

# Perils and Paradoxes of Writing Biography

**From a trail of paper, sown with gaps and contradictions,  
a biographer seeks to convey the sense of a life being lived**

By PAUL MURRAY KENDALL

**O**UR BEST biographies present men of high action or men of letters. It is not hard to see why. The events in such men's lives—counting books, of course, as events—work like giant screens on which may be viewed the motions of personality. The cannons at Marengo hammer out, for that moment, Napoleon's character, as *Utopia*, more delicately, traces the psychic lineaments of Thomas More.

The greatest biography in the world unfolds the life of a man of letters; and literary figures have, in general, probably enjoyed a disproportionate amount of attention. For one thing, biographers, being writers of a kind, are attracted to writers, partly, no doubt, in order to seek their own features in a kindred face. Furthermore, men of letters are schooled, by temperament and talent, to examine themselves rather more assiduously than other beings do, and thus offer the biographer eloquent source material.

On the other hand, the biographer of a man of letters runs special risks: the dangers lurking in the subject's words. There have probably been composed more disappointing lives of literary men than of any other kind of human being. In some cases, the works have been cavalierly ignored or scanted; in others, they are too recklessly or crudely plundered as biographical evidences; in still others, they are mechanically shunted to one side and dealt with separately, as

though the life and the "letters" did not penetrate each other.

Moreover, a poem-event is, paradoxically, more difficult to translate into biographical terms than an action-event. Whereas the poem is tantalizingly close to the heart of self, it may well turn out to be a subtle concealment or a deliberately stylized projection or a privately visioned myth of that personality.

Whatever paper trail the biographer treads, he shares the trials of other men of letters. The obvious difference between biography and poetry-novel-drama is, if enormous, not quite so enormous as appears. It will not do simply to say that biography is made out of fact (whatever that is) and fiction is made out of fancy (whatever *that* is). The writer of fiction, out of the mating of his own experience and his imagination, creates a world to which he attempts to give the illusion of reality. The biographer, out of the mating of an extrinsic experience, imperfectly recorded, and his imagination, recreates a world to which he attempts to give something of the reality of illusion. We demand that a novel, however romantic or "experimental," be in some way true to life, we demand of biography that it be true to a life. Both phrases signify not "factual" but "authentic"—and authenticity lies not only in what we are given but in what we are persuaded to accept.

The biographer often finds himself in the grip of an extrarational, even compulsive choice, not unlike that which descends on the novelist or poet. The biographer's subject, it might be said, is a man whom he would have longed to create if he had not existed. Like the novelist, he must be continually asking questions about his materials and sus-

pecting the form into which they too quickly fall—hoping for the patience to reject easy devices and plausible solutions and brilliant breakthroughs, so that he may trap those shy, belated birds, the best answers. The failed biography and the failed novel frequently suffer from an identical ill: the authors have taken their materials for granted.

In his questioning, the biographer, cherishing the obligations of science and the hopes of art, teeters on a precarious perch. There are times when he must resist the enticements of art in order to be true to biographical art, must build with stone instead of rainbow. There are times when the biographer must query apparent facts, "scientific" evidence, in order to be true to biographical science; must build with rainbow instead of stone. Facts that mock his vision of character may turn out not to be facts or to be facts that do not say what they seem to say.

**I** shall offer a brief illustration drawn from my biography of that fifteenth-century political adventurer, Warwick the Kingmaker, in which an apparently documented fact collided head-on with my conception of Warwick himself and of his friend Louis XI of France, the famous "spider King." English accounts state that Warwick was paid for two journeys to the Continent in the summer of 1464. However, though he and Louis XI had indeed arranged a rendezvous for that summer, there is no record, or even the faintest suggestion, that the two met; and Louis's movements at this time were closely reported by the Burgundian historian Chastellain and by a Milanese ambassador who was a confidant of the king. Historians therefore assumed that Warwick had hidden him-

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self at Calais, perhaps at the bidding of his sovereign Edward IV, who had no love for Louis.

This assumption, in my view, was false alike to the character of Warwick, who regarded himself as the mentor rather than the minister of King Edward, and to the character of King Louis, who was far too nervously voluble to have concealed an interview with the man of all men he longed to ensnare in his web and far too well informed to remain in ignorance of Warwick's presence at Calais. The truth of fact simply did not square with psychological truth, as I saw it. Since I could neither accept nor ignore the former, I could only desperately scabble for evidences to undermine it.

Fortunately, I at last dug out a series of counter-facts which indicated that Warwick was besieging castles in northern England at the time he was supposedly crossing the Channel, that the diplomatic journeys ascribed to him were actually made by two of his adherents, whose presence at Louis's court was fully vouched for, and hence that the clerk of the royal accounts, paying Warwick for his men's expenses, had wrongly assumed that the Earl himself performed the service. In this case, pig-headed refusal to let "art" bow to "science" enabled me—I hope—to reconcile fact and vision, stone and rainbow.

Current definitions of life-writing are lucid and simple, but not altogether satisfactory. In *The Development of English Biography*, Sir Harold Nicolson concludes that "pure" biography comes into being when the author, eschewing all extraneous purposes, writes the life of a man for its own sake, and, though adhering to truth, attempts to compose that life as a work of art.

In excluding the lives of saints or campaign biographies or pious memorials, Nicolson effectively clears the ground. But can it be said that even the "purest" biographer is not moved by the commemorative urge? The fundamental emotion that powers biographical practice is surely the desire to mark, to keep alive, the passage of a man by recapturing the life of that man; because that life, for him, says something or symbolizes something about the meaning of life in general. What signals the pure biographer is that he regards the truth as the only valid commemoration.

Considering that biography represents imagination limited by truth, facts raised to the power of revelation, I suggest that it may be defined as "the simulation, in words, of a man's life, from all that is known about that man."

As the *simulation* in words of a life, biography works through effects, like the other literary arts, but it is an art with boundaries. The definition excludes works at both ends of the biographical

spectrum: the "fictionalized" biography simulates life but does not respect the materials at hand, whereas the fact-crammed biography, from the magpie school of scholarship-as-compilation, worships the materials at hand but does not simulate a life. The one fails truth; the other fails art. Between the two lies the impossible craft of true biography.

The question is often asked—how can a biographer be impartial (like a referee)? Of course he cannot be so, would not be so. He is not a biologist looking at one-celled animals under the microscope. He is a human being deeply involved with another human being. He lives another life along with his own, and hopes he can persuade the reader to live that life along with *his* own. A biography may take a dozen years or more to write. Who would be willing, who would be able to spend that much time with a man for whom he had no feeling?

The biographer is forced into a struggle with his subject which is, in a way, the opposite of the novelist's struggle. The novelist must fight for detachment from material that is a part of him, so that he may see that material in esthetic perspective, may ask it the right questions. The biographer is already detached from his material, but it is an inert, a fortuitous detachment, a detachment that has not been won but thrust upon him. Before he can achieve true detachment, he must first achieve something like the psychic immersion in his material that the novelist begins with.

In general, from the inception of modern life-writing in the fifteenth century to the present, the biographer, and the

autobiographer, too, have confronted their subjects with a sharpening consciousness of perils and possibilities. The deepening of psychological perception achieved in the twentieth century has affected the biographer's awareness of his relations with his materials as much as his understanding of the materials themselves.

A second, more obvious tension now develops between the subject, as brute materials, and the writer, as shaping intelligence: the conflict between the intransigence of facts and the imperious demand of art. It is this second tension that I have been mindful of in my definition of biography as the simulation, in words, of a life—but a simulation growing out of the materials at hand.

At best, fact is harsh, recalcitrant matter, as tangible as the hunk of rusty iron one trips over and yet as shapeless as a paper hat in the rain. Fact must be rubbed up in the mind, placed in magnetic juxtaposition with other facts, until it begins to glow, to give off that radiance we call meaning. Fact is a biographer's only friend and worst enemy.

**W**HEN biographers talk shop among themselves, you will hear animated discussions of a problem rarely mentioned by reviewers, the problem of gaps. That paper trail, extending from the birth certificate to the death certificate, is never continuous or complete. The more remote in time the man is, the more gaps there will be. These gaps occur at all stages in the trail but are very likely to come during the childhood and adolescence of the subject.

There are no rules for handling gaps.



"It says, 'This idol protected by Franklin Automatic Alarm System.'"



Each paper trail is unlike any other paper trail. Each biographer is unlike any other biographer. The right way to fill gaps is unknown; the wrong ways are legion.

Confronting a gap, the writer can but recognize that he is domesticated in imperfection; at the same time he must respond to King Harry's call—"Once more into the breach!"—and, summoning his talents and honesty, struggle to suggest the life of his man during the blank, without either pretending to more knowledge than he has or breaking the reader's illusion of a life unfolding.

I will use an experience of my own only because it is accessible. In trying to write a biography of Richard III, I was faced with an enormous gap in Richard's boyhood. From the age of ten till about fifteen (1462-66) he is but the merest supernumerary in the annals of the time. I could find only three elements out of which to build a bridge: what was going on in England; what, in all probability, he was doing; where he was living.

Since Richard's brother, King Edward IV, and the mighty Kingmaker, Richard, Earl of Warwick, were in these years moving toward a collision in which Richard would be deeply involved, the great events of the period had to be intertwined in the texture of his life. I sought to introduce them, not from Richard's viewpoint—which would mean a leap into a mind closed to me—nor yet as inert information interrupting the biography, but as the stuff of Richard's developing experience.

As for the other elements, I had only the naked fact that Richard was being schooled as a "henxman," or page, in the household of the Earl of Warwick

at Middleham Castle in Wensleydale, Yorkshire.

Out of several contemporary "courtesy books" and a mercifully detailed manual on the proper education for an aspirant knight, I sought to reconstruct the probable pattern of Richard's boyhood days. Place itself provided equally valuable clues. On the southern slope of Wensleydale—a great rift in the Yorkshire moors through which tumbles the river Ure—there stand the massive ruins of Middleham Castle. Behind, the land rolls up to the sky; before, stretch the village and the valley; then, empty moorland climbing to the clouds. It was in Richard's day a wild sweep of country, inhabited by a folk more primitive than those in Edward IV's capital, marked by huge stone abbeys and bristling castles, the hills rounded by the stamp of Celtic kings and Roman legions. Since, in later years, Richard owned Middleham and spent his happiest days there, I concluded that he must have developed his feeling for the region during his early sojourn. I therefore juxtaposed his training in knight-hood with an account of Wensleydale and its people in an attempt to suggest the shape of his boyhood.

The problem of filling gaps involves more than material; it is likewise a question of rhythm. Obviously, the amount of biographical space-time devoted to a moment in the subject's life should approximate the weight of significance of the moment. Not only, then, must the writer find material in the things that stand around, in order to bridge space; he must likewise sensitively adjust the movement of the narrative so that its pace reflects the true pace of the life. Otherwise, even the least perceptive

reader will feel that "something is wrong," perhaps that the biography is "dry" or that the biographer has somehow cheated him or that he has missed a point. When the narrative moves quickly or slowly according to the quantity of the material rather than the quality of the experience, the writer and his subject have become prisoners of the papers.

It is gaps that tempt the fledgling biographer to speculate, the "artistic" biographer to invent, the scholarly biographer to give a lecture on history. To fill gaps by wondering aloud, lying, padding—or simply to leave them for the reader to tumble into—is not to fill the shoes of a true biographer.

If the absence of witnesses—gaps—poses one of the chief biographical problems, availability of witnesses does not mean that the biographer can switch on the automatic pilot. Mark Schorer has eloquently commented on the vanity, fallibility, unconscious duplicity, animosity, taciturnity, or volubility of living witnesses and evoked the specter of libel rustling above the workbench of the biographer writing of a man recently deceased, like Sinclair Lewis.

**D**EAD witnesses, preserved only as paper, are no less humanly perverse, inaccurate, and prejudiced; and if they have been dead for more than two centuries, their terseness, their indifference to details of behavior, their maddening penchant for generalizing, moralizing, and sometimes paralyzing human situations, in sum their over-all failure to satisfy the most modest demands of twentieth-century curiosity, offer perhaps even greater obstacles to biography than the copiousness, however misleading, of the witness-in-the-flesh.

Judicial, scientific, historical tests of evidence are useful, but the writer who deals in the unstable stuff of letters, diary, conversations, hearsay, the elusiveness of human testimony not offered as testimony, evidences that may yield more in their lies, omissions, euphemisms, and periphrases than in their truths, mainly depends on his shaky knowledge of psychology, his own sense of human nature, what he has learned from other biographers, dogged industry, a skepticism that is quizzical rather than systematic, and a determination to reject the golden fable for the leaden fact.

With no respect for human dignity, the biographer plays off his witnesses one against the other, snoops for additional information to confront them with, probes their prejudices and their pride, checks their reliability against their self-interest, thinks the worst until he is permitted to think better. Withal, he must expect to be deceived, and more

(Continued on page 65)



"Yeah! I'll bet Humphrey Bogart could have trimmed the pants off James Bond any old time."

# The Iliad

By KENNETH REXROTH

**T**HE BEST-QUALIFIED CRITICS have always agreed that the first work of Western European literature has remained incomparably the greatest. In itself this is a revelation of the nature of the human mind and of the role of works of art. This is a popular judgment as well as a critical one. Today, over 2,500 years old, Homer competes successfully with current best-sellers, detective stories, and the most sensational and topical nonfiction.

Modern Americans may be the heirs of Western civilization, but all the elements of that civilization have changed drastically since Homer's day. The office worker who reads Homer on the subway bears little superficial resemblance either to Homer's characters or to his audience. Why should two long poems about the life of barbaric Greece have so great an appeal?

It was the fashion in the nineteenth century to deny the existence of Homer and to break up the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* into collections of folk ballads. Nothing disproves those theories more than this public reception. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have been read by such a vast diversity of men because, as unitary works of art, they deal with universal experience with unsurpassed depth, breadth, and intensity. Each poem shows the powerful insight and organization that comes from the artistic craft of a complete person.

Men have argued about the *Iliad* for so long and raised so many side issues that it is easy for a critic to forget that it is formally a tragedy, saturated with a tragic sense of life and constructed with the inevitability of the tragedies of Orestes or Macbeth. It is a double tragedy—of Achilles and the Greeks, and of Hector and the Trojans, each reinforcing the other. To modern taste, the heroes are not the Greeks, who are portrayed as quarreling members of a warrior band, but the Trojans, men of family united in the community of the city-state.

Homer, like most later writers of epic—Teutonic, Irish, or Icelandic—portrays heroic valor as fundamentally destructive, not just of social order but of humane community. The Greeks are doomed by their characteristic virtues. Achilles sulks in his tent. Agamemnon has stolen his girl. The Greek camp is beset with a disorder that wastes all

good things. Underlying disorder is violence. Violence is not approved of in itself by the Greeks, but all the values they most admire—the nobility, pride and power, glamour and strength of barbaric chieftains—flourish only in the context of violence and must be fed by it continuously. Failure of these values provokes shame, the opposite of the assumption of responsibility, and shame provokes disaster.

On the other side of the wall the Trojans go their orderly and dignified ways. None of them approves of the crime of Paris but he is a member of the family of the King of Troy and the citizens of Troy are members one of another. So they assume his guilt in an act of collective responsibility. When the Greeks arrived before the walls of Troy, the Trojans could have thrown Paris and Helen out of the city. The invaders would have gone their way. When the *Iliad* opens, the Greeks have been fighting for ten years and are worn out with the moral attrition of war, while the Trojans have grown ever closer together in the consciousness of doom. "Our lot is best, to fight for our country," says Hector, and Homer implies a contrast with the Greeks who are fighting for themselves, each for his own valor and pride.

Greeks and Trojans are not the only protagonists of this tragedy. There is another community—the gods of Olympus. In the vast literature of Homeric criticism, I have never read a mention of what kind of community this was, of where in Homer's day he could have found an earthly parallel to such a group of people. The court of Zeus is precisely a court, like those to be found in the great empires of the ancient Near East, in Egypt, Babylon, or Persia. After Homer, for a few hundred years, Greek society strove to rise above the tyrant and the court of the tyrant. The Greeks of the classical period looked on the rulers of Persia or Egypt and their provincial imitators in the Greek world as at once frivolous and dangerous, because, in Greek opinion, they were motivated not by the moral consensus of

a responsible community but by the whims of what today we would call a collection of celebrities.

Homer contrasts the societies of the Greeks, the Trojans, and the Olympian gods as the three forms of political association that prevailed in the Heroic Age (a time that in fact, 400 years before, must have seemed almost as remote to him as his age does to us), namely the barbaric war band, the ancient, pre-Greek city-state, and the imperial court. He also contrasts men and gods as two disparate orders of being. The gods may behave like painted and perfumed courtiers of the Persian King of Kings, but they function also as conceptual forms of the forces of nature and of the forces that operate within the human personality on nonhuman levels. In this role, too, the tragedy of the *Iliad* reveals them as frivolous, dangerous, and unpredictable.

True, Homer speaks worshipfully at times of the gods, and especially of Zeus, but in terms of standardized flattery, empty of moral content. For Homer, utterly unlike the Jew or Moslem or Christian, the supernatural is devoid of value altogether. Value arises only in the relations of men. He contrasts two different systems of relationships, the epic chivalry of the Heroic Age war band of the Greeks, and the Trojan community of mutual respect and responsibility. The conflicts and resolutions and tragedies that beset the interactions of these human beings are all the good and evil there is in the *Iliad*. The gods contribute only chance, fate, doom, as amoral as so many roulette wheels.

Homer has been read for almost 3,000 years, and is read today by millions, because he portrayed men in the night-bound world of insensate circumstance as being each man to his fellow the only light there is, and all men to each other as the source of the only principle of order. This, says Homer, is the human condition. Out of it in the *Iliad* he constructed a dramatic architecture of a cogency never to be surpassed.

Each time I put down the *Iliad*, after reading it again in some new translation, or after reading once more the somber splendor of the Greek, I am convinced, as one is convinced by the experiences of a lifetime, that somehow, in a way beyond the visions of artistry, I have been face to face with the meaning of existence. Other works of literature give this insight, but none so powerfully, so uncontaminated by evasion or subterfuge. If the art of poetry is a symbolic criticism of value, the *Iliad* is the paramount classic of that art. Its purity, simplicity, definition, and impact reveal life and expose it to irrevocable judgment, with finality, at the beginning of European literature.

