Whole Lives
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Biography and autobiography are so conspicuously present in the high finance world of modern American publishing that high-minded opponents of the industry's practices find it easy to think of the genres as split down the middle, between serious books and promotional stunts. To do so may be snobbish, but there is enough wrong with the promotional dominance in modern book publishing to make snobbery almost a virtue.

The chief drawback to being virtuous like this is that there seems no place to stop. What industry in America is not dominated by forces that even a teaspoonful of virtue might improve? The soundest approach would seem to be, then, at root historical rather than ethical. One should look at the past of these long-lived genres with the intent of ferreting out their most pervasive elements. At least that approach was what I took in this book's predecessor, Pure Lives.

In Pure Lives I began far back, as one does when being ambitious, but I soon found out that not many modern students of the genres, ambitious or not, have dug deeper than Samuel Johnson and James Boswell. Their common assumption has been that biography did not really get up steam until modern times, and that autobiography—though represented earlier by such oddities as Saint Augustine's Confessions and Benvenuto Cellini's famous personal outpourings—was not a genre with a clear shape and intent until modernity set in, with its sudden respect for the self and the probing of self.

The assumption was a lucky one for me. Not a classical or medieval scholar, and claiming only an ordinary English teacher's grasp of the
“great tradition,” I was able to go back to many familiar texts in that tradition, and to look at them in a relatively unfamiliar way. In Pure Lives I imposed the history of these genres upon some elements of that tradition in ancient cultures, and then carried the history hastily forward from Plutarch through the hagiographers and chroniclers—with way stops for Machiavelli, Cellini, Shakespeare, and Laurence Sterne—to Johnson and Boswell. With this volume I move relentlessly forward from there, but into a world where the scholars of genres are many and busy. I must watch my step, and not only historically. Value judgments of all kinds become important as soon as one nears one’s own world. The result is that I have not been able to avoid being virtuous here, though being so about Freud and Norman Mailer is more dangerous than being so about Plutarch. At least I have tried to be virtuous quietly.

But to return again to Plutarch for a moment. His relative lack of interest in the self, characteristic of the classical period, was the product of an attentiveness to public lives—that is, lives dedicated to public, social service. Plutarch and his contemporaries rendered incidental—because they thought it was incidental—the kind of domestic detail that we now think central to biography and autobiography, especially detail about the self’s childhood and maturing years. They did not explore the home sources of Alexander the Great’s greatness, but the signs in the heavens at his birth.

What was true in Greece and Rome was also true of biblical lives, for though the biographers of the Bible were always ready to report conflict among the children of patriarchs, they paid little attention to the causes of conflict. And as for the public figures in Egyptian and oriental cultures, they could well have had no childhoods.

Neglect of the domestic being did not mean lack of knowledge about it, and about its maturing, though curious notions were common. It meant that the authors of early lives had a different sense of their mission than do modern authors. The cultures of Greece and Rome produced a few works in which private affairs were seriously studied—think of Oedipus—yet the Oedipus of Sophocles has little in common with Freud’s modern version of him. The Oedipus of Sophocles is ruled by forces outside himself, while Freud’s Oedipus rules, though subconsciously, his own fate.

The modern mind, though still surrounded by astrologists, is resistant to heavenly causation other than, loosely, fate. It does not readily accept the presence of outside givens other than those supplied by
sociologists and biologists, and in biography and autobiography it looks steadily in rather than out. It is therefore baffled by the functions and roles of the old gods and goddesses, since those deities were symbols not just of givens, but also of mysterious overseers playing a positive role in the formation of human character and in its conduct at maturity.

Homer's description of the siege of Troy is an early instance of the classical point of view, with gods and goddesses overrunning the battlefields, and much extrinsic influence can still be seen at work in Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (about 50 A.D.). For his time Plutarch was a sophisticate, but he was no skeptic about heavenly influence. He could sometimes sound like a modern man, but not when he discussed, for hundreds of words, whether Brutus was physically confronted with his "evil genius" the night before his death, or whether Lycurgus in old age ascended directly to heaven after abandoning his governance of Sparta and walking out of town.

*The Metamorphoses* of Ovid (about 10 A.D.) is probably the fullest rendering we have of the mythical weaving of classical selves with outside forces. Ovid was satirical about the gods, but no disbeliever. He could not have ascribed so much human fate, even figuratively, to Jove's lecherousness, Juno's jealousy and so on, if he had not assumed that qualities of earthly character had sources other than earthly conditioning. He did not describe Io becoming a cow, Arachne a spider, and Hyacinthus a flower by their own choosing. He was always careful to place their destinies in higher hands and make them self-modest.

But there is one story not in Ovid that may, with a little squeezing and molding, be said to represent a significant shift in the classical view of self: the tale of Cupid and Psyche. The tale nearest to it in Ovid is that of Narcissus, but the fates of Narcissus and Cupid were very different. When Narcissus looked into a reflecting pool, "neither desire of food or sleep" could lure him away, and he was soon defunct; but when Cupid made love to Psyche, their affair became, after a rocky start, a fine romance, so satisfying to Jupiter that he made Psyche immortal.

And Psyche, unlike the empty pool loved by Narcissus, was a positive something. She was the soul, and the soul, I must insist, cannot be winnowed away from the self itself—though many have tried.

The Cupid-Psyche story as we have it comes from Apuleius, a
century after Ovid. Like Ovid he was a satirist, and Edith Hamilton
says of his tale, “The writer is entertained by what he writes; he
believes none of it.” Yet this complicated, variously interpreted tale
suggestively contains a view of the soul or self that was a novelty for
its time. Usually it is described as a forerunner of romances like that
of Cinderella and the Prince, and of Romeo and Juliet, tales of lovers
evading wicked sisters and angry parents, in short the Establishment;
but since Cupid’s love is not for a clear “other” but for the self, the
Cupid tale should perhaps be allied instead to the likes of the story of
Hamlet or, among the story’s less noble progeny, tales of the later
bourgeois apostles of unlimited individualism. Jack Lindsay, an excel­
lent modern translator of The Golden Ass, in which the Cupid-Psyche
story appears, describes the story’s theme as that of “the soul’s pro­
gress,” a phrase that would be a suitable title for this book if I did not
fear being taken for a man of the cloth. In the story the fabled Psyche
comes, as it were, of age.

Psyche was a beautiful mortal, to whom Cupid made love, though
he had been told by his mother, Venus—who was jealous of Psyche’s
beauty—not to do that at all, but to mate her somehow with a low,
beastly type (perhaps someone similar to Apuleius’s image of himself).
Cupid came to Psyche only in darkness, and she did not know his
identity (though her wicked sisters told her they had heard—and from
a high source, Apollo—that he was a serpent and would eat her up).
Incurably curious, she at last held a lamp over him while he was
sleeping, and was, briefly, delighted. Cupid was not. In the first place
she had inadvertently wounded him by spilling hot lamp oil on his
shoulder while he was sleeping, and in the second place he knew that
in loving her he was breaking his mother’s command, that his indul­
gence would now be evident, and that both he and Psyche would now
be punished. They were. Psyche was obliged to do several odd jobs for
Venus, like sorting innumerable seeds (of course Psyche arranged to
have innumerable ants do this), and the wounded Cupid was placed
as near to death’s door, by the angry mother, as a god can be. Yet the
conclusion was no more tragic than the essentially comic narrative
itself. The Establishment at last relented and blessed their relationship.
So a question arises. Why did the gods change their minds?

An answer of sorts was given in the simplistic finale that Apuleius
gave the tale, details of which Edith Hamilton omits in her rendering.
Apuleius declared Cupid and Psyche to be incorrigibly loving lovers
who handled the world’s assaults so well that eventually their body-and-
soul relationship was found by Jupiter to be "perfectly in accord with usage and the civil code." Apuleius added that their union was productive of a child named Joy, thus affirming—as I read the tale—respect and love for the privacy, dignity, and beauty of the soul or self, and declaring that an ethical revolution in heaven and on earth had occurred.

Do I thus twist the tale? A little, but others have done so, including Robert Bridges. What I am doing with it is pointing it, as I think it asks to be pointed, in the direction of two overlapping archetypal moments in human history that are much discussed in our time. The first moment is, in theology and also psychology, that of spiritual conversion or second birth. (The psychologists differ from the theologians only, or chiefly, in their tying the moment to the physical maturation process of adolescence.) The second, hard-to-distinguish moment is the moment of truth, when an individual sees for the first time something basic about his life that he has not seen before. In the Apuleius story these two moments converge. Cupid and Psyche succeed in breaking away and also, simultaneously, in discovering a great truth about the self. For biography the convergence is vital because it widens the base for the genre, to include the self life. Before Cupid and Psyche had their affair the genre was, because of custom's heavy hand, censorious about all but the public life—that is, it did not normally allow private life to enter its domains. After the affair the biographer could conventionally ask, while presenting the public life of his hero, what was he really like? Or he could even forget about the public life entirely.

But why do I propose the Cupid-Psyche story as my example of these themes, when even early Greek tragedy contained moments of truth, and when all the early Christian martyrs, of the same period as Apuleius, are more obvious cases of conversion than his little sexual bedtime tale? Were not the martyrs' opposition, upon conversion, to the things that were Caesar's, and their resultant instant ascension to heaven, more important historical symptoms of cultural change than the tale?

Perhaps, but the martyrs' rebirths, as described by the early hagiographers, remained conspicuously impersonal. Each Christian convert's greatest mission was to relinquish individuality, abandon the selfness of soul, with the result that hagiographic "lives" had as little in them of the private life as the pagans'. The Protestants had yet to come, but they would not uniformly approve of the Cupid-Psyche kind of independence either. The rise of the middle class had to come along too, as well as the Renaissance, Copernicus, and dozens of other
forces in sophomore surveys, before there was consensus in the West that a man's soul was, or could be sometimes, and with many reservations, his own.

Those forces spoke slowly, so slowly that they are still speaking, often without conviction. What cultural evidence is there, even now, that Psyche should not keep sorting seeds? Yet in biography—and particularly English and American biography—attention to the self has come to be at the center of things, with the biographer sometimes playing the role of Psyche herself, by holding the lamp over Cupid and, as his temporary soulmate, discovering (and telling the world of) his true identity.

Yet this attention to self, while widening the base of the genre, has not changed the primary motivating force behind it. Biography has always been, and remains, chiefly dedicated to celebrating individual human success. It would not be read, would not exist, if it had not brought news down the centuries of the fulfillment of human hopes by great achievement. It has been read because the creators of biographies have had such hopes with the rest of us and have written of individuals who have, with hundreds of greatly flawed exceptions, fulfilled those hopes. The shift of attention to private lives has altered our hope quotient little; it has simply altered the biographers' focus as they proceed with their celebrations. Now a common biographical formula is, for instance, to look for a moment of truth in infancy and to find that it was a hidden moment, an unexpected private moment, not at all a moment out of which success would seemingly proceed. And another, related formula is to delve into a biographee's writings and actions, to find in them repetitive motifs and concerns lying beneath their surface. In thus shifting attention from the evident to the submerged the biographer partly alters his own function; he becomes not merely a recorder, a commemorator, an evaluator of performance, but also an analyst of the sources of performance.

But when those sources are, as they so frequently are, dismal, traumatic experience, and when the biographee's subsequent successes therefore become clouded over with all sorts of psychic misery, then questions begin to arise about the nature of success itself. They may be happy questions for a reader who is not himself a success but shares the successful one's miseries, but they are definitely subversive questions for a genre traditionally committed to the study of performance per se. (See W. H. Auden's sonnet "Who's Who" in my Freud essay below for a poetic announcement of the kind of subversion I am talking about.)
So we have come far enough now, with this shift to self study, to produce the common assumption I have mentioned, that biography did not even exist until it began to be attentive to the self. In *Pure Lives*, I therefore took a partly opposed position, thinking it wrong to put good classical minds like Plutarch's back with the Neanderthals. But I agreed that in focusing upon public selves Plutarch omitted biographical matters of moment, matters that Apuleius did not omit. For, unlike Plutarch, Apuleius was an earthy writer in the comic tradition, a predecessor of Rabelais and Boccaccio, and he was more concerned with the humanity of Psyche and Cupid—even though Cupid was a god and Psyche a perambulating ideal—than anything else. In his recounting of their affair, Psyche was very human, and Cupid went to bed with her as a human. His tale was fanciful, but physical too, and he presented Venus's jealousy of Psyche's beauty as human and physical. Thus when Venus heard of her son Cupid's treachery in romancing her competitor in beauty, she raged at him (in the Lindsay translation) as follows: "You, a mere boy, entangle yourself in a lewd schoolboy affair—just to annoy me with a woman I hate for a daughter-in-law. But no doubt you presume, you jokester, you prof­ligate, you disgusting fellow, that you are my only high-born son, and that I'm past the age of bearing another."

Oddly enough, not until the nineteenth century did this kind of comedy in literature and drama reach far into biography, since biography until then had taken its cues from the gospels of epic poetry and tragedy, and from historians of great-man performances. Not until then did the shift in focus take place in earnest.*

In this book I begin with Thomas Carlyle's inwardly driven (but

*And in poetry the shift did not occur even then, if Robert Bridges's version of the Apuleius tale—"a poem in twelve measures"—is representative of the late century. It appeared in 1885 without a smile in it. Presumably Bridges was offended by Apuleius's frivolity. He translated the passage quoted above as follows:

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Thou too to burn with love, and love of her
Whom I did gate; and to thy bed to take
My rival, that my trusted officer
Might of mine enemy my daughter make!
Dost thou think my love for thee so fond,
And miserably doting, that the bond
By such dishonour strained will not break?
Or that I cannot bear another son
As good as thou? (Bridges, Eros and Psyche, 86.)
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hardly sexually driven) heroes, and move from them—at after discussing
dictionary biographies of public personages as seen in Leslie Stephen’s
Dictionary of National Biography—to Freud’s inward selves. And with
Freud and his successors I come to our world of capitalism, individualism, and the subconscious, where all biographers must now be dili-
gent students of self even if not lovers of it.

In the eighteenth century and early nineteenth, these students were
not psychologists because psychology had not been invented. One
earthly school was Lockean and thought of mental conditioning as a
sure way to mankind’s progress upward, dismissing intractable subjects
like the will and the spirit. Another school was heavenly and took its
lead from German philosophers who demonstrated, with invulnerable
logic, the superior reality of the will and spirit. In time, the earthly
school begat utilitarians, positivists, and most of the varieties of so-
cialist. In time, the heavenly school produced the transcendentalists
and even, circuitously, Hitler. We should not blame these originals,
though of course we do, for what was later derived from them. We
should instead be properly cautious in assigning blame, and simply
note that by the early nineteenth century both schools were present
throughout Western culture and were trying to understand and guide
the massive social and technological revolutions taking place around
them. We should also note that the culture of the time was more
deeply influenced by these essentially social-political schools than by
anything remotely resembling modern psychology.

In England Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill represented the
opposed schools handsomely, and made the conflict between them
dramatic by being, for a time, good friends. What needs to be kept in
mind about both of them is that despite their differences they talked
about the self as if it were a philosophical concept. Freud, perhaps
oddly, later read and admired both of them,* but if he had settled
down to analyze either, he would probably have described their con-
ceptual lives as mere sublimations of their “real” lives. In any event, he
went out and started his own school of the self,† and with him more

*Freud seems to have named his son Oliver after Cromwell, of whose work (in
readmitting the Jews to England) he may have been made aware by Carlyle. See
my Freud essay, below, for his feelings about Mill.
†Or soul. Bruno Bettelheim is particularly insistent that when Freud talked of
psychoanalysis, he was not thinking, as his English translators have insisted, of
something medical, but of the root meaning for psyche. (Bettelheim, Freud and
Man’s Soul, 53.)
Introduction

than with any other individual, psychology became an intellectual force in the private life of Psyche and Eros. And an intellectual force in biography too.

Then too, with Freud, perhaps unfortunately, psychology became a profession in earnest, though it was hardly the only intellectual field to do so as the nineteenth century came to a close. The great age of professionalism was upon us then, and with its arrival somebody was sure to make private lives professional matters even if Freud did not. But for biography, no matter who was to blame, professionalism has not always been—or so this volume tries to show—the wonderful solution to its "prolonged immaturity" that some modern biographers have claimed.* I should not be snide, but there is something about the arrogance and assertiveness of the modern, professional, analytical mind that has annoyed me throughout my readings for this book, with the annoyance being stirred about equally by the various professions I have confronted, including my English-department own. My doubtless prejudiced conclusion is (here is where my virtue becomes troublesome) that in our world the professionals have generally come to feel obliged to deal as specialists with private lives, and that while they vary widely in the range of their vision, few seem ready to admit that other professions have knowledge and talent equal to their own. Each seems fixed in his own wondrous way of "taking hold" of the genre of biography, a phrase that Freud once used and with which I begin my essay on him.

The taking-hold is sometimes impressive and persuasive, but it is sometimes also absurdly self-serving, dedicated to promoting the biographer's welfare within his profession. The results can be dismal. With the most professionally driven of the biographers one can imagine, for example, all sorts of tragicomic versions of the Cupid-Psyche story emerging, were they to put their minds to it. Some might discover that the delights to which the lovers addressed themselves were mere channels into which their subconscious resistance to their elders had blindly flowed, hence not really delights at all. Some might dwell learnedly on the complex character of the multifaceted forces, earthly and divine, opposing the lovers' union. Some might even probe Psyche's own psyche, discovering—how could they avoid it?—that she was not what she was. And of course some connoisseurs of best-sellerdom and the

*The phrase is Richard Altick's in his Lives and Letters, 186.
dollar might uncover nasty pornographic perversions beneath the lovers' ostensibly romantic affections.

My dander is therefore up, intermittently, against authorities and authoritarianism in biography, the how-to-do-it people who would take hold of the genre with firm hands as if it were somehow their genre. If ever there was a genre resistant to such narrowing of its domain, biography is it. It is a genre whose long, complicated history has indeed been that of the soul's progress, a progress toward wholeness in the sense of inclusiveness. It is therefore a genre in which, finally, humility must be the best policy, allowing the soul to progress without being told how to.

Yet even that cautionary pronouncement needs qualification. A biographer cannot, aspiring to humility, simply pile up detail like scholarly cordwood, believing that he has no discriminatory function. His artistic role in the proceedings must remain, or he is only a woodpiler. I hope that in my fulminations against specialist excesses I will not myself seem authoritarian about them. Professionalism breeds the vice, and I confess that with this, my fourth book of biography (one, a kind of private training ground, has not been published), I am beginning to feel like a biographer professional.