Literary Biography

An Introduction

Michael Benton

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

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Those parallel circumstances and kindred images, to which we readily conform our minds, are, above all other writings, to be found in narratives of the lives of particular persons; and therefore no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition.

Dr Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, No. 60, Saturday, October 13, 1750

As everybody knows, the fascination of reading biographies is irresistible. No sooner have we opened the pages … than the old illusion comes over us. 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 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 straight off whatever came into their heads. But once you are in a biography all is different.

Virginia Woolf, 'I am Christina Rossetti', in *Collected Essays*, IV, 1967: 54

The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that. The biography stands, fat and worthy-burgherish on the shelf, boastful and sedate: a shilling life will give you all the facts, a ten pound one all the hypotheses as well. But think of everything that got away, that fled with the last deathbed exhalation of the biographee. What chance would the craftiest biographer stand against the subject who saw him coming and decided to amuse himself?

Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*, 1985: 38

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Introduction

No-one, it seems, has a good word to say for biographers, not even the biographers themselves. That their subjects are often critical, even abusive, is only to be expected: 'biografiends' Joyce called them; 'a disease of English literature' was George Eliot's diagnosis of their work (quoted in Salwack, 1996: 37). But for biographers to turn upon themselves is uniquely odd. Perhaps the current spate of self-vilification was triggered by guilt stirred by Janet Malcolm's analysis of the Plath biographies in which she describes the biographer as a 'professional burglar' and accounts for the popularity of the genre by its prurient and 'transgressive nature' (Malcolm, 1995: 9). Whatever the cause, Dale Salwack's (1996: 6) book on literary biography begins with a catalogue of quotations from writers disgusted by biography; Michael Holroyd (2003: 3–9) plays devil's advocate in his entertaining 'The Case Against Biography'; and Mark Bostridge's (2004) collection of essays by practitioners is replete with self-conscious masochism. His Preface describes biography, in a tone of nervous playfulness, as a 'vice' and acknowledges that the biographer is often spoken of 'as a scoundrel'. Then, successive biographers indulge themselves in bouts of literary flagellation. Here are half a dozen of them. They see themselves as 'voyeurs' (pp. 7, 44), as 'vultures' (pp. 9, 54) and, in a string of equally nasty names, as 'scavenger, jackal, vampire, garbage-collector' which, Hilary Spurling concedes, are 'all of them valid up to a point' (p. 68)! They are seen, too, as guilty of a 'biographical love' between biographer and subject that is 'obsessive, possessive, irrational and perverse' (p. 38), which, in turn, may lead to 'a narcissist's wedding' (p. 12). It is little wonder that the issue of such a marriage is likely to be a malformed parasite: 'intrusive, trivial, irrelevant and somehow immoral' (p. 50).

Faced with the practitioners' lack of self-confidence, their subjects' frequent abuse, and the scepticism of academia, this defensiveness is understandable. However, by definition, anyone writing or reading a biography

assumes the relevance of the life to the works as part of the historical and cultural context of literature. But it is an assumption that begs basic questions about the nature of the genre and what it offers the reader. It is these questions that this book sets out to explore. *Literary Biography: An Introduction* has two purposes: the main one is to discuss the principal generic issues in a literary form of ambiguous nature and uncertain status; the subsidiary and complementary aim is to show how the biographical context can enrich the study of familiar canonical authors whose lives and works mutually illuminate each other. As the title indicates, the book is intended as an introduction for students and general readers. It is not an attempt to theorise biography. This would require consideration of the genre both from a historiographical point of view and, in a literary perspective, from a historicist stance. Such an exploration would, no doubt, be revealing in its complementary concerns for the textuality of historical representation and the historicity of biographical texts. But it is an exploration beyond the scope of this book. Where I have drawn upon literary theory – especially in Chapters 2 and 8, for example – I have aimed to do so in language that is accessible without oversimplifying the ideas.

The book is selective, concentrating on those authors and biographers whose writings open up the key generic issues. My principal examples are taken from the mainstream literary canon – Shakespeare, Dickens, Blake, Wordsworth, the Brontës, and a range of twentieth-century authors. Major biographers from Dr Johnson, Boswell and Woolf to Holroyd, Holmes and Lee are also drawn upon extensively. The book is selective also in that the majority of subjects and biographers are British or Irish. I have found no place to discuss the distinguished 'Lives' of Henry James by Leon Edel, or of Edith Wharton by Hermione Lee, let alone biographies from European or Commonwealth sources. There are, of course, losses here; but in the competition for space, my aim has been to illustrate different aspects of literary biography with examples that will be most familiar to readers coming new to the genre. There are also practical reasons for the selections I have made. First, there are many more biographies about these subjects, stretching over different historical periods, making the study of the genre richer, more demanding, and more amenable to the teasing out of its characteristics. Secondly, the works of these writers are both well known to the wider reading public and specified on course programmes year after year, so that readers are likely to find more points of contact and interest in these 'Lives' than in any others.

How far can information about a poet or novelist be expected to clarify the source of the works and illuminate the nature of the poetry or fiction that we read? T. S. Eliot discussed this question in 'The Frontiers of

Criticism' (1957), distinguishing between the '*explanation*' of origins and context, seeing it as 'preparation' for the '*understanding* and *enjoyment* of literature' which, he emphasises, is unique to each individual reader: 'There are … many facts about which scholars can instruct me which will help me to avoid definite *mis*understanding; but a valid interpretation, I believe, must be at the same time an interpretation of my own feelings when I read [a poem]' (pp. 49–50, Eliot's italics). Eliot acknowledges the uses of biography but also sees the danger of it becoming a barrier to the appreciation of the works, either through information overload, or through falsely 'explaining' poems or novels in non-literary, biographical terms (p. 52). The biographical context of Eliot's remarks is itself significant. They occurred in a lecture to some 14,000 (!) people in a baseball stadium at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis and, as Eliot's biographer comments, no doubt with the memory of an interpretation of *The Waste Land* in mind that provoked him to warn 'against too much psychological or biographical conjecture in the explication of poetry' (Ackroyd, 1985: 317). Reading the life in the works or reading the works through the life are the Scylla and Charybdis between which literary biographers must navigate. Unlike their counterparts in political or military fields, they sail in uniquely dangerous waters. To one side, they face the hard rocks of historical data which they ignore at their peril; to the other, a whirlpool of imaginative literature which, for biographical purposes, is of uncertain depth and relevance. Maintaining a steady, discriminating course which acknowledges the importance of both bodies of evidence, without being subsumed by either, is the special skill demanded of the literary biographer.

* * *

The twelve chapters which make up this book exist in a federal relationship – independent essays that set out to give a sense of the historical development of the genre, to describe and account for its main characteristics, and to illuminate its connections with the arts of fiction and portraiture. Given the variations in the genre, any attempt to update the efforts at a typology, made in the past by Clifford (1962) and Edel (1984) among others, seems inappropriate. Instead, the diversity is best served by viewing literary biography from a range of perspectives – historical, comparative, inferential, auto/biographical and so on. As in any federation, there are not only different roles but also contrary emphases, and occasional dissenting voices. So, here, the roles of the first three chapters are to sketch the evolution of the genre, to introduce the principal traits of a hybrid form that lies between history

and fiction, and to look at the consequences for the reader. In subsequent chapters, there are contrary emphases, for example, in listening to a biographer speaking about his practice, while others struggle with the dearth of hard evidence in their search for Shakespeare, or read the lives of their subjects alongside, behind or against the autobiographical images projected in the works. And, in Chapter 4, there is a measure of dissent from the whole biographical project in the subversive argument for the inevitable mythologizing of literary subjects. Yet, implicit in the notion of biomythography is the view that the genre is an art supported by elements of craft, rather than vice versa. It is this that holds this federal relationship together and is the stance adopted throughout this book.

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of the ambiguous status of literary biography – a genre in vogue with the reading public yet still treated with a mixture of suspicion and disdain in many academic circles. It offers a historical sketch, identifying three phases of particular importance in the mid-eighteenth century, the early twentieth century and the present day. The contributions of the two major figures, Dr Johnson and Virginia Woolf, are then considered both for their theoretical essays and in two key works, *The Life of Savage* and *Orlando*, in order to show where the main issues in literary biography originate and how they have developed.

Using concepts drawn from narratology, Chapter 2 shows how biography's handling of life stories is both like and unlike that of fiction. Narrative is not neutral but imposes a shape on 'real life histories' involving selection, continuity, coherence and closure. These four elements are discussed with particular reference to examples of the beginnings, middles and endings of biographies of the Brontës, Thomas Hardy and Jane Austen. Two features unique to reading *literary* biography are identified: how readers must accommodate the image of the 'implied author' constructed from the author's works with that presented by the biography; and the asymmetrical timelines of the author's 'life narrative' and 'literary narrative'. Literary biography is then shown to occupy an uncomfortable position between factual and fictional truth, illustrated in different ways from Thomas Hardy's self-ghosted biography and from Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

Chapter 3 considers the dualistic nature of the genre from the point of view of the problems and benefits it presents for the reader. The first part conceptualises the communication between biographer and reader that is represented in the text. It argues that the hybrid character of biography, a cross between verifiable historical information and aesthetic narrative, is also reflected in the twofoldness of the writer's task and the reader's role. The second part shows how this model works in practice through examining two recent biographies of William Blake, one by G. E. Bentley, Jr with a

'documentary' emphasis, the other by Peter Ackroyd with an 'aesthetic' emphasis. It exemplifies the differences, in particular by contrasting how these two accounts deal with one of Blake's central concepts, the 'Two Contrary States of the Human Soul', which provides the theme for his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The third part considers two potential problem areas that derive from biography's hybrid form: the handling of historical data within the time-frame of the subject's life; and the difficulties of dealing with the 'inner life' of the subject's mind and feelings. A brief final section weighs up the problems and benefits of studying literary biography and concludes that this genre offers readers uniquely important reading lessons.

Myth-making is endemic in the life histories of novelists and poets. Literary biographies are complicit in the process even when they seek to demythologise their subjects. Chapter 4 outlines a five-phase development in the Brontë myth as the paradigm of 'biomythography'. Life-writings about Byron, Dickens and Sylvia Plath are then shown to follow a similar pattern and to exemplify, respectively, the characteristics of celebrity, idolatry and martyrdom which typify myth-making and which literary biography both helps to create and attempts to expose. The chapter concludes with ten brief reflections on the notion of biomythography which substantiate its claim to subvert any concept of life-writing based on a simplistic account of supposed 'facts'.

Chapter 5 is untypical in the prominence it gives to explicit discussion of a writer's works. To a greater or lesser extent, all literary biographers draw inferences from their subject's writings; but Shakespeare's invisibility as a man means that his plays and poems become the prime source of insight into the mind that created them. Accordingly, the chapter summarises the evidence for the 'life', such as it is, and then discusses what recent biographers infer about the thinking of their implied author in a representative selection of his works. A final section assesses the patterns of thinking in Shakespeare's works which modern biographies reveal, in particular, the increased sophistication in language and thinking around the middle of his career, and his typical mode of representing ideas through the dialectical conflict of characters and situations.

Chapter 6 on the relationship between biography and portraiture consists largely of a gallery of ten portraits of poets and novelists, each with an accompanying commentary which links these images to the lives, works or times of the writers and to the artistic conventions of the period when the paintings were created. Portraiture is seen as veering uneasily between aesthetic and referential values. The chapter questions the common notion of these 'sister arts', finding some similarities in the cultural motivation

behind them and in the uncomfortable position which both occupy within the literary and visual arts while, at the same time, recognising their role in canon formation within literary history, as well as their broad cultural appeal.

Chapter 7 develops the theme of 'lives and times', acknowledging that each age rewrites the biographies of its favoured authors in ways which reflect the mores and literary conventions of the period. Any of the major nineteenth-century novelists could be the focus, but Dickens is taken as a particularly interesting example since not only have there been recurring 'Lives', but there is also a fascinating biographical conundrum to be explored in the relationship between the private, domestic family man, the even more private literary man at his writing desk, and the public man of affairs recognised by all (and not least by himself) as a giant of the Victorian Age. These relationships are discussed in respect of three major biographies: the Victorian Dickens of John Forster, the Modern Dickens of Edgar Johnson, and the Post-modern Dickens of Peter Ackroyd.

Self-representation in autobiographical literary works requires the biographer of the author to discriminate between the subject as a historical person and the persona projected into the text and mediated by literary technique. The difficulties are particularly acute when the author's self-creation is dedicated to accounting for the growth and development of an artistic life. Chapter 8 focuses upon William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as the two seminal texts and considers the implications for biographers who must view the lives of their subjects through an autobiographical screen. Following suggestions by Paul de Man, it argues that autobiographical writing is both 'mask' and 'metaphor' and it draws some conclusions about literary auto/biography, concentrating particularly upon the gaps and temporal qualities of narrative, the synthetic operation of memory, and the effect of literary forms and language in the self-creation of the subject.

In the interview recorded in Chapter 9, we can listen to a biographer's reflections upon the practice of his craft – or, should one say, his art? For one of the issues that arises from the conversation with Wilfred Owen's biographer, Dominic Hibberd, is his role in relation to his subject, in this case, one that lies somewhere between the detached historian and the ardent storyteller. The conversation covers three broad areas: first, the development of the biographer's initial interest in the subject, the handling of sources, the management of data and the process of composition; secondly, the main themes that emerge in the portrait of Owen – his reading, his religious upbringing, his sexual orientation, his class-consciousness – and how they bear upon his writing; and thirdly, some wider generic issues such as

the justification for a new biography, and the relationship that develops between the biographer and the subject.

Chapter 10 considers five modern biographies of twentieth-century subjects – Graham Greene, Bernard Shaw, T. S. Eliot, George Orwell and Philip Larkin. It gives a critical pen portrait of each writer as seen through the eyes of their biographer and sets each 'Life' in the context of the literary estate that has (or in one case, has not) sanctioned its publication. Some tentative conclusions are then drawn about how biographers respond to their subject's literary persona and about the different relationships biographers forge with authors and their literary estates.

Chapter 11 revisits the relationship between history and fiction in life-writing initiated in the opening two chapters. It focuses on the making of scenes and stories as the fundamental building blocks in biography. It pursues this theme through close readings of two famous dinner parties: Boswell's account of Dr Johnson's meeting with John Wilkes, and Virginia Woolf's description of Mrs Ramsay's dinner party in *To The Lighthouse*. The analyses of the theatrical scenes of the one and the painterly scenes of the other highlight the similarities and differences in scene-making in biography and fiction.

The final chapter gives a brief summary of the main themes of earlier chapters and speculates about future directions in literary biography. However literary biography is represented in the dualisms of history and fiction, craft and art, the life and the works, its hybrid nature asserts itself. This generic 'looseness' suggests that, despite its inbred conservatism, twenty-first-century biography may develop in new ways in which, as in Jonathan Coe's 'story of B. S. Johnson', the 'Life' is not represented in a smooth narrative but reflects, in its style and form, something of the jaggedness of the subject's own life and work. Or, as exemplified by Nicholl on Shakespeare, Bodenheimer on Dickens and Wroe on Shelley, the conventional chronology of the life narrative is set aside as these biographers employ different means to probe beneath the continuity of its events.

The question of the difference between non-fiction narrative and fiction remains the central one. 'All good biographers struggle with a particular tension between the scholarly drive to assemble facts as dispassionately as possible and the novelistic urge to find shape and meaning within the apparently random circumstances of a life. We make sense of life by establishing "significant" facts, and by telling "revealing" stories' (Holmes, in France & St Clair, 2002: 16–17). As the examples discussed in this book amply demonstrate, the biographer's task is more complex than that of the novelist. If we allow that biography is an 'art', we must also recognise that the creative impulse expresses itself in a different way from that of the novelist. To

develop a point made by David Cecil, the novelist's creativity shows itself mainly in *invention*, in the power to create characters, to put them in scenes, and to tell stories about them; the biographer's creativity shows itself in *interpretation*, in a capacity to discover in the scenes and anecdotes and the mass of other raw material the dominant, thematic life story to be fashioned into a work of art. Cecil continues: 'Like the maker of pictures in mosaic, his [the biographer's] art is one of arrangement; he cannot alter the shape of his material, his task is to invent a design into which the hard little stones of fact can be fitted as they are' (Cecil, in Clifford, 1962: 153). The analogy is apt: no-one would deny that a mosaic is a work of art; equally, no-one can ignore the amount of sheer craft that goes into its composition.

1

Literary Biography Now and Then

The Cinderella of Literary Studies

There are no prizes for guessing who are the two ugly sisters: criticism, the elder one, dominated literary studies for the first half of the twentieth century; theory, her younger sister, flounced to the fore in the second half. One scorned Cinderella's very existence as 'the biographical fallacy'; the other attempted her assassination by announcing the 'death of the author'. Meanwhile, 'Cinders', who had been doing the chores for centuries, was magically transformed, decked out in new clothes by Michael Holroyd, Richard Holmes, Claire Tomalin, Hermione Lee, Peter Ackroyd et al. and, as the millennium approached, celebrated and admired on all sides. Two decades ago, as Malcolm Bradbury (1988) pointed out, we seemed to live in two ages at once: the age of the Literary Life and the age of the Death of the Author. Nowadays, at the start of the new century, it transpires that reports of the death were greatly exaggerated. Literary biography remains in vogue. The bibliography that carries it forward is rolling and there is no sign of it turning into a pumpkin. Why is Cinderella so popular?

One obvious if superficial answer might be that literary biography is where literary people go who find the contemporary preoccupation with theory to be personally undernourishing and critically unenlightening; they would rather stay with the literary works themselves and with the lives, the minds and the times that produced them. Yet it is not only literary biography that is thriving; life-writing in general is a staple of mainstream publishing for which the appetite of the reading public seems insatiable. This commercial high profile is responding to an evident, if unfocused, need to look at other lives and understand them. Individual reasons for the popularity of biography range from prurient interest and hero worship to a, perhaps unrecognised, search for coherence and purpose in an age that is often disinclined either to accept institutional values or to respect traditional authority.

The motives for this search usually include the desire for recognisable success, to which end the invention of a convincing identity is essential. Biographies offer models of how others live, face challenges and cope with change; they offer prime sites for studying ourselves. Curiously, this justification for biography as providing a model for living was felt most strongly when this literary genre first emerged in its recognisably modern form in the eighteenth century. The difference nowadays is that the model has changed: biography as a moral *exemplum* based upon Christian principles has been replaced in today's celebrity culture by the demand for models of success provided by public personalities. Nonetheless, whatever the range of satisfactions readers seek in biography, life-writing offers detailed pictures of widely different ways of living and, amidst these perhaps, some clues to how an individual sense of identity might be shaped.

Literary biographies, as distinct from the past 'Lives' of politicians and military men, or the part 'Lives' of present-day footballers and pop idols, constitute a significant and, in several respects, a unique sub-genre. Literary biography often deals with subjects who stand apart from society's norms and whose intertwined lives and writings offer a critique of the world the rest of us inhabit. Whether as an outsider like Shelley or as an insider like Dickens, the literary biographer's subject tends to adopt an individualistic, critical view of the principles and practices of society which, on particular issues, may develop into outright opposition. The writer as rebel, the writer as exile, are familiar figures, particularly in the past two centuries.

Literary biography is unique, too, in that its subjects offer the prospect of access, however limited or illusory it may turn out to be, to the workings of the creative imagination. This prospect of gaining some insight into the mysteries of the artistic process is a seductive invitation to readers, one greatly enhanced by the intimacy between the biographer's and the subject's shared medium of words, their common interest in literary forms, and the particular closeness of fictional and historical narrative. When as often happens, an artistic affinity between biographer and biographee is inscribed in their relationship, the mystery of imaginative writing seems even closer. Novelists writing the 'Lives' of novelists (Mrs Gaskell on Charlotte Brontë; Peter Ackroyd on Dickens); poets writing the 'Lives' of poets (Andrew Motion on Philip Larkin; Elaine Feinstein on Ted Hughes); autobiographical writing in the form of poetry (Wordsworth) or fiction (Joyce) – all suggest specialist insights afforded by practitioners of the arts.

Literary biography also has an implicit appeal to readers as would-be authors, to the wish-fulfilment of being able to write poetry or fiction ourselves. Whether the writer's life is seemingly mundane and ordinary, hemmed in by convention or prejudice, dogged by frustration and disappointment,

or cut short by tragedy, we tend – despite the facts – to accept it as the essential condition of the creative being, romanticising the quality of the life into an inevitable pattern that reflects the works and which, because it does so, becomes a pattern at some level to be envied. If life could be lived vicariously, the writer's life is the one we would choose; as biography, it offers a secondary life to share and enjoy alongside the secondary worlds created in the writer's works.

Yet, despite the evident attractions of biography, it has become a truism to declare that biography has failed to establish any theoretical foundations upon which to build. In a period given to literary theory, Ellis (2000: 3) speaks of 'the comparative dearth of analytic enquiry into biography'. Backscheider (1999: 2) quotes Ira Nadel's remark on the absence of 'a sustained theoretical discussion of biography incorporating some of the more probing and original speculations about language, structure, and discourse that have dominated post-structuralist thought'. She goes on to lament the poverty of criticism, the absence of a cultivated readership, the failure to engage even with the practical questions of selection, organisation or presentation, and indicates that readers of biography are too easily contented with reading for the life story. The implication is that biography is easy reading for lazy readers. D. J. Taylor, author of the biography *Orwell: The Life*, writing in *The Guardian* (8 November 2002), points to the unstable basis of the genre with a different emphasis: 'Although several universities have recently established centres of biographical research,' he says, 'there is hardly such a thing as a theory of biography, merely an acknowledgement that each age tends to explore the form in a manner consistent with its preoccupations.' This is uncontroversial if one compares pre- and post-Stracheyean biography, but it does not explain why, during the 1990s, there were four biographies of Jane Austen and three each of George Eliot and the Brontës – about all of whom we already know a great deal – let alone a dozen biographies this century of Shakespeare about whom we know next to nothing; or why, in a longer perspective, there have been over 200 'Lives' of Lord Byron (Holmes, 1995: 18). This insistent rewriting of writers' lives stems from more than commercial pressure. It indicates a genre where the life narrative can be explored from many different angles; where the revaluation and interpretation of existing and newly discovered evidence are fundamental to its history; and where biographers constantly respond to the challenge to represent the life in new artistic forms. Literary biography lies between history and fiction and has often been seen as the poor relation of both. As such it has attracted little theoretical interest from either side. Recent writing, however, has increasingly introduced elements of metabiography into studies of the genre

(Miller, 2001; Sisman, 2001); and biographers have reflected in print upon the nature and principles of their work (Holmes, 1985; Holroyd, 2002; Lee, 2005). The issues they raise will constantly recur in the chapters which follow; and the origins of most of them are to be found in the mid-eighteenth century.

The Rise and Rise of Literary Biography

The modern history of literary biography has seen three phases of exceptional development. It was invented in the mid-eighteenth century by Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, reinvented by Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf at the start of the twentieth century, and today we are living in a period when the genre is showing a greater variety of formal innovations than ever before. Johnson and Boswell had their predecessors, notably Isaak Walton, who wrote the lives of John Donne (1640) and George Herbert (1670); and that most notorious of seventeenth-century life-writers, John Aubrey, whose *Brief Lives* (1667–1697) aimed to show that 'the best of men are but men at best'. In his accounts of scholars and writers in a wide range of fields, he avoided general comments and empty praise in favour of specific, intimate and sometimes scandalous details. But Aubrey's *Brief Lives* were just that – Milton is given eight pages, Shakespeare one and a half – and their contents are quirky, humorous, solemn and salacious by turns.

In the next two centuries, by contrast, biographies were to become long, substantial books devoted to a single subject; they aimed to incorporate the intimate details of a person's life; and in doing so they ran up against fundamental issues such as verifiable facts versus likelihoods, personal privacy versus public knowledge, the biographer's role in giving interpretations, opinions and judgements – all of which still exercise present-day biographers. No-one was more aware of these genre issues than Dr Johnson. Expressing his impatience with contemporary biographers who were content merely to log the chronology of their subject's achievements, Johnson famously declared: 'more knowledge may be gained of a man's character, by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree, and ended with his funeral' (Johnson, 'On Biography', *The Rambler*, No. 60). Johnson's essay was published in the same year, 1750, as Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*. From the outset, the line between biography and fiction was a blurred one, as indicated by Fielding's title, or by Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1760–1767). And so it continued with *Jane Eyre* (1847),

subtitled 'An Autobiography'. Conversely, reading the opening chapter of Mrs Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) is like reading the start of one of her novels. The concurrent rise of the novel and biography meant that fictions incorporated quasi-documentary items like letters and diary entries more commonly found in biographies, whereas biographies presented scenes and people with the creative eye of the novelist. It is little wonder that boundary disputes should break out, or that biofictions like *According to Queeney* and *Author, Author* should develop the popularity they enjoy today. Nor is it surprising, given the aura that surrounds many writers, to find that recent literary biography often struggles to extricate itself not only from fiction but also from myth. The posthumous mythologizing of Sylvia Plath since her suicide in 1963, and Lucasta Miller's demythologising in *The Brontë Myth* (2001), are two modern examples taken up in Chapter 4.

Fact, fiction or myth? Literary biography has long been a mixture of all three from its beginnings in Dr Johnson's *An Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage, Son of the Earl Rivers* (1744), whose extended title attempts to mask by its assertiveness the uncertain status of its subject. Together with his *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–1781), in which the *Life of Savage* reappeared as an outsize component, Johnson is usually seen as the father of modern literary biography. The 'son', his successor and protégé in the next generation, was, of course, his own biographer James Boswell. Their approaches to biography were sharply different. Johnson's style was to assimilate what information he could find about his subjects, to order it, interpret it, and weigh its significance and to produce a series of 'Lives' of generally modest proportions. (His *Pope* and *Savage*, the one through his eminence, the other for friendship, are longer exceptions to this rule.) Boswell's view of biography was to let his subject speak for himself by quoting *verbatim* letters, conversations, stories and words of wit and wisdom, thus creating a 'baggy', loosely formed 'Life' of elephantine size. The contrast between the summary qualities of the 'distilled life' and the inclusiveness of the 'comprehensive life' punctuates the history of biography in various guises in succeeding centuries: in Strachey's scornful rejection of 'those two fat volumes' that characterise Victorian biography and, nowadays, in the difference between, say, Carol Shields's brief, personal life of *Jane Austen* (2001) and Park Honan's fully documented *Jane Austen: Her Life* (rev. edn, 1997), which, its author claims in his Preface, 'is acknowledged to be the most complete, realistic life' of its subject.

Nineteenth-century biography generally favoured the Boswellian fullness without emulating his frankness. It reflected the decorous proprieties of its