

A Speculative Introduction: Life-Writing as Drama

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In casting about for a way of introducing this collection which would also enable me to make some contribution of my own, it suddenly occurred to me that unifying these otherwise quite disparate essays was some element of conflict: the Gospels as a “passion” story and their adherence to a basic martyr “plot” (Aune); memoirs of “war” (Mason); the dismantling versus the unifying impulse in autobiography (Kertzer); the political implications of rebellion in childhood autobiographies (Ayling); breaking autobiographical “game” rules (Adams); the fiction/fact tension in autobiography (Dodd); sibling rivalry, mother/daughter tensions and the struggle with language (Elliot); indigenous versus imported esthetic values (Noonan); competing psychological interpretations of an autobiographical document (Funt); the autobiographical subtext of a suffragist opera (Winston); experimental fiction versus conservative biography (Nadel); rival desires in the lives of politically active women (Kadar).

Since this unifying feature was not a result of any deliberate design, the situation seems to suggest that conflict is somehow indigenous to life-writing, and since conflict is also the definitive component of drama, I am led to wonder whether a major stumbling block in the formulation of a poetics of life-writing has not been a tendency to liken it to prose fiction when in fact it is drama that provides the most appropriate generic touchstone. Thus in his “manifesto” for the inaugural issue of *Biography*, Leon Edel pronounces: “Biography is written in narrative prose. It should be narrated as if it were a story....” (1-2); more recently, in *Ultimately*

Fiction, Dennis W. Petrie emphatically concludes that “both biography and fiction are ultimately narrative” (182), a situation which he feels applies to autobiography as well: “the best autobiographers often consciously select the form of biography” (5). As one might expect, both Edel and Petrie place the highest premium on “literary” biographies.

If most autobiographies and biographies do have a narrative format, however, the frequent recourse to the concept of portraiture reflects a counter tendency to downplay a sense of sequence or telling in favor of showing. Some of the earliest biographies, indeed, were purely visual (the pictographs in Egyptian tombs), while some of the greatest life-writing documents today take the form of photographs (the portraits of Karsh and Jill Krementz). What the visual arts cannot do, of course, is to portray character in action, which is what drama does but without becoming purely narrative. It should also be remembered that in the case of Hellenic biography, chronological structuring was basically an expedient, whereas the inherent centrality of the dramatic component is evident in the way in which early types of this literature were titled: i.e., Acts of the Apostles, Acts of the Martyrs. Nor does the dramatic component really drop out when one moves to the eighteenth century: according to Boswell, the virtue of his biography of Johnson is that it enables one “to see him live, and to ‘live o’er each scene’ with him, as he actually advanced through the several stages of his life” (22). Similarly, when Fielding titled his fictional biography *A History of Tom Jones*, his purpose was to identify it as a form of life-writing rather than to suggest any adherence to a sequential form of narration, as he takes pains to point out at the beginning of Book II, Part I: “Showing What Kind of a History This Is: What It Is Like, And What It Is Not Like.” In doing so he also indirectly points to what makes the narrative model so problematic: designed to rescue life-writing from “history” and to suggest that such literature is an art in its own right, such a procedure forgets that narrative—in the sense of sequence—mimics an “historical” orientation.

Moreover, that critics are themselves beginning not only to question the appropriateness of narrative analogies but also (albeit implicitly) to move in the direction of drama can be seen in the titles of two modern studies: Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* and Albert E. Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts*. Even more to the point, in his pioneering study, *Metaphors of Self*, James Olney explicitly likens autobiography to “drama” (xi) and throughout he is concerned with the *agon* of self-dramatization. Equally significant is the extent to which modern autobiographers have realized their dramatic legacy: thus just as Gertrude Stein quite literally *stages* her autobiography in *The Mother of Us All*, so Maxine Hong Kingston not only gives her memoir a “dramatic” title—*The Woman Warrior*—but she also echoes the ancients’ metaphor for the nature of plot in drama in her presentation of herself as a “knot-maker” (190). As for the connection between modern biography and drama, one need only point out that one of the most applauded dramas of our time—*Amadeus*—and one of the most successful films—*Yentle*—could be described as life-writing documents.

To say that life-writing has major affinities with drama is not, of course, to deny

that certain types of prose fiction also have a thespian core; on the contrary, it is herein that the best basis for distinguishing between novel and romance can be found.¹ Accordingly, the real problem may be not so much the tendency to equate life-writing and narrative as the tendency to equate narrative and the novel. In turn, one way of salvaging the narrative model might be to argue for the similarities between life-writing and romance—focusing for example on the way in which both feature heroes or heroines, both present society as an antagonistic force, and both proceed in a relatively straightforward fashion from crisis to crisis toward a climax. Along the same lines, one might note that the more a novel has an autobiographical character—i.e. the *kunstlerroman* or *bildungsroman*—the more it resembles romance. Since romance is an older form than the novel, by allying life-writing and romance one could also highlight the faultiness of seeing the later form as an appropriate touchstone—urging the parent to imitate the child, as it were. To move in such a direction would, however, over-complicate the issue at this point, so let me simply continue with the drama/life-writing equation—although now with the understanding that in questioning the appropriateness of the narrative model I am referring—as do those who argue for it—to novelistic practice.

In his classic discussion of drama, Aristotle begins with a consideration of mimesis and the type of pleasure it produces, and this is also where the formulation of a “dramatic” poetics of life-writing best begins. Viewing drama first as script, one notes that common to it and life-writing is a sense that something empirically real is being imitated, something that has an existence outside of or prior to the text; thus while theoretically all art is mimetic, in drama and life-writing mimesis is a necessary condition; in both cases, art is less an end in itself and more a means of reproduction; what we take pleasure in is the mimetic impulse itself, while in some strange way, what we also delight in is the fact that what is imitated—basically “life”—can never be fully appropriated or superseded by the copy. Insofar as drama is performance it shares with life-writing the interaction between something tangible and concrete and something abstract or non-material (actors and script in the case of drama, the lived life and its verbal reconstruction in the case of life-writing), with our pleasure deriving from the way in which the fixed and the factual (the script or the life) are both followed but given a unique signature.

The importance of a dramatic analogy, therefore, is that it enables one to recognize the historical component of life-writing while still arguing for its artistry, whereas the use of a novelistic model in effect involves a denial of the very premise of that art form: namely, esthetic autonomy. However “realistic” a novel might be, factual fidelity is not a criterion, and indeed if the novel began by imitating history, it came of age according to Henry James when authors began to assert their own *données*. Moreover, the imitation of history was to a large degree an esthetic strategy—a rebellion against romance principles—just as what is imitated in the novel is not something that has actually happened. Accordingly, whereas pleasure in drama and life-writing derives from imitation and its limitations, pleasure in the novel derives from the pretense of imitation and from the absence of constraints.

To make these points in a less theoretical way, one might consider why life-writing documents by or about the “famous” attract more attention than do the lives

of the “unknown”: does it not have something to do with the extent to which the reader is in a position to compare the “original” and the “copy,” and is not this also the informing (albeit in reverse) attraction of the exposé?—which is itself a central ingredient of drama. Similarly, with regard to the unknown, one might note the way in which such documents tend initially to be treated either as history or fiction until their subjects lose their anonymity, just as it is only when comparison between the original and the copy (or various copies) is possible that any meaningful criticism can begin. Paradoxically too, as much as “mock” life-writing documents sport with this notion of mimesis, so much does our pleasure depend upon our recognition of the rule that is being invoked and broken. As for the basic differences between the novel and life-writing in these respects, one might consider why pictorial material seems appropriate in biography but is distracting in even a historical novel. Why also, despite our appetite for biographical details, do we object to fiction that is too autobiographical? More important than the fact that life-writing and prose fiction have narrative in common, in short, is that they differ radically in the area of mimesis.

Life-writing as well can be too “subjective,” and here is another area in which dramatic analogies are helpful. Just as an actor assumes the role of another, so autobiography involves the creation of a persona. In both cases, a temporary sacrifice of one’s historical identity is required, while at the same time the degree of pleasure is in proportion to the amount of sacrifice involved. Hence our dislike of autobiographies which are too lacking in objectivity—a failing, significantly, which usually takes the form of too much narrative and too little dramatization. Hence also the special tension of watching a performance by famous actors or reading autobiographies of those we know, in contrast to what might be called a narrative response when we do not know those in question. That acting and autobiography go hand in hand might also be seen from the extent to which our most famous twentieth-century diarist, Anaïs Nin, was an aspiring stage performer. Conversely, it may be the extent to which their acting left them with only a persona that accounts for the proclivity for autobiography on the part of many actresses (i.e. Anne Baxter or Shirley MacLaine). Via the concept of the persona, moreover, another non-narrative way of linking life-writing and the novel comes into focus.

Equally profitable are the analogies that might be drawn between the director and the biographer. Both are in a position of authority, on the one hand, but at the mercy of their materials, on the other. Both make their presence known via their interpretation, and in both instances success takes the form of their names eclipsing those of their subjects. Thus just as we speak today of a Hitchcock film or a Bergman film, so we recall Plutarch’s *Lives* and Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*. Such “subjectivity,” however, is very different from the tendency of some modern biographers to write themselves into the text. What the latter tendency reflects, significantly, is an imitation of contemporary novelistic practice, whereas it could be said that the great biographers succeeded because they adhered to dramatic principles of composition.

The first of these, according to Aristotle, is the priority of plot over character delineation, a principle which would at first seem to be at total odds with life-

writing. In claiming that plot is the soul of drama, however, Aristotle specifically referred to our preference for the chalk outline of a portrait over a confusion of details, and one need only consider why “composite” biographies are less appealing than single-authored ones to realize that the principle does apply. What the former lack and the latter provide is a theory of character development, which in illustrating a law of life is the equivalent of Aristotle’s notion of plot. It is in privileging plot over character, moreover, that the “universal” appeal of life-writing is to be found: just as a drama can be performed by various sets of actors, so life-writing has a theoretical component which goes beyond the individual example.

That in the novel, in contrast, character has equal if not more importance than plot may be seen both in the tendency to regard as inferior fiction which is formulaic (the adventure or detective story) and by the numerous central consciousness novels, on the one hand, and by the almost plotless nature of much post-modernist fiction, on the other. Even when there is a strong element of plot, moreover, the novel seeks to generate the sense of a unique happening and appeals, as its name suggests, to our delight in novelty.

Where the novel also differs from life-writing is in the nature of its genesis and subsequently in the type of suspense that it creates. Whereas the novelist constructs his plot or discovers his direction as he writes, the biographer and autobiographer write in retrospect; as a result, whereas in a novel the reader does not recognize the pattern until the end, in life-writing one senses from the outset what the outcome will be, since it was in accordance with the total picture that events and details were selected. As such, life-writing perfectly adheres to Aristotle’s theory that a good plot is one in which the end arises inevitably out of the beginning, and wherein the effect is one of seeing the action unfold rather than following a progressive narrative.

To illustrate practically that life-writing is thus a “closed” form, one might consider why we are hesitant to accord authority to biographies of the living and why on-going diaries are less successful than autobiographies, as well as why the success of the latter requires a certain amount of distance or distinctness between the period described and the vantage point of the writing. A specific case in point here is the serially published diaries of Anaïs Nin which statistically decreased in popularity in proportion to their movement into the present and to the degree that she did less and less retrospective editing. Significantly, too, the difference between the earlier and later volumes could be described as a shift from a dramatic to a narrative mode.

What the Nin diaries at their best also illustrate is the way in which life-writing approximates drama in its spatialization of time. Thus just as drama takes the form of acts and scenes, and just as Aristotle denigrates the episodic plot, so successful life-writing eschews temporal sequence and presents development in terms of clearly demarcated phases—frequently, indeed, using places of residence as a structuring principle. It is this view of life in terms of distinct phases, moreover, which explains why an autobiography can deal with only a segment of a life and yet provide a sense of completeness, just as it is the extent to which a biographer operates on this principle that he can write the “life” of a living person. Another way in which time is spatialized in life-writing is through the presentation of

genealogy as “setting” or expository material, and just as time is always the eternal present in drama, so in life-writing historical setting is typically of importance only insofar as it highlights the subject’s problems. Hence the great difficulties of the “life and times” approach and also why such an approach is successful as life-writing to the extent that the author ascribes to a “great man” theory of history, and to the extent that the author does not, the work tends to move into the category of history itself. Similarly, with its focus on the individual in society, the life and times approach also has more affinities with the novel than with drama.

It is also by virtue of its focus on the individual that life-writing approximates the notion of unity of time and place in drama, while it is because life-writing adheres to plot rather than sequence that the matter of length becomes a real issue. According to Aristotle, who again uses a pictorial analogy to make his point, to be impressive a drama must have “magnitude” but not be of such a scope that the whole is lost sight of. When life-writing fails, I would argue, it most frequently has to do with lack of adherence to this principle, a failure which involves placing character before plot or confusing the beginning and end of the plot with the beginning and end of a life. By the same token, what is frequently forgotten is that it is not action per se that moves a plot but a rising action, so that the matter of length must also be gauged in terms of how much inexorability a reader can stand without becoming impatient.

Having identified plot as the soul of drama, Aristotle gives relatively little attention to a discussion of character in itself, with his major contention moreover being that in drama character must be revealed in action. Since life-writing frequently focuses on “uneventful” or “secret” lives, we would at first glance seem to have here not only a fundamental divergence between life-writing and drama but also a definitive alliance of life-writing and the novel. Thus in his classic *Aspects of the Novel* E. M. Forster specifically takes issue with Aristotle on this point, seeing the virtue of the novel to lie in its concern with what goes on behind the scenes and is never acted out, and he especially applauds the fact that the novelist can “talk about his characters as well as through them” (92). Such a descriptive method, however, is precisely the pitfall in life-writing, where we want indeed to see character issuing out of struggle. Nor will it really do to object that this is internal conflict in contrast to the external kind called for by Aristotle, for actually it is in the context of criticizing speeches which do not reveal choices that he argues for a dramatic mode of characterization. Moreover, Aristotle’s own downplaying of purely physical action may be seen in his dismissal of spectacle as the least important aspect of drama. The point, in short, is that in arguing that character should be revealed in action, Aristotle was first of all describing a method and only subsequently how it might be put into practice in the medium of stage performance.

As for Aristotle’s contention that the protagonist of tragedy should be above the common level, although again we might seem to have a problem, it disappears when one considers that even when the subjects of life-writing documents are not “eminent” in any historical sense, they are invariably treated as special cases, with the effect of their immortalization through print being to make them so. Accordingly, life-writing also reflects Aristotle’s notion that protagonists in drama should

be true to life and yet truer than life. Understanding this principle, one also begins to see less difference between the “exemplary” lives of the past and the “realistic” lives of today. Conversely, one begins to see that it is not really the hagiographic impulse which makes some early life-writing documents unsatisfactory but rather the tendency to narrate rather than to “dramatize.” For if actions speak louder than words, drama in itself also militates against moralizing. Partly this is a result of the immediacy of the experience: when one is caught up in an action one is not in a position to judge; partly, it is a result of the closed nature of the form: moralizing is possible only when the premise is that things might have been different. Thus when moralizing does occur in successful life-writing—consider Plutarch’s *Lives*, for example—it typically occurs outside the framework of the plot (like a prologue or epilogue) or is somehow distinct from the main action (like the chorus).

What also militates against moralizing in drama and life-writing is the process of identification which takes place, and herein Aristotle’s affective theory concerning the nature of audience response also provides helpful analogues. However much life-writing might appeal to a sense of curiosity, and however much such work might be well-crafted, the measure of success is the degree of emotional response that is evoked. Consider here the frequency with which adjectives like “profoundly moving”—or even “shocking” and “stunning”—are used to praise such works, or the recurrence of words like “understanding” and “sympathetic” in praise of the author, or the extent to which such lives are described as “passionate” or “tormented.”

In emphasizing emotional response, Aristotle was speaking primarily of the “tragic” effect caused by scenes of wounding or death, and what should be noticed in turn is the way in which autobiography approximates tragedy in its concern with pain and suffering, just as biography does so by virtue of its elegiac character. As such, both also satisfy Aristotle’s contention that the action of drama must be “serious.” Moreover, just as Aristotle felt that the language of tragedy should accord with this seriousness, so one might note that a certain solemnity of tone and dignified diction are to be found in successful life-writing.

Having established this common denominator of drama and life-writing, one is also in the position of considering how the differences between the two major classical forms of drama might also help to elucidate the difference between the two major forms of life-writing. Common to tragedy and autobiography, one might generalize, are their concentrated focus on individual and personal turmoil, their philosophical/religious orientation and delight in extremes, whereas common to comedy and biography are their concern with societal opposition but ultimate integration, their secular orientation and *ob-scena* methodology. Or again, tragedy and comedy might be seen as ways of distinguishing various types *within* the two major categories of life-writing. Thus the conventional journal or memoir and “popular” biographies might be allied with comedy, whereas confessions, apologies and “quality” biographies could be allied with tragedy; Marxist and Feminist biographies of a specific individual could similarly be distinguished from those of a Jungian variety, and perhaps life-writing documents by men might also be distinguished along these lines from those by women.

Pursuing these directions, however, is something I must leave for later or for

others. For the moment I am content if I have succeeded in suggesting that drama is more helpful than prose narrative as a model for formulating a poetics of life-writing. Although narrative might be closer in a mechanical sense, drama has more in common with the dynamics or spirit of life-writing. As such, a dramatic orientation not only allows for greater inclusiveness but also points to ways in which life-writing might become more experimental without sacrificing its roots or heritage. Writing in accordance with a dramatic model, for example, could enable one to short-circuit the "screen-script" phase of adaptation for video technology. In related fashion, recognizing the dramatic nature of life-writing affords new ways of viewing the popularity of such literature in a given historical ethos and its relationship to other cultural developments: is there, for example, any connection between the state of drama in a period and the interest in life-writing? similarly, given that drama developed out of ritual—i.e., a religious and communal exercise—to what extent does life-writing answer to these needs in a climate of spiritual crisis and egocentricity? Along these lines, too, and in the light of the fact that Aristotle himself was essentially a biologist, one might note that it is via the affinities of drama and life-writing that one best explains the interest in this literature on the part of scientists. What the dramatic connection has to offer literary critics, in turn, is the vocabulary and criteria needed to explain why some life-writing documents succeed and others fail.

NOTES

- 1/ In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye suggested that the "confession" should be viewed as a form distinct from the novel, and he also called for a distinction between novel and romance. For a criticism of his method of making the latter distinction, however, see my article, wherein I also emphasize the ritual nature of romance. Note in this context, too, the way in which C. S. Lewis structures his romance—*Till We Have Faces*—in the form of an apologia, just as James Branch Cabell collectively titles his romances *The Biography of Manuel*.

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