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We Are All Modern: Exploring the Vagaries of Consciousness in 20th & 21st Century Biography and Life Writing

In 1913, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas traveled to London. Stein was seeking a publisher for *Three Lives*, three short experimental pieces she wrote from the points of view of a female servant, a housekeeper, and a “Negro” woman. From London Stein wrote a chatty letter to an American friend reporting that she and Toklas went to the Richard Strauss opera *Elektra*. Though not generally a fan of music, Stein found Strauss’s work quite compelling. “He has made real conversation and he does it by intervals and relations directly without machinery. After all,” Stein wrote Dodge, “we are all modern” (in Mellow 172-3).

Stein’s offhand praise of Strauss is unexpected and important. Strauss’s opera felt to her like part of the same story, or moment, or movement, as her own work, as her friend Pablo Picasso’s work, and the works of the Bloomsbury group, all gathered under the umbrella “modern.” The term had enough currency so Stein could be confident Dodge would understand her shorthand. Modern works, like modern people, were daring, forthright, and defied expectations of conventional society.

While in Bloomsbury, Stein and Toklas went to a dinner party at the home of painter Ethel Sands, a sometime admirer of Virginia Woolf’s whom writer Lytton Strachey dismissed as an “incorrigible old Saphhist.” Strachey reported he had a “vexing” conversation with “Spanish-Jew-American lady” Toklas—certainly not the first or the last person to do so—and was disappointed he

did not learn more from Stein about Picasso (Mellow 173; Holroyd LS 521). As for Stein, she slyly wrote of the party in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* that, “Lytton Strachey and I talked together about Picasso and the Russian ballet,” the “I” here referring to Toklas; so perhaps Strachey did learn something about the painter, but just did not find his source particularly credible (or likable) (Holroyd footnote 521). What Stein probably discussed with Strachey was Stein, but apparently, he did not find her worth talking about—just another incorrigible old Sapphist.

Despite their personal differences, Stein and Strachey shared a vital interest in pushing biography into modern art. Though their experiments fall on diverse ends of a spectrum of innovation in documenting real and fictional people’s lives, both are part of a revolution that transformed biography and ultimately changed the way people conceptualize their lives. Stein’s fictional *Three Lives* (1909) chronicled the consciousnesses of three poor women in Baltimore using prose meant to replicate their innermost thoughts and feelings. Strachey’s nonfiction *Eminent Victorians* (1918) cheekily revamped the way public figures of the recent past were memorialized and smashed the sanctity of his renowned subjects’ reputations. Yet both are participants in a revolution in biography firmly located in the modern age.

Stein and Strachey are two of modern writers laid the foundation for a revolution in writing literary biography. They lived lives more daring and nonconformist than the ones they were able to write. It would take another fifty years and the breakdown of sexual and social taboos for their lives to finally be told in the truthful, if not brazen, way they advocated. Thus the modernist revolution in biography is one with a dual thrust: an initial outpouring of creative biographical works in the period from roughly 1890 through the 1930s, and then in the groundbreaking biographies of the moderns that date from Richard Ellmann’s *James Joyce* in 1959.

The modern period is rich in biographical works that explore the vagaries of consciousness—whether in paint, in fiction, or in the broad category of nonfiction—and try to re-create the

experience of being human in a manner distinctly different than the hagiographic Victorian norm. This group, which I will refer to as the moderns, were active from the late nineteenth century until World War Two. The moderns' experiments in biography went by many names—portraits (Oscar Wilde's 1850 *Picture of Dorian Gray*), fiction (Stein's 1925 *Making of Americans*), history (Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*), sketches (Henry James's 1879 *Hawthorne*), novels (Virginia Woolf's 1928 *Orlando*), essays (Woolf's), and short stories (James's 1888 *The Aspern Papers*). This generic expansion was a natural outgrowth of their self-conscious literariness: the moderns were writers writing about writing, forging new literary identities from the self-conscious aestheticism of Oscar Wilde to the self-proclaimed genius of Gertrude Stein.

Alongside the fresh and interesting work modern biographers did in reinventing biography as a concept, there is a fascinating parallel with the way the moderns' lives were later documented in biographies of them. The moderns reinvented the way we chronicle and think about life, but, in a stroke either ironic or apt, it took another world war and several generations for their own lives to be written in a way recognizably modern. When it happened, a second modern revolution was enacted. These biographers are the subjects of some of the most fruitful and complex biographies we have: *Henry James* (1953-72) by Leon Edel; *Lytton Strachey* (1968-71) by Michael Holroyd; *Virginia Woolf* (1997) by Hermione Lee (and first by her nephew Quentin Bell in 1972); and *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice* (2007) by Janet Malcolm.

Why is it that the innovators in modern biography have been so compelling for present-day biographers? Is it their reveling in ambiguity, their love of complexity, the difficulty inherent in knowing these writers all bent on exploring the depths of the human psyche? This cadre of artists preoccupied with expanding and exposing the limits of biographical writing has had a genealogical pull for late-twentieth-century biographers, who recognize aspects of the origins of their craft in the moderns' works and their lives lived with a self-conscious eye toward flaunting the rules and

discarding tradition. The curiosity that motivated this period's writers and artists to tackle the life stories of both ordinary and extraordinary people was boundless. Retrospectively this period inaugurates the world of biography we now live in—call it the modern world—where families, scientists, murderers, and mistresses share shelf space with writers and politicians.

James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) is usually thought of as the first “modern” biography, modern in that it reflects the biographical enterprise as we now conceive it: gathering personal papers, conducting interviews with contemporaries, and assembling varied accounts to build a warts-and-all portrait, an enterprise that virtually disappears during the long, conservative Victorian age (Lee Short Introduction 39-44). Victorian biographies were memorials to Great Men—both literary men and statesmen—and their reverence robbed their subjects of humanity. Often commissioned by grieving families as memorials to their loved ones, or even written by a relative, their tone was hagiographic, their mood sanitized, their subjects had no private lives and only as much carnal life to produce progeny.

This was the “life and letters” formula the Victorians followed with rigor and zest. Lytton Strachey rightly moaned about in the preface to *Eminent Victorians*. Strachey claimed that biographies produced by the previous generations were, “Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead—who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design” (Strachey EV viii). Strachey calls these books the “*cortège* of the undertaker,” an insult to both the writers and the families who commissioned them.

One widely cited exception to Strachey's critique is Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857). An official life commissioned by Bronte's father, Gaskell has a voice with charm and wit to spare. Gaskell does hammer the points that her subject was a pious woman and dutiful daughter, but

she provides exceptional insight into the struggles of women writers, disdaining the “detachment” Strachey cites with such terrific scorn. Gaskell’s sympathy, if not empathy, with her subject throughout is obvious and heartfelt, and Bronte’s life has a character arc straight out of a nineteenth-century novel: from wild girl traipsing with her sisters on the moors to a reluctant schoolmistress, to anonymous writer of the blockbuster *Jane Eyre*, and then, for a brief moment, to famous, happily married woman, before death snatches her.

Critics agree that Gaskell’s work is an exception to the Victorian rule but Gaskell, also submitted to the censorship of her day (Gittings 36). She omitted romantic letters between Bronte and a married teacher (Lee 59). Moreover, her life of *Bronte* is accused of excess sentiment. Critic Harold Nicholson, another Bloomsbury character, claims the book is “an excellent sentimental novel replete with local colour; but it is not a biography” (Nicholson 128). Yet it is Gaskell’s “sentimentality” (which we should surely read as sexist) that brings the characters to life, and her narrative skill aligns her biography more closely with modern ones that freely borrow techniques from fiction than hagiographic Victorian doorstops.

A pivot: James Froude, in his authorized biography of Thomas and Jane Carlyle, published in 1881, held back nothing that he felt the reader had a right to know. It was a critical transition between Victorian and modern biography. Froude was best known before the Carlyle biographies as the author of a gargantuan Victorian twelve-volume history of England. Despite this credential, Lytton Strachey said Froude was an “able, brilliant writer, copious and vivid, with a picturesque imagination and fine command of narrative” (Strachey BE 262). After Froude read the Carlyles’ private papers, entrusted to him by his friend Thomas Carlyle, Froude felt he had no choice but to tell the truth about the Carlyles and their marriage, even if the truth would result in outrage. It did.

Froude documented the Carlyles' notoriously unhappy marriage with the suggestion of Thomas's infidelity, domestic violence, and general mistreatment of Jane (Hamilton 163-4; Froude 572). From Jane's papers and speaking to her friends Froude concluded, "It was evident that [Jane's] life was painful and dreary. She was sarcastic when she spoke of her husband—a curious blending of pity, contempt, and other feelings (Hamilton 160)." Virginia Woolf, whose parents traveled in the same literary circles as the Carlyles, conceded that Froude's work was more lifelike than others of its time: "Froude's Carlyle is by no means a wax mask painted rosy red" (Woolf 189). Because Froude included their private lives, his biographies of the Carlyles marked a critical shift in Anglo-American literary biography and culture. Though Froude's intention was only to tell the truth, in doing so he wrote a different kind of book than expected of the author of a twelve-volume history of England. Froude's biography was surprisingly modern.

The moderns are the first artists to have a consciousness of being part of a media culture (whether they liked it or not), with a connection to a larger world of news and notoriety—their lives, from where they drank to what they wore, were in the public eye, and the new gossip columns, radio shows, and magazines devoted to celebrities scrambled to get the word out. For example, Gertrude Stein and Oscar Wilde were both huge hits on the American lecture circuit. Virginia Woolf was featured—in her mother's dress, for she had a fear of buying clothes—in *Vogue* in 1926 (Lee VW 463). Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* was in all of the newspapers, its author demonized as a "bearded Mephistopheles" (Holroyd 732).

Writers and other artists were suddenly celebrities, and their lives were *stories*—modern biography and the media were and are interdependent entities, and privacy is the sacrifice modern writers were asked to make for fame. For some modern figures, this was an easy tradeoff: Oscar Wilde loved his fame and the media attention it brought him, although he felt differently after the scandalous love affair that landed him in prison. The opposite, however, would be someone like

Henry James, who so feared this kind of incursion into his privacy he not only burned his papers but wrote *The Aspern Papers*, an account of an unscrupulous biographer who would do anything to get a dead poet's papers from his heirs.

Modern biography differs from its immediate predecessor in every substantial and ideological way: in style, in tone, in subject, in approach, and aim. Like Strachey's work, modern biography has a voice, a point of view, an author; it is not hiding behind sheaves of letters or some other pretense of objectivity. Stein and Woolf set out to document the ordinary as well as the great; women as well as men; poor as well as rich. In shattering these old categories and hierarchies suddenly everybody is worthy of biographical study. Woolf especially also tries to capture the difficulty in knowing another person, to account for how a person changes as circumstances change, to document more than just public achievements—she chases the ordinary time in between life's significant events, which she called “moments of being” or “specimen days.”

Woolf, Strachey, and Stein weigh alternate versions of events, believing the truth is pliable. Some biographies, like Stein's hybrid *The Making of Americans*, present multiple accounts of important moments for this reason. All of this moral accounting means that many modern biographical works have a distinct turn inward, like Henry James's 1879 biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne, which is more revealing about James than about his subject, or Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return*, which purports to be about his (Lost) generation but is really about himself. The modern emotions and modes are introspection, self-consciousness, and nostalgia: these permeate Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, Strachey's *Victorians*, and Virginia Woolf's writing about her family. Given the multiple possibilities of the self, the truth, the story, it is easy to sink into the salacious, to wallow in the mire of gossip and nastiness, to the vicious strain of biography that is called pathography.

Where did pathography come from? In his biography of Leonardo da Vinci, Sigmund Freud characterizes the relation between biographer and subject as “pathological,” an unhealthy attachment that he also applies to biographies. Pathology applies to biographies that emphasize the lurid, the low, skeletons, secrets, the stuff of gossip rather than news. He speculates that readers are drawn to biography to experience this tension between hero-worship and disgust: “It would be futile to blind ourselves to the fact that readers today find all pathography unpalatable. They clothe their aversion in the complaint that a pathographical review of a great man never results in an understanding of his importance and his achievements, and that it is therefore a piece of useless impertinence to make a study of things in him that could just as easily be found in the first person one came across” (Freud 91). Ideally, Freud argues, readers would not want to know anything sordid, would have no truck with the pathography of a great man. It would make him too much like “the first person one came across,” or, perhaps, like looking in the mirror.

On some level Freud must know his contentions about pathography are not entirely true. From Aristotle’s theory of tragedy onward, the suffering of a great man has had the makings of great entertainment, if not instruction. Freud’s case histories—his real commitment to biography in their extraordinary construction and writerly ambition—rely on pathography, a fascination with illness and dysfunction, as their engine. In the modern era, this theory of biography as pathography has a long future ahead of it: Joyce Carol Oates famously declared a biography of writer Jean Stafford a pathography in a 1988 review in the *New York Times*. Oates claims “pathography emphasizes the sensational underside of its subject’s life to the detriment of those more scattered, and less dramatic, periods of accomplishment and well-being” (Oates). Freud could not have been more wrong about both biographers’ and the public’s interest in the sordid side, the dramatic turns, the underbelly of life.

Freud was the controversial but incontrovertible guiding hand behind the second biographical revolution. In the same period that Oates was decrying pathographies, she acknowledged she was living in a time of “magisterial” biographies including Richard Ellmann’s of Oscar Wilde (1987) and Leon Edel’s of Henry James (Oates). A 1979 *Time* magazine article by Gerald Clarke, the author of an acclaimed 1988 biography of Truman Capote, is typical of the media’s crowing (Clarke 1). Clarke writes, “All but half a dozen of the greatest biographies in the language have been written in the past 25 years.” Among his literary examples are Edel’s, Ellmann’s book about Joyce (both in the top three), as well as Michael Holroyd on Lytton Strachey, and Quentin Bell’s account of his aunt Virginia Woolf. The sustained creative work of contemporary writers concerning the biographical record is still very much underway: not only must the figures of the past be documented fully and fairly, but new permutations in biography are constantly being invented. Notable attempts are Geoff Dyer’s account of DH Lawrence, *Out of Sheer Rage*, Mark Doty’s study of himself and Walt Whitman, *What Is the Grass?*, and David Karashima’s *Who We’re Reading When We’re Reading Murakami*.

That Ellmann’s *Joyce* roughly inaugurated a golden age, and why, is a point of general agreement. In a 2005 speech Michael Holroyd said: “Early in the twentieth century biography was woken from its slumbers by Lord Strachey, that *enfant terrible* of our genre, and at the end of the 1950s, it grew to full maturity and sophistication with the publication of Richard Ellmann’s masterpiece, his life of James Joyce. Contemporary biographers have been working in an extraordinarily stimulating climate” (Holroyd 2005). Holroyd is not only among biography’s greatest artists; he is one of its shrewdest analysts. So while he applauds his contemporaries and appreciates the advantages of a free society which enables all of them to do better, richer work, he also knows that many biographers traffic in “gossip and bad taste.” Holroyd posits that with the new openness

in biography comes commensurate responsibility: biographers constantly have to walk an ethical line lest they veer from honesty to pathography (Holroyd Works 17).

Yet contemporary biography has perils beyond the ethics of the biographer/subject relationship. Holroyd's fellow biographer Richard Holmes traces the lineage of the genre in a manner now familiar: from Boswell to his "first true heir," Lytton Strachey. Richard Holmes claims of Strachey: "What he released was a generation of brilliant experimenters in biographical narrative, who at last began to ask how can lives be genuinely reconstructed: what is memory, what is time, what is character, what is 'evidence' in a human story?" (Holmes 372). These are the questions biographers are still asking, the modern questions, yet they have been given a new dimension. As Holmes puts it, "Our own generation has seen literary biography especially, freed of Victorian inhibitions, rise to power as a virtually new genre" (Holmes 372-3). Without the inhibitions modern writers still faced, the second revolution was imminent, and in these new works. He cites Ellmann along with Holroyd as among the biographers who ushered in this new era.

The term neither Holroyd and Holmes do not use to describe their biographical work or their milieu is *postmodern*. There is nothing in the style, the mode, the work the modernists did that falls into what is commonly characterized as exclusive to postmodernism, nor is there anything in the productions of their biographers that requires a label other than—or beyond—modern. Quite the opposite is true. Many of the tenets of postmodernism are present in the moderns' biographical work. Pastiche or assemblage: Gertrude Stein's word collages. The questioning of power relations is the exact topic of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*; a critique of institutions the subject of *Three Guineas*. The denial of objective truth or exploration of multiple truths—Wilde, Strachey, Woolf, and Stein all explore and propagate the notion that there is no one truth.

We have not left the modern age; on the contrary, modernism is a category that includes the initial outpouring of modern biographers' creativity and the biographies of those modern writers. Wilde's exploration of beauty and fame in the 1890's *Dorian Gray* is modern; so is Ellmann's chronicling of Wilde's romances with men in *Oscar Wilde* (1987). Woolf's gender-twisting *Orlando* (1928) is modern; so is Hermione Lee's 1997 exploration of Woolf's theories of sexuality and the imagination in her biography of Woolf.

As far as biography is concerned, we are all still modern. Although nearly a century separates us from Wilde and Woolf, and social upheavals have rightly freed us from many of the strictures that bound the modern writers, the simple passing of time has not remade us. Our lives still follow the patterns and successions that these modernist writers would understand—thanks, in part, to Freud, and the continuing belief in life as a narrative of progress—and our biographies are written in ways that they would surely recognize, and to which they would certainly relate.

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