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A Six-Part Practical Framework for Life-Writers

IN AN EFFORT TO ORGANIZE the mass of critical material which exists on the subject of life-writing, I propose a frame which sorts that material by identifying its central concern. I suggest a six-part practical framework for use by biographers, from conception through completion of the biographical project, from the accumulation of primary and secondary materials through to closure. The frame is useful for those working both with single lives and with groups, such as families or groups of artists; it also has applications for the variety of generic possibilities (meaning autobiography, biography, memoir, journal, correspondence, travelogue, film, creative non-fiction and so on) under the life-writing umbrella. The six points of the frame are:

1. sources
2. interpretive aids
3. keys
4. selectivity
5. configuration
6. cures

For each of these six points, I offer considerations drawn from theorists, critics, and practitioners concerned with telling and writing lives, along with anecdotal references from my practical work to exemplify the utility of the scholarly dicta. These considerations discuss what things may be read as textual sources, what to look for when sorting through the evidence, and the importance of be-

ing analyst rather than annalist of our subjects' lives. At each stage of the process, life-writers need to be creative and theoretically grounded, in order to demonstrate both serious scholarship and art. This six-part approach provides the foundation for an emotionally and intellectually satisfying product that is respectful of the life, and does it justice.

Traditionally, biographers have turned almost exclusively to written sources, such as journals, letters, and newspapers, as repositories of fact. Privileging verbal texts in this way, unfortunately, leads to a pair of serious shortcomings; first, it excludes potential subjects; secondly, it ignores potential sources. It perpetuates the marginalization of those who have limited access, or are deprived of access, to the production of those materials. By broadening the criteria for textual consideration, we can bring a measure of equality to our work without compromising its integrity. The lives of working-class and poor people, of women, of the illiterate, of those who simply did not choose to write, all have value, and are worthy subjects for us to consider. Reconsideration of the boundaries, of what is "text," makes possible the inclusion of diverse materials and liberates the life-writer from a necessarily constrained exercise. The historian R. G. Collingwood says that "Anything is evidence which enables you to answer your question."[1]

Sources

The first responsibility and right of the life-writer is to gather the sources; these include conventional language texts, and also a rich variety of what have been called traces (by Ricoeur) and relics (by Gadamer). The idea of traces creates the image of a tracker who detects the faint scent of the quarry in the bush or the detective who finds a matchbook in the flower bed. Hunting and sleuthing are what we do at the start. Leon Edel promises that "the right doors will open if the right questions are asked";[2] our task is to bring all the doors together in one room (rather like a non-threatening version of the fairy tale "The Lady or the Tiger"), and thereby increase the chances of getting an answer. We have to consider the

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[1] R. G. Collingwood, "Part V: Epilegomena," *The Idea of History*, ed. Jan van der Dussen (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1993) 281.

[2] Leon Edel, *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica* (London: Norton, 1985) 161.

social and cultural milieu; after all, people do function in time and space. Shirley Neuman reminds us to consider "race, nationality, religion, education, profession, class, language, gender, sexuality, a specific historical moment and a host of material conditions."[3] Material conditions beyond the abstract of annual income, reaching to the concrete reality of running water and electricity, sharing bedrooms, sharing bathwater, walking or riding to school and what distance, all add to the texture and colour of the story we are trying to tell. Imagine no running water in a house where there comes a baby a year in the time of cloth diapers; imagine the endless round of heating and hauling water, while the next pregnancy is already under way and the one before is dragging on your skirts, and picture the hands that do all that scrubbing. Confirm an informant's recollection that she had a long walk to school, and laugh when you walk it yourself in ten minutes.

Although it's useful to make a reference chart of the births, deaths, and weddings which affect our subjects' lives, leave enough blank spaces for the story to come. Not only are the events of a life important, but also the physical and mental health and processes[4] of the subject. The stories of women, in particular, need to be mindful of the matters of the body because women cannot ever get away from their explicit bodies; women always are in the body, counting its days and subject to the fact of violence from within (in the case of hormonal ebb and flow) and the possibility of violence from without (in the case of gender-centred assault). The experiences of puberty are important to males and females alike when it comes to physical metamorphoses and their concurrent psychological agonies. But writing about women is incomplete without direct confrontation with menstruation; not only is it useful to know when menarche or menopause occur, but to remember, in the life of an early twentieth-century boarding-school girl, for example, that menstrual cloths had to be laundered, and probably laundered by someone else. Sidonie Smith astutely calls blood "the metonymic

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[3] Shirley Neuman, "Autobiography: From Different Poetics to a Poetics of Difference," *Essays on Life-Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, ed. Marlene Kadar (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992) 224.

[4] Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1995) 11–13.

marker of woman,"[5] because for most of a woman's life either she is bleeding or not bleeding; it advances or recedes, but it never goes away. Two situational questions women continue to face, with uniform certainty, are "what were you wearing" from investigating officers and "when was your last period" from attending physicians. Inextricable from the body, for subjects of either sex, are the activities of the mind, both intellectual and emotional. One does not have to be housed in an asylum to experience mental suffering sufficient for consideration as a real factor in decision-making and behaviour. One does not have to be a degree-holder to demonstrate an active and hungry mind.

Trends in politics and music situate the subject: not merely who was President or Prime Minister or Chancellor but voting statistics for the specific locality in which the subject(s) lived; not only knowledge of major compositions and performers of the day (be they Handel, Gershwin, or The Tragically Hip), but what sheet music is found in the piano bench, and what 78s or CDs are in the cabinet. One of the most effective moments in James King's biography of Virginia Woolf, because it places the Woolfs so bizarrely in their bizarre time, is when he describes Leonard and Virginia inadvertently driving along in solitary possession of a Bonn motor route lined with adoring fascists waiting for their Führer.[6] The anecdote from 1935 provides a moment of stark subjectivity which breaks down the barrier of objective historical separation so far as possible. Surely there was a brass band enthusiastically standing by, tubas and trumpets at the ready. If the soundtrack of a time and its composers held no meaning, then Wagner would not be the issue he is in Israel, and the Bavarian State Opera orchestra would not have refused to play Scott Joplin as recently as 1988. Paul Ricoeur reminds us that the text is "communication in and through distance";[7] it follows logically that the more texts we consider, the more thorough the communication can be, as we heed Ricoeur's

[5] Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth-Century* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) 3.

[6] James King, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994) 525.

[7] Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, trans. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge UP, 1981) 131.

admonition to "struggle against cultural distance and historical alienation."[8] We need to consider the major movements of the day, as well as the reactionary counter-movements, and to know what books the subject kept on the shelf; we need to look in the cupboards and drawers and closets.

For example, almost no one darns socks anymore; but to inspect the contents of a woman's mending basket, to rub your thumb on the smoothness of the darning egg (if you're lucky), to see the colours and quality of the threads is to struggle against historical alienation. At the same time, these literal materials inform that woman's life in economic and practical terms. The cottons and wools are text, because they speak to the functionality or leisure of the work; not all needleworks are "created equal": darning and petit point have very different stories to tell about keeping feet warm and household adornment. Likewise, determining what passenger vehicles and machinery and implements were used by a person provides important clues to the finances and labour of a subject. What we want to do is bring together as many pieces as possible, "all of which," as Elizabeth Cohen says, "can be read as texts for the reconstruction of a conceptual whole."[9]

Obviously, photographs reveal a vast variety of information. We can see with our own eyes the measurable physical attributes of the subject, as well as make note of the posture and positioning of the subject in relation to others and to things. We can see what they have, and can theorize on these potentially very revealing observations. Photographs can help to establish provenance as well. My sister has a lovely pin that is a family heirloom, although we did not know its origins. Last year, I was sorting through photographs for my work, and—because my sister had worn the pin just recently—I recognized it at the throat of our great-grandmother. I excitedly showed the portrait to my sister, who paused for a moment and said, "Well, that explains why it never sits right—I've been wearing it wrong."

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[8] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics* 185.

[9] Elizabeth Cohen, "Court Testimony from the Past: Self and Culture in the Making of Text," *Essays on Life-Writing*, ed. Kadar 85.

Interpretive Aids

Along with the surface facts a photograph offers, there are its many subtleties to be considered; pictures do not necessarily wear their stories on their sleeves. Useful interpretive theories, such as Terry Barrett's[10] and Richard Chalfen's,[11] discuss portraiture and casual photography and offer assistance in decoding images. Barrett warns that "Photographs that are made in a straightforward, stylistically realistic manner especially need interpretation," because "they have the capacity to lull us into believing that they are evidence of an impartial, uninflected sort" (33). Because he is right that "there is no such thing as an innocent eye" (34), we as life-writers must be sure not to look with a naïve eye. Likewise, we have to employ other interpretive strategies at our disposal. In the case of family stories, birth-order theory and genogram are particularly helpful, but they have applications for so-called single lives too. Early life is "the great biographical gap"[12] because details are almost always sparse; however, childhood is when the subject is in process, is becoming, and therefore childhood is a significant time for biographers. The privileging of verbal sources has the natural result of a biographical neglect of childhood since small children produce no artifacts of that sort. Compounding the problem are the sparse and spotty holdings of the subject's own memory and the unfortunate loss of the relics which are the "childish things" which get put away and cast off. Photographs offer substantial assistance in the reconstruction of a subject's formative years.

Birth-order theory introduces possibilities for a profiling sketch based on many variables, such as place in the "family constellation,"[13] time-lapse between births, serious illness or special-needs children, and gender, which need to be factored in to the biographer's assessment of the subject's nature and nurture. The first-born per-

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[10] Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images* (London: Mayfield Publishing, 1990).

[11] Richard Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State UP, 1987).

[12] Robert Blake, "The Art of Biography," *The Troubled Face of Biography*, ed. Eric Homberger and John Charmely (New York: St. Martin's, 1988) 82.

[13] Kevin Leman, *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1984).

sonality is markedly different from the last-born personality; they are created things dependent on parental expectations, real or perceived demands, parental and sibling attention or the absence thereof. Large families develop psychological and social issues less likely to be experienced in more limited numbers; the only child is a person also psychologically apart. According to Dr. Kevin Leman, "Your birth order ... has a powerful influence on the kind of person you will be [and] ... the type of occupation you choose" (9).

Equally revealing is the genogram, a charting method set out in McGoldrick and Gerson[14] for use in family psychotherapy and behavioural assessment. The genogram is a modified family-tree-type diagram and employs a series of symbols to indicate more than biological and legal connections. The chart can reveal trends which otherwise may go unconsidered, such as levels of education, successive marriages, alcoholism, suicide, or profession. People are affected by the permission-granting acts of others; my grandfather dropped out of university and all four of his daughters began but did not finish post-secondary programs. A few of his grandchildren are high-school dropouts (including myself), as are some great-grandchildren. A more dramatic example of permission-granting acts is suicide, which is not such an aberrant behaviour if it has been observed as an option for others in intimate contact through family or other association. Alcoholism as a family trait points to the role of genetic factors, as well as social conditions. In my maternal lineage, substance-abusers are well represented in all of the last six generations (at least). In my paternal family connections, divorce is the signature habit. On that side, there are eight cousins; we have had eight divorces, one cousin who chose never to marry at all but promises she would have divorced if she had, and one first marriage of endurance but we credit our sister-in-law with that; there are two subsequent marriages which seem to be holding up. Add that to the divorce of our paternal grandparents, and take it to a psychologist. It adds up to a lot of wedding presents.

Other aspects of our joint maternal-paternal heritage have to receive equal consideration, however, because they colour the story

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[14] Monica McGoldrick and Randy Gerson, *Genograms in Family Assessment* (New York: Norton, 1985).

significantly. There are many things that are neither genetically nor socially reducible but still are profound influences on development and ways of seeing. Two of four sisters in my mother's family were young widows: one at the age of twenty-four and one at thirty-four; another of the sisters died at forty-three. In the next generation, two of six females were widowed—both at the age of forty; and in the next generation of six females (of which only two have established committed relationships so far), my own daughter has already been widowed at twenty-one. We carry an enormous burden of generational sorrow due to events beyond either prediction or deterrent; growing up in a tradition of mourning has a shaping effect. This is the utility of the genogram, and its cousin the sociogram (which theorist Margot Peters employs when considering Bloomsbury): bringing together events and tendencies and relationships in all their diversity for subsequent scrutiny and interpretation.

Keys

Somewhere within all the resultant physical and circumstantial evidence now within the biographer's scope lies the key to the subject; the one thing that acts as Rosetta Stone to bring everything else into alignment and focus. From the opening frames of *Citizen Kane*,[15] everybody, in the audience and on the screen knows that "Rosebud" is vital; but those within the film look in the wrong places, and give up too soon, because no one would think of a wooden sled as text. The one piece of material evidence that is the key to Charles Foster Kane is overlooked and destroyed because of its deceptive simplicity and apparent lack of secrets. The wooden sled is the only artifact of Kane's past that he valued in all those crates of his mother's worldly goods. Ironically, it is the one thing that connects Kane's dying thought with the single most significant morning of his life; understand that morning, and you soon understand Citizen Kane.

Many theorists note almost in passing the existence in every life of a Rosebud morning. Lois Banner calls it the "random event";[16]

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[15] *Citizen Kane*, dir. Orson Welles, screenplay by Orson Welles and Herman J. Mankiewicz (RKO, 1941).

[16] Lois W. Banner, "Biography and Autobiography: Intermixing the Genres," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 8.2 (Fall 1993): 168.

Felicity Nussbaum calls it the "crisis moment";[17] Elspeth Cameron, the "set point";[18] John Sturrock, the "liminal event";[19] for Paul Ricoeur, it is the "founding event" and the "axial moment";[20] and Ira Nadel remarks on Plutarch's "concentration on the illuminating incident."[21] If you find it, you find at once both the moral and the metaphor of the story you are about to write. Hayden White believes that "every historical narrative has ... the desire to *moralize* the events of which it treats";[22] certainly, we cannot pretend, even to ourselves, that we are copying out an uninflected truth. The biographer's subjectivity is an acknowledged presence in the work; we are story-tellers and, as Walter Benjamin says, "every real story contains something useful."[23]

Selectivity

Once the sources, the texts, traces, and relics are collected, the interpretive theoretical aids have been employed, and the Rosebud has been found, the process of selectivity begins, because, once we know where we are going, we know what we need to get there. Initial collection of materials is an omnivorous undertaking; selection is a discriminating exercise which requires both sensitivity and mercilessness, and which, Gadamer reminds us, needs to result in the "harmony of all the details."[24] Poring over the materials I had collected in my exploration of my maternal grandmother's life, I concluded that her perception of her physical self was a major factor in her adult life. Because of this, I selected two particular photographs from the family collection which would demonstrate

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[17] Felicity Nussbaum, "Towards Conceptualizing Diary," *Studies in Autobiography*, ed. James Olney (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 134.

[18] Elspeth Cameron in conversation, University of Calgary, 1995.

[19] John Sturrock, *The Language of Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 111.

[20] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984-88) 3: 106.

[21] Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (London: MacMillan, 1984) 17.

[22] Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 18.

[23] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 86.

[24] Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975) 259.

her transformation more vividly than I could describe. The first of these is her graduation portrait, taken in a studio when she was twenty. She is dressed in a formal gown, with carefully coiffed hair, and draped languidly across an ornately carved chair, gazing confidently into the camera lens. The next, taken almost twenty years later when she is seven-months pregnant with her fourth child, shows a woman wearing a heavy coat in spite of the August heat, surrounded by her three daughters, and standing behind a wheat stook. These two photographs, set beside each other, show a woman (who once engaged so intimately with the camera) whose body changed so dramatically that she quite clearly no longer wanted to be looked at. Aside from a letter written soon after the first baby's birth, in which she laments her "sloppy" body, there is no evidence that she wrote about her feelings concerning her body; the early twentieth century was not a time when those sorts of things were widely discussed. The camera did that work for her. The biographer also has to be aware of the "cultural process of inclusion and exclusion," a "disciplinary technology," which according to William Epstein, "must be disrupted."[25] This means, for example, we have to resist the tendency to write within the margins of tradition for its own sake, and consider writing about the traditionally untalked-about, not for the purpose of sensationalism or shock but in order to serve best the subject as well as the object. This does not mean, however, that we forsake ethics and propriety.[26]

Configuration

At this point, the process requires a conceptual shift; we are no longer wandering hunters and gatherers, but instead become herders and growers, in a theoretical-anthropological sense. Configuring the project, anchored by the key, is work of a very different kind than research; here is where the biographer attends to art. Margot Peters' encouragement to "impose some kind of pattern"[27] is not a

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[25] William H. Epstein, "(Post) Modern Lives: Abducting the Biographical Subject," *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism* (West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1991) 219, 229.

[26] Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives* 13–15.

[27] Margot Peters, "Group Biography: Challenges and Methods," *New Directions in Biography*, ed. Anthony M. Friedson (Honolulu: UP of Hawaii for the Biography Research Centre, 1981) 50.

constraint; as Leon Edel explains, "every life takes its own form—find the ideal and unique literary form."[28] There is not a necessarily "correct" generic form and, in fact, Robert Skidelsky urges us to "be more audacious in treatment of the subject."[29] One of the issues with which we need to take particular care is the ordering of content; we have all no doubt read biographies that are thinly disguised lists of events. Chronological order is not a requirement, and, in fact, can be detrimental, because the narrative can fall into the trap of sequential listing: this happened, then this happened, then this happened; in that case, we may as well publish our daytimers, and save ourselves the trouble. Unless we have the delightful whimsy of Saint Gall's chronicle (whose recorder probably was ignorant of his poetry), whose sole entry for the entire year 732 reads "Charles fought against the Saracens at Poitiers on Saturday,"[30] there is little chance that unmediated calendars will meet with much critical or commercial success.

Philippe LeJeune insists that we must question the "'natural' status implicitly granted chronological order,"[31] and certainly we know the validity of this from experience; we consistently interrupt chronology when we tell a story orally because we are reminded of things as we go, reminded not by time but by relationships of things to each other. Collingwood says that "memory is not organized, not inferential";[32] indeed, it may not be inferential, but organized differently is not the same as not organized at all. Memory is organized; it merely refuses to be catalogued artificially along date lines. Rather, it is referential, a sophisticated and intricate system of cross-references, a filing system unique to the clerk. Chronological configuration relieves some of the artistic responsibility caused by disruption; if we are going to take people out of time, we have to be careful not to create (too much) confusion in readers. If they have to be in several "whens" at once, a comfort level

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[28] Edel, *Writing Lives* 30.

[33] Robert Skidelsky, "Only Connect: Biography and Truth," *The Troubled Face of Biography*, ed. Eric Homberger and John Charmley (New York: St. Martin's P, 1988) 14.

[30] White, "The Value of Narrativity" 11.

[31] Philippe LeJeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine M. Leary (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989) 71.

[32] Collingwood, *The Idea of History* 252.

can be maintained by the affinity of the details, unless, of course, the story is better served by assuring the reader's discomfort.

When we do forsake chronology, Ricoeur assures us that the "resonance-effect compensates for rupture-effect."[33] Remember the list of young widows I provided earlier; their losses span a half century, but rupturing time to bring those events together in four lines has a rhetorical power that resonates sufficiently to extirpate the liberty taken with the clock. My grandfather's life is best understood through his love of travel and of space; his journeys provide the anchor to the story. While we must choose a "principle of configuration,"[34] the principle does not have to be chronology, and an understanding of the lived life with which we work will make that choice clearer. Perhaps an arrangement anchored by geography or trauma will be best; we can tell our story in a variety of ways without compromising the end result. In fact, careful considerations of the alternatives can help us make a choice which best marries form and content. Neuman stresses that "felicitous style and narrative shapeliness are not incompatible with factual accuracy."[35]

Cures

Finally, when the project is concluded, the biographer can experience the cure; perhaps even realize why the project was undertaken in the first place. No matter whose story we are telling, we are also telling our own story in some sense. Hélène Cixous speaks of writing as search,[36] and it is to be hoped that by the last page the writer has found something. Freud spoke of analysis as a "talking cure," and life-writing is also analysis, for subject, reader, and writer alike. We tell because, as Freud posited and Peter Brooks concurs, we have "the desire of narrating ... to be heard, recognized, lis-

[33] Ricoeur, *Time* 2: 104–05.
[34] Ricoeur, *Time* 2: 25.
[35] Shirley Neuman, "Life Writing," *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, gen. ed. W.H. New, 2nd ed. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1990) 4: 333–70, 361.
[36] Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986).

tened to ... understood, ... the desire to tell";[37] we have the repetition compulsion. It is, I think, the hidden reason why victims of abuse experience the phenomenon of choking: they want to tell but they cannot. Telling is fundamental to us as people; we use language to make the abstract real for ourselves, to grant some degree of permanence to our stories, to validate our experience, and to connect ouselves to others through our stories. A written life potentially can do all of these things for the triad which participates in the text. Until I undertook to write about my mother's nuclear family, my grandparents and eldest aunt were abstracts for me; during the research and writing of their lives, they became human for me, albeit humans of my own making to a large extent, but they are people who are understandable to me now. This process has cured, so far as is possible, what for me was a curious and uncomfortable absence from my life.

What we as life-writers can offer is the opportunity for understanding which John Sturrock sees in the shift from "ardent immediacy of experience to cool mediacy of language."[38] One of the things we all want from life-writing, regardless of where we fit in the subject-reader-writer trinity, is resolution of "our own sense of fragmentation."[39] If you are interested in the talking cure or the reading cure or the writing cure, life-writing is the place for you. The six-step framework provides a guide at the same time that it accommodates the freedom essential to the production of a life, written or lived.

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[37] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 53–54.

[38] Sturrock, *The Language of Autobiography* 140.

[39] Nadel, *Biography* 9.