

# The Possibilities of Life-Writing

Lyndall Gordon

One of Chekhov's greatest stories, "The Lady with the Little Dog," dramatizes the idea that each of us has "two lives." The story is seen through the mind of a middle-aged womanizer, Dmitri Dmitrich Gurov, who has never experienced love. In the Black Sea town of Yalta, away from his wife, he begins another affair when, unexpectedly, he finds himself profoundly attached to an unhappily married young woman, who turns out to be a moral being. Gurov's awakening to emotion is the defining drama in his life, but it will remain unseen. There is the public life with its actions and deceits, and there is the "secret" life with its unseen "kernel." We do well to be wary about what we see, "always supposing that each person's real and most interesting life took place . . . under the veil of night."

Gurov goes to a rendezvous with Anna Sergeyevna, aware that "there was not one living soul who knew about it; probably no one ever would know about it." Virginia Woolf makes the same observation about secrecy. Waking one morning while she was completing *To the Lighthouse*, she was visited by a "Spirit of Delight"<sup>[1]</sup>—a spirit of invention. It's the first intimation of her masterpiece, *The Waves*, and in her diary recording this in 1926, she adds, "No biographer could know this fact, and yet biographers pretend they know people."

She often debunks traditional biography as practiced by her father, Leslie Stephen, the first editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography* (underway at the time of her birth in 1882). Candidates for the *Dictionary* were largely public men of the past. "And what is greatness? And what is smallness?" she asks in her late essay on "The Art of Biography." At one point she had hoped to write a book called "The Lives of the Obscure." It's fitting that she should have been an early publisher of Eliot, whose first great poem admits us to the consciousness of an obscure character, Prufrock, who is inadequate in public yet leads another life, wandering unnoticed in half-deserted backstreets that wind towards a question about the point of existence. Later, in his own masterpiece, *Four Quartets*, Eliot

too questions traditional biography: “Our past is covered by the currents of action.”

Long before—when the young Eliot met Virginia Woolf in 1918—she was devising that approach to lives through the divided structure of her second novel, *Night and Day*. Night is the time for the hidden life, when Katharine is alone upstairs doing mathematics, set apart from her visible and empty daytime life as a daughter at home in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea (where Henry James had lived) in the early years of the twentieth century. Throughout Virginia Woolf’s fiction, night is her marker for the unseen life. It’s no accident that while she composed *Night and Day*, she reviewed the posthumous volume of James’s *Autobiography*. “The Old Order” (1917) commends him for his attentiveness to the “crepuscular,” so as to see what the glare of day fades out.

It was these writers in other genres who opened up possibilities for biography with a shift of focus from public to private. Chekhov invites this with his sense that “every individual existence is a mystery.” The title of Eliot’s verse drama, *Murder in the Cathedral*, teases us with the popular genre of the murder mystery, yet there is no mystery of the usual sort: Archbishop Thomas à Becket’s murder in 1170 takes place onstage, and the murderers are visible: four identifiable knights who are hit men for the king, Henry II. The real mystery lies in the inner life: Becket’s capacity for self-transformation. This is a biographical play about a twelfth-century saint in the making, as he readies himself for martyrdom by sloughing off his public life together with the outlived temptations of his former worldliness and ambition.

Once, in conversation, Humphrey Carpenter, biographer of Pound and Auden, brought up the more dubious side of life-writing: the acts of detection driven by curiosity when we scent mystery. He was amusingly candid about his desire to rummage through other people’s bottom drawers. It was a compulsion, he owned, that had come to him from his mother and found its métier in the biographer’s fascination with papers in archives. I remember his saying that you must go to an archive with questions in mind, “or you will get seriously unstuck.”

These can be intimate questions, and I put it to him whether, in his following the life of the English composer, Benjamin Britten, it was right or not to look into Britten’s predilection for little boys. Humphrey insisted that this element in Britten’s make-up could not be kept under wraps because it was close to the creative core. He waved off guilt, which from time to time does trouble me. I

can't forget Janet Malcolm's admission that what journalists do is morally indefensible, which applies also to biographers, and I recall guilt at its keenest when I looked at Henry James's death mask in the Houghton Library at Harvard.

It came in a white box so tall that I had to stand to lift the lid. It was like looking down into a grave. I saw white face, thinner than in life but shockingly lifelike, as though the eyes might open at any moment and look at you. The line of his mouth sliced through the lower half of his face, exceptionally wide, parallel to the edge of his eyes. No one saw that mobile mouth in repose. It was always in motion as the Master dictated his works or held forth to admiring listeners or else pursed those lips in the spectatorial gaze of John Singer Sargent's distinguished portrait of James at seventy. As, transfixed, I stared into that bared face, I felt horribly intrusive. A while after, I went to speak on James at the Rye Festival, and on the way in the train, read his sophisticated ghost tale, "The Real Right Thing." It's about a biographer taking on the life of his friend, a famous writer. The biographer is enjoying the task, coming to know his friend better than in life, when suddenly the ghost of the celebrity appears to him and bars the way. The biographer then does the Right Thing: he stops writing. I was uneasily aware that I'd carried on in the face (literally, so to speak) of James's resistance to biography. That night in Lamb House, his home in Rye, and assigned to sleep in what had been his bedroom, something startling did happen: my comeuppance, if you like.<sup>[2]</sup>

Might guilt be somewhat assuaged by biographies that do justice to greatness? To do so, we must keep the vital life in view, as distinct from enumerating each of the myriad pills that Hemingway popped into his mouth (conveying rather little beyond hypochondria). And how necessary might it be to pile up page upon page detailing the seemingly interchangeable one-night stands of the dancer Nureyev? A repetitive record with its documentary overload risks blurring instead of illuminating Nureyev's rarity. One or two instances could suffice to make the link between androgyny and art. And more disturbing, why did Leon Edel, after living closely and exclusively for years with Henry James's papers, see fit to demean his subject at the last by including his deathbed ramblings in the biography? For in the course of a lingering death, James was no longer the man who devised the novels. Do biographers have to guard against unconscious power play masked with the righteousness of fact? In "The Art of Biography," Virginia Woolf makes the case against the vogue for inclusiveness. "Almost any biographer, if he respects

facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders.”

\*

I'm drawn to biographies that stretch the boundaries of the genre. It's a very old genre, and every age has its different approach. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, in the second century, relays forty-eight public lives, paired to illustrate virtues or failings Greeks and Romans had in common. The Victorians had their reticent two-volume life and letters, which idealized their subjects. "Full-scale" or "definitive biography" were catch phrases of the later twentieth century, and they led to ever larger tomes, hoping to be the last word on a life. Yet there is no such thing as completeness. Emily Dickinson rebuts this delusion when she declares in a letter that "Abyss has no Biographer."

A few do find ways to brave the abyss through experiment with the genre. Their ventures are inspiring because, in place of the routine plod from pedigree to grave, they bring us as close as can be to the hidden life that gives rise to originality. Eliot's 1929 essay on Dante is not biography in the present-day sense, but it's a convincing alternative: an exploration of the traditional schema for life as a spiritual journey. Dante, for Eliot, was the greatest poetic exponent of this undertaking. And below the surface of Eliot's essay there is what drives the best biographies: a private passion, not identification with the subject but the biographer's subjective feeling for issues in that life. It's of the essence of Eliot's own life that there was for him, as for Dante, no shortcut to paradise: an inferno is followed by purgatory *en route* to a distant heaven. Eliot expounds a universal pattern and wants to tap into it as a poet of the spiritual life. It's the schema of a life that moves from a sense of sin to an awareness of a broken-down life—a *Waste Land* existence—and then moves deliberately through a purgatorial phase of suffering. Eliot was writing his most purgatorial poem, "Ash Wednesday," at the very time he wrote this second and most subjective of his three Dante essays. The poem's "Lady of silences," based on Dante's love for Beatrice, has a parallel in Eliot's own life in the figure of Emily Hale—or, more accurately, in his poetic transmutation of this American speech and drama teacher to whom he sent more than a thousand letters in the course of their relationship from 1930 till 1956. In some sense Eliot remains a purgatorial poet, always looking towards a *Paradiso*, which his poems glimpse in "unattended moments."

Where Eliot tests a medieval model of existence, Frances Wilson tests a Romantic model of lives interfused with nature in *The Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth*. “Interfused,” or more precisely “deeply interfused,” is Wordsworth’s word in his “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” (1798). There, with him on their walking tour and in the poem itself, was his “dear, dear sister!” who—for a short but intense period from 1795 till 1805—shared the poetic eye that half-perceives and half-creates. Wilson’s sharp focus offers a close-up of one decade in Dorothy Wordsworth’s life; the narrative moves swiftly over the before and after. Here is a biographer who goes to the core.

Dorothy Wordsworth is a character whom we cannot wholly know. Wilson refuses to label her, and nor will this biographer label Dorothy’s fertile bond with the poet. Of one mind, they walked for miles and honed their vision. As orphans, this brother and sister had been separated in childhood. All the children of the Wordsworth family were dispersed, and Dorothy had been unhappy. But then, in her early twenties, she comes together with this beloved brother. They live together at Dove Cottage in the Lake District, near the lake at Grasmere, attuned in what they see and feel. Wordsworth co-opts the very words in Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Journal* for the daffodils she saw with an eye intent on the natural world.

The pair was physically close, and some have wondered if this was an incestuous relationship. Wordsworth would lie with his head on Dorothy’s breast. They would lie together outside, looking up at the sky. They lived like a couple, but Frances Wilson persuades us that this was a symbiosis that can’t be defined.

Some blotted lines Dorothy wrote tell us that she wore Wordsworth’s wedding ring the night before he married. The climax of the biography is this statement in her *Journal*, which is otherwise not much concerned with the personal. There was a strange dawn ceremony between her and her brother, which somebody crossed out, but was recovered through infrared treatment in the 1950s: “I gave him the wedding ring, with how deep a blessing. I took it from my forefinger, where I had worn it the whole of the night before. He slipped it again onto my finger and blessed me fervently.”

The crisis comes when Dorothy looks out the window and sees the bridal pair returning from the church. At that moment she falls on her bed in a trancelike state. Frances Wilson quotes a psychologist calling it a vegetative retreat: an animal curling up in the face of tragedy and disaster. All the same, Dorothy is

absorbed into this marriage. She sits between the bridal pair in the carriage during their honeymoon. They look after her; she is loved. She shares in the children born of the marriage and has a say in their fates (tough towards a daughter, Dora, in effect ousting her so that Dora spent her entire and wretched childhood away from home at boarding school, even though she wept and clung to her father's legs when he visited). The biographer moves swiftly over Dorothy's long mental decline. The great decade of her life was over, and as for poetry, it was over also for Wordsworth.

As in *The Ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth*, Janet Malcolm, in *Reading Chekhov*, had to accept the impossibility of knowing her reserved subject. She quotes at length from Gurov's biographical musing: "everything that was essential, of interest and of value to him, everything that made the kernel of his life, was hidden from other people; and all that was false in him, the sheath in which he hid himself to conceal the truth—all that was open."

Malcolm too invents an original form uniquely appropriate to her subject. Her subtitle *A Critical Journey* complements the priority she gives to the experience of "reading." The Chekhov experts who reviewed this biography in the U. K. noted that Malcolm does not know Russian, and yet she was wonderfully accurate. So Malcolm, undeterred by translation, reaches out to Chekhov through his stories and plays, and her own "journey" also matters. Here is a revealing blend of autobiographical travel, biography and criticism. The presence of the biographer, viewing the settings of Chekhov's life and starting her journey in Yalta where he ends, takes us closer to him than the standard format of sequential chronology. We are with her in that lifeless Black Sea town, where Chekhov lived in his final years at the turn of the twentieth century, forced by his tuberculosis to leave Moscow for a warmer climate. We encounter him first through his strongest emotion: exile in a provincial place, longing for Moscow, like characters in *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*.

At the same time as *Reading Chekhov* relays the life through settings central to the works, it probes the weaknesses of the genre. A counter to the biographer as informed guide is a professional tour guide whom Malcolm encounters. There's the comedy of her visit to an ersatz dacha outside Moscow. Chekhov's actual

dacha was in fact demolished in 1920 and rebuilt. It's a tasteful fake. The Soviet-style guide is a biographical automaton who pulls out strings of dead facts without finding it necessary to read Chekhov. What he required of Malcolm was celebrity worship, which Chekhov himself would have detested. Malcolm's skepticism about what she's told is a model for the thinking biographer. She further entertains us with six biographers who all differ in their accounts of Chekhov's death in a German spa in 1904. It's a warning how slippery biographical facts can be.

Why read biographies at all? There's the draw of a distinctive character followed over the course of time, tested as characters are in novels. But when it comes to biography, the point is that it's *not* fiction. What happened is documented; the back matter, whether the reader consults it or not, must be there. The challenge is to find a telling narrative lurking in every life amidst all its visible activity: making appointments, business communications and getting on from tea to dinner. Let's look to the frontier of the genre, to those who abjure inclusiveness in favor of a living narrative and cut their way to the kernel.

[1] From Shelley's poem, "Rarely, rarely comest thou / Spirit of Delight."

[2] "The Death Mask," *Lives for Sale: Biographers' Tales*, ed. by Mark Bostridge (London and New York, 2006).