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FROM “LIVES” TO BIOGRAPHY: THE TWILIGHT OF PARNASSUS

For Roberto Calasso

“Biography” is a sober, precise and modern word. Like other words formed from a Greek root, it has a competent and knowing air. It makes a good appearance in the summary of reviews, on the platform at conferences, between “biology” and “bibliography,” between “necrology” and “radiography,” in that scientific elite of the lexicon that travels in “business” class from one language to another, always at home in the time belts, hotel lobbies, conference rooms or amphitheatres. Compared with this prosperity, the word “Life” is old-fashioned, a poor relative doomed to retirement homes. In the period between the two wars it disappeared from bookstore windows and book jackets. The hesitations of André Maurois, the author of *Aspects de la biographie* (1928), are characteristic of a transition: he wavered between *La Vie de Disraeli* (1927), *Ariel ou la vie de Shelley* (1923), *Prométhée ou la vie de Balzac* (1965) and *Byron* (1930). We sense that the title *Vie*

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

From "Lives" to Biography

was on the way out or had to yield to a proper name or an allegorical figure. However, it was a word in good standing, nobly Latin in origin, as great a *signore* in its class as those Massimi or Colonna who claimed their ancestors were mentioned by Titus Livy. Its genealogy is still more ancient, if we recall that its metonymic and literary meaning in Latin is a translation of the Greek word *Bios*, which the Hellenes, inventors of the genre and who had a more pedantic use of their language than we do, were content to use up until the end. "Biography," according to Liddell-Scott, is not found in Antiquity except in a very late neo-Platonian, Damaskios, who put this humorless *escogriffe* into circulation when twilight was descending on the Roman Empire, between the 5th and 6th centuries A.D., at the dawn of the Middle Ages. It made its entrance into modern languages in the last quarter of the 17th century, when the humanism of the Renaissance was coming to an end, and the Enlightenment was beginning its rise. This late and ill-boding word began a slow ascension, long delayed: it did not come into usage outside the circles of antiquarians until the 19th century. The old word "Life" proudly kept its importance until the '20s of our era in the particularly conservative language of titles of works. Its definitive effacement to the profit of "biography" brought that of the word "memoirs" or the word "confessions," which yielded to "autobiography," while "hagiography" without being able to impose itself so well in usage, took much gravity and credibility away from the "Lives of the Saints."

The fact is that the "Lives" flourished in the happy times for Letters, and it is under this generous name that they knew their highest level. Xenophon would have subscribed to the judgment of Montaigne who, in his essay *Des livres* places Lives and Memoirs among his favorite reading.

"Les Historiens," he writes, "sont ma droite balle: ils sont plaisants et aisés; et quand et quand* l'homme en général, de qui je cherche la connaissance, y paraît plus vif et plus entier qu'en nul autre lieu, la diversité et vérité de ses conditions internes en gros et en détail, la variété des moyens de son assemblage et des accidents qui le

* In modern French, "*et par ailleurs*."

menacent. Or ceux qui écrivent des “Vies”, d’autant qu’ils s’amusent plus aux conseils qu’aux événements, plus à ce qui part du dedans qu’à ce qui arrive au dehors, ceus-là me sont plus propres. Voilà pourquoi, en toutes sortes, c’est mon homme que Plutarque. Je suis bien marri que nous n’ayons une douzaine de Diogène Laertes, ou qu’il ne soit plus étendu ou plus entendu. Car je ne considère pas moins curieusement la fortune et la vie de ces grands précepteurs du monde que la diversité de leurs dogmes et fantaisies.”

Montaigne sets Plutarch’s “*Parallel Lives*” high above the long-winded “*Histories*” of Polybius; the “*Lives of the Philosophers*” by Diogenes Laertius are preferred to the works themselves of these preceptors. The paradox is in harmony with the project of the *Essays* and with the lesson of Antiquity such as Montaigne saw it. The Muse of all the authors and readers of “Lives” is the Sphinx that appears before Oedipus at the gates of Thebes and invites him to solve an enigma: the “word” of the enigma is the life of man, from birth to death. Such is the unity of time, the standard measurement of Greek art, that of Thucydides, historian, like that of Sophocles, dramatist. A “Life,” so to speak, is that unity of measurement at the simplest stage, the most resistant, the most elementary. But it is a posthumous unity. Oedipus, having solved the enigma of a word, believes he is its master. But he is in the invisible grasp of claws more dangerous than those of the Sphinx: those of Time. The enigma posed to him was too general not to have hidden another to which only Time, on two occasions, will give the answer: that of Oedipus’ life itself, still in suspense; when faced with the Sphinx he discovers, in a general and abstract way, that the great affair of man, his measure, is the *bios*, the complete vital cycle that is allowed him. That life, full of surprises, had to be written by no less a man than Sophocles and Sophocles needed two tragedies to record all its shocks. However simple and elementary may be the genre of “Lives,” in comparison with *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonna*, it none the less plays its part in the tragic concept. The drama embraces only one episode: tragedy. And the “Life,” following its example, embraces the entire course of a career and life cycle. It adopts the posthumous point of view which alone permits us, when the veil of death is lifted, to see the organic logic of a destiny and the definitive traits of a character. What is astonishing in Oedipus is

From “Lives” to Biography

that he had two lives, one of a blind seer, the other of a seeing blind man, one sealed by death to the visible world, the other sealed by an awakening to the invisible world. “*Bios*” is a measure, but this measure is like a set of nesting boxes. A life cycle brings with it shorter cycles that have their own organic completeness. It is woven into a rapport of repetition or variation with earlier cycles, that of parents, for example: the “Life of Oedipus” contains a life of Laius, Jocasta and Antigone. Nothing is more striking in Suetonius’ “*Life of Caligula*” than the insertion at the beginning of a short “*Life of Agricola*,” Caligula’s father, the admiration and love of the Roman people, whose superior humanity and tragedy had already been recounted by Tacitus. The antithesis of Agricola, Caligula would be the caricature of the executioner of his parents, Tiberius the brief repetition of his uncle. Thus the “*bios*” is a nest of Time in which are lodged several broods, and the comparison between them is a subject for inexhaustible reflections for anyone—and this is the case of any reader—who occupies another nest that is proper to him. Montaigne feels at home with Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius: taking Time quickly, standing firm to its pressure, he writes his own “Parallel Lives” and “Lives of the Philosophers.” In the more prudent register of prose, he avoids the surprises of Oedipus by prematurely making himself his own Sophocles. Did such a genre have at its beginning an inscription on a tombstone? In their way, cemeteries are immense collections of “Lives” with their juxtaposed family nests. The dispersion and variety of tombs conceal the monotony of the rectangle that is the measure for all of them, based on that of the human body. It is their unity of place. There are few genres whose contours are as natural as those of the “*bios*” and whose “subject,” universal and susceptible to infinite variations and interlacings, is more central to all literature. One of the precursory signs of a certain “death of man” is the substitution of “biography” for “Life.”

The two authors of “Lives” mentioned by Montaigne wrote collections. They have come down to us intact. Others that he does not mention, the “*Illustrious Men*” by Cornelius Nepos; the “*Lives of the Twelve Caesars*” by Suetonius; the “*Lives of the Sophists*” by Philostrate have also survived the shipwreck of the literature of Antiquity. But it is certain that the Ancients wrote collections of the same type very early, beginning with the 4th century B.C. and

abundantly in the Hellenistic period. These were organized according to professions: captains and statesmen, orators and philosophers, painters and poets. The “Lives” are more generous than the “Histories,” which are reserved for the leaders in war or government. They recognize the “immortality” of men who excelled in the things of the mind. This attracts attention to the importance of a profession in the antique “*bios*.” The “life cycle” takes on a social form in a “career profile.” Oedipus himself has his when he becomes king. The business of living, common to all men, is learned or finds its decisive tests within a career, only that. If the life cycle properly called incites the author of “Lives” to interest himself in genealogy, family, the medical history of his personages, their career leads him to evoke their education, rivals, acts and works, successes and defeats. These beacons are so many signs of recognition for a family of minds and the human type that corresponds to it. The “Lives” of these various professional families form for each of their new aspirants an elected society, an ideal assembly of examples or witnesses among which one is invited to take his place. A passage from the treatise *Du Sublime* introduces us, along with the aspiring writer, into the circle of aspiring writers who are, so to speak, seated invisibly above his desk:

“Donc, pour nous aussi, lorsque nous travaillons à un ouvrage qui réclame élévation de style et grandeur de sentiments, il sera bon de nous figurer par la pensée ceci: “Comment, le cas échéant, Homère aurait dit la même chose? Avec quelle grandeur l’aurait exprimée Platon ou Démosthène, ou dans l’histoire, Thucydide?” Ces illustres personnages, parce qu’ils dépassent notre émulation et qu’ils nous éclairent comme des flambeaux élèveront en quelque sorte nos âmes vers les hauteurs que nous imaginons? Et mieux encore, si c’est cet autre sujet que nos esprits esquissent: “Comment Homère, s’il était présent, ou Démosthène entendraient-ils telle chose que je dis? Quelle impression leur laisserais-je?” C’est une grande épreuve en réalité de présupposer pour nos propres expressions un tel tribunal, un tel théâtre, et devant de si grands héros appelés pour juges et comme témoins, de feindre par jeu de leur rendre compte de nos écrits.”

The life and work of an “illustrious man” are seen here as a living person, a presence of a superior order, beyond time, but with

From "Lives" to Biography

whom a dialogue is possible. And these exemplary presences are gathered in a tribunal, in a theater, as on the Mount Parnassus painted by Raphael or Poussin, intimidating, but ready to receive those of the living who in their turn will be able to conquer Time.

We have looked at Aristotelian encyclopedism, at its desire for a complete inventory of the real, for the impulse that led the Greeks to conceive collections of "Lives" corresponding to the great professions of the City. But it is clear that this appetite to classify and inventory is not incompatible with the more practical desire to create a "formative milieu," a world of paradigms and examples that stores the experience acquired by humanity. The "Lives" are not simple introductory cards. They are intended—aside from the philosopher attentive to the variety in all things human—for the professional careful to orient his own itinerary by taking into account the one that the most representative of his predecessors have followed. This formative finality of the "Lives" is still more visible in a similar genre, that of the Eulogy. With this, we go from the simple style of the narration of "Lives" to a more sustained and ornate style. We leave scrupulous truth and rise to idealization. A certain quantity of Platonism appears to exalt a particular life to the altitude of an admirable example. The distance between the two genres is not such, however, that cross-checking may not occur. The "*Parallel Lives*" of Plutarch are also "exemplary lives," paths to the virtues that the Plutarchian heroes have followed. The "Lives" of Suetonius, without taking anything away from the superiority of Caesar or Augustus, do not hide the vices and pathological excesses of their twelve sacred monsters. Suetonius assumes both admiration and disgust in his reader, and he knowingly cultivates a discernment of humanity. And the series of these emperors, with their first successes but also with the growing and monstrous effect that absolute power had on the defects in their nature, traces the eulogy of the adult and experienced emperor, in control of his nerves, who would finally be the "joy of the human race." In short, the portrait of Trajan that Pliny celebrated in his *Panegyrics* appears like the ripe fruit of those twelve lives that were still green. Hadrian, the reigning emperor to whom Suetonius dedicated his "Lives," is also his ideal reader, the *optimus princeps* who drew from all the lessons of the gropings of his predecessors. "Life" and "Eulogy" although linked

here in a paradoxical way, concur in the education of *humanitas*, that internal harmony desirable in all professions, but more than in any other in that of the “master of the world.”

The families of professional “Lives” are not specialized to the point of forgetting that the exercise of a career first supposes that of the career of being a man. If the “Life” poses an unequal measure of time but one common to all men, it has as a central reference a norm of humanity whose transgression or neglect has its necessary and tragic sanction. And this norm, more or less found, more or less lost, transcends the differences in epochs, regimes and peoples, on which an author of “Histories” (such as Tacitus) tends to insist. The “Lives” do not know any “progress” or “decadence.” They are so many variations around the same paradigm, a destiny of man unfolding between birth and death. That suspense has no age or country. The “Life” form is thus a rendez-vous whose center is everywhere and the circumference nowhere and where the living are convoked to meet, outside of time, the assembled representatives of earlier generations. This indifference of the “Lives” to chronology and geography makes all their heroes contemporary, guests at the same banquet. When the authors of “Lives” lend their personages discourses that they had seemingly held during their lifetime, why not imagine conversations they might have with each other in the Elysian Fields where they met after their death? The genre of “Dialogue of the Dead” that Fénelon will illustrate, after Lucian, and that Montaigne practiced in his way in the plot of the *Essais*, is the flowering of the *Parallel Lives* come to maturity.

“Lives,” “Memoirs,” and “Dialogues of the Dead” compose, beyond historical time and its accidents, a humanity that has passed the test of “*bios*” and is entrusted to bear witness toward the living still “involved” in the suspense of their own lives. And we may say that the Ancients did not invent history, whose narration was abstracted from the “Life” form, as sacred Christian History already was and would be even more so in the philosophical history of the Enlightenment and Hegel. Ancient history inscribes its accounts in a cyclic time that corresponds in the life of peoples to the rhythm of the ages of human life, that of seasons and cosmic revolutions. Everything is born, dies and is metamorphosed in a new cycle. The “Life” form is also installed

From "Lives" to Biography

in ancient history, of which it offers at the same time the reduced model and the canonic measure.

However "egalitarian" "Lives" are among themselves with regard to time and death, they reserve the privilege of access to "immortality" for a small number of elite and one that is parsimonious in growth. How is this elite recruited? Its assembly represents and epitomizes humanity but according to what method of selection? There must be unanimity among the electors, first of all the contemporaries, whose choice must then be ratified by later generations.

To have the right to a "Life" presupposes that this right has been unanimously recognized by an ensemble of men, in a continuous plebiscite that, although implicit, is none the less without appeal. This supposes in a humanity raised to an "electoral body" of the great a sure and definitively infallible instinct which allows it to discern those in its ranks who, in one way or another, have been exemplarily "human." In other words, they have passed the test of *bios* under exceptionally typical conditions. An author of a "Life" does not have the power to make his hero "great." He only carries out an implicit but objective decision which was unanimously made before him and without him. Even less, however high an opinion a man may have of himself, can he proclaim himself "illustrious," even with very good reason, if he can only claim the testimony of his "conscience"? Aristotle's "magnanimous" would not be so or even more consider himself so, if he were not recognized by the public as a "great soul." That does not mean that morally he is the best but that his "visibility," for good in some cases, for bad in others, raises no doubt. And if his reputation survives the test of death and oblivion, we can admit that the candidature for a "Life" has been ratified. At this stage, we can predict that sooner or later a "Life" will be composed, fixing in written memory an image that has been imposed by the oral tradition, through a unanimous vote. There is something profound and mysterious, especially for us today, in this kind of direct suffrage, spontaneous and with a degree of certitude that it long ago introduced into the changing flux of human opinions. The number of Greek cities which in Antiquity disputed the honor of having been the birthplace of Homer helps support the indubitable nature of his glory and his right to figure at the head of the most

illustrious poets, and thus at the head of men worthy of a "Life." It would be a mistake to believe that the "twelve Caesars" of Suetonius deserved theirs because fortune and their birth brought them to the head of the Empire. The underlying order of the "Lives" has nothing of bureaucratic automatism. For Suetonius to undertake his work, those twelve had to be recognized and "plebiscited" a second time, no longer as heads of the Empire but as exceptionally characteristic and properly *legendary* representatives of humanity, submitted in their persons to the test of a new power in Rome, neither royal, nor republican, and all the more discretionary. And this law of a unanimous vote, that the author of written "Lives" limits himself to sanction, was not abolished by Christianity. In the primitive Church, the canonization (and thus enrollment in the catalogue of *Lives of Saints and Martyrs*) occurred through acclamation of the assemblies of the faithful, prefiguring the unanimous consent of the Church. Later, the official recognition of the heroism of the virtuous will assume an "odor of sanctity" unanimously confirmed, and miracles attesting publicly and in the eyes of all the rights of the deceased to be counted among the saints and figure in the calendar of liturgical feasts. *Vox populi, vox Dei*. The only direct democracy since Athens that has functioned up until today without interruption and to the general satisfaction, is the one that has designated the Assembly of the representatives of humanity for the Pantheon, Parnassus or Paradise. Even Christian introspection and its sense of individual salvation has not broken with the plebiscitary objectivity of glory and exemplarity, an indispensable prelude to any entry into the transcendent Kingdom of "Lives." And however Aristotelian is the implicit philosophy of the *doxa* governing the regime of "Lives," Plato and the Platonians themselves, before the Christians, had accepted its presuppositions without question. It is true that Socrates, eminent mortal among mortals, was condemned to death by an Athenian tribunal approved by a majority of the Athenians. Plato and the disciples of Socrates were nevertheless able to appeal this verdict in a more decisive court, universal public opinion. Unanimity was obtained on the greatness of Socrates where an ephemeral majority had denied it. But in the strict meaning of Aristotle, the exceptional reputation of Socrates in Athens, even during his lifetime, had

From "Lives" to Biography

already made him one of the great souls designated for a "Life." His condemnation, far from putting this reputation in danger, brought it to its culmination and, as though sealed by a tragic event, to being unanimously discussed and disputed. The rehabilitation of Socrates through the "Lives" that Plato and Xenophon devoted to him quickly rejected into odium the judges who had condemned Socrates and the Athenian majority that had approved them. But that was not the essential: these dialogued "Lives" have above all sanctioned the unanimity of the suffrage which in Athens itself, friends and foes alike, had recognized the rights of Socrates as exceptional man and philosopher. Even Aristophane's *Clouds* confirms this prodigious reputation, and the condemnation of the philosopher shows the "importance" of the personage. The unanimity that recognized and elected the "great soul" is not then necessarily favorable; it may at first be manifested by cries of hate as well as by acclamation. After Socrates, the Christian martyrs were first "designated" by the fury shown against them by unbelievers, before being so through the admiration of the faithful. On the other hand, Christ escaped this sort of plebiscitary designation: in a provincial corner of the Empire, far from the theater where public opinion was manifested, he gained only a few votes during his lifetime, favorable or unfavorable. He had the germs of another kind of unanimity, summoned to increase in time and space, because his origin is divine and not human. Christ escapes the genre and philosophy of "Lives." Strauss, Renan and their imitators were mistaken in the personage when they wanted to put the "Son of Man" into the ranks of "illustrious men": he is first of all "Son of God."

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"Biography," the victor over "Lives," holds sway in a completely different landscape and follows quite another regime. The ancient customs relative to "illustrious men," the unwritten conventions that governed their canonization, the violent or pious dispositions that, from childhood, made them want to enter the circle of the elect: all this direct democracy of humanity has yielded to the egalitarian, modern democracy whose electoral body is formed of only living contemporaries. It is true that these living are as

numerous as all previous humanity put together. The ancient direct democracy gave considerable weight to the suffrage of the dead, to their vote repeated and confirmed from generation to generation; in a way, it made Time the president of the scrutiny with a preponderant voice in the decisions of the jury. Egalitarian democracy has banished Time, with the "Lives," to the store-room of historical cast-offs. It knows nothing more about him except his perennially young daughter, forever smiling, active and in a hurry: Actuality. And it has slyly stopped being direct. Between the mass of contemporary electors and the objects proposed for its favors, all candidates for biography, is interposed a swarm of Mediators who are not at all decided to give play to the ancient spontaneous sympathy, the irresistible unanimous recognition that formerly made up the price of glory. The heroes of the ancient "Lives," borne along by a stubborn popular memory, still command attention and find "biographers." But they are no longer anything but an old, decimated Senate whose superstitious cult historical science endeavors to reform. A host of newer representatives, younger, more fashionable, are every day designated for the admiration of the democratic masses by the Great Electors coming from who knows where: the "Mediators." And if by chance a reputation has grown without them and far from them, they hasten to reduce it to their mould so that it may not be said that even one idol had been formed otherwise than by their hands. They dispose of the necessary means to impose admiration and even adoration for the creatures of their choice. They make it a point of honor to fashion something from nothing and are careful to multiply the stars, so that, among those nebulas, not one being really detached, all are diminished. Their secret despair is Time which, however relegated it may be, works as in the past. They conjure it by occupying space and deploy everywhere their trumpets of Renown. For the artisanal chiseling of the Eulogies, the accounts in Lives, Memoirs and Dialogues of the Dead, they have substituted flash-back and interview. On the shelves of department stores, printed echoes of sport, political and cultural celebrities jostle biographies of great men that respond confusedly to the thirst for "Lives." The thirst remains in spite of this bombardment, over-excited and unsatisfied. Because, reduced by the Mediators to the state of need, by their qualified privilege, it is stripped of its

From "Lives" to Biography

ancient right to choose for itself what really quenches it: the best of men. The usurpers of the *Vox populi*, imprisoned in Actuality, throw them overabundant fodder of the ephemeral elect, oscillating between the Charybdis of hyperbole and the Scilla of sudden silence.

In the biographical factory, prolific in ready-mades, it is not enough to confuse the ancient and familiar intercessors with the celebrities of the day. History has ceased to be balanced by a Parnassus tested by experience, where a large measure of humanity approved by humanity itself was gathered. History has become a conglomerate of Actualities, all equal to each other, all radically different, a chaplet of "cultures" that have all produced "types" with no common measurement among them but insist on their biographical right. Actuality, the new Virgin of Mercy, thus gathers under its ample cloak of gilded nylon the Hopi Indian and the Bronx drunk, the Siberian shaman and the headhunter. In this *Who's Who* with so many entries anyone can dream, by means of an unpredictable caprice of a Mediator, of suddenly making an appearance in the clamorous box-office and putting on for a season the shining garb of a standard biography.

To so generously extend the antique privilege of a "Life," life itself loses its flavor. The Mediators have tried to ward off the danger. They have each new face pass through a contrived opening in a phantasmagorical decor; this is supposed to represent the abyss of the "Self" that psychology can render more or less mysterious but always under the same projectors and with the same extras. The "Lives" were less florid, and also less predictable. Chance, temperament, character and caprice but also talents and miracles secretly manifested the impatience of the soul in the body struggling against Time or letting itself calmly be measured by it. There was a sort of transport in seeing so many answers to the same questions, so many different players in the same game with unknowable rules. Going from the soul to the "Self", there is the threat of monotony. This Proteus of psychological confection adjusts to all identity photos. The biographical monsters of Sartre (*Saint-Genet* and *l'Idiot de la Famille*) have this in common with the mass-produced biographies: they do not succeed in showing the person clearly, in spite of their inexhaustible analyses. Flaubert and Genet become understudies, not of Sartre but of the Writer

piercing his “self” with a more or less accepted bad faith. From these shades to the working girl or the rock star, there is only the difference, hero-making in Literature, of the inkwell.

Sartre did not resort to the most radical method of leveling, the Terror of scientific truth. The “Lives” aimed at truth but at a truth according to Aristotle and not according to Sherlock Holmes. They did not use a spyglass or a microscope. The human eye and its discernment sufficed for them to intercept in detail and act the *elan* proper to an existence and make it appeal to the common experience of the reader. This “*juste sonorité*” has always been what connects the historic “Life” to the novel. In Suetonius, young Tiberius stealthily casts a bashful lover’s glance at his wife Agrippina, whom he had divorced for reasons of state. This is the same man who, as emperor, enlivened his voluntary and menacing exile with atrocious and complicated debauchery from Capri. There is nothing to explain. The truth “cries out,” as we say. But for the scientific biographer this kind of trait is not acceptable. Who saw these furtive glances attributed to Tiberius? And if they had been cast and correctly interpreted, how can they interest historical science relative to the Roman Empire? The art of Suetonius comes from literary fiction. Our intellectual curiosity is attached to other indices and is related to a police inquiry. Even the good biography of yesterday is no longer any more than a novel when compared with a rigorous prosography or a more subtle method. The “glances” of young Tiberius, sensual and still amorous, like Racine’s Nero, nevertheless appeal to a sense of “truth” that has remained unchanged for twenty-four centuries and is still with us. But savant biography looks farther: the singular drama of a man is for it only a clash of superior or subterranean forces, the traits of his “character” only a facade or a result. The Great Condé is no longer the Great Condé but a product of the old feudal society at grips with the rise of an administrative monarchy. Even more profoundly, he is a soldier thinking he is crossing the Rhine at a ford. The sense of History takes this away, and for the historian it becomes simply an occasion to measure the level of the river and the speed of its current. Scientific intelligence thus seeks to unveil the great machine that animates the theater, along with the decor and the actors who entertain the audience. That maintains the specialists’ attention but leaves others a little

From "Lives" to Biography

undernourished or in compensation overfed with mass-produced biographies. It is not the fault of the word: it has the misfortune to triumph when the common sense of the "Lives", the thread of their implicit wisdom, went astray. When communication was interrupted between the initiates of Time, between them and with us. Biographies can accumulate. They no longer work together to liberate us.

Must we believe, however, that we left the era of "Lives" for biographical modernity all at once, as in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* where we pass from the Merry England of Shakespeare and Fielding, sunlit and lively, to the rainy and pompous Victorian England, all in one day? Between the antique and medieval landscape of the "Lives" and the biographical tropics of today, an extended intermediary epoch saw the superb sunset of the "Lives" and the first signs of our age of Mediators. It is the era of the Academies in Italy and France: it is that of the English "Lives" that find their masterpiece in 1792 with Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*.

The Academies, a characteristic institution of the Italian Renaissance and later of classical France, go hand in glove with the genre of "Lives." One of the principal activities of this kind of institution is to perpetuate the memory of its members, after their death, by a funeral oration and by the publication of collections of funeral eulogies. But this panegyric vocation of the Academies extends well beyond their own ranks. After the 16th century, Paul Jove canonized in a cycle of *Eulogies* the most famous men of humanist Italy, by preference Florentine. It seems that Vasari followed his example when he undertook his own *Lives of the Most Excellent Architects, Painters and Sculptors*, again Italian by preference. He does not limit himself, like Pliny the Elder (Book XXXV of his *Natural History*) to juxtapose names of unanimously admired artists and the definition of their styles. He takes the trouble to narrate the career and describe the character of each of them as though it were a matter of Plutarch's heroes or philosophers according to Diogenes Laertius. Spontaneous, popular and princely recognition had obviously preceded him. But the explicitness shown in the *Lives*, aside from the fact that it made Italy the motherland of artists and art the real confirmation of the Italian *patria*, raised the artist in modern Europe to the rank of an

example of highest humanity, having the same title to it as the statesman or warrior, the thinker or the poet. Vasari added a rostrum of honor for his own in the assembly of Parnassus. But he also introduced a hitherto unknown hierarchical criterium, with a great future. His *Lives* mount slowly, the most recent most closely approaching perfection. This idea of a "progress in art" was completely foreign to common sense which would have "elected" Giotto and Raphael, Leonardo and Michelangelo as the "best." It is thus a matter of a learned "historiographical schema" added to the general judgment and whose increase in meaning has for origin the court of the Medici, the Florentine Academy and the concern of this lettered aristocracy to appear in opposition to Gothic Europe. The progressive breakthrough of Florentine painters and other artists outside the Medieval "crudeness" was one more title for Florence, capital of the mind. That does not at all encroach upon the classic function of the "Lives" and the transhistoric magnetism of the assembly of the finest that they propose:

"Solevano gli spiriti egregii" writes Vasari in his general introduction, "in tutte le azzioni loro, per uno acceso desiderio di gloria, non perdonare ad alcuna fatica, quantunque gravissima, per condurre le opere loro a quella perfezzione che le rendesse stupende e maravigliose a tutto il mondo; né la bassa fortuna di molti poteva ritardare i loro sforzi del pervenire a' sommi gradi sí per vivere onorati e sí per lasciare ne' tempi avvenire eterna fama d'ogni rara loro eccellenza.

Thus there is some Plutarch in Vasari: it is the grandeur of the soul and the response it receives from the latent desire for grandeur in all men that is at the basis of true and enduring glory, and he returns to the author of "Lives" to fix, so to speak, and shelter from the accidents of time the memory of this encounter. But Suetonius is also no stranger to Vasari: the greatness of the soul has its reverses, its dangers, its singularities that may go so far as the pathological and ridiculous. The "best" artists are not always wise men but often melancholics agitated by a demon and sometimes destroyed by it.

Rarely will a "family of minds" find, as it does in this collection of "Lives," the exalted feeling of resuming in its way, in its own illustrations, its own identity and at the same time its distinctive

From "Lives" to Biography

traits of relationship with all humanity, with its greatness, weakness, variety, invention and folly.

But it is in France that the "historiographic schema" outlined by the Italian Academies will take on the dimensions and empire of a national myth. The Kingdom of the Lily will not only renew the miracle of the Augustan age but go beyond it. And this upward movement that the Italian Academies, numerous and dispersed, had faintly stamped on the circle of the elect of Parnassus, the State in France will exert itself to elaborate to its profit. The French Academy is a "glory machine", authorized in a different way, central and visible, from its Italian predecessors. It is itself the official Parnassus but a modern and French Parnassus, implicitly inaugurating a new way of evaluating great men. Not that it claims to replace the spontaneous choices that a long tradition had sanctioned nor even those that contemporary public opinion effects, as the Mediators of the 20th century do. But it admits—not without fertile resistance—that its tribunal, whose authority comes from the State, is called upon to confirm the acquired glories and to impose its own propriety on more recently acquired glories. Quite naturally, it would endeavor, followed by its cadets, the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture and the Royal Academy of the Sciences, to support its recent magistracy of the idea of "progress," which made it, from the king its Protector and from modern France, the witnesses of "great men" more accomplished this time than all those who preceded them. With the exception of the Gallican Church, there was nowhere else such a manifestation of "biographic" vitality with a double intent (exaltation of human excellence in general but also of the French and modern civility). Nowhere does it appear with such perseverance than in the collections of "academical Eulogies" that Fontenelle, the Abbé Goujet, D'Alembert and Condorcet brought to the level of a regulated genre. It is striking that the "reformer" of properly English biography, Lytton Strachey, (1918), in the preface to his *Eminent Victorians*, thought it well to render homage to a tradition so contrary to British customs and to a genre so closely linked to the French conventions of the academy.

"The art of biography," he wrote with the aplomb proper to Bloomsbury, "seems to have fallen on evil times in England. We

have had, it is true, a few masterpieces, but we have never had, like the French, a great biographical tradition; we have had no Fontenelles and Condorcets, with their incomparable *éloges*, compressing into a few shining pages the manifold existence of men."

This excess of Francophilism is evidently pure strategy: France is here the hostage in an intimidating attempt to turn the autochthonous tradition of the "Lives" to the profit of Bloomsbury. Through the voice of Lytton Strachey, it is the entire group that reveals its ambition of a self-appointed Academy of English Letters, freed from the Tory yoke. It is a long way from the Oxbridgian persiflage of Strachey's biography of Cardinal Manning to the delicate urbanity of the clear-cut Eulogies by Fontenelle, Valincour and Newton! The only thing the two styles have in common is their refusal of Suetonius. But Fontenelle discards the bizarre or pathological trait, the "true little fact" in the name of elegance and decorum that prevail in the French Royal Academies, while Strachey, avid to denigrate, prefers insinuation of the abject "underlying psychological" to the frank and calm vigor of detail that "depicts." If Fontenelle was scarcely Suetonian, his colleague in the Academy of Painting and Sculpture, André Félibien, was just as little "Vasarian": in his *Entretiens sur les vies et les ouvrages des plus excellents peintres anciens et modernes*, whose publication was begun in 1666, he establishes a Parnassus of artists in which the French, and first of all Poussin, receive the laurels of Apollo in the form of dialogued "Lives," in the "natural" French style, in which the conventions of decency and good taste discreetly veil the sharper angles of his heroes. From 1696 to 1700, Charles Perrault of the French Academy and the Academy of Inscriptions published in this vein the series of his *Hommes illustres qui ont paru en France pendant ce siècle*, with their complement, the *Éloges de MM. Arnauld et Nicole*, published separately "in Cologne" in 1697. For the leader of the party of the "Moderns" this was to extend the official privilege well beyond that of the Academies to declare immortality perhaps on the pontifical model of the Congregation of Rites established in 1588. Perrault even went so far as to make amends for the injustice of the court toward the great men of Port-Royal, unanimously respected and admired in France and all of Europe, in spite of their Jesuit adversaries who had the ear of

From "Lives" to Biography

Louis XIV. He was not the first to amend in some fashion what the regime of the academic "Eulogies" might have had in the way of too much administrative prudence. In 1673 the Academician Honorat du Bueil, Marquis de Racan, had published *Mémoires pour la vie de M. de Malherbe*. This poet, his master in the art, having died too soon to enter the Academy and benefit from a normal Eulogy, received his true rank on Parnassus through Racan's *Mémoires*: that of the founder of the French school of poetry, the Nicholas Poussin of modern belles-lettres. It was to ratify a unanimous plebiscite in favor of Malherbe and fix in memory the traits of this very singular man. Racan, to give himself more scope modestly claimed to write only "*Mémoires pour la vie...*" The fact remains that by his work he definitively placed Malherbe in the "historiographic schema" of which the Academy is the guarantee and which keeps a processional character, or which responds to a care for precedence. The following year Boileau took up the intent of this canonization with the famous "Enfin Malherbe vint" in *Art poétique*, and La Fontaine was not long in placing Malherbe and Racan "among the choirs of angels." There was the same procedure of "correction" in the case of Molière, denied the Academy while he was living because he was an actor but whom Grimarest provided with a "Life" in good and due form in 1705, making Molière a posthumous academician. Nothing more was lacking to the glory of the author of *Misanthrope*. We may ask if Adrien Baillet, who in 1691 published the masterpiece of 17th-century "Lives," that of Descartes, a retreating and vagrant personage, was not moved by an analogous concern. In his dedication to Chancellor Boucherat the librarian of President Lamoignon claims that ever since his childhood Louis XIV surrounded Descartes with his solicitude and provided him with pensions, which is at the least exaggerated. The intention is clear: repatriate Descartes and provide him with the "Life" without which a great man in France is not definitively and officially established as such. Adrien Baillet was an impeccable erudite and not subservient to the literary canon of the academic eulogy. This meticulously chronological "Life" is both the history of a great personage and that of a great thought. It ends with a portrait of a "Salesian" philosopher who resumes in his person the traits of an antique sage and those of the Christian "honest man." Nor is the

“Suetonian” trait, softened in the French manner, missing: the invincible attraction of Descartes to “crossed eyes,” a consequence, Baillet explains, of an unhappy love in his childhood for a little girl who was cross-eyed.

This way of completing the official lists is even taken up by the church. The Jesuit Bouhours, author of elegant “Lives” of St. Ignatius and St. Francis Xavier (1679 and 1682) published in 1686 *Vie de Mme. de Bellefonds, supérieure et fondatrice des religieuses bénédictines de N.D. des Anges établi à Rouen*: this exquisitely-lettered abbess who had held salon in her Norman parlor is not known for any miracle, and the Congregation of Rites did not dream of beatifying or canonizing her. Nor was it a question of the Academy for a woman, cloistered in addition. With this “Life” Father Bouhours, himself so close to the Academy but not suitable to enter it, at least raised Mme. de Bellefonds to the Christian Parnassus.

There is hardly any doubt that the academic genre of the eulogy and its relative, the “Life”, so regulated, so reasonable, so courteously intellectual in France, had a determining influence on the novel. A certain Valincour, whose *Éloge* Fontenelle wrote, was himself the author of a *Vie de François de Lorraine, duc de Guise*, (1681) a typical work of an academic historian, while the Abbé de Saint-Réal had published in 1672 a *Don Carlos* with the subtitle “historical account”. Saint-Réal also wrote the memoirs of the Duchess of Mazarin (1675). Thus through contagion authentic “Eulogies,” “Lives,” “Memoirs” affected fiction. The distance between this and the degree of truth recognized by history was narrowed. In his *Éloge de Valincour* the description Fontenelle gives of the *Vie du duc de Guise* could be applied to many of those “historical accounts” that under Louis XIV became the *nec plus ultra* of the novel.

“Petit morceau d’Histoire, qui remplit tout ce que l’on demande à un bon Historien, des recherches qui, quoique faites avec beaucoup de soin, et prises quelquefois dans des sources éloignées, *ne passent point les bornes d’une raisonnable curiosité**, une narration bien suivie, et animée, qui conduit naturellement le Lecteur et l’intéresse toujours, un style noble et simple, qui tire ses ornements du fond des choses, ou les tire d’ailleurs bien finement, nulle par-

*My italics.

From “Lives” to Biography

tialité pour le héros, qui pouvait cependant inspirer de la passion à son écrivain.”

We wonder if, by adopting the academic canon of the “Life” for her historical novel *La Princesse de Clèves* (1687) Madame de Lafayette did not try to set up a counter-altar and canonize a woman in the required forms but in a feminine register, foreign to the masculine “Lives”: that of the private life and secret grandeur hidden within a heart.

Women were not alone in aspiring to Parnassus. The scholars who found little favor with the French Academy and did not have their own company, that of the Inscriptions, until 1704, were patient and could count on a certain form of canonization in the ephemeral genre of the “-anas.” *Naudaeana*, *Patiniana*, *Chevraeana*, devoted to luminaries of erudition such as Gabriel Naudé, Guy Patin and Urbain Chevreau, clearly departed from the narration of academic “Lives”: inspired by the *Attic Nights* of Aulu Gelle, these discontinuous collections resembled anecdotes, witticisms and literary judgments relative to their heroes. There was no pretence of tracing the entire curve of a *bios*: the last French Pantagruels of Greco-Latin humanism were satisfied to appear at the summit of their learned careers, among their peers, with all the cruelty in judgment of those who had read a lot, thought a lot and seen a lot. The genre, compromised by the number of mediocre forgeries, quickly declined in the 18th century. The *bon ton* of academic eloquence then enveloped the scholarly world, more and more disdained as “antiquarian,” and the timid attempt to make heroes of the citizens of the ancient Republic of Letters, the one that wrote in Latin, foundered in archaism or ridicule. A norm of worldly French and modern civility was imposed, through the bias of the academic eulogy. Parnassus became the polished and elegant salon where the dead in full dress and wig converse under the eyes of the gracious Muses and Apollo in a sacred mantle. Voltaire’s *Siècle de Louis XIV* recapitulated this assembly of Moderns that he called on to preside over the progress of the Enlightened.

* * *

From that time History took the ascensional idea that had been made of it very seriously, after the victory of the Moderns. The

Revolution, the work of orators, ended by persuading the men of letters that they were the motivating forces of a humanity on the march and not the depositories of human experience. Without deigning to clash directly with the grand illusions of his century, the Chateaubriand of the *Mémoires* countered with irony and melancholy what he had the courtesy to present as his singular adventure: the enchaining of men to “*bios*,” the rules of a game as old as the world but whose antique rigor, dissimulating itself under prating ideas, had become even more poignant. Less haughty, Sainte-Beuve presents himself indirectly and commands little attention today. Yet, in his feline way he is all the more alert. This historian awoke very early from the nightmare of History. He saw himself as the author of “Lives.” Benedictine, he built a Parnassus for himself alone that could intimidate the Moderns. Poet and novelist, he peopled this Parnassus with presences that were less damaged by the irregularities of his time than the great eloquent soul of Chateaubriand: not “beacons” but countenances that are reflected in half-light. To be able to distinguish and make these countenances appear supposes an interior independence and superiority whose masked heroism has not often been recognized. This work of fragmented “critique”—Roberto Calasso saw it very well in his recent and admirable essay “La Ruine de Kash”—is in fact a creation just as ambitious and monumental as *La Comédie Humaine*, the *Légende des Siècles*, Michelet’s *Histoire de France*, with less stuffing. Saint-Beuve, giving a new and polemical meaning to the genre of “Lives,” convokes a humanity that is known in order to give play to the one that projects itself into the future. There is some Boileau in Sainte-Beuve but also some Pascal. What literature has undone, he forces it to do over by meditating, by concentrating into a chaplet of parallel “Lives,” not of men of letters but of men and women who have lived and written. They did not necessarily write masterpieces: Saint-Beuve has been reproached for that. He distrusted the modern notion of masterpieces, corrupted by excess and illusions of the sublime. His choices, less ingenuous, went elsewhere, to a true fidelity toward the unanimously recognized masterpieces of all time (Homer and Virgil, Horace and La Fontaine, Racine and St. Augustine). He recognized it where excitation and garrulity did not know how to discern it, in the unknowns or the *minores* who have their secret

From "Lives" to Biography

apart from the commonplace, typified by Joseph Joubert. He liked Leopardi. He would have enjoyed Emily Dickinson if he had known her. The touchstone with him, less a personal taste than an infallible intuition of what suited and will always suit honest people of all centuries, is a way of *being*, preferably veiled, the reverse of the Faustian will to astonish his time and throw it a little more out of kilter. If discretion and indirect written testimony did not suffice, a divinatory critic would make restitution for the singular fullness of a life and countenance in other ways. "Life" and "work," "character" and "style" complete each other to manifest an interior singularity but also human dignity achieved over time. They are as indissoluble for Sainte-Beuve as physiognomy, dress, interior decoration and inclinations for Balzac. The *Causeries du Lundi* are thus the last Parnassus of the Occident and the first to make for the intimacy of beings, their talent for life hidden and appreciated by a small number. The universal norm of humanity to which Sainte-Beuve refers has ceased to be immediately and unanimously recognizable: it is threatened by clandestinity. It all the more needs an interpreter who knows how to efface himself, to be drawn out of the shadows and unveiled to its distracted contemporaries. The discontinuity of the *Lundis* and their prodigious diversity seem only at first sight to dissimulate the unity and profound coherence of an Elysian landscape where critical genius has convoked fewer glories than souls, fewer masterpieces than tested and civilized interlocutors. The cat's claw, scratching others, may lead readers to be more wary.

"L'esprit critique," writes Sainte-Beuve in *Joseph Delorme*, "est de sa nature facile, insinuant, mobile et compréhensif. C'est une grande et limpide rivière qui serpente et se déroule autour des œuvres et des monuments de la poésie, comme autour des rochers, des forteresses, des coteaux tapissés de vignobles et des vallées touffues qui bordent ses rives. Tandis que chacun de ces objets du paysage reste fixe en son lieu et s'inquiète peu des autres, que la tour féodale dédaigne le vallon et que le vallon ignore le coteau, la rivière va de l'un à l'autre, les baigne sans les déchirer, les embrasse d'une eau vive, les comprend, les réfléchit; et lorsque le voyageur est curieux de connaître et de visiter ces sites variés, elle le prend dans une barque, elle le porte sans secousse, et lui

développe successivement tout le spectacle changeant de son cours.”

Chateaubriand et son groupe littéraire, Port-Royal, the Causeries, the Portraits: an entire society chosen and assembled, away from the noise and “acceleration” of history, to keep company with the modern *homo viator*, to transmit its experience to him, offer him a selective family and liberate him from what is not absolutely necessary. The literary kingdom of the “Lives” became for Sainte-Beuve the double initiatic of the principalities of this world on the march, the only fixed base for liberating oneself from it.

* * *

The “pace” of the genre had been found in the 17th century, in the academic movement. The vast harvest gathered by Sainte-Beuve in the 19th century was therefore not without affinity with the academic genre of the “Eulogy” that the satirical author contributed not a little to reviving:

“M. de Chastellux,” he writes in his *Pensées et Maximes*, “(l’auteur de *La Félicité publique* sur qui Villemain est en train d’écrire une Notice académique) était l’engoué par excellence à un point où l’illusion enlevait toutes les têtes et où était comme des cerfs-volants. Il portait cela en tout. Un jour qu’il revenait de la Comédie française où il avait vu débiter une actrice appelée Thénard, il dit en entrant à M^{me} de Staël: “Je viens de voir une nouvelle actrice qui a joué *admirablement*.” “Ah! c’est un peu fort, dit M^{me} de Staël; j’y étais et je trouve qu’elle n’a pas bien joué du tout.” “Mais, reprit M. de Chastellux, elle me semble s’être très bien tirée de telle ou telle scène,” et il essaya de les indiquer. M^{me} de Staël persista et une ou deux personnes qui revenaient du théâtre se joignant à elle, M. de Chastellux finit par se rabattre à ce mot: “Que voulez-vous? *la pauvre diablesse a fait ce qu’elle a pu*.” C’est là que, de rabais en rabais, cette grande admiration vint aboutir. Je ne sais si Villemain osera raconter ce trait dans son Éloge académique: il le faudrait pourtant, sous peine de ne pas peindre l’homme.”

Portray the man: that portrays Sainte-Beuve. Suetonius who would have the Christian outlook of la Bruyère; Plutarch who would have the French traits of Voltaire; it was in vain that he was “our literary

From "Lives" to Biography

Homer," his heirs, Taine, Brunetière, Lanson, injured him cruelly. And the art of the "Lives" in France suffered from the scorn that Valéry and later Proust showed for the jewel of the genre, the writer's "Life". Legend as well as truth, admiration and the art of knowing oneself lost a great deal there. The era of mass-produced biographies will perhaps end by decanting and take us back to the "Lives," "Portraits," maybe even to the "Dialogues of the dead."

* * *

Nothing can give a better measurement of what separates French tradition from English tradition than a parallel between the art of "Lives" with the French and that on the other side of the Channel, and Lytton Strachey claimed to be astonished that the English had nothing comparable to the academic *Éloges* of Fontenelle. However, he could not have been unaware of the existence of John Aubrey (1626-1697), a friend of Hobbes, a member of the Royal Society, who wrote *Minutes of Lives*, a collection of short "Lives" devoted to those of his contemporaries who counted and that he had known either personally or through recent oral tradition: Bacon, Hobbes, Sir Thomas Wotton. But they are masterpieces of melancholy and scholarly wit, composed "tumultuarly," as he himself wrote to his friend Anthony A. Wood, an antiquary at Oxford. There was nothing that could be read before the Royal Society, which in addition was a company of savants and scholars cultivating the plain style and not eloquence. But we must be indulgent toward the silence of Lytton Strachey: Bloomsbury posed too much as the London French Academy to recognize itself in John Aubrey: the group dreamed of the power of Fontenelle, Voltaire, D'Alembert and their brilliant friends. The delightful and profound bluntness of John Aubrey was too much for those slightly terroristic intellectuals who could do no better than add a collection of originals and eccentrics to the rich literary patrimony of England, where the capricious spontaneity of the ancient and medieval world in the canonization of great men, including writers, is preserved better than anywhere else. The Anglican rupture with Rome forestalled the ascendancy exercised on Richelieu by the example of the Congregation of Rites. "Lives" in England arise without fail where an individual has achieved universal esteem.

Another way to posthumous consecration is the tomb with inscription in Westminster Abbey, another rite in the antique style and one that has no equivalent in France. In France, the Pantheon is not a family chapel but one a party one. It is natural that, for lack of academic Eulogies, the genre of “Lives” takes on in England a character that is properly vital for national memory and enjoys an extraordinary consideration. An English Sainte-Beuve would have been published in Penguin books. In France the *Lundis* have not been revised for half a century. The history of the *Life and Letters*, a reflection on the genre, is a national discipline in England which has spread to all Anglophone countries: there is a magazine called *Biography* in Honolulu. The vitality of the genre, the consideration its authors receive, the place it occupies in reviews of the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *New York Review of Books* is surprising to the French, children spoiled without their knowing it by their majestic academic tradition. More generally, English national wisdom sees humanity only through the slant of the individual, in all his singularity, and it sees no contradiction between private and public virtues. In short, it has the sense of *bios* as Suetonius and Plutarch understood it. It is not in Shakespeare’s country that one could announce the “death of man” with impunity, in other words, the death of the individual. Loyalty toward a common basis of civility and humanity (extended even as far as the animal kingdom) is extremely alive there. It is a little like the mystery of the English garden: it seems tumultuous but actually each element is treated with a loving care that presents them all in their best light! Before foundering in biography, French “Lives” seem to have been regulated by the compass of Le Nôtre. When they escaped him, in Sainte-Beuve’s work, the most “English” and “Tory” along with Montaigne and La Fontaine of all the French, their countrymen regarded this eccentricity with a growing auspicion. The English “Lives”, numerous, vigorous and varied, answer to quite a different concept of the landscape, men and the activity that links them. In this landscape we find a noble oak: the *Life of Samuel Johnson* by James Boswell. Although amplified to the measure of a novel by Smollett, it is somewhat similar to a *Minute of Life* by Aubrey. Its “hero” is a scholar comparable to the French Saint-Evremonde, Boileau, Bayle, whose excellent “Lives” by Pierre Desmaizeaux (1711, 1712 and 1732)

From "Lives" to Biography

we lost no time in forgetting. Johnson, and rightly so, is given the honors of a Roman emperor by Boswell: we know everything about his interior self, his caprices, his deformities, the extent of his literary knowledge, his tastes and his wisdom. But Boswell is no less singular than his model: only at second glance does he reveal the most complete "nature" of authors of "Lives" in all literary history. Goethe tried in vain to repeat the miracle with Eckermann: a comparison of the two only makes what must be called the "genius" of Boswell more salient. He is the Herodotus of the genre of *Lives*. In him are manifested in their lively and fortunate plenitude the latent gifts of this anonymous public that has always been able to recognize, love and honor its great men. In addition, he has the well-trained taste to be able, like Sainte-Beuve, to see the grandeur of a hidden humanity and help it to come out into the full light of day. Johnson, for his part, could sense this vocation, which for him was a gift from heaven, and he made Boswell his closest friend and confidant. He himself had published a *Lives of the Poets*. He knew that literature has no better meaning than to confer measure and the memory of this measure to human life. From this encounter sprang the most unsparing and tender *Life* that has ever been written, whose hero, without ceasing to be one, appears "naively" in his comic oddness as he does in his traits of a great soul. That Johnson was a scholar, a living library, a philologist, a critic, a peerless moralist, appreciated by true connoisseurs and little noticed by the crowd or the fashionable world, a poor man in addition, a sort of London Socrates who nevertheless sent his rays throughout England: that gives us the measure of the perspicacity of Boswell and of the admirable persistence of the English for these "Ancients" in the sense of Boileau and his confidant Brossette, at the very time (1792) that in France the "Moderne" completed their triumph by polishing up the guillotine.

* * *

Beginning with that masterpiece, an English bedside book as much as Montaigne's *Essais* are in France, the English "Lives" ripened with the abundance and regularity of grape harvests. In the 19th century it could happen that during the lifetime of the "great man"

a deputy of the “electoral body” would spontaneously detach himself to prepare, in his intimacy, his future task as author of a “Life.” This is the case with Forbes with regard to Carlyle, himself obsessed by the quest for great men and the form of their “Lives.” The most important writers and historians did not disdain to contribute to the genre. The *Life of Charlotte Brontë* by the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell and the *Life of Charles Dickens* by John Forster are among the still-visited monuments of these so-called Victorian “Lives,” that were so scorned by Bloomsbury. However, it is from this tradition that the most incontestable biographies of our century are derived: the *Henry James* of Léon Edel; the *James Joyce* of Richard Ellmann; and even the *Virginia Woolf* of Quentin Bell!

Since every rule has its exception, in the 20th century we must consider separately a French masterpiece of a “Life” in the English style: the marvelous *Jeunesse d'André Gide* by Jean Delay (1956) that Sainte-Beuve would have enjoyed. Doctor and friend of Gide, Jean Delay was in a way his Boswell. His *Avant-Mémoires*, a clutch of “Lives,” have since confirmed with what detached and witty humanity this writer could make the *bios* the veritable measure of time for men. In him the French academic tradition joins the resources of the “Lives” from across the Channel that had already inspired André Maurois. Jean Delay could adopt this epigram given in the 17th century by John Aubrey as an epigram for his own work: “I remember a saying of General Lambert’s, that the best of men are but men at the best.”

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