



Narrating the Human and Singing the Sacred Song: Notes toward an Aesthetic of Biography

Abstract: Drawing upon the theoretical writings of Tzvetan Todorov and Georg Lukács on the subject of the novel, this essay argues for more widespread recognition of the biography as a literary genre. It frames the genre of biography as a genre of radical incompleteness, discussing the search for verisimilitude and the tendency toward fragmentation in the biographer's pursuit – a quality that describes not only the biographer's sources, but also the contingent, broken nature of the intellectual and emotional space that both the biographical subject and the biographer herself inhabit.

Keywords: biography, critical theory, theory of biography, Tzvetan Todorov, Georg Lukács, verisimilitude, prose, genre

In bookstores, biographies are alphabetized by subject, not by author. This practice speaks eloquently and somewhat sadly of the position of the biographer in the world of letters. It reflects the assumption, typically accurate, that the biographer is less interesting than her subject. Yet it also reinforces the prejudice, scandalously false, that the biographer is not fully deserving of recognition as a literary artist and that her work is not truly creative.

Admitted: the art of the biographer lies only secondarily in innovation and new construction; its chief functions are retrieval and reconstruction. It is a peculiar form of aesthetic endeavor because it seems to strive *against* originality. The typical reader may understandably presume that a biography is simply a restatement of past realities, telling of things that were as opposed to bringing forth anything distinctly new. The subjects of the book created the story through their words and deeds; it appears, at first glance, that the biographer merely authored a summary. The lay reader is also likely to presume that truth speaks with a single voice. He is therefore inclined to suppose that biographers are unoriginal because of the imperative that the biographer is bound to narrate the truth about her subject. And this imperative does exist: the modern biographer who invents dialogue; who repeats apocryphal stories under the guise of fact; who accords full credence to questionable or discredited sources, is universally and justly condemned. This insistence on fidelity to truth can create the impression that the biographer is not an artist,

but merely a belated reporter, one who discovers and relates facts with detached and clinical neutrality. This presumed disengagement is also a leading reason why biography – unlike, drama, poetry, and the novel – has never prompted critics to evolve an extensive body of aesthetic theory in relation to it. It may be reasonably argued as well that, because every human subject of a biography is different, no unifying poetics can be proposed that will be pertinent to every biography, or even any two biographies. Yet there is no reason why the genre should remain devoid of aesthetic constructs and philosophical frameworks. Although biography demands the diligence and precision of a craft, it is also emphatically an art. Let it be considered as such.

At one time or another, most biographers have heard the bromide, “A biographer is a novelist under oath.”¹ The spirit of the novelist, much more than the strictures of the oath, demands critical attention. Most, though by no means all, biographies are written about dead subjects.² Thus the typical reconstructive task of a biographer is to restore flesh to a skeleton – to give the appearance of life and multi-dimensionality to a person who can now be known only through writings, recordings, and, if the subject is a recent one, the recollections of survivors. Part of the biographer’s mission is to save as much as possible from oblivion. One cannot perform an adequate restoration merely by reciting a litany of facts. Inescapably, the biographer turns toward narrative, and engaging narrative necessarily calls for artifice. There is no such thing as a factual record without gaps. To render the story of the life, the biographer must address these lacunae – which, as we shall see, is an intellectually risky process. Even the most scrupulously documented biography risks committing errors on almost every page. A source’s memory may be faulty; crucial letters may have been lost or carelessly transcribed. It may well be impossible for anyone to construct a story without fictionalizing, and this principle holds as true in biography as it does in the novel. The difference is that the novelist creates material to support the narrative. The biographer shapes the narrative around the available facts.

The nature of those facts determines, to a large extent, the kind of story that can be told. It is no accident that the biography of a writer who kept a journal

1. Leon Edel quoted by Martha Wolfe in: “On Writing: The Reluctant Biographer,” *Cagibi*, April 5, 2019, <https://cagibilit.com/on-writing-the-reluctant-biographer> (24.03.2021).

2. Working as a biographer leads one naturally to reflect on how quickly the presence of a recently deceased person typically fades from memory. Someone in relatively close proximity to us – a neighbor or a co-worker, perhaps – feels deliciously vivid and three-dimensional while still living. Yet the vividness can promptly vanish upon death, dwindling to a few fragments and anecdotes: he spoke Greek; he was a Giants fan; he drove a red car. It is not only the annals of the poor that are short and simple, and the percentage of the world’s people whose lives persist in more than a few lines is lamentably tiny. Reflections like these make the biographer’s task feel all the more urgent.

and who sent and received hundreds of letters will generally make for richer, more nuanced reading than the life of a painter who left no papers. But the difference does not depend solely on the heft or quality of the available materials. Different subjects attract different authors. A writer is apt to be portrayed by another professional writer, who knows something not only about writing but about how writers live. The painter is likely to be chosen as a subject by an art historian, someone whose knowledge of artistic tropes, materials, and techniques may (but certainly need not necessarily) far exceed his gift for storytelling.

The biographer, if she is a good one, does not lie deliberately. However, unless the biographer is content to churn out a cold, lifeless fact-dump of a book, she must strike a balance between truth and what Tzvetan Todorov, in his writings on the novel, has called verisimilitude. In *The Poetics of Prose*, Todorov observes that verisimilitude has various definitions. The most basic definition is to be consistent with reality. Under this definition, certain actions, certain attitudes, are said to lack verisimilitude when they seem unable to occur in reality. “We speak of a work’s verisimilitude,” writes Todorov, “insofar as the work tries to convince us that it conforms to reality and not to its own laws.”³ However, as is also true of the novelist, the biographer has a subtler form of verisimilitude with which to contend; she is compelled to ask, not only what is consistent with objective reality, but also what is consistent with the subjective reality that a community of readers carries around in their heads – an unspoken consensus as to what is likely to have happened in a given circumstance. Verisimilitude, says Todorov, is a matter of “public opinion.”⁴ Verisimilitude, then, is a gray area between truth and fabrication, where popular judgments as to what is probable quietly displace and masquerade as certainty.

An example may be drawn from my own recent work. A considerable portion of my just-published book, *A Worse Place Than Hell*,⁵ concerns the fortunes of a Union Army chaplain named Arthur Fuller, who was killed at the Battle of Fredericksburg in the American Civil War. Several years before the war, the Reverend Fuller found himself in a railway carriage a few feet away from President-Elect Franklin Pierce and his wife and son. The train crashed, sending the car rolling down a hill and killing Pierce’s son.⁶ As a general student of American history, I had known about the accident for many years. As I began the research

3. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 83.

4. Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 82.

5. John Matteson’s latest book was reviewed in Polish by Mariola Świerkot, “Ameryka odkupiona, czyli Johna Mattesona *Miejsce gorsze niż piekło*,” *Er(r)go. Teoria – Literatura – Kultura*, no. 41 (2/2020), 227–232, <https://doi.org/10.31261/errgo.11395>.

6. This incident has been described in John Matteson, *A Worse Place Than Hell: How the Civil War Battle of Fredericksburg Changed a Nation* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), 117–118.

on which I would base my description of the scene, I felt a slight morbid excitement; I looked forward to describing the terrified shrieks of the passengers as they were tossed about in the tumbling car. However, I encountered a surprise when I read Fuller's letters. In his narration of the accident, Reverend Fuller notes that, as the carriage careened down the hillside, no one uttered a sound. Everyone was too shocked to cry out.

As a matter of narration, I was instantly thankful for the detail of the passengers' silence; it adds a kind of unanticipated, spectral horror to the scene, which I was grateful to include. However, I was led to reflect on how easily I could have gotten the detail wrong. It had seemed quite natural and obvious that passengers trapped in a derailed, airborne train car would scream lustily. Had I not read Fuller's letter, I think there's a good chance that I would have made some mention of screaming passengers, because that detail would have comported with my own idea of verisimilitude, as well, I surmise with the expectations of my reader. (Imagine, if you will, the same scene, not in a book, but in a film. The cries of horror would then be requisite. If the scene were presented without them, audience members might actually complain that the silence was unreal. Note, however, that the reaction would differ if the scene were presented with a voice-over from Fuller: "I shall never forget a most stunning fact. As the train rolled down the embankment, not a sound escaped from any passenger: they were too horrified even to scream." Fuller's words would suffice to bring the silence back within the pale of verisimilitude, and the audience would likely accept it without a murmur).

My point is this: that a novelist, much more than the biographer, can afford to play freely with verisimilitude because, to a great extent, the author of fiction creates his world; the factual authority for his writing emerges from his imagination, not from an actual written record. The fiction writer may be bound to observe historical chronologies or laws of physics, yet his freedom is nevertheless substantial. Biographers perpetually worry that, immediately after they publish, a newly discovered cache of documents will overthrow their theory of their subject. By contrast, William Faulkner never had to live in dread that a letter would someday surface, establishing that Quentin Compson was murdered, instead of dying by suicide. We may object that a scene in a novel is improbable or unrealistic. However, we can never produce the evidence that the incident never happened for the very reason that, paradoxically, it never did. Fiction is the untruth that can never be shown to be untrue.

By contrast, the biographer must accept a given world as she finds it: a world defined by historical records but also defined by their ambiguity or absence. She describes an actual world as it once existed. Nevertheless, all the work of establishing verisimilitude has not been done for her. If she is to make that actual world *seem* actual, she must recreate it in a convincingly realistic way. Part of a biography's

verisimilitude arises from incontrovertible facts: those parts of the historical record on which all reasonable people agree. A biography's adherence to these facts establishes its basic reliability. Another part of the biography's verisimilitude stands on shifter ground: those issues of fact on which the sources disagree, and which may be variously accepted or rejected. The biographer's credibility in this region depends on her capacity to choose rationally among the contradictory accounts and to argue convincingly in support of her decision. One becomes caught between competing, multiple truths. Arguably the biographer's most crucial task in establishing similitude, however, calls for a different skill from those already mentioned. The record of a subject's life is rarely, if ever, as complete as the biographer requires to tell the story. To fill the gaps, the biographer must make inferences and suppositions. She must supply the narrative that arranges the facts into a work that, in places, begins to feel very much like a novel. Indeed, because her reader's ideas of verisimilitude, as well as her own, have likely been conditioned by a lifetime of novel reading, the biographer's suppositions and interpretations are likely to be more convincing the more novelistic they happen to be. And novelistic expectations are likely to be somewhat sensationalized. Hence, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, a biographer is more likely to populate Arthur Fuller's tumbling passenger car with shrieking passengers than with stunned, silent ones.

Biography hinges on an impossibility. One may safely assume that most readers pick up a biography because they have heard something, however vague or even erroneous, about the subject's outward actions in the world of phenomena. But it is the noumenal self that the reader hopes to glimpse: the person *as person* that is finally unknowable. In the actual text of the biography, the greatest value is not typically found in the subject's bare accomplishments; a short timeline would serve that purpose just as well. The value that matters most in reading a biography is the value that the subject carries within himself or herself: her ideas, ethics, feelings, motivations, and inner contradictions. The richest biographical subjects are those who recognize themselves as the source of an unfolding reality – those who translate their inner selves most effectively into observable action. The life itself becomes a work of literature *in utero* to the extent that one accepts and undertakes the obligation to become the author of oneself.

An eminent and normally reliable scholar has somewhat flippantly posited, "No life has an arc; a life is a series of events, and then you die."⁷ The assertion is clever but very much mistaken. Lives do have arcs and trajectories, not merely

7. John Bryant, "The Biographical Re-Turn: Writing Melville Biography and the Example of Women," in: *The New Melville Studies*, ed. Cody Marrs (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 209.

as a biographer writes them but as we live them. Drawing upon a long hermeneutic tradition, I would argue that, consciously or unconsciously, most of us have in our heads an ongoing narrative of our lives. Our expectations for the future are shaped and determined by what we have learned from our experiences, our observations of others, and, indeed, from stories we have been told – the Cinderella complex is only one example. We absorb fictions and attempt to realize them. Both consciously and unconsciously, we establish patterns for ourselves. We come to terms with what Todorov terms “the laws and conventions of the life around us.”⁸ We make choices in conformity with these inner narratives and thereby impart arc and directedness to our lives. To suppose that no great person has ever felt guided by a sense of destiny – that no one has ever lived life according to an inner narrative – is to have an inattentive knowledge of both history and human nature.

In life, as in biography, as in the novel, action reveals character. Henry James’s rhetorical questions, posited long ago in “The Art of Fiction,” shed much light here: “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is *not* of character? What else do we seek in it and find in it?”⁹ Similarly, biographical narrative achieves nothing if it does not, page by page, gesture by gesture, proclaim a personality. If, then, there is no “arc,” if the actions and events of the life lack a kind of cohesion and logic, then neither can the personality who initiates those actions and experiences those effects be said to possess a narratable self. Events, understood only as random points, can yield only a chaotic, disordered portrait of a human being.

The biographer has a dual identity: she is expected to be both a scrupulous custodian of facts and an entertaining storyteller. In one sense, the biographer’s necessary adherence to fact creates a freedom that is denied to the novelist, a freedom explained by the cliché that truth is stranger than fiction. When supported by fact, biography need not make sense with regard to dramatic conventions and expectations. *Dei ex machina* that would be rejected in fiction occur in real life all the time. Yet at the same time, a biographer may well find a more appreciative audience if she employs novelistic conventions: a cliffhanger at the end of a chapter; a sense of rising and falling action, catastrophe and catharsis. The remarkable thing is that the biography feels more believable (and, in some alchemic way, may actually come nearer to truth) when it employs the art of a novelist. And this is true not only because the reader’s sensibilities have been conditioned by the influence of novels, but also precisely because we think of our own lives in novelistic terms, as stories with a rise and fall, strewn with repeated themes.

8. Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 87.

9. Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” in: *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1919), 392–393.

A good biographer, then, is conscious of the human desire for self-authorship and the need, both for the biographer and the subject, to construct a life that makes narrative sense. Yet limits must be observed, in large part because lives do not unfold in true teleological fashion. As the poet observes in Ecclesiastes, time and chance happeneth unto all, and the power of any biographical protagonist to shape her or his own life narrative is conditioned by numberless unforeseeable forces. Thus, in articulating the arc of a subject's life, one must preserve the sense of unpredictability and surprise that forms a part of life itself. (Thus, the biographer of a subject who dies in an unexpected and notorious fashion takes on an especially tricky and perhaps impossible assignment: she must write without anticipating the dénouement with which her readers are doubtlessly familiar, and present that ending in a way that somehow recreates the astonishment of a death that is no longer shocking. Editors of biographies wisely caution their authors against foreshadowing, as this practice shatters the presumption that the subject's future is unknowable, even to the writer.) The inner narrative driven by pure ambition and desire inevitably alters as it meets with resistance in the world of phenomena. This clash between inner drives and resistant reality is, of course, the fundamental condition of the novel. It is also a fundamental condition of biography.

Because novels and biographies operate similarly in the ways that their protagonists confront opposition, a poetics of biography cannot differ entirely from a poetics of the novel. As intimated by my observations thus far, the biographer must work within a realm of incompleteness, one in which details, at one level or another, have been lost to memory: the most scrupulous recorder of a conversation, for instance, may well neglect to note whether the subject has taken off his coat or his interlocutor has put aside his reading glasses. Because the novelist is at liberty to manufacture endless details, he can create a more layered and nuanced word than can the fact-bound biographer. The novelist also enjoys the still more important freedom to imagine and explore the unspoken mental states of the protagonist, whereas the biographer may only infer a state of mind from the subject's outer appearance and behavior. But if the novelist and the biographer confront incompleteness in radically different degrees, it is still this shared experience of incompleteness that creates their common ground as artists.

More than a hundred years ago, in *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukács argued that the key distinction between a novel and an epic is that the epic hero inhabits a world of reassuring oneness and totality, in which the soul is not divided against itself and the individual is spiritually at one with the surrounding cosmos. The epic spirit "does not yet know any abyss within itself."¹⁰ The hero of the novel,

10. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 30.

on the other hand, lives in a fragmented, contingent world, one where there can be no spontaneous totality. Inescapably, to exist in the world of a novel means being inwardly conflicted and existentially alone. Lukács's insistence upon this separateness both from the world and from one's own essence led him to conclude that the external form of the novel "is essentially biographical."¹¹ He found this statement to be true precisely because, in both genres, the conceptual frame of the work can never perfectly and completely capture life, and the life being described can never achieve the inner wholeness that is reserved for the heroes of epic poetry. In the fallen, post-epic era, "the very disintegration and inadequacy of the world is the precondition for the existence of art."¹² This assertion holds true for both the novel and the biography.

Lukács's idea concerning novelistic motivation – that the novel's protagonist must be driven by disharmony, and that that disharmony derives both from a sense of inner fragmentation and from a feeling of being out of step with the enveloping world – is equally applicable to the genre of drama. Indeed, if biography has a companion art form, just as poetry may be analogized to music, that companion art is acting. For in both acting and the writing of biography, the artist attempts a deep dive into another person's consciousness, whether that consciousness belongs to a dramatic role or to a historical figure. Like the actor, the biographer examines words on a page and investigates the emotions and motivations that lie behind them. She seeks to determine, by the most objective means possible, how the author or speaker felt. Why, she asks, did the subject choose just those words to express himself? How does the character of the biographical subject respond to situations and to other people? In this seeking after feeling and motivation, the biographer is already filling gaps, because the raw material of the historical record seldom serves to communicate the whole of the subject's spirit or intention. This is the first level of incompleteness on which the biographer operates.

A second encounter with incompleteness arises when, again à la Lukács, the biographer considers the subject as, within the subject's own existence, a kind of author. I am not speaking solely of the biographical subject who literally happens to be a writer. Rather, I am referring to the Romantic condition of existence wherein every subject regards himself as what Lukács calls "the source of the ideal reality."¹³ When this self-perception takes place, the life as lived becomes a work of literature, and the person living it becomes both the author of that work and the observer of the act of its creation. This creation, however, is fated for disillusionment. As I have already suggested, and as everyone knows from experience,

11. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 77.

12. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 38.

13. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 118.

a shortfall always arises between the subject's ideal attainment of the objects of his various quests and the results that he actually achieves. Thus even a biographer's narration of what may seem like an ultimate success works best when, in keeping with realism, it preserves the shadow of imperfection and non-fulfillment that is present even in victory. As Lukács notes with regard to the novelistic hero, if this non-fulfillment of the biographical subject appears in no other fashion, it will still express itself in the inevitably failed struggle against the passing of time. As Hemingway observed that all true stories end in death, the paths of glory that are blazed in a biography also lead at last to the slow walk to the churchyard.

As if to parallel the necessary decline of human fortunes toward death, the writing of the biography is also a battle against the forces of time. This struggle is felt with particular force by the biographers of recently departed subjects – writers who must often scramble to interview surviving friends and associates before they, too, fall forever silent. But it is felt as well by biographers of subjects who are more remote in time. The biographer labors amid fragments. She strives to preserve them and, by publishing them, to give them a greater durability. She hopes to slow the gradual erosion of what can still be known, even as, day by day, history both creates and destroys itself. Biography adheres to the principle that the life ends, not when the heart stops beating, but when the deeds and impressions of the life have faded from memory.

Lukács confined his theorizing about alienation and incompleteness to the hero of the work. He might well have expanded his thinking to include the author of the text. It is a proposition too evident to require proof that writers tend to write because of a sense of insufficiency. They may write to understand some loss or vacancy, to address some inner hurt, or to try to adjust their emotional or intellectual relation to fit more snugly with the outside world. As the suburban homeowner tries vainly to fill the emptiness of his life with consumer goods, so the writer seeks to fill up the voids with words. It is said that the late Robert K. Massie, author of the celebrated biography, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, undertook that volume because his own son suffered from hemophilia. Massie took up his project so as to learn more about how parents respond to a child with that disorder. My own first two books each addressed a verbally gifted woman with a difficult and demanding father. I wrote about Louisa May Alcott and Margaret Fuller because they interested me intellectually, but also both to come to terms with my difficult relationship with my father and to better understand the emotional and intellectual growth of my own daughter – not coincidentally an aspiring writer. In my most recent work, the theme of the frictions between fathers and children remains present but is somewhat less central. Arguably, the theme has diminished in importance for me because my father, alive during the writing of the first two books, is now deceased. It has been glibly asserted that all biography

is autobiography. A grain of truth inhabits that adage, and, indeed, the critic who seeks to craft a poetics of biography might well begin by investigating the lives of various biographers. What pains did they suffer? For what wrongs did they seek to be recompensed or to atone? What voids did their writings strive to fill? What wants are voiced in a biographer's prose? Why did the biographer try to address those wants through writing instead of action? The fullness of a biography is born out of absence.

As the biographer writes to compensate for loss, she or he also writes to overcome separateness and to affirm her or his presence. In every biography, there exists the potential for a dual assertion of Romantic identity, for the spirits of both the subject and the author are constantly in play and interplay. Indeed, *biography* as a genre inherently reflects a Romantic conception of the self because it very naturally sets a single person at the center of its reconstructed world and narrates that self as though it were the most important being in that world. The biographical self, to paraphrase Lukács, posits a kind of idealized reality, implying that this self is the material most worthy of realization.¹⁴ The subject's self is, of course, the *sine qua non* of the biography. The protagonist resides at the hub of existence, and the surrounding world is of relevance insofar as it shapes, relates to and reacts to this centralized figure. Indeed, it may be in this respect that the biography fictionalizes more than in any other. In according such centrality to its protagonist, the biography assumes away the rest of the world. It neglects or obscures the truth that, at any given moment in its narration, worlds of activity are unfolding with which the subject has nothing to do. The fallacy of the centrality of the biographical subject is so ubiquitous that we barely notice it, yet it matters. So, too, does the bias that draws many biographers to subjects whose claim to centrality is especially strong. Some superb biographers – Robert Caro, David Nasaw, and Ron Chernow come to mind – have made careers out of investigating the origins and nature of power. Perhaps more intriguing, however, are those biographers who seek out subjects who, because of race, gender, or other circumstances, are persons of limited power who must use their resources to carve out an effective space for themselves amid larger, often hostile forces. The ambitious woman, the gay man, the soldier on the losing side of the fight: all these have their poignancy and grace.

I have suggested that biography is a Romantic genre. But the romance of biography is a thwarted romance, because the self that is communicated in a biography is always fragmented and, to a large extent, beyond recovery. The narrated self is always a construction of exteriors. Biographers, in striking similarity to other human beings, are subjective. They observe – they *can* observe – their subjects only

14. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 118.

with their own eyes and through the conditioning lens of their acquired knowledge of human nature. The biographer's subject, then, comes under the reader's eyes as an alloy – a mingling of the pure element with the self of the biographer. Indeed, if the biography is based in part on the accounts and perceptions of the subject's contemporaries (and this is almost invariably the case), the subjectivities of those observers also enter the mix. The result is that the subject who appears on the page inescapably stands at some remove from the actual person. Boswell's Johnson is not Johnson, but rather an intermingling of Johnson and Boswell's interactions with and responses to him. Walter Jackson Bate's Johnson is a formidable Johnson, but he is necessarily a mosaic, not a man – a composite of the perceptions of every source that Bate employed, each of whom brought her or his own subjectivity to the dance. To purloin a phrase that Todorov applied to the *Odyssey*, biography “is not a simple narrative, but a narrative of narratives.”¹⁵

Not only is the perceived and narrated subject a contingent creation, but one must pause to think as well as the part of the subject that has gone through life without ever having been perceived: the unspoken thoughts, the half-forgotten dreams. Thus, one is aware that the full expression of the Romantic self is thwarted in biography; the subject cannot be bodied forth as a Romantic whole because the inner, unspoken movements of the subject's spirit can never be recovered.

Likewise, the spirit of the author asserts itself in limited form because the author is typically only partially visible – either in the wings or in disguise. Moreover, it is granted that the conscientious biographer seeks to suppress the self, leaving the spotlight to the subject of the book. Nevertheless, that self is always present, and the book is the cryptic vehicle of its expression.¹⁶ The famous life that the biographer describes is, even before that description has begun, a work of art – a deep and brilliant story waiting to be told. The biography is really the second telling of that story, since the first telling was the actual living of it.

Through the subject, the biographer endeavors to explain the great to the ordinary, reminding readers that, for all of the similarities that unite all of humankind, the force that throbs within another person may be both qualitatively and quantitatively different from our own. At the same time, the biographer encodes her own thoughts and feelings into the text. As she talks to an audience, the biographer is continually communicating herself along with the story she is telling and continually using the biographical subject as a go-between in the conversation. A biographer typically spends years in crafting the eventually published narrative; thus a good deal of her life has gone into the work alongside the life

15. Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 61.

16. My observations on the “self-in-the-text” are, of course, close to those offered by such Geneva School critics as Georges Poulet, Jean Starobinski, and Jacques Rivière.

of the subject. She is an invisible but essential character in the drama. Indeed, it can be the heart, soul, and love that emanates from the biographer's being that can transform a biography from a dry account to a living work. Whether the reader ever breaks the code and recognizes the author's presence is of relatively little importance. The author knows how and to what extent her own identity is immanent in the work; that knowledge, for most purposes, is sufficient.

Probably more than one biographer has drawn inspiration and comfort from Homer's *Odyssey* and the scene that follows close upon Odysseus's slaughter of Penelope's suitors. Unforgettably, the great hero spares Phemius, the suitors' minstrel: a "sweet [...] heaven-instructed bard" must survive to sing the songs of Odysseus's exploits.¹⁷ In Alexander Pope's translation, the poet pleads for his life by exclaiming to the great hero, "A deed like this thy future fame would wrong / For dear to gods and men is sacred song. [...] Save then the poet, and thyself reward; / 'Tis thine to merit, mine is to record."¹⁸ A biographer dedicates herself or himself to the proposition that there is also merit in the recording – that the historic deed remains incomplete without a singer to sing it. Biographers sing long songs, bringing life to the dead through the writing and rewriting of the subject. Sometimes they have to work hard to stay on key. But when they do, they raise a hallelujah in which Leonard Cohen might have taken pride.

John Matteson is Distinguished Professor of English at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in the City University of New York. He was awarded the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father*. His 2012 book *The Lives of Margaret Fuller* received the Ann. M. Sperber Prize for best biography of a journalist. His most recent book is *A Worse Place Than Hell: How the Civil War Battle of Fredericksburg Changed a Nation*.

17. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Alexander Pope (London: F. J. Du Roveray, 1806), VI: 62.

18. Homer, *The Odyssey*, VI: 63.

Bibliography

- Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Poetics of Prose*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Bryant, John. "The Biographical Re-Turn: Writing Melville Biography and the Example of Women." In: *The New Melville Studies*, edited by Cody Marrs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- James, Henry. "The Art of Fiction." In: *Partial Portraits*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1919.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Alexander Pope. London: F.J. Du Roveray, 1806.

