

Biography: Big Lives

In his text *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971), Roland Barthes wrote that "Were I a writer and dead, how I would love it if my life, through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences a few inflections, let us say: 'biographemes'..."¹ Barthes was not so lucky. A 2017 biography by Tiphaine Samoyault is 584 pp. An earlier 1996 life by Louis-Jean Calvet was 312 pages. Roland Barthes own work, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* of 2010 was a svelte 209 pages. But since Barthes original wish, biography has gotten bigger, much bigger. Why?

Something has happened to contemporary biography as a set of lengthy, mammoth literary biographies have appeared in the last year or two including Zachary Leader's 2 vol. life of Saul Bellow (1579 pp.), Benjamin Moser's Sontag (816 pp.), Hermione Lee's new life of Tom Stoppard (977 pp.), Heather Clark's life of Sylvia Plath (1152 pp.) and Blake Bailey's forthcoming life of Philip Roth (960 pp). Other new lives include Blake Gopnik's life of Andy Warhol at 976 pages and David Reynold's *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in his Times* at 1088 pages. What's happened? Why have the books gotten longer when the time and desire to read has gotten shorter?²

¹ Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, tr. Richard Miller (1971; London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), pp. 8-9. The full text reads: "Were I a writer and dead, how I would love it if my life, through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences a few inflections, let us say: 'biographemes' whose distinction and mobility might go beyond any fate and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body destined to the same dispersion." In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes wrote that photography, a textual snapshot, "has the same relation to History that the biographeme has to biography" (*Camera Lucida*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 30. Identity, he believed, is open to constant re-composition.

² Marking the popularity of the short read is the subscription service Blinkist based in Berlin. Sixteen million subscribe. Long, lengthy non-fiction texts are reduced to 15-minute podcasts. It's tag line is "Fit reading into your life." The texts range from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to *Becoming* by Michele Obama. A competitor is Instaread which focuses on fiction and non-fiction titles including *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill, *On Writing* by Stephen King and Mariah Carey's autobiography. The site offers audio and text formats.

Cheaper costs and easier production methods may be one explanation. Another may be the belief that in the digital age we *can* and *need* to know everything about a person. Records are more readily available and accessible. New methods of accumulation make information better known renewing an inductive approach to lives. Data management is the new art of biography with archives obtainable often without leaving one's desk.

Such an increase in the amount of information, however, has overpowered narrative. Details have subsumed narration which offers interpretation, while the wish to be comprehensive offers a false sense of completeness. Incident replaces teleology, generated by what passes as an event and possibly a "fact." The result is a chronicle as the documentary prevails over any authorial telling; information alone defines the text. Mimesis not diegesis rules the day creating what one might label "lazy biography," a life defined only by accumulated detail without judgment. Lacking any narrative guidance, history seems to tell itself.³

Contributing to this development is the interview which has supplanted the document. The diary or letter no longer speaks for itself but is superseded by the interviewee who may be the subject of the biography or one who had some form of recent or distant interaction with the subject, providing a new avenue or perhaps insight for the biographer. The interview as its own form becomes the oral biography, the latest by Michael Posner on Leonard Cohen. The first of three volumes

³ See Isabelle Bour, "John Gibson Lockhart's *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott* or the Absent Author," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 29.1 (1996): 39. Appraisals of Scott's personality and judgments are limited. Only at the very end of the biography is there a moral portrait. This failure is the difference between narrative truth and historical truth. As Donald Spence explained in 1982, "the facts alone are not sufficient." At the very least, they require context. Donald P. Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth, Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1982), p. 22. Continuity, coherence and closure are elements of narrative truth, he adds (31). On the need for narrative see Michael Gorra, "The Rules of the game, turning criticism into a narrative act," *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 6131 (2 October 2020), pp. 21-22. Gorra argues for "narrative historicism".

is 496 pages; two more are to follow.⁴ Boswell's life of Johnson may be considered one long interview with occasional interruptions by Johnson.

And Boswell may be blamed for the emergence of the long life. His account of Johnson first appeared in 1791 as two quarto volumes, vol. 1 with 516 pages and vol. 2 with 588 pages. In a second edition of 1793, the *Life of Johnson* became 3 octavo vols. totaling more than 1300 pages. The reason for the expansion was more letters, anecdotes and details, similar to Matthew Bruccoli's explanation of his extensive, 624-page life of F. Scott Fitzgerald, the third on Fitzgerald in English when it appeared in 1981: "More facts."⁵

But incidents and facts require a context. In more clinical terms, one must move from observation to a concept, biography being a synthesizing art often at odds with the idea of the biographer as a reporter or even archaeologist. Biography is a constructive, narrative process, not merely the accumulation of detail into a newly fashioned repository called a text. A biographer is not a historian nor content provider, a position questioned by the art critic Roger Fry when, in a letter quoted by Virginia Woolf in her biography of him, he asked what is the function of content?

This is a question biographers must address, for biography must be more than a compendium of events. Fry went on to suggest that content "is entirely remade by the form and has no separate value at all."⁶ This challenges the reliance on detail as the apparent form of biography today where, perhaps, less *is* more. But can we return to short, interpretive lives or is detail simply too irresistible? Can insight triumph over incident?

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⁴ See Michael Posner, *Leonard Cohen, Untold Stories: The Early Years*. NY: Simon & Schuster, 2020. For a general critique of long artistic works, see Leaf Arbuthnot, "Never-ending stories: from Bond to Galbriath, Why is everything so long?" *Guardian*, 29 October 2020. <<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/leaf-arbuthnot>>.

⁵ Matthew Bruccoli, *Some Form of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981) xx. The second edition of 2002 expanded to 656 pages.

⁶ Roger Fry in Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 193.

The focus in narratively controlled biographies shifts to the means by which the narrative is constructed, responding to Roger Fry's point that content alone has no meaning. It gains value only through the form which remakes it. The irony is that biographers believe detail, resulting in inflated lives, creates a seemingly authentic, everyday immediacy. The false assumption is that details will shape a life with a story. But a biographer should do the opposite: deconstruct the story the details have formed to identify the stages of developments and identify what's missing. Or as Woolf concisely summarized in a 1917 review, biography should be a "record of the things that change rather than of the things that happen."⁷ What's important is not the events of the life supported by detail but the changes in a life and their impact.

Perhaps the "biographical turn" should face a new direction, one that recognizes that detail does not, in and of itself, offer the immediacy of experience. Biographers aware of this often substitute their own process of making a life –not hiding but exposing their method, even if it results in failure. This, of course, was the process of A. J. A. Symons in *Quest for Corvo* where his failure to discover details of Baron Corvo's life led to a more fascinating account, repeated by Geoff Dyer, translating his own displeasure with his own faltering search for a story in *Out of Sheer Rage, Wrestling with D. H. Lawrence*. Again, the biographer makes his own quest the subject of the book. But some biographers become so disheartened that they write a fictitious biography as William Boyd did in his successful hoax biography, *Nat Tate: An American Artist 1928-1960*.⁸

In these accounts focusing on the process of biography where the search overtakes the life, the biographer maintains narrative control

⁷ Virginia Woolf, "Stopford Brooke," *Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. II, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), p. 184.

⁸ This suggests other fictional biographers such as Dubin in Bernard Malamud's *Dubin's Lives* or the complicated set of fictional biographers in A.S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* where a graduate student undertakes the biography of a fictional biographer, Scholes Destry-Scholes, who wrote a biography of the fictional Sir Elmer Bole. Biographemes are rampant throughout the text, units of life and history, which correspond and can range from actual place names and documents to the names of real people. But all biographemes are incomplete. See August C. Bourré, "Biographemes and A.S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*," 2012. Vestige.org. <http://www.vestige.org/2012/05/18/biographemes_and_as_byatts_the/>.

refusing to give it up to detail or information. The content suddenly alters as displacement becomes a form of textual, narrative meta-text. This form comes closer to the experience of the biographer, a more accurate rendering of the process of discovering the subject with its dead ends and discoveries. In importance, the experience of the biographer is then parallel in attractiveness to that of the subject, competing for the reader's attention. It is Boswell once again telling *his* story as well as that of Johnson creating a new rhetoric of presence capturing the reader's attention in ways that a narrative prone to detail cannot.

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Part of the responsibility for the inflated life lies with the outburst of biographies by North American academics in the late fifties and sixties beginning with Edgar Johnson's two-volume Charles Dickens (1952, 1159 pp.), Leon Edel's five-volume life of Henry James (1953-1972, 2196 pp.). Richard Ellmann's Joyce (1959, 842 pp.) preceded Gordon Haight's life of George Eliot (1968, 616 pp.); William Riley Parker's life of Milton (1968, 2 vols. 1489 pp.) and Joseph Blotner's two volumes on Faulkner (1974) at 1846 pages with 269 pages of notes more or less completed the process.⁹ Since then, length has fluctuated but inflation has returned, the chronicle substituting for the critical life. Documents, letters, diaries, anecdotes and interviews remain impossible to resist. So, too, are the words of the subject, especially if she or he guides their biographer. Blotner's friendship with Faulkner, or Bailey's with Roth provide enticing opportunities to include the voice of the subject, turning biography into a virtual autobiography creating that dangerous form, the authorized life. Biographers must remain on guard against adopting only their subject's point of view.

But what explains the sudden renewal of long lives? Instead of a more probing focus on character or analysis, there is a need to include as

⁹ Blotner went on to write a biography of Robert Penn Warren which appeared in 1997. It was a relatively quick read at 597 pages.

much information as possible. The biographer, largely because of access to more data, becomes a documentarian, replacing story with event. Virginia Woolf again sensed this frustration in her five-year effort to write a life of Roger Fry, concluding that there should be two lives: the first of fact, the second of fiction, or the actual and the imagined.

At the outset of her writing, Woolf sketched an outline for a Fry biography written by different people to illustrate different periods of his life. That did not happen but she tried consistently to analyze her subject, although that became sidetracked partly because the family felt she should only report the story of his life. Her search for "moments of being" got lost. Daniel Mendelsohn recently outlined the problem in his 2020 work of memoir and adventure entitled *The Three Rings, A Tale of Exile, Narrative, and Fate*. As a mentor explained to him, incidents alone do not a biography make; he had to add a story providing a narrative frame to give the life and biography meaning.

The overall direction of biography towards bigness provides readers with a false sense of wholeness. Reading the new Sylvia Plath life of 1118 pages must surely tell me everything I should know. Finally, I can understand her. Or is it that as lives have gotten longer, so biographies must follow, even though reading books has fallen away before the video screen? Our wish to know everything has not abated and authors, as well as publishers, are striving to satisfy that need – but will the incisive, short life ever return?

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