, as he repeated it with wild gestures, lent additional horror” (49). This scene not only conveys Wilde’s interest in the figure of the *poète maudit*, but depicts biographer and subject as accomplices viewing the uneasy conflation

²⁰⁷ Wilde to H.C. Marillier, Postmark 12 December 1885, in *The Complete Letters*, 272.

of life and work through the living body of the author. The friends disagree on the appropriateness of intervening in someone else's act of self-destruction. Sherard admits that his "Calvinistic principles" would not allow him to ignore a suicide, while Wilde considers intervening to be "an act of gross impertinence," as the act would be "the definite result of a scientific process" (50). The "scientific process" of suicide echoes the "scientific pose," threatening to replace the mutual understanding of artifice that defines Wilde and Sherard's friendship with the deliberate movement towards a fixed outcome that Sherard recognizes as the defining feature of Wilde's career in the moment immediately following his death.

The dissolution of the friendship occurs just before Wilde's marriage to Constance Lloyd, which proves to be a turning point in Sherard's narrative consciousness. After the marriage, Sherard's focus shifts from moments when he and Wilde participate in aesthetic debates together towards moments when Wilde's manner seems to foreclose the possibility of any further interpretive play in their relationship. In one pivotal scene, Sherard is staying in London to develop his lagging career as a novelist when Wilde appears on an early morning visit with some unsettling news:

It was some time during my stay in Charles Street that Oscar Wilde told me that he was engaged to be married. He had arrived in town early one morning from Dublin, and he woke me in bed and gave me the news. I said, "I am very sorry to hear it," and turned over to resume my slumbers. He said, "What a brute you are, Robert," and that was the end of the conversation then. I know that I felt he was not likely to be happy in domestic life, and still less to make a woman happy. (91)

This bedside interruption is the "end of the conversation" in more ways than one.

Sherard's self-portraits of his literary endeavors say little about his personal affairs; he was married several times, and the few commentators who have noted Wilde's attraction

to his youthful good looks and “honey-coloured hair” have portrayed Sherard as merely befuddled and naïve about Wilde’s sexuality.²⁰⁸ But the confrontation between the two men suggests that the “scientific pose” told him more than he professes to understand about Wilde, enough to respond to Wilde’s marriage as a misfortune, and to suggest that he could not ensure a woman’s happiness. Whatever Sherard knew—and from whatever experience he knew it—the interruption marks the turn to an unhappy friendship, from the romance of Paris to the dreary gutters of its realism.

For Wilde, the artistic life is a “long and lovely suicide” because no sensation can ever be new. “A strange mixture of ardour and of indifference” motivates the artist, who must always seek new experiences only to remain unfulfilled by them.²⁰⁹ For Sherard, Wilde’s alternation between these two poles becomes even more foreboding immediately after the marriage, suggesting a deterministic outcome that clashes with Wilde’s desire to find continual renewal in art and life. During a carriage ride with Wilde and his wife, Sherard asks if he should throw the swordstick he is carrying—a walking stick containing a concealed blade—from the vehicle. When Wilde objects that it would cause a scene, Sherard replies, “I don’t know how it is, but for the last minute I have had a wild desire to pull out the blade and run it through you.”²¹⁰ Sherard’s desire to run Wilde through with a phallic object suggest, with little subtlety, that Wilde’s danger now lies on the surface of the narrative he is telling, rather than in the unsung harmonies of their friendship. “I do not know if a passing madness had really put my friend in danger in one of the happiest moments of his life, but I have sometimes thought since that here was a

²⁰⁸ Wilde to R.H. Sherard, May-June 1883, in *The Complete Letters*, 211.

²⁰⁹ Wilde to H.C. Marillier, Postmark 12 December 1885, in *The Complete Letters*, 272.

²¹⁰ *Unhappy Friendship*, 93. This moment recalls Basil Hallward’s threat to destroy his portrait of Dorian in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and, of course, Dorian’s eventual slashing of the altered portrait at the end of the novel.

premonition—in what mysterious manner suggested, I cannot say,” he writes. Notably, Sherard feels no such premonition during his early acquaintance with Wilde, when Wilde’s dissimulating behavior nonetheless remains in line with his artistic aspirations. The marriage indicates the moment when Sherard can no longer pursue the friendship as an aesthetic ideal, but must read it through the prescribed narrative society imposes upon Wilde, which Wilde frames in *De Profundis* as an embarrassment of biography.

As Wilde moves, in Sherard’s view, towards the “realism” Wilde accuses Lord Alfred Douglas of in *De Profundis*—having sexual relationships with men below him in social class—Sherard finds that the realism of his own writing can no longer aspire to objectivity because it has fallen in line with the narrative of Wilde’s downfall that the public expects. In the early sections of *An Unhappy Friendship*, Sherard places Wilde among other realist writers, always maintaining a textual connection even when Wilde’s material and conversational affectations threaten to undermine his status as a literary artist. When Wilde marries and his sexuality becomes specifically associated with premonition, Sherard can no longer maintain the interpretive play that initially allows him to accept Wilde’s “dissimulation.” When Wilde and Sherard visit a tavern together, the scene is full of details that suggest the inescapable literalism Wilde’s life imposes upon his art. Walking through the tavern’s upper room, the two friends observe “many in the stupor of drink, many displaying foul sores, maimed limbs, or the stigmata of disease, all in filthy and malodorous rags.” Wilde, Sherard notes, seemed particularly affected by this scene even as he remained unaware of its implications for his own life: “not one of the poor wretches who lay there stunned by the merciful sleep of exhaustion, whose most evil fate, compared to his, was not one to be envied!” (97)

Ultimately, *The Story of an Unhappy Friendship* uses novelistic techniques to chastise the effective novelization of Wilde's biography in the aftermath of his scandal, and to suggest that the turn towards criticism of his work must be the next step—the future return to essay writing that Wilde imagined in *De Profundis* but never got to make. While Sherard's lives of Wilde read like self-protective exercises, they also mourn the loss of “the capacity of being stirred by the same noble things in art and song” that the two men shared. Sherard acknowledges that there were real dangers in claiming a friendship with Wilde in the aftermath of the trials. He recounts being mocked in London and Paris and being questioned by a private investigator: “My loyalty,” he explains, “lent to misinterpretation” (128). Here, the idea that Sherard's personal intimacy with Wilde might be misconstrued suggests the potential of misinterpreting Wilde's career through forcing his writings to be understood in terms of a sterile objectivity imposed by the outcome of the trials. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that in his later *Life of Oscar Wilde*, Sherard does away with his personal perspective entirely “to record facts” and little else:

The upward climb, the attainment, the joys of conquest, the catastrophe, the precipitation, and the horrors of the abyss may now be depicted upon his canvas in plain fashion. The reader shall see them as they were; he shall no longer be coaxed by a cunning elicitation of his sympathy for the teller of the story to listen to a tale against which prejudice, the voice of public opinion, and his own conception of what it is seemly and expedient for him to hear are ever prompting him to close his ears. (xi-xii)

Sherard does not absolve himself of the task of giving readers a sensational life of Wilde, from “the upward climb” to “the horrors of the abyss.” He does, however, cease eliciting “sympathy for the teller of the story”—himself. *The Life of Oscar Wilde* did not turn out to be the publication “for the student” that Sherard envisioned in the preface to *An Unhappy Friendship*, but it did suggest that readers might first need to form their own

relationships with Wilde to foster a critical distance from his story. Sherard facilitated this process with his faulty but “chivalrous” example.²¹¹ The chivalrousness that Wilde attributed to him during their friendship aligns his projects with the romance of a critical future in place of the realism that threatened to destroy it.

Arthur Ransome’s *Critical Study*

“Impatient of such criticism of Wilde as saw a law-court in *A House of Pomegranates*, and heard the clink of handcuffs in the flowering music of *Intentions*,” Arthur Ransome sought to “write a book on Wilde’s work in which no mention of the man or his tragedy should have a place.”²¹² Ransome was primarily a writer of children’s fiction who made forays into biography and various literary and philosophical subjects (prior to his study of Wilde, he produced a relatively unsuccessful volume on Poe). *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (1912) was conceived as an in-depth discussion of Wilde’s work across multiple genres. Such a volume, to his mind, had been previously discouraged by the notoriety surrounding Wilde’s life and career. But Ransome was not permitted to let the texts speak primarily for themselves. His publisher, Methuen, objected to the number of extractions from Wilde’s work that appeared in the study and ordered a reduction, resulting in a slim volume of critical assessment ranging from Wilde’s earliest poems at Oxford to *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.²¹³ Ironically, it was as a work of biography that Ransome’s study attracted notice, for he was soon involved in a libel case initiated by Lord Alfred Douglas. Douglas objected to the account of his relations with Wilde in the *De Profundis* portions (Frank Harris was to

²¹¹ Wilde referred to the example of Sherard's friendship as "fine" and "chivalrous" in his letters. See Oscar Wilde to R.H. Sherard, 16 April 1895, in *The Complete Letters*, 644.

²¹² *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study*. (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1912), 13.

²¹³ See Roland Chambers, *The Last Englishman: The Double Life of Arthur Ransome*. (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).

use the trial transcripts as a source for the sections of *De Profundis* quoted in his own biography), and Ransome was forced to remove all claims about the relationship in the second edition.

Although Ransome's study was effectively suffocated by Douglas's contest for Wilde's posthumous image, it nonetheless shows that the need for a critical assessment of Wilde's career remained inseparable from the problem of biography more than a decade after his death. Even without the challenge of Douglas's interventions, Ransome finds it difficult to conceive of a better method than Wilde had already achieved in his essays. He reminds readers of Wilde's claim in "Pen, Pencil and Poison" that Wainewright is too near a figure in history to be treated with appropriate critical distance. Although Ransome wishes to assume "an artificial ignorance that should throw him to a distance where [Wilde's] books alone would represent him,"²¹⁴ he finds this task not only impossible in principle, but unsuited to a discussion of Wilde's aesthetic. Without the sympathetic claims of friendship to influence his decisions, Ransome still faces choices that grow from Ross's and Sherard's difficulties to represent a literarily commorable Wilde.

The idea of "artificial ignorance" turns out to be Ransome's most portable phrase for describing the difficulties that accompany the critic's attempt to assess a body of work apart from the life that gave it interest. He draws on the Romantic tradition to situate his own perspective, observing that no discussion of Shelley would omit the important details of his life, and that Wordsworth's loco-descriptive poems prove "a work of art is not independent of knowledge."²¹⁵ Grouping biographical knowledge with knowledge

²¹⁴ Ransome, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study*, 14.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

that accompanies the work of art as an interpretive frame allows Ransome to make artificial ignorance possible through an embrace of the banal. When the critic acknowledges the presence of insuppressible details, they are no longer available to be suppressed.

Finding that he cannot completely abandon biography in his criticism, Ransome works to clarify the relationship between Wilde and his texts as it impacts the reading process. Rather than think about how *not* to think about Wilde, Ransome makes the presence of Wilde a component of thinking itself, urging readers to “continually perceive behind the books the spectacle of the man, vividly living his life and filling it as completely as he filled his works with his strange and brilliant personality.”²¹⁶ Ransome’s model thinks of biographical details as part of Wilde’s “spectacle”—they provide no essential truths, but they form part of a continual process of becoming in relationship to texts, rather than a series of facts to be forgotten in order to let the texts speak for themselves. “A personality as vivid as [Wilde’s], exercised at once through books and in direct but perhaps less intimate social intercourse, cannot suddenly be wiped away like a picture on a slate,” he explains.²¹⁷ This sentence dances awkwardly around the issue of intimacy, recalling the way Sherard fears his intimacy with Wilde might lead to misinterpretation. Ransome positions reading and “social intercourse” as two forms of becoming intimate with Wilde, and gives books the greater advantage—social contact, as he would have it, is more direct but less intense. It is a strange claim to make in a study that, in keeping with those that came before it, repeatedly references the notion that Wilde was a more effective speaker than a writer. And yet Ransome shows that the

²¹⁶ Ibid., 17.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 23.

divide between the bodily and textual versions of Wilde that creates unease in the recollections of those who knew him personally might be a key component in recognizing Wilde's critical value. The brief biographical overview of Wilde that begins his study is, as he puts it, merely "a skeleton that shall gather flesh from the ensuing pages of the book."²¹⁸ The designation of the biographical portion of the study as "a skeleton" and the discussion of Wilde's works as the "flesh" reveals Ransome's investment in the eventual accumulation of substance around the ossified remains of Wilde's infamous life.

"A Miracle of Representment": Frank Harris's *Life and Confessions*

Frank Harris's *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* (1916) does not offer the flesh of criticism so much as the criticism of flesh. While Sherard claimed to find himself immediately taken in by the effeminate beauty of Wilde's aesthetic pose at their first meeting, Harris found "something oily and fat about him"—an impression he found hard to shake.²¹⁹ Harris delights in these visceral descriptions throughout the *Life*, and they may seem to detract from the earnest attempts at securing Wilde's cultural status that preceded it. Yet the *Life and Confessions* demands that Wilde receive his due, and the very scenes that feel most fabricated take the idea of pleasurable knowledge as an opportunity for intervention by the biographer. These scenes draw attention to their own excesses, containing dialogue to which Harris clearly could not have had access, expressions of sentiment that Wilde may or may not have ever felt, and warnings about Wilde's fate that could only emerge after its realization. Rather than move from subjective impressionism towards sterile objectivity in his writing about Wilde, as

²¹⁸ Ibid., 28.

²¹⁹ Harris recycles these details in his *Contemporary Portraits* series (1920-1923), which also records candid moments with Carlyle and Browning.

Sherard did, Harris enlists Wilde's own voice to create scenes which provoke readers to weigh the value of pleasurable knowledge against critical understanding, and prompt them to consider the effects of debased intentionalism in biography through the exploitative pull of narrative drama.

Harris positions himself as a biographer whose narrative skill matches his capability of offering insights into the artist's career. He begins with a sensational description of a trial—not Wilde's own, but that of his father, the oculist Sir William Wilde. The incident that led to Sir William's libel trial was of a disturbingly sexual nature. He was accused by one of his patients, Mary Travers, of seducing her over a series of visits, possibly using chloroform to render her unconscious. Since Sir William gave no defense, the jury awarded Travers negligible damages. Harris draws his account of the trial from the Irish papers, and observes that they produce "a realistic photograph, so to speak, of Sir William and Lady Wilde." He then adds,

An artist, however, would lean to a more kindly picture. Trying to see the personages as they saw themselves he would balance the doctor's excessive sensuality and lack of self-control by dwelling on the fact that his energy and perseverance and intimate adaptation to his surroundings had brought him in middle age to the chief place in his profession, and if Lady Wilde was abnormally vain, a verse-maker and not a poet, she was still a talented woman of considerable reading and manifold artistic sympathies.

Such were the father and mother of Oscar Wilde.²²⁰

Harris offers both the sensationalism of the papers and the sympathies of the artist. Using the father's trial to raise associations with that of the son allows Harris to draw a portrait of a passionate family history filled with a personal sense of triumph indistinguishable from narrowly avoided tragedy. Knowing that Wilde was proud of his parents, and his mother in particular, Harris also shows that the son was not always capable of "balance"

²²⁰ Harris, *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1997), 13. All in-text citations are from this edition.

when writing or speaking of them. If Harris is leaning to “a more kindly picture” here, it is partially because he is inhabiting Wilde’s perspective, showing how it could block out the less favorable traits of those he loved in favor of choosing the ones that would elevate his own literary standing (this tendency is on full view in *De Profundis* as Wilde criticizes Bosie for his lack of intelligence and initiative while celebrating the impact of Bosie’s beauty on his art).

The trial of Wilde’s father allows Harris to allude to the legacy of ambiguous meaning that emerged from Wilde’s own trials. The traits of Wilde’s parents—two passionate people whose professional commitments override the less praiseworthy aspects of their personalities—emerge from it to create a dichotomy in Wilde’s view of them, which Harris extends to illustrate the vacillation between affective and intellectual knowledge in Wilde’s career. Harris embeds Wilde’s artistic presence within layers of others’ perceptions, such as Wilde’s former schoolmates, while always giving precedent to his firsthand biographical knowledge. “It is love alone which in later life can achieve such a miracle of representment,” he explains (15). Harris makes the layers of Wilde’s biography visible to show that the pleasure of remembering Wilde can also corrupt the accuracy of responses to his art. He constructs his project according to a narrative arc similar in shape to Sherard’s, but ultimately holds that his artificial method of remembering Wilde legitimates Wilde’s own artificial self-fashioning, creating a space for him in literary history that might otherwise be foreclosed. A particular scene that illustrates the leveling involved in writing Wilde’s biography reconstructs Wilde’s memories of being Pater’s student at Oxford:

Pater meant everything to me. He taught me the highest form of art: the austerity of beauty. I came to my full growth with Pater. He was a sort of silent,

sympathetic elder brother. Fortunately for me he could not talk at all; but he was an admirable listener, and I talked to him by the hour. I learned the instrument of speech with him, for I could see by his face when I had said anything extraordinary. He did not praise me but quickened me astonishingly, forced me always to do better than my best—an intense vivifying influence, the influence of Greek art at its supremest. (28)

The dialogue given to Wilde in this scene emphasizes the place of silence and speech in his intellectual exchanges with Pater, who sits in sympathy. Harris encodes in Wilde's fascination with Pater a forbidden response in the older man that has perhaps less to do with his loquacious student than the "intense vivifying influence" that led him to withdraw his applications for two Oxford professorships, and to limit the discussion of Greek love in his publications after his bold discussion of the topic in "Winckelmann." But the scene is also about the strength of personality as a form of absorption and development, the substitution of the man himself for his corpus of writings. Harris complicates the idea that such substitutions are the inevitable desire of the reader by portraying Wilde as their vehicle. Harris depicts Wilde as someone who takes pleasure from a figure whose responses must remain unwritten. Such responses can only be transmitted through Wilde's perception of how Pater received him.

Wilde becomes an analogue for the desires embedded in biographical reading, as Harris's manipulations show the gratification that comes from having one's enthusiasm validated by the presence of a sympathetic figure that withholds speech. Wilde's affectations of admiration by his former tutor are supplemented with an exaggerated scene that warns of the dangers of letting this enthusiasm go too far:

"I really talked as if inspired, and when I paused, Pater—the stiff, quiet, silent Pater—suddenly slipped from his seat and knelt down by me and kissed my hand. I cried:
'You must not, you really must not. What would people think if they saw you?'
He got up with a white strained face.

‘I had to,’ he muttered, glancing about him fearfully, ‘I had to—once...’” (29)

Harris follows this embarrassing scene with a caveat: “I must warn my readers that this whole incident is ripened and set in a higher key of thought by the fact that Oscar told it more than ten years after it happened.” He emphasizes the lapse of time over the particulars of the incident itself, criticizing Wilde’s habit of storytelling (whether or not he ever told Harris this story). By laying the blame on Wilde for privileging his own intellectual gains over the importance of Pater’s tutelage, Harris draws attention away from his loose biographical approach to facts. The kiss is gratuitous, unnecessary, and patently false, but it calls to mind the process by which Wilde’s writings were reduced during the trials to equivalences with events that suddenly were no longer about “the life of every artist,” but his own.

In such scenes, Harris’s efforts to safeguard Wilde’s literary genius against slander and scandal emerge ironically through Wilde’s failures to fully process the influences of the figures he approached as models. For Harris, Whistler is the consummately modern artist, the individual who accomplished everything that Wilde wished to do while still at university. When Wilde styles himself as “Professor of Aesthetics and a Critic of Art” in his Oxford alumnus profile, Harris sees this as an example of Wilde’s tendency to take on the characteristics of his contemporaries almost faster than he could absorb them. Especially significant in this context is the famous jibe Whistler made in response to Wilde’s claim that he wished he had thought to make the painter’s remark that there are no good or bad paintings: “‘I wish I had said that.’ ‘You will, Oscar, you will,’ came Whistler’s lightning thrust” (38) (and in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde did). Whistler’s response to Wilde describes the idea of

hearing something already said before one says it. This idea translates into a different issue when it applies to Wilde's writings once they became texts instead of ideas in speech: the problem of bringing preconceived notions to a work of literary art before it could be completely understood.

It follows that in the biography's later scenes, the term "criticism," as Harris uses it, refers to Wilde's dismissal of objections to his behavior rather than written responses to his expanding body of work. This understanding of "criticism" draws attention to the kind of commentary on Wilde which did not yet exist, and thus forms part of Harris's effort to secure for Wilde a place in literary history within the confines of the pathologizing tendency he shares with Sherard. In a chapter titled "Danger Signals: The Challenge," he describes Wilde at "the very zenith of success," as well as his growing intimacy with Lord Alfred Douglas. Harris uses this relationship to portray the intellectual intimacies with such figures as Pater and Whistler in baser form. There is the sense in the biography's early chapters that Wilde's association with other artists leaves him vulnerable to the charge of self-fashioning without enough work of his own to support his reputation. Once he has amassed enough successful material to substantiate his social success, however, the focus of Harris's objections turns towards the effects of Wilde's personal activities on the reception of his material. After relating a story about Wilde and Bosie getting discovered by a parish vicar following an afternoon spent bathing, Harris notes that "Oscar's tone was not pleasant" when he provided the original version and that "The change in him had gone further than I feared. He was now utterly contemptuous of criticism and would listen to no counsel" (105). Wilde's "contemptuousness of criticism" is never far from his "grossness of body" in Harris's

account—a juxtaposition that illuminates the extent to which Wilde’s sexual proclivities overshadowed the interpretation of his work during the first decades of his posthumous reception.

When Harris reacts to Wilde’s altering physical presence, he registers the dissonance involved in transcribing Wilde’s speech into text, and ultimately in privileging a Wildean text over the persona he worked so fervently to create. As Wilde’s anxieties over this transition turn in *De Profundis* towards the embrace of Christ’s life as a poetic example, Harris draws on their mutual interest in Christ’s historical and spiritual presences to address his anxieties about Wilde’s bodily presence as it manifests through his words.²²¹ Harris acknowledges a “pagan” element in Wilde’s work, and observes that “It has been called blasphemous; it is not intentionally blasphemous; as I have said, Oscar always put himself quite naively in the place of any historical character” (106). One of Wilde’s “prose poems” serves as an illustration:

‘Christ went out of the house and, behold, in the street he saw a woman whose face and raiment were painted and whose feet were shod with pearls, and behind her walked a man who wore a cloak of two colours, and whose eyes were bright with lust. And Christ went up to the man and laid His hand on his shoulder, and said to him, ‘Tell me, why art thou following this woman, and why dost thou look at her in such wise?’ The man turned round, recognized Him and said, ‘I was blind; Thou didst heal me; what else should I do with my sight?’

This is only one of several occasions Harris uses heteronormative attraction as a prefatory gesture towards discussing Wilde’s homosexuality.²²² But it can also be construed more broadly as a commentary on seeing and not seeing, and how the recovery from blindness

²²¹ Jennifer Stevens traces the adaptation of Wilde’s oral stories into the scriptural fiction written by several of his friends, including Harris, in *The Historical Jesus and the Literary Imagination*. She includes an observation by the painter Augustus John, who saw Harris’s manuscript of the *Life and Confessions* before publication and described it as a “text interlarded with pious sentiments and references to our Saviour” which were only toned down after considerable resistance from the author” (209).

²²² Another oft-repeated instance is when Harris claims that Wilde admitted to him that his wife Constance’s beauty faded for him after her pregnancies: “She dragged herself about the house in uncouth misery with drawn blotched face and hideous body, sick at heart because of our love” (285).

might merely lead to a loss of focus elsewhere—a state of affairs that feels remarkably like the difficulty of trying to avoid reading Wilde’s life into his texts without succeeding. Harris claims that Wilde’s blasphemy stems from his tendency to “put himself naively in the place of historical character,” and this problem, in turn, proves to be a crucial part of the problem of writing Wilde’s biography, as does the issue of intentionalism. Harris’s explanation that the blasphemy of the prose poem is “not intentional” suggests that the narrative of Wilde’s sexual life has limited the wider breadth of interpretive significance in his work.

The most strident defense of the importance of Wilde’s work on its own terms in Harris’s biography occurs in the chapter titled “How Genius is Persecuted in England,” which argues that Wilde is a “benefactor of humanity” whose works should not be suppressed because of any posthumous information that emerges about him. Harris maintains that the artist’s achievements should be comparable to those of other professions, and that biography should not be capable of diminishing them. Harris’s approach to scandal differs from Sherard’s in his *Life of Oscar Wilde*, where Sherard attempts to clear Sir William Wilde’s reputation: “It should be remembered that the reputation of a great surgeon cannot be disturbed by the discoveries of posterity as is the case with men, who as doctors, have obtained in one age the fame of great luminaries of science, and who, as knowledge progresses, reveal themselves to a mocking world to have been the veriest merry-andrews” (19). Sherard differentiates between the infallible accomplishments of dexterity and skill and the erosion of outmoded discoveries across generations in the sciences. He does not translate this distinction into a comparison between Sir William Wilde and his son, but he uses Sir William’s other achievements,

which included a biography of Oliver Goldsmith, as evidence of his overall character overriding any potentially questionable moments in his past. In Sir William's case, according to Sherard, literary work accomplished in the spare moments of a different sort of career might serve as a corrective gesture.

Harris seizes on this discrepancy between the biographical futures of figures in political and scientific careers and those in literature. He recounts his efforts as the editor of *The Saturday Review* to publish an article in Wilde's defense, and his subsequent rejection by his printers, as well as *The Times*. The editor of the latter journal, Arthur Walter, did not share Harris's views:

In his heart [Walter] held the view of the English landed aristocracy, that the ordinary successful general or admiral or statesman was infinitely more important than a Shakespeare or a Browning. He could not be persuaded to believe that the names of Gladstone, Disraeli, Wolseley, Roberts, and Wood would diminish and fade from day to day till in a hundred years they would scarcely be known, even to the educated; whereas the fame of Browning, Swinburne, Meredith, or even Oscar Wilde, would increase and grow brighter with time, till, in one hundred or give hundred years, no one would dream of comparing pushful politicians like Gladstone or Beaconsfield with men of genius like Swinburne or Wilde. [...] In his opinion anyone leading a clean life was worth more than a writer of love songs or the maker of clever comedies—Mr. John Smith worth more than Shakespeare! (149)

Harris refuses to recognize that a John Smith would be worth remembering more than a Shakespeare—in part because literary geniuses might make it possible for such commonplace figures to be remembered. To uphold the middle class ideal of “clean living” for entry into posterity is to foreclose modernity's debts to the past as well as to inhibit the experiences of future readers. Yet Harris also makes clear just how aligned his acquaintances in the literary profession could be with these ideals, complaining that “there is no fellow-feeling among English men of letters; in fact they hold together less

than any other class, and, by himself, none of them wished to help a wounded member of the flock" (208).

The argument Harris offers for Wilde's genius is a standard appeal in the face of recognition lacked, but it nonetheless suggests that a biography such as his own might supply a template for the kind of fellow-feeling needed to preserve a career such as Wilde's in posterity. The example of Wilde's peers failing to unite in his defense feeds into a recurrent theme Harris applies to Wilde's life: the disparity between thought and action. The multiple forms this disparity assumes in Harris's biography—a literary man unwilling to separate his life and art, his friends unwilling to raise his art above his life—illustrate the vexed legacy of Wilde's work that Harris's and Sherard's biographies work to record. What does interpretation owe that legacy, their *Lives* of Wilde implicitly ask? As long as Wilde's actions are regarded more seriously than his words, they suggest, the "literary argument" of the trials will always draw attention to a question that already knows its answer, not one that needs to be uncovered through the act of criticism.

When Richard Ellmann quotes Wilde's prose poem, "The Disciple," in his biography of Wilde, one might wonder why he comes to the conclusion that he does:

When Narcissus died, the flowers of the field were desolate and asked the river for some drops of water to weep for him. 'Oh!' answered the river, 'if all my drops were tears, I should not have enough to weep for Narcissus myself. I loved him.' 'Oh!' replied the flowers of the field, 'how could you not have loved Narcissus? He was beautiful.' 'Was he beautiful?' said the river. 'And who should know better than you? Each day, leaning over your bank, he beheld his beauty in your waters.' 'If I loved him,' replied the river, 'it was because, when he leaned over my waters, I saw the reflection of my waters in his eyes.'

Ellmann observes, "The point was that there are no disciples...People are suns, not moons."²²³ This prose poem also forms part of an anecdote in Andre Gide's memoir of

²²³ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 357.

Wilde, and in this context it might well suggest that disciples are always really most interested in their own sensations. Yet Sherard's and Harris's attempts to work through their sensations of Wilde suggest that the recorded life is itself a mere moment, subject to renewal and revision.

It was not only in *De Profundis* that Wilde recognized the capacity for biographical and interpretive embarrassment to shape readers' experiences with the work of particular authors. Earlier in his career, he contributed a review on two biographies of Keats by Sidney Colvin and William Michael Rossetti. In it, he observes that "Part of Keats's charm as a man is his fascinating incompleteness. We do not want him reduced to a sand-paper smoothness or made perfect by the addition of popular virtues." He finds that Colvin's biography is well-written and researched, but that its pleasantness does not contribute much to an understanding of the poet. Rossetti's biography is, by comparison, "a great failure." Rossetti makes the mistake "of separating the man from the artist" when, Wilde notes, "The facts of Keats's life are interesting only when they are shown in relation to his creative activity."²²⁴ These remarks were published almost six months after another review Wilde wrote of Joseph Knight's life of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William's brother. That review offers similar sentiments and bears the title "A Cheap Edition of a Great Man"—a phrase that was to make its way into "The Critic as Artist." Wilde may not have recognized the extent to which his statements on Keats would apply to the biographies that were written about him after his death, but as he observes that biographies always come in successive editions in spite of the best efforts of their subjects to prevent them from being published—some of which are inevitably "cheap"—he recognizes their potential to determine literary value. The first Wilde biographies do

²²⁴ Wilde, "Two Biographies of Keats" in *Reviews*, (London: Methuen & Co., 1908), 181-186.

not always locate value where it might be expected—in the works themselves—but their consideration of speech as it transmits into text, the aesthetic virtues of friendship, and Wilde's affections for contemporaries and predecessors in literature indicate the challenges conferred by biography's association with debased intentionalism in the wake of the Wilde trials.

CHAPTER FOUR

How Should One Read a Biography? The Critic and the Common Reader

Biography has been seen as a slightly maverick, perhaps too popular, perhaps not sufficiently serious genre, so I come back to this phrase the Art of Biography. How do we talk about the art of biography?²²⁵ —Hermione Lee

I. Woolf, Biography, and Form

"I'm reading David Copperfield for the 6th time with almost complete satisfaction," writes Virginia Woolf in a February 8, 1936 letter addressed to the novelist Hugh Walpole. She continues:

I'd forgotten how magnificent it is. Whats wrong, I can't help asking myself? Why wasn't he the greatest writer in the world? For alas—no, I won't try to go into my crabblings and diminishings. So enthusiastic am I that I've got a new life of him: which makes me dislike him as a human being. Did you know—you who know everything—the story of the actress? He was an actor, I think; very hard; meretricious? Something had shrivelled? And then his velvet suit, and his stupendous genius? But you wont want to be discussing Dickens at the moment.²²⁶

Woolf would have been reading Thomas Wright's *Life of Charles Dickens* (1935), the first Dickens biography to discuss the novelist's affair with the actress Ellen Ternan. The quick shift from novel to biography in this letter has the effect of making the novel's deficiencies and the shortcomings of the novelist as a human being feed off one another, though Woolf keeps these things separate, unsatisfied with her overall impression of Dickens as a writer in spite of *David Copperfield's* magnificence. Although her interest is piqued by "the story of the actress," when she turns to describing Dickens as an actor, the language suggestive of the affair ("very hard," "something had shrivelled") gives way to the language of stylistic deficiency for which Woolf has no words. Woolf pairs the

²²⁵ "Writing Writers' Lives: Hermione Lee in Conversation with Gary Giddens." The Graduate Center, City University of New York. 18 March 2013.

²²⁶ "Leave the Letters Till We're Dead": The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. VI: 1936-1941, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), 12-13.

reference to Dickens's sartorial style, his "velvet suit," with the "stupendous genius" on display in his writing, conjuring up the living author and the persona of his novels, but struggling to reconcile the two. For Woolf, there is something deceptive about Dickens's writing, but the new biography does not explain what it is, any more than it explains the coexistence of the novelist's multiple selves. Her casual remarks at first seem to oppose novelistic form and biographical content, but the series of questions Woolf asks ultimately become complementary; they work towards an imaginative picture of Dickens as *writer* that is unavailable to her when she contemplates *David Copperfield* independently of the life, and unsatisfying to her when she confronts the reality of Dickens's personal circumstances.

Woolf does not follow through with her impulse to provide a critical response to Dickens's work in her letter to Walpole, but this impulse nonetheless prevents her from writing about *David Copperfield* on the basis of its formal characteristics alone, just as it prevents her from addressing Dickens's biography solely for the portrait it presents. Several years later, in her life of the painter and art critic Roger Fry, Woolf again found herself at an impasse as she attempted to make sense of an artist's life in relation to his work, this time invoking the figure of the critic to balance her discussion:

He did not believe with all his knowledge that he could guess the secret of a work of art. And human beings are not works of art. They are not consciously creating a book that can be read, or a picture that can be hung upon the wall. The critic of Roger Fry as a man has a far harder task than any that was set him by the pictures of Cézanne. Yet his character was strongly marked; each transformation left something positive behind it. He stood for something rare in the general life of his time.²²⁷

Ultimately, Woolf chooses to describe Fry's critical approach rather than his actual paintings, treating Fry's criticism in itself as a kind of art. Recalling Pater's "School of

²²⁷ Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 294.

Giorgione," Woolf makes the case that Fry's artistic legacy lies in the work of those he has influenced, more so than any of his individual paintings. Woolf's essays frequently employ Pater's method of using the artist's biography to explore the transformative powers of form. When she thinks of the works of Shakespeare and Jane Austen as "incandescent" in *A Room of One's Own*, she writes as a critic who sees biography and artistic form constantly shaping one another through impressions.²²⁸ There, Woolf defines "incandescence" as the creative mind's ideal state, where the artist's expression occurs freely and without impediments. But this state also describes the absence of any glaringly personal, biographical particularities that prevent the work from being absorbed without prejudice. In such a state, Woolf explains, "We are not held up by some 'revelation' which reminds us of the writer." Woolf cannot describe the positive effects of incandescence without also drawing attention to the "unwelcome revelations" that reveal the writer's biographical presence.

These moments in Woolf's writing, where her desire for formal critique runs up against the distraction of biographical details, not only register the ambivalent place of biography in her career, but they illustrate biography's unstable position within discussions of form during the first decades of the twentieth century. During a period in which biography became increasingly less associated with the goals of literary formalism, the "new biography" touted by Woolf and Lytton Strachey utilized techniques that blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction, as Max Saunders explains: "The New Biography thus catalyzed a new and substantial challenge to the idea of biography, which had a profound effect on creative writers, critics and teachers. [...] Biography seemed

²²⁸ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, 73.

irrelevant to literary studies; a survival from a belletristic age."²²⁹ Commentators on the New Biography were concerned with what kinds of biography might matter and to whom, and interested in how their positioning of its artistic status might look to different audiences. Surveys of biography, including Harold Nicolson's *Development of English Biography* (1928) and André Maurois's *Aspects of Biography* (1929) connected scholarly or academic practices with more generalized, idiosyncratic and personal reading, covering a range of material presumed to be too vast for the typical reader, while also inviting the reader to go deeper. These works lay out a set of detached critical goals, but rely on subjective assertions to implement them. Biography, in these instances, becomes a teaching tool that lays bare the relationship between subject, reader, and critic. The facts of biography are not ends in themselves; they are instead a means for thinking beyond the life towards responses to the work, the very responses that at first seem wholly detached from any element of the writer's or artist's life.

Why should Woolf be the central figure in a discussion of "biography as an art" when she believed that the biographer's work was "not destined for the immortality which the artist now and then achieves for his creations"?²³⁰ Woolf's deep ambivalence towards biography exhibits the uneasy response to biography that still characterizes its use in criticism.²³¹ Woolf shared with her contemporaries a desire to flesh out the artistic possibilities of biography as a literary form, even as biography and formalism became increasingly opposed. She objected "to the kind of criticism that gives preference to the

²²⁹ *Self-Impression*, 456.

²³⁰ "The Art of Biography" in *The Death of the Moth* (New York: Harcourt, 1942), 195-6.

²³¹ On Woolf's ambivalent attitude towards biography, see Saunders, *Self-Impression*, 438-50; Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester University Press, 1994), 90-134; Elena Gualtieri, "The Impossible Art: Virginia Woolf on Modern Biography," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 29, 4 (2000): 349-361.

formal elements and structure of the book"—such as Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction*—but also to the kind that is purely impressionistic and "evaluates the text in terms of life itself," such as E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*.²³²

Although Woolf hesitates to acknowledge biography as a form of literary art, she recognizes its potential to mediate between formal characteristics and impressions. Clive Bell's definition of "significant form" as both a collection of lines and colors and a set of components which results in aesthetic feeling, or the capacity to be moved, is useful here in illustrating Woolf's investment in something more than just the generic characteristics of biography.²³³ For her, biography is an object that ignites readers' feelings—of pleasure and curiosity, but also dislike. Biography is an essential component of Woolf's thinking about artistic form, especially when it appears to be prohibiting the circumstances under which form can generate subjective impressions. While one vision of the biographer in Woolf's writing is that of the hopelessly encumbered literary historical scholar, too immersed in his research to see it coming together as an accessible whole—the narrator of *Orlando* immediately comes to mind—there is also the artful selector, someone who helps readers remember "something we had known before."²³⁴ Woolf uses biography to tap into collective and personal memory: the "something" previously known need not be about the subject of the biography at all.

If, on the one hand, Woolf's writing on biography engages in some decidedly specialist practices, including the coinage of terms like "the new biography," on the other, it makes formal encounters accessible to a wider audience that includes common readers

²³² Pamela L. Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 173-174.

²³³ Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1913), 8.

<<https://archive.org/stream/artbellclive00belliala#page/8/mode/2up>>

²³⁴ Woolf, "The Art of Biography," 197.

and women. Woolf enjoyed writing about biography for "the common reader," who she believed to be "guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole—a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing."²³⁵ This description of the common reader's instincts is close to Woolf's own practice, for her essays may create a portrait, sketch, or theory. She frequently chose common figures both to represent a wider swathe of life and to embody the fiction writer's biographical impulse (in, for example, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown"). However, Woolf's attentiveness to form in her biographical writing may also serve as a response to the inherent challenges of directing biography towards the interests of a broader readership. As Kathryn Hughes writes, "When biography gained its first modern theorists, it also began to acquire its reputation as being unfit for academic purpose," particularly because of a "lingering anxiety that the subject attracted women and adult learners."²³⁶ These are the groups that Woolf typically has in mind when she acts as a theorist of biography, and when she uses her voice as a critic—or narrator—to mock the conventions of scholarship and the institutions that produce traditional biographies, she is always attentive to the gender roles that shape them. *A Room of One's Own*, a lecture originally delivered not for common readers but for the students of Cambridge's two women's colleges, Girton and Newnham, opens by asking what it even means to speak about "women and fiction." To assume that these women scholars will be satisfied by "a few remarks about Fanny Burney; a few more about Jane Austen; a

²³⁵ Virginia Woolf, "The Common Reader" in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 4, 1925-1928*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York and London: Harcourt, 1994), 19.

²³⁶ Kathryn Hughes, "Lives in Institutions," *a/b: Auto/biography Studies*, 25, 2, (Winter 2010): 281-293. On Woolf's interest in the unrecorded stories of women from the past, see Alison Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 227-233. On Woolf's interest in "lives of the obscure," see Juliette Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century 'Hidden' Lives* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 252-262.

tribute to the Brontës and a sketch of Haworth Parsonage under snow; a respectful allusion to George Eliot; a reference to Mrs. Gaskell" and nothing more would limit the uses of biography to a series of illustrative flourishes, and prevent more complex uses for biography from unfolding in Woolf's lecture, such as those in which a woman's critical impulse is activated when she picks up a biography written by a Victorian patriarch.²³⁷

Woolf, of course, was trained to read biography by a Victorian patriarch, but her reaction against the *Dictionary of National Biography* model, exemplified by the work of her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, is not entirely antagonistic.²³⁸ Her ability to intuit formal responses to biography, and to build them into the critical voice of her essays, grew out of the sense of inadequacy Woolf and her father both felt towards capturing a life in writing. Stephen's views were more flexible than the *Dictionary of National Biography* made them seem, with its entries consisting of lives easily condensed into homogenous narrative structures that allowed for little imagination or variation. In his 1893 essay, "Biography," Stephen criticized the modern biographer, who "is not content to be silent when there is nothing to be said. If facts are wanting, he fills up the gap with might-have-beens." Where this type of "exuberant biographer" engages in speculative acts of association, "The dictionary-maker must trust that his reader will see all this between the lines."²³⁹ While it may look as though Stephen forbids the "might have been" from having any place in biography at all, he actually endorses the imaginative act of reconstituting the past, as long as it occurs "between the lines" and remains the work of

²³⁷ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, 3-4.

²³⁸ Karyn Sproles, for instance, notes that all of the women writers Woolf refers to in *A Room of One's Own* were actually featured in *The Dictionary of National Biography*—although the emphasis on these women's lives in the *Dictionary* fell on their roles as wives and daughters rather than their work as professional writers (*Desiring Women: The Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West* [University of Toronto Press, 2006], 123).

²³⁹ Leslie Stephen, "Biography," in Nadel, ed., *Victorian Biography: A Collection of Essays from the Period* (New York and London: Garland, 1986), 173-174.

the reader. Woolf reiterates this idea in *Three Guineas*, when she beckons her own readers to “Let us go on looking, if not at the lines, then between the lines of biography.”²⁴⁰ Stephen's flexibility is, nonetheless, couched in the anxiety he felt about moving between private and professional realms through his biographical work. For Woolf, these realms are united in the practice of looking between the lines of biography, to digest the responses which the form itself can only approximate by grasping at facts.

This chapter will conclude with Woolf's efforts to use biography strategically in her criticism, as a means of moving between forms and impressions. But to begin with her late career is to consider the ways Woolf regarded biography as a de-hierarchizing genre, one that appealed to "common readers" and "common seers" as well as critics such as Woolf herself. Woolf foresaw that biography would maintain a resistance to theorization, something she regarded as especially important for the needs of the audiences—women, adult learners—with which it was beginning to be associated. Critics of Woolf's biographical work tend to focus on "The New Biography" as a vexed effort to define the appropriate relationship between fact and fiction in her writing, but that essay is part of a larger conversation about biography's artistic status in the early twentieth century. This conversation aligns biography with the de-hierarchizing potential of artistic form, because the critic must move between historical particularity and individualized responses to lives. Writers on biography in the early twentieth century recognize their subject as occupying an embarrassed space between historical narrative and critical discernment—a space that Woolf's writing inhabited throughout her career.

II. Pure and Impure: Histories of the New Biography

²⁴⁰ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, 265.

In one of the early twentieth century's major studies in the field, *English Biography* (1916), Waldo Dunn writes at the end of the chapter on biography in the nineteenth century: "A tribute is...due to the English reading public in that, in an age reputedly given up to the reading of fiction, readers have demanded biography in quantity well nigh to that of fiction."²⁴¹ Dunn's tribute to biography in an age of fiction was, nonetheless, about to be validated by a work of biography that succeeded precisely because of its use of fictional techniques. In 1918, Lytton Strachey published *Eminent Victorians*, the book that brought the idea of a "new biography" into being. If it remains a matter of debate how much fiction can be permitted in biography before the balance of fact is upset, after Strachey, the new biography is defined by its relationship to fiction, and the fictional methods the biographer employs. Max Saunders identifies among these methods "selection, obliqueness, indirection"—to which might be added the manipulation of narrative time and the accounting for missing material and absent information by imaginative means.²⁴²

The publication of *Eminent Victorians* is still identified as a watershed moment in English biography, but some critics have found that the more nuanced qualities of the book tend to be overshadowed by an overblown sense of its irreverence.²⁴³ The distinguishing feature of the small volume was its irony—Strachey presented his subjects with an earnestness that undercut the seriousness of their self-regard. He put this tactic to use at greater length with *Queen Victoria*, published in 1921 with a dedication to Woolf.

²⁴¹ Dunn, *English Biography* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1916), 199.

²⁴² Saunders, *Self-Impression*, 453.

²⁴³ See Simon Joyce, "On or about 1901: The Bloomsbury Group Looks Back at the Victorians." *Victorian Studies* 46, 4 (Summer 2004): 631-654. Joyce points out that Strachey had originally planned a project called "Victorian Silhouettes," which would be divided between positive and negative subjects, and proposes that *Eminent Victorians* carries out this plan in its individual essays.

Strachey's description of Victoria's marriage to Albert offers an example of the knowing tone that characterized his work: "It was decidedly a family match. Prince Charles Augustus Albert Emmanuel of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha—for such was his full title—had just been born three months after his cousin Victoria, and the same midwife had assisted at the two births."²⁴⁴ As Hermione Lee observes, "Lytton Strachey's debunking of his eminent Victorians was a key moment in the pulling down of the draperies" around the practice of writing lives in the nineteenth century, though she adds that Woolf did not subscribe to his methods without scruple.²⁴⁵ Woolf would herself make light of marriage as a plot device in a biographical romance in *Orlando*, when the "spirit of the age" tells Orlando she must marry, and Orlando subsequently collides head-on with the dashing Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire. But her fiction worked more subversively to veil a series of private jokes exchanged with the real "Orlando," her friend and lover Vita Sackville-West. The target of Strachey's irony has always been less clear: what is most remarkable about a work like *Eminent Victorians* is Strachey's ability to use history to critique biography, while staking a claim for the biographer's impressions and judgments as an exercise in literary art.

Beyond securing Strachey's reputation as an ironist, *Eminent Victorians* reignited the conversation about the art of biography by suggesting that biography could elicit pleasure from its readers when written with the interest of the best fiction. As T.S. Eliot observed, "Irony and mockery are not Mr. Strachey's product, but merely his tools, which he uses slyly to allow us the luxury of sentiment without being ashamed of it." Eliot adds, "The great difference, indeed, between Mr. Strachey's methods and those of his

²⁴⁴ Strachey, *Queen Victoria* (New York: Harcourt, 1918), 134.

²⁴⁵ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 9.

imitators is that the latter are often limited to mere derision, whereas in Mr. Strachey there is always affection, and often strong admiration, for his prey."²⁴⁶ Eliot stresses that irony and mockery are "tools" for Strachey, which permit readers of Strachey's work to experience sentiment without shame. While a reader might be "ashamed" of enjoying a sentimental book, what Eliot describes sounds more like embarrassment, with a potentially negative gesture—mockery—giving way to collective appreciation and affection (or even "admiration"). The recovery of mockery through appreciation enables a book like *Eminent Victorians* to move past the moral propriety Victorian Age conferred upon biography. Eliot's remarks suggest that Strachey's book allows for admiration through dissonant desires, desires which emerge in the reader's embarrassed reckoning with biography and the irony and critical detachment it produces.

Strachey lays out these desires in the preface to *Eminent Victorians*, where he offers a new standard of authority for writing biography that rests with the modernization of its form. Biography has not been given its due as an art, because it has been written by the "journeymen of letters," who sift through the vast quantity of material that the Victorian Age has left behind. Such biographers produce funereal tomes that aim to be all-encompassing resources, but offer little for the readers who keep history alive for successive generations. Strachey refuses to be caught between form and history. Instead, he presents himself as a selective, subjective chronicler of the Victorian Age: "my choice of subjects," he writes, "has been determined by no desire to construct a system or prove a theory, but by simple motives of convenience and art."²⁴⁷ He proposes to relay information dispassionately, impartially, and without ulterior intentions," vowing to

²⁴⁶ T.S. Eliot, "Elizabeth and Essex, by Lytton Strachey." *TLS* 6 Dec. 1928 in *The Modern Movement: A TLS Companion*, ed. John Gross (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 269-273.

²⁴⁷ *Eminent Victorians* (New York: Harcourt, 1918), vii.

maintain his "freedom of spirit" and to present the facts "as I understand them."²⁴⁸

Strachey's critics noted these claims of dispassionateness and impartiality, but Strachey's claims to "convenience and art," as T.S. Eliot understood them, could also emphasize the individual's response to biography, a response shaped by the freedoms of sentiment—even *determined* by that sentiment, when a reader accepted a heroic subject's flaws as reflective of their own. In this sense, *Eminent Victorians* told a history of the Victorian Age not merely through the institutions its subjects (Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold, and General Gordon) represented—the church, the army, and the schools—but through the perspective of the contemporary, general readership to which it appealed.

Strachey's slim book thus introduced a new critical perspective on biography that deemphasized theories and systems in favor of impressionistic responses. Strachey used the language of art and form to describe his approach to history, and he used his capacity for subjective selection to justify his choices of subjects. These principles of formal discernment and subjective selectivity were the basis for "the new biography."

Increasingly, however, the focus shifted from the historicity of biography to whether biography could flourish as an art form for common readers. Even writers on biography who chose to explore its chronological development, like Harold Nicolson, concerned themselves with the future of biography and how the genre would have to adapt to survive. Strachey had inaugurated a conversation about the practical function of form and sentiment in biography, both in terms of how biography might exist as a form that appealed to a wide range of readers, and how critics of biography might maintain a

²⁴⁸ Ibid., ix

scholarly (rather than academic) position that allowed them to mediate biography's formal characteristics.

Woolf's 1927 essay, "The New Biography," makes only a passing reference to Strachey, but it shares a number of the sentiments Strachey outlines in the preface to *Eminent Victorians*; Woolf memorably describes Victorian biography as a "particoloured, hybrid, monstrous birth," reiterating Strachey's criticism of its length and shapelessness.²⁴⁹ "The New Biography" is one of Woolf's best-known essays because it articulates one of the most pressing issues she faced as a novelist—how to accurately convey personality. But it is also a crux in the criticism of biography as an art, because it incorporates Strachey's contributions with the work of Harold Nicolson and André Maurois, both of whom would publish their own studies of biography in the two years following Woolf's essay. The second half of "The New Biography" is devoted to a review of Nicolson's *Some People*, a semiautobiographical collection of vignettes Nicolson published based on his boyhood and diplomatic career. Woolf praises Nicolson for what she deems "a triumph not of skill only, but of those positive qualities which we are likely to treat as if they were negative—freedom from pose, from sentimentality, from illusion."²⁵⁰ All of the qualities that Woolf finds in Nicolson's volume might be found in Strachey's work as well (the "freedom from sentimentality" she mentions is Woolf's version of the "luxury of sentiment without shame" Eliot saw in Strachey). The difference, Woolf implies, is that Strachey cleared the way for Nicolson's "negative" irreverence to be received as positive.

²⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography" in *The Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 4: 1925-1928*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London and New York: Harcourt, 1994), 474.

²⁵⁰ Woolf, "The New Biography," 478.

Woolf's remarks in this essay treat biography as a decidedly embarrassed object of aesthetic inquiry, since biography revives itself by continually vacillating between negative and positive qualities. Woolf enacts this vacillation within her own argument, for after she praises Nicolson, she equivocates with regard to his method of mixing fact and fiction. While acknowledging that "one can use many of the devices of fiction in dealing with real life," Woolf advises that "the imagination will not serve under two masters simultaneously."²⁵¹ It has been suggested that this statement proves Woolf's theories of fiction triumph over her thoughts about biography, because she would always find the act of fictionalization more creative than the transmission of historical facts.²⁵² But Woolf treats biography as a specific object of aesthetic inquiry, too, using a range of descriptive terms to make history a container for personality. The essay begins with a historical distillation of biography from Izaak Walton to James Boswell, and then gradually moves towards the blending of fact and fiction as a means of actualizing personal characteristics: "In order that the light of personality may shine through, facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded: yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity."²⁵³ Although Woolf ends the essay by claiming fact and fiction can never mix, here, she is interested in biography as process: history and personality animate one another through the selective principles employed by the artist.

The metaphors Woolf uses in "The New Biography" look towards the visceral excitement of the encounter with the figure whose life the biographer records and represents. She focuses on elements—light and shade, mass, color—more likely to be

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² As the philosopher Ray Monk argues in "This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography, Reality, and Character," *Philosophy and Literature* 31 (2007): 1-40.

²⁵³ Woolf, "The New Biography," 473.

associated with visual forms of art than with the literary art of biography: the "granite-like solidity" of truth contrasts with the "rainbow-like intangibility" of personality; truth is "like radium," since it "seems able to give off for ever and ever grains of energy, atoms of light." These metaphors allow Woolf to animate the less appealing aspects of Victorian biography, while enabling her to claim that an "artistic wrong headedness" characterizes the Victorian biographer's work. The major distinction of the new biography is that it has allowed the biographer to cease being artistically wrong-headed—and to become, simply, an artist.

Metaphors of tangible and intangible experience in "The New Biography" work through the embarrassments of biography and towards the conditions under which readers can approach biography as a work of art. When embarrassment emerges as a distinct term in the essay, Woolf uses it to illustrate the difference between biographical art and biographical drudgery: "The conscientious biographer may not tell a fine tale with a flourish," she writes, "but must toil through endless labyrinths and embarrass himself with countless documents."²⁵⁴ Here, Woolf plays on the meanings of embarrassment attached to biography in her moment of writing—to be embarrassed is to be overwhelmed by materials and lost in the attempt to assemble them coherently. But it is also to fail at interpretation on several counts, since the biography produced under such conditions does not present a clear version of the subject's life and work, or invite the reader to do so. A successful biography would encourage active participation in the formation of stories, and emphasize features of character likely to be shared by common readers with no individuated place in a grand narrative. Woolf challenges her readers at the conclusion of the essay to "Consider one's own life; pass under review a few years

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 475.

that one has actually lived," inviting them to notice how their own lives might fall outside of the scheme of the biographies she critiques.

Harold Nicolson's *Development of English Biography*, which appeared the year after Woolf's essay, reinforces the notion that an artfully written biography instills sympathy in its readers and produces a convincing interpretation of its subject. However, it keeps to a chronological discussion of biography to argue that biographies will become more specialized in the future. Nicolson departs from the generic fluidity Woolf had celebrated in his book *Some People*; the central distinction he makes in the *Development* is between "pure" and "impure" biography. In the first chapter of this short study, he argues that "we must above all distinguish 'pure' from 'impure' biography; and having thus narrowed down the art of biography to a recognisable and distinct form of narrative, we must indicate what elements go to render any particular biography either 'good' or 'bad'."²⁵⁵ Nicolson's definition of "impure" biography appears to refute the claims Woolf makes in her essay, for one of the qualities that he includes in this category is "an undue subjectivity in the writer." But Nicolson does not mean that the biographer's personality should be completely undetectable. He objects to intrusions—moments when the biographer's attitudes and judgments are forced upon the subject. The writer of "pure" biography, by contrast, produces a work that enables readers to connect with the subject because the biographer has opened a sympathetic channel which results in "an altered attitude of mind."

For Nicolson, "pure biography" does something more than satisfy the curiosity invited by confessional documents such as diaries and journals; it provides evidence of "a consciousness of creation," and a creative transposition of facts that results in a

²⁵⁵ Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, 8.

"convincing interpretation." Fundamentally, then, Nicolson agrees with Woolf's stance on the biographer's role, but he sees a different place for fiction in the biographer's toolkit. The future of biography does not depend upon its relationship to fiction, but upon its fracturing into separate, specialized categories. "In general," he speculates, "literary biography will, I suppose, wander off into the imaginative, leaving the strident streets of science for the open fields of fiction."²⁵⁶ The possibilities he sees are multiform:

There will be medical biographies—studies of the influence on character of the endocrine glands, studies of internal secretions; there will be sociological biographies, economic biographies, aesthetic biographies, philosophical biographies. These will doubtless be interesting and instructive, but the emphasis which will be thrown on the analytical or scientific aspect will inevitably lessen the literary effort applied to their composition.

As Laura Marcus points out, Nicolson's inclination towards scientific biography seeks to contain the cross-proliferation of genres that Woolf envisioned in "The New Biography," but it also makes a departure from the previous century's emphasis on morality, reputation and character as the biographer's primary domain.²⁵⁷ A more strategic version of Nicolson's study, however, is that he has taken the embarrassments of moral propriety in Victorian biography and transmuted them into categories of formalistic purity and impurity. Traces of moralism remain in the language of "pure" and "impure" biography, but Nicolson is less interested in using these categories to limit the mixture of fiction and fact than he is in pointing towards specialization, rather than cross-proliferation, as the future direction of biography. In his view, there will be a biography for everything: for organs, works of art, branches of philosophical inquiry. Specialization will come to replace the pure aesthetic response that biography can lay claim to as a literary art.

²⁵⁶ Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, 155.

²⁵⁷ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, 104.

André Maurois drew on Nicolson's study as preparation for his series of lectures, *Aspects of Biography* (1929), but where Nicolson ultimately abjures the idea of biography as a literary art to make way for specialization, Maurois claims that the survival of biography lies in its capacity to bridge disparate disciplines and experiences. Maurois also acknowledges his debts to Woolf in his lecture-series-turned-book, although he is more comfortable with considering the relationship between fact and fiction in biography, an unsurprising turn given the other work he produced during his career. Maurois wrote biography in a novelistic style, making it appeal to a broad audience; his biography of Shelley, *Ariel* (1924), was the very first book issued in the Penguin Paperbacks series in 1935. In *Aspects of Biography*, Maurois critiqued the style of *Ariel*, explaining that he found it "Spoilt by an ironic tone."²⁵⁸ Maurois came to renounce the way he had used Shelley's life as a vehicle for his own personal frustrations; but at the same time, Maurois recognized that the frustrations he put into *Ariel* stemmed from the inapplicability of his early studies to his experiences in the outside world. His Shelley is someone who invents because scientific logic is not wholly satisfying, someone who is accustomed to "looking at facts through the vaporous meshes of clouds."²⁵⁹

Aspects of Biography is arranged so that individual readers may bring their judgments to bear upon the individual subjects outlined in its six lectures. These are arranged by theme rather than according to chronology, disburdening Maurois of comprehensiveness and allowing him to combine the needs of the scholar and the common reader ("Modern Biography," "Biography as a work of art," "Biography considered as a science," "Biography as a means of expression," "Autobiography," and

²⁵⁸ Maurois, *Aspects of Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 1929), 108.

²⁵⁹ Maurois, *Ariel: The Life of Shelley*, trans. Ella D'Arcy (New York: Appleton, 1924), 23.

"Biography and the Novel"). Maurois named the series after E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, and in his preface, Maurois borrows Forster's distinction between genuine scholarship and "pseudo-scholarship." The pseudo-scholar, according to Forster, classifies books without having read them, whereas the genuine scholar illustrates a mastery of facts and a thorough knowledge of his subject.²⁶⁰ Maurois claims that the structure of his lecture series came about by virtue of not wanting to appear as a pseudo-scholar before a distinguished audience (like Forster's *Aspects*, Maurois's book was originally presented for the Clark lecture series at Cambridge University). "I said to myself that since circumstances had not made me a professional scholar," he explains, "I must beware of the absurdity of playing the pseudo-scholar."²⁶¹ He cites Nicolson's *Development of English Biography* as the example of true scholarship which ultimately enables him to break free of the chronological plan he would otherwise have been tempted to pursue in *Aspects of Biography*. With his reference to Nicolson's work, Maurois acknowledges an intellectual debt and introduces the angle of *Aspects of Biography*: it will move beyond historical chronology to evaluate the ethical and aesthetic functions of biography. He thus addresses the issue of specialization that Nicolson raises at the end of his study. *The Development of English Biography* suggests that literariness is not one of biography's constituent elements, but that the literary aspects of biography must inevitably diminish as its subjects grow more specific; hence Nicolson's claim that biography will "wander off into the imaginative," leaving the more "strident" subject of science to biographies with a more disciplinary (biological, sociological, economic) focus. Designating himself as a speaker whose remarks on biography will fall

²⁶⁰ E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 9-13.

²⁶¹ Maurois, *Aspects of Biography*, 4.

somewhere between the work of the scholar and the pseudo-scholar, Maurois offers a different take on Nicolson's fractured future vision of biography.

Maurois's refusal to discuss biography chronologically serves his assertion that the problem of biography is "not merely a historical one." It is also "an ethical problem and an aesthetic problem," and therefore the questions it raises must be common to *all* types of biographies that emerge in the future, even if they fall into the specific categories mentioned in Nicolson's book.²⁶² Maurois's approach accommodates the inconsistencies he finds in Nicolson's arguments. When, for example, Nicolson contradicts the claim that authorial interruption is the primary feature of "impure" biography by placing Lytton Strachey's work in this category, Maurois suggests that Strachey's books cannot be impure because "the author never appears himself."²⁶³ And rather than dismissing altogether Nicolson's belief that literary and scientific biography must go off in separate directions, Maurois contends that "a scientific book, perfectly constructed, is a work of art."²⁶⁴ Rather than formulate a narrative where biography will have no place among the new kinds of knowledge available to the reading public, Maurois lays out a set of conditions where the imaginative consciousness of the reader displaces belief—a process that begins in the nineteenth century. Summarizing the reasons for the change that came upon biography after the nineteenth century, he observes, "The biography of standardised panegyric had no educative value, because no one any longer believed in it."²⁶⁵ The rupture between value and belief threatens to diminish biography as a source of knowledge in a specialized age. And yet Maurois finds that biography maintains a

²⁶² Ibid., 5.

²⁶³ Nicolson, *The Development of English Biography*, 152-153; Maurois, *Aspects of Biography*, 17.

²⁶⁴ Maurois, *Aspects of Biography*, 34.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 21.

unique value through emotional order—it allows for a projection outside the self that contributes to the formation of critical dispositions.

To reinforce the idea of biography as a source of knowledge generated by a creative critical consciousness, Maurois must acknowledge that biography generates embarrassment. He observes that "the two qualities...which are essential for all aesthetic activity—an ethical neutrality and a reconstruction of nature by man—are a source of some embarrassment to us today as we attempt to treat of biography considered as a work of art; for they appear to debar biography, as well as history, from admission to the domain of art."²⁶⁶ This logic holds that a reader who picks up a biography knowing the fate of its subject can expect less of a transformative experience than that offered by the novel, whose characters may elicit sympathetic responses because they never actually existed. Attachment to a biographical subject who is alive (or who has recently died) interferes with neutrality, while the awareness of how a life ends tampers with the reconstruction of nature. Maurois responds to the idea that biography cannot be an art because its subjects are real—in life or in death—by naming death as the "greatest of artists." This familiar conceit allows Maurois to challenge the view that biography cannot be art because it is merely mimetic. By enforcing critical detachment, death demands the reconstruction of nature. Knowing how a life ends is not a disadvantage to the reader from an ethical point of view, because the approach of a tragic event instils a "proper aesthetic attitude," in which a person can revive and complete extant recollections.

Maurois's ethics of biography discourage a single-sided, mimetic exchange where the subject can be nothing other than an imperfect representation of the biographer's

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 39.

imagination, since biography is embarrassing when it does not open up new critical impressions of the subject. The alternative channel Maurois finds for embarrassment is through the hypothetical exchange between biographer and reader. He paraphrases the moment in Woolf's "New Biography" essay where she asks her readers to "consider one's own life," turning the suggestion into an admonition: "Think of your own life." Maurois follows this admonition with a series of imaginative exchanges between the reader and the reader's future biographer. "Would you like to see him turning over the pages of your books and deducing from them that you had done things quite foreign to your nature?" he asks. The response: "'That is not myself,' you would say, 'that is the work of my imagination'."²⁶⁷ Here, Maurois shares Woolf's technique of soliciting readers' reactions to make them aware of their natural tendency to invent others' stories. Biography succeeds as an art when this natural inventive tendency creates an alien feeling in its readers, making them sympathize with principles or actions that are not their own; it fails when it merely recasts the reader's own life situation in another time and place. Maurois invites the reader to become a ghost looking back upon his or her own life in print: he keeps biography from becoming a dying art by asking readers to accept the reconstitution of human life that death demands.

The ethical and aesthetic elements of biography are closely aligned in *Aspects of Biography*, for together, they make self-analysis possible and useful amid the proliferation of new disciplines. Biography secures its place in modern society by opening itself to new scientific developments while making these developments comprehensible to general readers. Maurois perhaps sensed this when he singled out *Mrs. Dalloway* as an ethical book—while he does not offer much elaboration, the novel's

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 91, 31.

focus on the health of the mind sets the balm of poetry and the example of literary history next to "proportion," science, and sanity, without either category gaining clear ground over the other. Woolf's novel weaves together multiple perspectives over the course of a single day, challenging the traditional form of biography and asking how reading about others' lives can help people come to terms with the layers of experience within themselves. Septimus Smith—the shell-shocked young soldier returned from the Great War—illustrates what it feels like to live past the moment when one is expected to die, and to see many different versions of his life written for him in the eyes of others: his doctor, Sir William Bradshaw; his wife, Lucrezia, and the London populace. Septimus suffers as he attempts to reconcile his love of beauty and poetry with the scientific explanations of his condition. When Clarissa Dalloway learns of Septimus's suicide at her party, she thinks not of a life coming to a close, but of her own life's continuing:

She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away. They went on living (she would have to go back; the rooms were still crowded; people kept on coming). They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally), they would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death.²⁶⁸

Clarissa's meditation on Septimus's death does not attempt to explain away his condition; it is an occasion for her to take account of her own life through the unexpected act of communication his death becomes. *Mrs. Dalloway* gives bits and pieces of Septimus's and Clarissa's biographies to present life as a narrative that is not mimetic or linearly structured, but continually unfolding and reshaping, in the middle of the most ordinary occurrences and events. Maurois's theory that death in biography brings about the

²⁶⁸ Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925. New York: Harcourt, 2005), 180.

reconstruction of nature holds true for the novel: Septimus's death might be a tragedy that readers of *Mrs. Dalloway* can see coming, but its effect is to put Clarissa in the middle of her own life rather than at the end of her story.

The effort to define "the new biography" in book-length studies, lectures, and critical essays went beyond discussions of the genre's precarious status in a modern age—biography turned into a leveling force in the distribution of specialized knowledge, particularly for Maurois and Woolf. But it is Woolf's work which offers the most complex picture of the art of biography as a practice dependent on the interaction of subjects, writers, and readers across time. *Orlando* is a case in point: both a mock-biography and a fantastical piece of scholarship, it comes complete with an index, "archival" photographs (of Vita-Sackville West), and ironic witticisms by the biographer-narrator scattered throughout. Because of *Orlando*'s fundamental subversiveness, it is more challenging to locate within it the kind of ethics of biography that Maurois associated with Woolf's fiction. The novel reverses the critical detachment of death which Maurois identifies as a necessary aesthetic component of literary biography. Not only does Orlando live through several centuries without dying, but she gets to speak with the dead (and they are sometimes prevented from answering, as when the narrator describes a carriage ride Orlando takes with the voluble Alexander Pope, without giving Pope a single line of dialogue). Dead authors are presented not as "others" in *Orlando*, but as reflections of the innumerable selves contained in a single life. When Orlando sees Pope and Swift before her, she sees ordinary human beings: "she now began to live much in the company of men of genius, yet after all they were not much different from other

people."²⁶⁹ By the time she enters the twentieth century, Orlando lives in a world where genius is found in the ordinary, and biography can only account for several phases of an infinitely various life. As the narrator observes, "she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand."²⁷⁰ *Orlando* never presents someone being edified, transformed, or inspired by a standard biography. And yet the novel needs the target of its satire to function as art: Woolf creates a fiction that reminds readers how many selves fall outside of the parameters of a typical biography.

If the narrator's droll remarks are taken at face value, *Orlando* seems to have no use for biographies that do not take the same narrative and temporal risks, and the novel makes Woolf's views on biography as an art appear worlds apart from the future of biography as Nicolson and Maurois imagined it. But overall, it is a novel that thinks about what and who biography is *for*, and this question sustained the dialogue between Woolf and her contemporaries. As she began to focus more explicitly on broadening opportunities for women writers and scholars, Woolf encouraged these women to use biography creatively as well as critically. The narrative of Shakespeare's sister in *A Room of One's Own* does both: it invents the death of someone who never lived to imagine the shape of future lives yet unwritten, and to comment on the intellectual limitations of biographies (and autobiographies) that inhibit the workings of the androgynous mind. Where *Orlando* illustrates the androgynous mind at work, *A Room* can make its argument because no biographies like *Orlando* exist.

²⁶⁹ Woolf, *Orlando* (Harcourt, 1956), 208.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 309.

Towards the end of her life, around the time she began to write her biography of Roger Fry, Woolf offered what was perhaps her most direct statement on how biography might increase access to knowledge for common readers. *Three Guineas* is an indictment of war and patriarchal society, and yet, Woolf turns to biography in this essay—not as material for fictional experimentation, but as a repository for multiple perspectives. Early in the essay, Woolf refers to "that marvelous, perpetually renewed, and as yet largely untapped aid to the understanding of human motives which is provided in our age by biography and autobiography."²⁷¹ Along with the daily news, biography provides the raw material for making sense of the educational divide in modern society, and it constitutes evidence of the need for equality in the professions. And it is "raw" biography that interests Woolf—not biography blended with fiction. Although "The New Biography" had argued for the techniques of fiction as a means of revivifying an outmoded form, in the years before she wrote *Three Guineas*, Woolf refined her thoughts with "The Art of Biography," where she looked at the biographer's work on its own terms. In "The Art of Biography," she reintroduces her familiar claim that "the novelist is free" while "the biographer is tied," but she also sees new possibilities for biography:

...since we live in an age when a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters, and diaries, at every character from every angle, he must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face. Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners. And yet from all this diversity it will bring out, not a riot of confusion, but a richer unity.²⁷²

²⁷¹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, 159.

²⁷² Woolf, "The Art of Biography," 195.

The language of multiple angles, contradiction, and the enlargement of scope makes its way into *Three Guineas*, where biography is described as seductive and "double faced" as well as "many-sided."²⁷³

For Woolf, biography is "double-faced" when it narrates the life of a compelling subject while situating that subject firmly within the strictures of her age, but it can become "many-sided" when the defeats it describes become lessons. This movement from the "double-faced" towards the "many-sided" aspects of biography can be seen when Woolf describes a series of exchanges in 1869 between Sophia Jex-Blake, a woman who wished to earn money through tutoring, and her father, a proctor. Jex-Blake's obscure narrative might look like yet another example of a women's subjugation under patriarchal authority in nineteenth-century biography, but Woolf uses it as an illustration of how to read biography for evidence of the intellectual limitations experienced by both sexes. Jex-Blake's father coerced her into refusing fees for her tutoring work, explaining that he would give her everything she required if she married someone who met with his approval. Bitterly acknowledging in her diary that she had only "defer[red] the struggle," Jex-Blake ultimately refused payment for the term (247). Woolf suggests that by adopting a narrow view of the professions, men become "sympathy addicts" who bemoan their lack of time for art and leisure. Women, in turn, suffer when they are prevented from contributing to society by supporting their own well-being, creativity, and enterprise. Through stories like Jex-Blake's (and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's), Woolf makes the case that biography's many-sidedness can illuminate the social structures which determine how art is processed, enjoyed, and understood.

²⁷³ *Three Guineas*, 187, 268.

Biography can illuminate the social function of art for "outsiders" particularly because of the ease with which it can be accessed. In *Three Guineas*, biography is a mainstay of the public library, that space which catered to the women and adult learners who apparently detracted from the more literary qualities of biography by the very fact of their interest in it. Woolf makes biography a "witness" to her claims about education: "The witness of biography—that witness which anyone who can read English can consult on the shelves of any public library—is unanimous upon this point; the value of education is among the greatest of all human values."²⁷⁴ The future of biography as an art, Woolf suggests, lies in the hands of readers who can make use of its double faces and many sides. But a critical approach must be maintained. When she discusses the life of Mary Astell, who was involved in an unsuccessful plan to found a women's college in the seventeenth century, Woolf observes that readers of Astell's biography should not be seduced by its charm. Astell's life, she argues, should not be celebrated simply because a woman endeavored to provide educational opportunities for other women at a period in history that discouraged them from doing so. It is not enough to claim that a benighted past makes the present more acceptable:

As, however, it is of great importance that we should use our influence through education to affect the young against war we must not be baffled by the evasions of biography or seduced by its charm. We must try to see what kind of education an educated man's sister receives at present, in order that we may do our utmost to use our influence in the universities where it properly belongs, and where it will have the most chance of penetrating beneath the skin.²⁷⁵

The argument about women's education in this passage grows out of an argument about how to read biography. What biography presents as evidence of "evasion" in the past, of women's opportunities and desires, and the aesthetic pleasures of both sexes, can become

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 184-185.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 188.

evasion in the present, too, if biography is not read critically and continually tested against its own attributes. Woolf's formal experimentation with biography, from *Orlando* to her reviews and educational lectures, made writing about the "new" biography an occasion for turning to the past to think about the future. The embarrassing qualities of biography—its predictable, mimetic form, the sentimental pleasures it offered everyday readers, and its uncertain place within an increasingly specialized set of disciplines—became tools for Woolf to investigate the relationship between writers and common readers in her criticism.

III. Biography, Death and the Critic

Woolf's efforts to unite the aesthetic and practical aspects of biography in her criticism are especially apparent when she approaches the text as a means of bringing the dead to life. It is this act of reanimation which facilitates the critic's transition from impressions to judgments. By reimagining the dead through writing, Woolf implements a version of Maurois's ethical imperative, his gesture towards death as the necessary provision for an objective point of view. As Catherine Neal Parke puts it, for Woolf, "critic and biographer alike function as mediums who translate into imaginative presence spirits of the distant or dead. Both must acknowledge imaginative responsibility to reanimate writers' personalities as central to the task of examining their springs of creativity."²⁷⁶ However, critic and biographer are not necessarily "alike"; the biographer is explicitly tasked with illuminating the life, while the critic must find a means of addressing the relationship between life and work. Woolf's writings are particularly interested in how readers' personal responses to the *idea* of someone who has lived shape

²⁷⁶ Catherine N. Parke, *Biography: Writing Lives* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 79.

their judgments of a writer's work.²⁷⁷ Writing contains traces of personality that end up bearing the most fruit as acts of self-negation, where biographical details give way to stylistic transparency. For Woolf, biography could be effective in criticism when unknown life details shock the reader into a new experience of a writer's work (as her own experience with Dickens shows). But it is most effective when it reroutes the reader's attention to the writing itself, which retains a kind of biographical presence that works *through* literary form rather than against it.

The ability to reanimate the dead through form became a defining feature of Woolf's criticism, even as it also allowed her to distinguish her literary work from her personal writing. In "A Sketch of the Past," the memoir she began while working on *Roger Fry*, she explains her struggle to bring her mother, Julia Stephen, to life. "If one could give a sense of my mother's personality," Woolf writes, "one would have to be an artist."²⁷⁸ Woolf had done just that with *To the Lighthouse*, but in the memoir, she avoids making any specific connections between the lives of her parents and their counterparts in the novel, offering only that when it was written, her mother "ceased to obsess" her. She abstracts her artistic persona from the biographical particulars of her own life in "A Sketch of the Past," but this has the effect of making Woolf's biography lead back to her process as a writer, the typical direction taken by her works of biographical criticism.

"A Sketch of the Past" hints at an influence that Woolf left muted in the memoir, but which informs her understanding of literary form as a negotiation between the worlds of the living and the dead. Leslie Stephen had experienced his own difficulty with

²⁷⁷ On Woolf as a critic, see Maria DiBattista, *Imagining Virginia Woolf: An Experiment in Critical Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2009), Elena Gualtieri, *Virginia Woolf's Essays: Sketching the Past* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), and Pamela L. Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism*.

²⁷⁸ Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past" in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt, 1985), 85.

bringing his late wife to life through writing, and he chronicled his struggles in *The Mausoleum Book*, which he began several weeks after Julia Stephen's death as a memorial for his children, and to which he continued to make additions until his own death in 1904.²⁷⁹ Leslie Stephen writes of Julia as an unreal figure, someone whose presence he can only make sense of by describing her with signs and texts that have lost their meaning. These signs are, more often than not, religious: Stephen's agnosticism caused him to leave his tutorship at Cambridge to pursue an independent career in letters. Recounting one of their letter exchanges in which Stephen tells Julia that he desires to marry her for more than just the experience of loss they share as bereaved spouses (Stephen was previously married to Thackeray's daughter, Minny, and Julia to Herbert Duckworth), he writes, "I did not judge of people by their acquirements but by themselves—a text upon which I had already preached to her." The text Stephen refers to is his proverbial moral rule book, which he can draw from liberally in his lapsed faith. He proposes not only to preach to Julia from that book, however, but also to make her a figure in it: "You see I have not got any Saints and you must not be angry if I put you in the place where my Saints ought to be."²⁸⁰

Throughout the book, Stephen attempts to find the form best suited for Julia's commemoration, struggling to develop the neutrality required for the biographer to maintain aesthetic distance. Woolf inherits this problem as she writes "A Sketch of the

²⁷⁹ On the relationship between *The Mausoleum Book* and "A Sketch of the Past," see Hannah Sullivan, "Autobiography and the Problem of Finish," *Biography* 34, 2 (Spring 2011): 298-326. For an extended discussion of Leslie Stephen's work on biography, its connections to the writing of memoir, and gender in the life-writing of late Victorian men, see Trev Lynn Broughton, *Men of Letters, Writing Lives: Masculinity and Auto/biography in the Late Victorian Period* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

²⁸⁰ *Sir Leslie Stephen's Mausoleum Book* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 53. In this sense, Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs become an especially fitting record of Julia's life as Stephen perceives it—as Cameron would arrange family members and friends to reenact Biblical scenes, Julia Stephen performs for her husband the role of saint and invests it with meaning that religious texts can no longer provide.

Past," which tests her ability to find the appropriate form for rendering her mother's personality, and it is ultimately the artist, rather than the grieving family member, who stands up to the challenge. And yet, Woolf's memoir thinks about death as a necessity for achieving critical distance; the desire to read and write actual biography exists alongside the desire to turn Julia Stephen into a work of art. It is only by laying bare each of these desires that Woolf can begin to explain her own process as an artist, and in her criticism, the interplay between them gives her access to the personalities of other writers.

* * *

In "How Should One Read a Book?"—part of Woolf's second *Common Reader* series—biography establishes the connection with a dead author that conveys personality through writing. "If we could banish all preconceptions when we read," Woolf advises, "that would be an admirable beginning. Do not dictate to your author; try to become him. Be his fellow-worker and accomplice." If a reader approaches a book predisposed to make judgments or comparisons, then the "fullest possible value" of a reading experience cannot be realized. "But," she continues, "if you open your mind as widely as possible, then signs and hints of almost imperceptible fineness, from the twist and turn of the first sentences, will bring you into the presence of a human being unlike any other."²⁸¹ Here, Woolf is referring to style, a personality that manages to assert itself in writing by becoming as transparent as possible.²⁸² The human being that emerges from this reading experience is everyone and no one, and the reader must furnish the personality's resistance to full disclosure with the impressions of an open mind. Woolf encourages her

²⁸¹ Woolf, "How Should One Read a Book?" in *The Common Reader, Second Series* (1935) <<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91c2/chapter22.html>>

²⁸² Woolf builds upon Pater's idea of "pure" style as "the medium through which alone [the writer] can expose that inward sense of things" (Pater, *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style*. 1889. [London and New York: Macmillan, 1895], 33).

readers to "follow your own instincts," "use your own reason," and "come to your own conclusions."

In "The Art of Biography," Woolf claims that the biographer can make the subject's life a reflection of knowledge readers have forgotten they possess. "How Should One Read a Book?" makes the encounter with biography result in the reanimation of forgotten knowledge; it is the first move towards style as the distinguishing feature of a reader's contact with the artist's personality. Woolf provides the visual image of a shelf filled with a heterogeneous array of books, the biographies distributed between the novels and poetry. Putting all of these genres on the same level removes the "great man" from his place in a grand historical narrative to the experience of ordinary, everyday life—when Woolf pictures the "lives of great men, of men long dead and forgotten," these two categories overlap. The biography of a great man continues curiosities that go beyond its subject: one finds in it "the servants gossiping, the gentlemen dining, the girl dressing for a party, the old woman at the window with her knitting." With all of these perspectives to bring together, Woolf wonders: "How far, must we ask ourselves, is a book influenced by its author's life—how far is it safe to let the man interpret the writer?" "Interpreting the writer" becomes more than a matter of discerning personal character: it is a means of evaluating that character's presence in the work itself, in the novels and the poetry that sit alongside the biographies on the shelf but have no necessary connection with them. Woolf leaves her readers to determine for themselves the degree to which a book is influenced by the author's life, "For nothing can be more fatal than to be guided by the preferences of others in a matter so personal." Woolf suggests that reading too far in any particular direction limits the reader's pleasures, and that the experience of a writer's work

is defined by impressions that evolve and change. The more familiar a work becomes, the less diversionary the author's biographical details are, because they have become part of a new, amalgamated experience.

"I Am Christina Rossetti" (1930) announces this amalgamation of experience in its very title: the "I" unites the poet, her work, the reader, and the critic in an essay that begins with a review of literary biography. In this piece, originally published as a review of Mary F. Sandars's *Life of Christina Rossetti*, Woolf begins by discussing biography as a potential interpretive impediment and turns it into a vehicle for formal understanding. An anecdote in Sandars's biography provides the basis for Woolf's reading. Sandars describes Christina Rossetti as particularly sensitive towards publicity of any kind, her natural habit of religious reserve taxed by the prospect of literary fame. According to the memoirs of a Mrs. Stirling, Rossetti stood up during a party, strode into the middle of the room, and announced "I am Christina Rossetti!" before returning to her seat. "The company must have been astonished," writes Sandars, "but Christina was doubtless unconscious of what she was doing."²⁸³

In Woolf's take on the story, Christina Rossetti is not an unconscious actor. Over the course of the essay, Woolf shows how the poet's assertion functions as a kind of erasure, a fading of the figure herself into the poems she writes (Rossetti's poem "A Birthday" in *A Room of One's Own* reflects this continuity of the figure through her work over time, when Woolf asks herself if men and women hummed "My heart is gladder than all these/Because my love is come to me" to themselves before the war). Rossetti reminds the company at the tea party and the audience of the future that she is first and foremost a poet, and that she wishes to be known through her poems. The moment she

²⁸³ Sandars, *The Life of Christina Rossetti*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 130.

"becomes" Christina Rossetti in Woolf's essay is the moment her name signifies a collection of writings, evocative of but separate from the author's life.²⁸⁴

Biography functions as a satisfying illusion, which gradually strips away Rossetti's biographer, Mary Sandars, as well as the portrait Sandars constructs of Rossetti. Woolf does not comment on the specifics of Sandars's method; she only calls *The Life of Christina Rossetti* "careful and competent." Instead, she finds irony in celebrating the centenary of a woman who made a career out of humility. The appearance of new lives and letters, portraits, documents, and medical histories—a shortlist provided by Woolf of the small industry an author's death brings into being—would have caused Christina Rossetti "acute discomfort." Even so, Woolf concedes that "As everybody knows, the fascination of reading biographies is irresistible."

The metaphor Woolf chooses to illustrate the amusement of reading biography—the aquarium—fuses the trappings of formal poetic analysis with the voyeurism of learning about the figures of the past, the very combination which in her view makes a biography of Christina Rossetti such a strange prospect. The aquarium is an object that promises scientific study in a controlled environment, limiting the free movement of the organisms in it even as it gives the illusion of a boundless world:

Here is the past and all its inhabitants miraculously sealed as in a magic tank; all we have to do is to look and to listen and to listen and to look and soon the little figures—for they are rather under life size—will begin to move and to speak, and as they move we shall arrange them in all sorts of patterns of which they were ignorant, for they thought when they were alive that they could go where they liked; and as they speak we shall read into their sayings all kinds of meanings which never struck them, for they believed when they were alive that they said

²⁸⁴ For an extended discussion of Christina Rossetti and posthumousness, see Alison Chapman, *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

straight off whatever came into their heads. But once you are in a biography all is different.²⁸⁵

Here, the imposition of “patterns” and “meanings” upon the subjects of biography overshadows the haphazardness of life as it is actually lived. The wonderful animation of the “magic tank” makes it harder to accept that biography forecloses the possibility of imagining oneself differently from the narrated version of a life. Biographical subjects can no longer do what they like, but the listeners and the lookers have their choice.

As conflicted an image of biography as this is, it allows Woolf to illustrate the difference between formal analysis and the kind of reading that begins with biography but does not use the life as the sole basis for discovering the inner workings of the art. She quotes three reviews of Rossetti’s poetry by Swinburne, Saintsbury, and Sir Walter Raleigh, isolating passages that show how these critics’ responses fall somewhere between pedantry and affective self-indulgence (Swinburne writes of “refluent sea-music”; Saintsbury of “line irregularity”; and Raleigh of his inclination to cry rather than lecture when he reads Christina Rossetti’s poems). Woolf’s counter-response is to emphasize close reading without biographical particulars, to “read for oneself, expose the mind bare to the poem” and record its impact immediately. Woolf’s reading of Rossetti’s poetry turns on the conflict between religious restraint and the admiration of beauty, an analysis that cannot be made without acknowledging the importance of religion in the poet’s life, and the way it shaped her reticent public demeanor. The critical quality is not separate from the biographical. These qualities do not threaten to cancel each other out, as they might be expected to do given the idea of biography the essay initially presents.

²⁸⁵ Woolf, “I Am Christina Rossetti” in *The Common Reader, Second Series*.
<<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91c2/chapter20.html>>

What Woolf offers instead is a reading of how the circumstances of a life are transcribed into art—and how art is transcribed back into life. The final image of the essay depicts this very movement from art to life, as Woolf envisions London flooded over by oceans or covered in forests, with fish swimming in and out of the windows of Rossetti's former bedroom. To complete the image, Woolf imagines herself at the party mentioned in Sandars's biography, proclaiming that she "should certainly have committed some indiscretion—have broken a paper-knife or smashed a tea-cup in the awkward ardour of my admiration when she said, 'I am Christina Rossetti.'"

By inserting herself, the critic, into this scene of poetic self-affirmation (with an "awkward ardour" that stays in the realm of the conditional "should have"), Woolf makes the case for using biography to read from the outside in, rather than the inside out. She illustrates how the vision of a dead writer, someone completely unfamiliar to the reader save from the works she has left behind, must be revealed as the reader's *own* vision. Woolf ultimately suggests that biography is never completely severable from the products of a literary life. Although Woolf recognizes that biography may be applied toward flat and undynamic interpretations of literary works, she suggests that biography's greatest drawback may also result in its greatest value: getting readers to exercise their critical faculties. In this way, her commentary illuminates the cross-purposes at work in biography during the century that informed much of her writing, and suggests that the embarrassment of Victorian biography, despite the countervailing attitudes it stirs, might yield its own store of riches.

* * *

In this chapter, I have considered Woolf's attitudes towards biography as both shaped by her personal embarrassment regarding its place in her career and by the conversations among her contemporaries that situated biography in a new era of intellectual production which included new discussions of literary form. The wide variety of biographical writing she produced shows a resistance to formal specialization and an upholding of common readers' interests. And yet the very idea of a "common reader" for biography—or of biography as the object of the common reader's desire—perturbed Woolf. The uneasiness with which she reflected on her efforts to produce a distinct aesthetic experience through biography emerges from an unresolved tension between critical sophistication and mass appeal. After the publication of *Roger Fry*, her last venture into biography, she wrote in a letter,

To return to Roger Fry himself. You say that his "interpretation of art was too sophisticated, too private for the general public." Yet he could fill the Queens Hall with two thousand listeners from all classes when he lectured. Could Herbert Read do that, or Kenneth Clark?

But you say "You must educate your public. Taste and appreciation can never improve until attitudes of mind are changed..." There I agree with you. I can't answer for what Roger felt. But I do feel myself that I ought to have been able to make not merely thousands of people interested in literature; but millions. Why have I failed to do that? The other day [27 April] I went and lectured to the WEA at Brighton, and felt that it was hopeless for me to tell people who had been taken away from school at the age of 14 that they must read Shakespeare. It is impossible so long as they are educated as they are. Now my own education (alone among books) was a very bad one. Yours too, at Eton and Oxford was I think tho better than mine a bad one. What is the kind of education people ought to have? That it seems to me is the problem we have got to solve. Until we do, we must have people like Roger Fry talking only to thousands instead of to millions.²⁸⁶

Woolf answers the charge that Fry's criticism was too sophisticated for the general public by emphasizing the sort of public his lectures tended to bring together: thousands of

²⁸⁶ Virginia Woolf to Benedict Nicolson, 24 August 1940. *Letters* 6:420.

individuals, "from all classes." The number of people that Woolf considers herself as having influenced is comparable: thousands, rather than millions. But Woolf's concern is that the education of her audience has been too similar to her own; when she addresses a group of common readers directly, she is embarrassed, all too aware that these individuals have not been reading Shakespeare since they were children. Fry's audiences are small, but various—they prove that a lecture on a specialized topic need not be prohibitive of understanding if the elements of form are made comprehensible to members of every class.

In *Roger Fry*, Woolf addresses her anxieties that her work would not reach as wide an audience as she desired by making Fry into a figure who accomplishes the set of critical goals with which she identified. Although the process of writing the biography would frustrate Woolf and make her turn to other projects, including a new novel and her autobiography, it is more than simply an instance of the limitations biographers must accept to accomplish their work.²⁸⁷ *Roger Fry* gave Woolf the opportunity to refine her thoughts on the critic's sensibility from within biography, the very genre that she recognized as most opposed to criticism of literary form. What distinguishes the biography is that it celebrates Fry's qualities as an art critic, a specialist in his field, by telling a story about his *refusal* to specialize. Woolf devotes the first portion of the book to Fry's boyhood, and the "two worlds" of art and science that remained divided in the Fry household: "Science was part of the home atmosphere; art was 'kept in its place'."²⁸⁸ Fry was encouraged to study science by his Quaker parents, but he was unable to successfully merge it with his interest in art, even after attending Cambridge. Woolf

²⁸⁷ On Woolf and the writing of *Roger Fry*, see Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 694-701. Lee observes of Woolf's process that "The frustrating challenge of the biography unlocked alternatives" (697).

²⁸⁸ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 19.

quotes a letter from Fry to his father that presents a formative picture of Fry's qualities as a critic: "Please do not think me weak because I find it hard to make up my mind about matters of great importance to me, but it really is because I realise what infinite possibilities there are [more] than because I am apathetic or indifferent."²⁸⁹ Woolf's portrait of Fry is of a critic committed to backing up his impressions with reason; she repeatedly asserts that Fry's powers of reason arise not from his education, but from his observation of reality.

Despite his failure to embark upon a project that merged scientific and artistic methods, the aftermath of this attempt, for Woolf, is present in all of Roger Fry's work, and especially in his appeal to "the common seer." Woolf presents the common seer as a sort of "common reader" of the visual arts, with whom Fry can connect because in his criticism, "Learning did not matter; it was the reality that was all important."²⁹⁰ The main attribute of Woolf's common reader is the ability to determine for oneself the idea of a whole (of a person, an age, or a theory of art). This is no less true for her vision of Fry's common seer, except both of the moments where Woolf mentions the common seer in *Roger Fry* accompany a definition of the critic's role that revolves around the discussion of painting and nothing else. Woolf notes that Fry was not a born writer, and consequently, "He was not led away to write prose poems, or to make the picture a text for a dissertation upon life" in the style of Symonds or Pater.²⁹¹ She explains that Fry used the terms of the literary or music critic to describe properties of art for which he had no words, and that this amounted to "drudgery" for him: "And yet in spite of these difficulties, perhaps because of them, it is plain even to the common seer, even in these

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 58-9.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 153.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 106.

old articles, that here is someone writing with a pressure of meaning behind him. He has a definite idea of the critic's function."²⁹² In Woolf's estimation, what draws the "common seer" and the critic together is their mutual drive to make meaning, and this, more than any specific set of specialized terms, distinguishes his prose.

Woolf indicates that if Fry had focused on biography in his art criticism, it would have conflicted with his limpid approach to description and formal analysis. Before describing his success with formal criticism, she asks, "Why is it that Roger Fry's criticism has for the common seer something of the enthrallment of the novel?" and goes on to note that "Roger Fry makes painting different from the other arts. It is not literature; it is not biography; it is not music."²⁹³ It is form that awakens sensation for Fry's readers, not the story of the artist's life as it combines with the spirit of the age, or any particular theory: "Undoubtedly he wakes the eye; and then begins what is in its way as exciting as the analysis by a master novelist of the human passions—the analysis of our sensations." Woolf deducts biography from the equation of Fry's critical success, but she does not exclude biography as a tool that other critics have used as a vehicle for sensation—in large part because of the negotiations between biography, criticism, and form she was accustomed to making in her own work. Woolf thus aligns herself with Fry's efforts to speak about form to an unspecialized audience. Writing Fry's biography enables Woolf to confront the incompatibility of biography and formalist criticism that was beginning to define the conversation about biography as an art, but it also allows her bring the two together: Fry succeeds because his personality dissolves in the act of writing or speaking about his chosen medium.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid., 227.

Roger Fry leaves an uncertain legacy, and it could very well be regarded as an embarrassment in Woolf's career, if her own estimate is to be given any consideration. When the book was published, Woolf described her feelings as consisting of "only a skin deep nervousness."²⁹⁴ Here, Woolf's insistence that her nervousness only goes skin deep suggests the sort of discernible flush to the visage that embarrassment provokes. Julia Briggs compiles several instances in Woolf's diaries that express her attitude towards the biography's publication: "She guessed that the reviews would swing between 'fascinating; dull; life like; dead.'" If, as Briggs concludes, "it was [Woolf's] own feelings that sawed thus," it may be because the thing she found most embarrassing about biography was its capacity to bring back the authorial persona that a critic's work endeavors to dissolve and replace.²⁹⁵ The vacillation in the diary entries between the "life like" and the dead recalls those moments in which Woolf raises the dead author in order to perform a critical reading of the work—as she does with "I Am Christina Rossetti"—but also those in which the possibility of criticism is foreclosed by her own desire to know the author for whose writing she admits an undefinable affinity, as when she attempts to find "what's wrong" with Dickens and his novels.

Such moments in Woolf's writing remind us that the art of biography has many guises, one of the most persistent being that of the critic looking to dispel it. Woolf's criticism exercises this tendency, while it continues to welcome biography back into the space of impressions and judgments that careful readers ought to keep impervious to its charms. It is with this gesture of readmission in mind that we might revisit those works in her canon that seem to be embarrassed by biography, and by biography's relationship

²⁹⁴ Qtd. in Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Penguin, 2005), 365.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

to criticism. The one that presents itself most pressingly for this purpose is "The Art of Biography," which ultimately says less about the form in its title than about the kind of critical act the form makes possible, for biography, as Woolf explains, "tells us what we already know." To make knowledge new again is to admit the knowledge one has lost in the process of forgetting, but it is also to introduce this knowledge to someone attempting to find it, perhaps for the first time, between the lines of a text that feels strangely familiar, if one is willing to risk embarrassment.

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