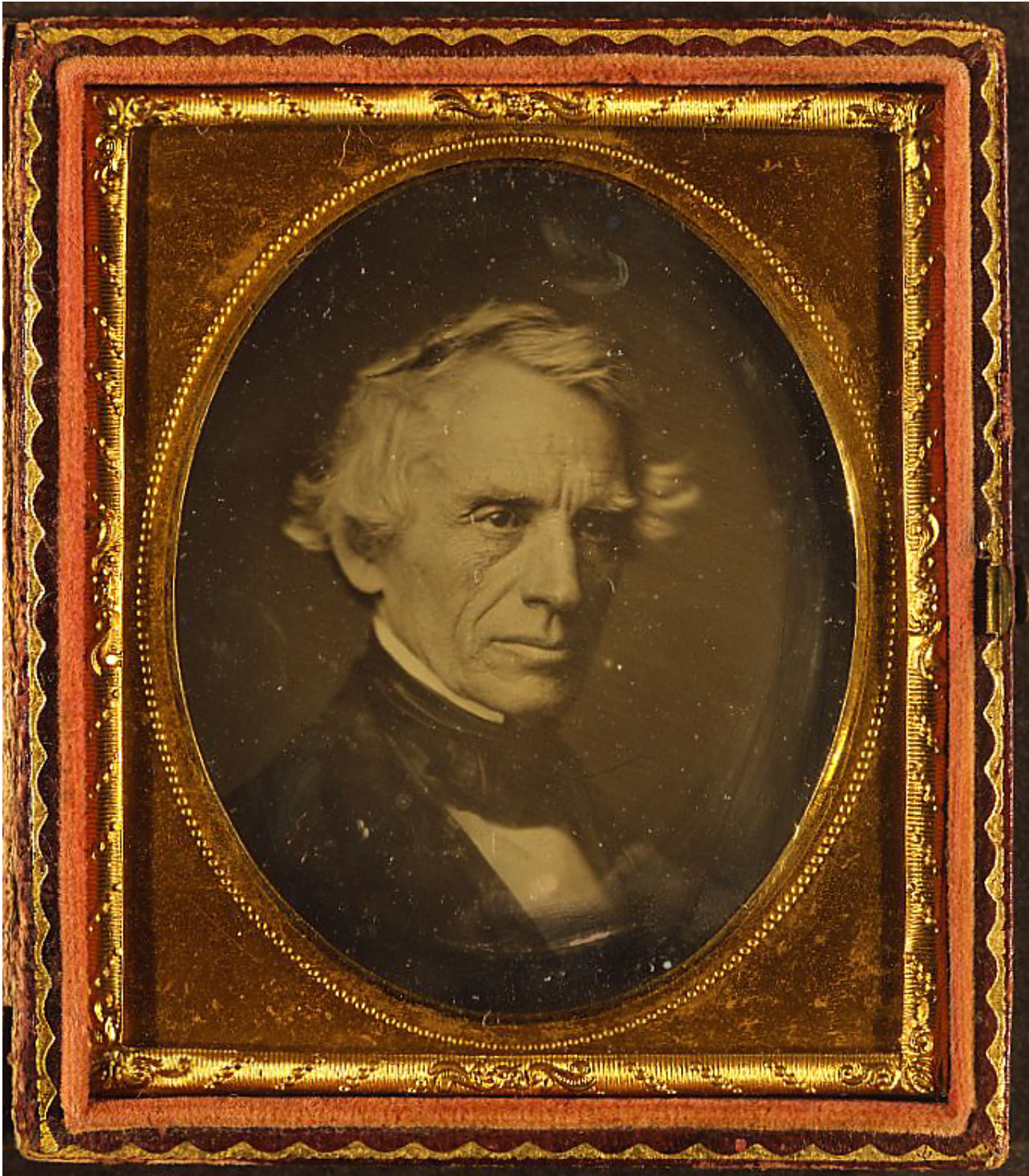


Biography and Pseudobiography



Like wrestling with an angel, writing a biography is hard work against long odds. And the effort has lately been much under attack. A recent collection of scholarly essays calls itself *The Troubled Face of Biography* (Houndmills, Eng., 1988). Most of the criticism takes off from the view that biographies are constructs, fictions not essentially different from novels. On this ground it's charged that biographers prepackage their subjects' lives, or invent them, or

falsify them for dramatic effect.

In a recent *New York Times* op-ed piece entitled "Minutiae Without Meaning," Stanley Fish, dean of Arts & Sciences at the University of Illinois, knocked biography as a "bad game." Fish observes that biographers obsessively collect details. Since these details "don't mean anything in particular, or can mean anything at all . . . the biographer is compelled to invent or fabricate a meaning by riding his or her favorite hobbyhorse until every inch of the subject's life is covered by some reassuring pattern of cause and effect."



To me, Fish's grumbling betrays unfamiliarity with the history of biography in the West and with how serious biographies get written. There are many types of biographical expression, each with unique objects and demands. Fish has in mind the biographical study—psychobiographies, for instance, such as Stuart Feder's searching life of Charles Ives, *My Father's Song* (New Haven, 1992). Feder unfolds the composer's relation to his musician-father not so much for its narrative interest, as to show how Ives's music grew from an unconscious fantasy of father-son collaboration.

But at the other end of the biographical spectrum are works that seek no pattern at all: the classic life and letters, for instance, which does little more than assemble the subject's literary remains, or the recent subgenre of testimonial biography, such as Frances Kiernan's 845-page *Mary Plain* (New York, 2000), which links by bits of commentary the impression Mary McCarthy made on some two hundred people who knew her. Between these extremes of tightly focused analysis and collage lie many other, varying biographical forms, some more "patterned" in Fish's sense, some less—memoir biographies such as Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, brief lives such as Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (London, 1918), nonhuman biographies such as the best seller *Seabiscuit* (New York, 2001), family biographies such as Brenda Wineapple's *Sister, Brother: Gertrude and Leo Stein* (New York, 1996), cultural biographies such as David Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America* (New York, 1995)—as well as critical biographies, children's biographies, TV or Hollywood biopics, the archaic forms of Graeco-Roman biography, and the saint's life.

Wrong as it is to accuse all biographers of imposing on their subjects' lives a pattern of cause and effect, it's more deeply wrong to accuse them of drawing from the pattern a "meaning." Fish does not say meaning of what. The meaning of the subject's life? Biography is not metaphysics, nor is it history. Except for writers of obituaries and elegies, no serious biographer judges his subject

under the aspect of eternity. The biographer seeks what the subject's life meant *to the subject*, how the subject's experience registered on his or her consciousness, the satisfactions it supplied, dilemmas it produced. This inwardness is what distinguishes biography from history. History concerns what Napoleon did; biography concerns what it meant to him.

Two related fallacies about pattern making also deserve putting down. One often hears that biographies are autobiographies, that the biographer is always writing about himself. This is just a swipe. What chromosome makes biographers any more narcissistic than other people, any more incapable of empathy, of trying to see things as another human being saw them? On the contrary, serious biographers seek and welcome the unfamiliar, however troublesome to account for. Ron Chernow, the author of rich biographies of J.P. Morgan and of John D. Rockefeller remarks that biographers "like to stub their toes on hard, uncomfortable facts strewn in their paths. They want information that will explode, like a prankster's cigar, in their faces." Such encounters with the unaccountable are opportunities for breaking out and breaking through, in new directions, to fresh understanding. I'd say that unless the biographer sometimes feels at sea in the material he's doing something wrong.

One also often hears that biographers must like their subjects. That would of course rule out such vastly important subjects as Hitler or Stalin. In practice, the biographer must like the subject not as a person but as a *subject*. Some are good subjects for you, some bad. And what makes one subject better than another for you is wildly overdetermined. Some of the reasons are purely practical. Does the subject need a biography? Virginia Woolf *again*? Are the materials available? Forget doing J.D. Salinger, like him though you may. How much time do I have? Benjamin Franklin? That's fifteen years' work, maybe twenty. A biographer's knowledge and ability also determine the choice. Albert Einstein is a great subject and you like him. But can you write about quantum mechanics without seeming like a dumbbell? Personal idiosyncrasies matter, too. I've always stayed in one place, but prefer subjects who moved around a lot. I'd like to write about Hemingway in Paris, Key West, and the Serengeti Plain, but couldn't possibly write about Proust in his cork-lined room. Gertrude Stein yes, Emily Dickinson no.

In choosing a subject, the biographer's main question should be, Can I make an effective book out of this person's life? Day after day for years, the biographer will be trying to untangle chronology, compress relationships without distorting them, keep the main narrative clear while carrying forward several intricate strands of the subject's life. What pushes most biographers on in this wilderness is not affection for Mary Wollstonecraft or André Gide, but the feeling, fingers always crossed, that they are writing a good book.

Another recent attack on biography comes, alarmingly, from a biographer. Peter Ackroyd has written lives of William Blake and of Charles Dickens, and has also published several distinguished novels. "Of course there are differences between the two forms," he says in a recent *New York Times Book Review* essay.

"In novels one is forced to tell the truth, for example, whereas in biography one can invent more freely." A decent gag, except that he means it. Like a digitized Lyndon Johnson shaking hands with Forrest Gump, the Dickens of his pseudobiography speaks dialogue invented for him by Peter Ackroyd. The practice is becoming common. A certain seven-figure-advance American pseudobiographer morphs himself into his biography of Ronald Reagan, together with an invented AIDS victim and an invented student-revolutionary.

This school of virtual reality biography has a deadly potential. It can create in public memory an Andrew Jackson who never desired the removal of Indian tribes from their lands. Pseudobiography can become David-Irving-the-Holocaust-Never-Happened biography. The present moment makes this willingness to fictionalize all the more lamentable. Recent history has aroused interest in scores of women, minorities, and other neglected figures little known but knowable. We don't want to see them speaking ventriloquized dialogue to dummy characters. We want to know how they lived and what they did.



Lamentable, and also self-defeating. Biography draws much of its power from its factuality, from relating what life really handed out to real people. Thomas Carlyle remarked on this power in a lively essay entitled "Biography": "[L]et any one bethink him how impressive the smallest historical *fact* may become, as contrasted with the grandest *fictitious event*; what an incalculable force lies for us in this consideration: The Thing which I here hold imaged in my mind did actually occur . . . had therefore, and has, through all time, an authentic being; is not a dream, but a reality." Once having learned the fact, who forgets that Poe married his thirteen-year-old cousin, Van Gogh cut off his ear, Lou Gehrig contracted sclerosis, Sylvia Plath suffocated herself in a gas oven.

Our ever fresh fascination with such biographical events comes from knowing that, unlike the trials of fictional characters, they involved permanent cost. Plath is in her grave. Carlyle went so far as to say that, because it can achieve this force of actuality, biography is superior to fiction: "[C]onsider the whole class of Fictitious Narratives," he wrote in the same essay, "from the highest category of epic or dramatic Poetry, in Shakespeare and Homer, down to the lowest froth prose of the Fashionable Novel. What are all these but so many mimic Biographies." When the biographer introduces fiction, he surrenders the very quality of authenticity to which fiction writers aspire.

Biographers of still-living subjects have different problems, but for the historical biographer, truth can never be the truth of the subject. It consists rather of an inflexible fidelity to the documents. It depends from beginning to

end on the conciliation, that is the adding and bringing together, of documentary evidence. Since the biographer cannot know in advance what document may be important, he needs to locate them all. Thoroughness is everything. And the search is tedious, expensive, and frustrating—which helps to explain why some biographers now hasten to invent.

The tedium and expense in part arise from the mindlessness of history, which scatters the past helter-skelter. Letters and diaries become sold, bought, and resold, stashed in trunks, lost, moved from place to place. As a result, the biographer finds himself piling up hotel bills and airfares, collecting his evidence from the Maine Historical Society in Portland, to the Huntington Library in Pasadena, to the Public Record Office in London, and beyond. For Brian Boyd, the unwearying biographer of Vladimir Nabokov, gathering his subject's documentary remains meant a commute to Montreux, Switzerland, and to Cornell University, from his home in Auckland, New Zealand. Kenneth Murdock of Harvard, a biographer of Increase Mather, is said to have flown to Argentina for a footnote.

Searching of course does not always mean finding. However far the biographer flies, he may get nowhere. Boswell reports that Samuel Johnson, when writing his lives of the English poets, went out of his way to interview a man named Swinney, who had known Dryden. Johnson learned no more than that, when visiting his club, Dryden sat by the fire in the winter, and sat by the window in the summer. In researching the life of Samuel F. B. Morse, I've hunted far and deep for information about his second wife, who particularly interests me. During his first marriage, Morse fathered a son who as a result of scarlet fever became deaf and suffered brain damage. After his first wife died, he sent the disabled boy to live with a family in upstate New York. That he chose for his second wife a deaf mute, suggests some need to atone for his near abandonment of his son. Much as I'd like to dramatize and explore this painful situation, I've been able to find little information about the boy and nothing at all about Morse's second wife. He remained married to her nearly twenty-five years, and in that time wrote voluminously about everything else. But of her not a letter, not a remark. Nothing.

Other frustrations in research arise from the biographer's often adversarial relation to archivists. His feelings about the documents he wants to see are proprietary. I'm writing about Elvis so Elvis's manuscripts belong to me. But nowadays many rare book and manuscript libraries take a custodial stance. They regard themselves less as pipelines than as guardians of their precious holdings. This is understandable considering the hyperinflated prices in the current rare book and manuscript market. A Poe letter these days, could one find any, might easily fetch thirty-five thousand dollars.

The cash value of such jewels has encouraged thefts of them. In the late 1980s a biographer of Gilbert Stuart was sentenced to three years in prison for possession of stolen manuscripts of James McNeill Whistler, Abraham Lincoln, and Winston Churchill. In the good old days, say twenty-five years ago, when I

asked for Cotton Mather manuscript letters at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester—a world-class repository—I was led into the vault, handed down some boxes, and told to use what I wanted. Now, many libraries dole out documents one by one. Some require the user to fill out a separate call slip for each. The waste of time produces fatigue and bigger hotel bills. Researchers in the manuscript division of the Library of Congress may even feel fear and trembling. They read and take notes under the Argus eyes of video monitors; the library guards are armed.

From my experience with such frustrations I pass on a few tips. First, get lucky. In doing research on Mather I spent several months in and around Boston—at the Harvard Library, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the New England Historic Genealogical Society, the Massachusetts State Archives. It happened that an undertaking called the Court Records Project was then quietly in progress. Financed by the state, it employed a corps of archivists to unpack for the first time in over a century the court records of provincial Massachusetts. The thousands of trial transcripts, depositions, and the like had been stored in no-longer-used holding cells of the Boston Supreme Judicial Court. Now they were being taken from grimy trunks and chemically treated by preservationists, to be housed in the State Archives facility.

By sheer luck I heard about the project, which set me wondering whether the legal papers ever mentioned Cotton Mather. This seemed unlikely, but I asked to see the so-far-unearthed records for early Boston. I got better than I asked. I was allowed to sit at a table on the site itself—a surreal scene where three or four men and women in surgical gowns and masks, behind bars, untied bundles of fragile documents and bathed them in troughs of liquid nitrogen (I think it was). To make this long story short, dozens of the court records named Mather as a litigant. I discovered that in the 1720s he had ensnarled himself in administering a debt-ridden estate. Supersensitive about his reputation as a minister, he was being sued by creditors, sought by the sheriff, even threatened with jail. My lucky strike of long-buried information exposed surprising facets of his personality and a disastrous scandal in his career.

Second tip: Hands on. Trust no index, catalogue, or finding list. Not even the most sophisticated librarians can anticipate what may count as biographical information to you. The shelves of the Library of Congress manuscript division hold several cubic feet of so-called Ellis and Allan Company Records—the correspondence and business papers of the Richmond, Virginia, merchant John Allan. It was Allan and his wife Francis who took in and raised the orphaned Edgar Allan Poe after the death of his mother, when Edgar was not yet three. The division's expert staff had sifted out from the Allen Company Records all references to Poe. These they photographed and made available on a separate roll of microfilm, classified as the Edgar Allan Poe papers. I read through this valuable film. But on the chance that some references to Poe had been passed over, I put in call slips for the eight or ten boxes of Allan Company Records as well. Every other page contained details of the Allan family's daily life—of the circumstances, that is, in which Poe was raised. There were

descriptions of the expensive house and furniture denied to Poe when he was cut out of John Allan's will, comments on Allan's tightfistedness and preoccupation with business, on Francis Allan's recurrent illnesses and restorative trips to spas. Edgar Poe was not mentioned. But this surely looked like Poe material to me—a record of the refusal, neglect, and absence that shaped the lifelong resentment he felt toward his guardians.

My final tip is, Hang on. Writing about Harry Houdini presented a peculiar problem. The first commandment of magic is, Don't Expose, i.e. don't tell laymen how tricks work. Given this basis of their trade, magicians are more secretive than most other mortals. Their papers usually end up not in public repositories but in private collections, so finding Houdini material was not easy. I knew that he had kept elaborate diaries, to me the most valuable of all biographical evidence. And after much detective work I tracked down the present owner. I first wrote to him, talking up the sincerity of my work, asking politely if I could take notes on the diaries, diplomatically offering him a week to consider before calling again to get his answer. Two seconds obviously would have been plenty. No, no, he couldn't possibly let me see them. He wished to keep hidden not just the content of the diaries but his very possession of them, avoiding out-of-the-blue intrusions like my own on his personal life. He did not say so, but I sensed that he also feared theft, collectors of Houdiniana being maniacally passionate. But my idea was, I'm writing about Elvis, those diaries belong to me. I let my appeal rest six months, and tried him once more, hoping he might have changed his mind. No, no, he couldn't possibly let me see them. After another few months I tried yet once more. No, no, he still couldn't possibly. I had really given up when about six months later, after nearly two years of trying, Jane Mallison of the Trinity School urged me to hang on, try one more time—just one more time. Embarrassed to barge in again where I was obviously a damn nuisance and maybe a threat, I did however call. Yes, yes, I could see the diaries, yes, sure. Their owner had just emerged from the hospital after major eye surgery. Relieved by its success, he obviously wanted to give thanks to the world, and lucky me happened to again be there. Still, he set two conditions. I must keep his ownership of the diaries secret, a condition I still observe. And I could have only one afternoon.

My now-patron's apartment turned out to be a Sutton Place minipalace, skyhigh and eerily quiet. Glass coffee tables, splashy postmodernist paintings by name artists, picture windows looking far down on East River traffic. The owner, one eye still taped and padded, led me into his elegant library and left me there. Houdini's diaries took up an entire shelf—about a dozen volumes, each boxed in an expensive leather slipcase, gold tooled—a treasure surely worth a few hundred thousand dollars.

But how much could I read and annotate in three hours or so? Not a problem if you carry the Biographer's Friend—the pocket-sized Sony VOR microcassette recorder, with pause, cue, and review. It often accompanies me on research trips, taking down my on-the-spot impressions of the street in Rome where Morse

lived, my undercover dictation of some letter displayed for sale in a manuscript dealer's shop. VOR ready, I opened the first leather case and slid out its diary. Then I began quoting and summarizing what I read at the page-a-second pace of a tobacco auctioneer. In three hours I managed to record what turned out to be about twenty single-spaced pages of typed notes. All invaluable—Houdini mourning the death of his mother, exulting that he had piloted the first powered flight in Australia, criticizing his magician-brother Hardeen in rivalrous way, groaning over the physical labor of doing escapes.

To sum up, the biographer's every statement about the life must arise from documentary evidence, and he can never look too hard for it or have too much. But this is only round one of wrestling with the angel. The management of biographical information is no less difficult and frustrating than the search for it. Leon Edel, the biographer of Henry James, gave the most helpful advice on how to begin: "Get a large table." The biographical remains of some subjects are staggering. Ezra Pound's correspondence, back and forth, has been estimated at three hundred thousand letters. Biographers who write multivolume presidential biographies often work with basements full of filing cabinets.

In organizing such floods of evidence the biographer is well advised to stock his large table with Tylenol. Any one letter, newspaper article, or diary entry points in several directions at once. It can contain at the same time information about the subject's personality, appearance, relationships, travel, finances, health. How to organize the documents so that when you come to deal, say, with the subject's feelings about her brother you can locate information contained piecemeal over twenty different items of different kinds and of different dates? At the very least, the biographer needs both a chronological file that amasses the documents in the order of events, and a subject file that arranges them under likely topics: magnetism, Rembrandt, religion, Paris apartment, whatever. But in what form? eight-by-ten sheets? databases? index cards? (three-by-five or four-by-six?)

Because every biography entails unique research problems it demands its own logistics. In writing about Cotton Mather I typed up all my information on eight-by-ten yellow second sheets. These I cut in strips of different widths—pencil-width, envelope-width, book-width, depending on the content. In drafting individual chapters of the book I gathered the relevant strips and spread them like tiles over the floor of my apartment, a sort of mosaic Matherland. I could walk on and about my chapter-to-be, reading down at and reflecting on the strips, arranging and rearranging them in narrative order. Matherland shrank as I worked on the chapter, stacking and taking to my desk what strips I needed for the day's writing.

By contrast, my research about Poe and about Houdini went directly into Microsoft Word files, to be printed out as four-by-six index cards, then arranged in a bank of metal filing cabinets. In writing about Samuel Morse I've learned what I should have known long ago: get a copying machine. My desktop

copier now runs off multiple copies of every-which-way-pointing documents, so that the information they contain can be filed under several different dates and topics.

After the evidence is compiled, the strips gathered, the narrative constructed, another, brutal frustration often remains. Copyright legislation in the last twenty years or so can make it enormously difficult or impossible to publish biographical material. By an act of Congress, unpublished manuscripts now belong in perpetuity to the writer or to his or her descendants. Technically, should the biographer of Genghis Khan happen on unpublished letters by his thirteenth-century subject, he could use them only with permission of the twenty-first century Khan family. Mercifully, many of the best repositories do not require the biographer to obtain the permission. They simply ask him to sign a statement holding himself liable for any copyright infringement, should the conqueror's descendants decide to hustle anyone to court.

But some libraries, fearing a lawsuit, do insist on written permission. In researching Poe at University of Texas Library in Austin—one of the world's deepest collections of literary manuscripts—I found an unpublished letter to him from the poet-editor James Russell Lowell, written in the 1840s. The library would not allow me to quote a few sentences of it without leave of a descendant. A network of letters and phone calls, one leading to another, brought me to Mr. James Russell Lowell IV. He instantly said OK, puzzled at being implored out of the blue by some biographer he didn't know and wouldn't read, about his great-great-great-great something who had written a few sentences that didn't matter to him. Or imagine the frustration of the biographer who wished to write about Ralph Ellison, using letters Ellison had written to her. Even these she could not use without permission. Legally she owned the paper and ink but not the words.

A third recent assault on biography is to me the most significant because it involves aesthetic judgment. "What biographer will admit that his subject lacks narrative shapeliness?" Joyce Carol Oates asked, in a *Times* review; "between an honest but dull book and a not entirely honest but lively one, how many biographers would hesitate?"

In the way Ms. Oates poses the conflict, no conflict actually exists. Biographers can and do use many of the devices of narrative shapeliness, mostly drawn from nineteenth-century realistic fiction. But they do so rhetorically, taking rhetoric in the classical sense, as the art of persuasion. To dramatize the subject's life, they describe his or her features and costume, set the scene where an event takes place, use dialogue-like quotations from letters and journals, break the narrative at moments of tension. And the best biographers experiment with fiction-like aspects of the form. Look at the imaginative third volume of Michael Reynolds's life of Ernest Hemingway, entitled *Hemingway: The Thirties* (New York, 1997). It is biographical narrative in overdrive, a little recalling Dos Passos's *USA*. Without compromising his scholarship, Reynolds jumps tense from past to future, switches typography, interjects new points of

view, flashes news bulletins. The hypertext of stacked-up voices and events gives Hemingway a startling immediacy and presence.



In practice, the biographer has to choose not between lively and dull, but more subtly and perplexingly, between candid and glib. The Cambridge scholar Eamon Duffy put the case well. "Good history," he says—and the same is true for biography—"good history gives its reader a sense of the limitations as well as the scope of the evidence on which it is based . . . we need to feel the fragilities of evidence, the nature of the documents, a sense . . . of historical conviction as an outcome, a labor." In fact, the documentary record is always depressingly full of fragments and gaps. For one twenty-nine-month stretch, Poe's life is nearly a complete blank. Better in such cases to confide in the reader than to aim at the facile narrative continuity that, sad to say, makes not a few contemporary British biographies seem slick. To confide artfully is the challenge, to use the evidentiary problems to enhance the biography's feel of authenticity, even to create a certain suspense.

That such a thing as biographical technique exists, one would never know from reading reviews of biographies. Few reviewers have given any thought to or had any experience with how biographies get made, what intrinsic difficulties demand solution, what conventions can be played with or reinvented. Few reviewers are any more capable of judging biographies than of judging sword swallowing. Nine times out of ten they synopsise the subject's life without evaluating the biographer's art in treating it.

Yet the aesthetic standard for biography, while complex, is no mystery. Biography aims not merely at informing but also at moving the reader, through the spectacle of another soul's journey through existence. The art of biography consists of producing an affecting narrative while remaining utterly faithful to the documents.

I'll illustrate this by one final personal example. Cotton Mather's life as I presented it had been full of deprivation and loss, including the deaths of nine of his children. I wanted the concluding paragraph of the biography to leave the reader feeling this. At the same time, for my own satisfaction, I wanted to render Mather's pain through documents alone. The last paragraph would be an emblem of the biographical aesthetic, an homage to factuality.

I worked it all out this way. Each of the five sections of the book begins with a page of quotations by or about Mather. To introduce the final section, covering his last years, I reproduced the inventory of his estate, drawn up the year of his death, 1728. The inventory is nothing more than a list of shabby

household goods—"1 pr. of Red Curtains Motheaten," [pause] "1 Old Standing Candlestick. A Cross cut Saw," [pause] "2 pr. of Iron Dogs, other broken Dogs," and so on.

Thirty pages later comes the final paragraph of the biography. The reader can see that it in effect repeats the inventory, but in a different shape. I rearranged the listed household goods to form a sort of litany, a single connected sentence whose thumping rhythm accents the decay and loss that these worn out objects represent: "However luxuriantly he lived in heaven, Mather had not lived affluently on earth, and had lost much. What he left behind, as set down in the inventory of his estate, was dingy and mean: pie plates, lumber, a crosscut saw, three old rugs, four old bedsteads, two old oval tables, two old chests of drawers, old china curtains, old quilt, old warming pan, old standing candlestick, red curtains motheaten, broken stone table, broken fireplace dogs, broken chairs, broken pewter, broken spoons." It's not for me to say how well this paragraph succeeds either as a narrative climax or an emblem, much less when thus taken out of context. But my aim was to make pure, inert documentary evidence serve dramatic ends, to marry my form to my research. That remains to me the aesthetic measure of biography, the angel with whom the biographer wrestles longest and hardest of all.

This essay was originally delivered at Kean University, April 4, 2001, as part of the school's Contemporary Writer's Series.

This article originally appeared in issue 3.2 (January, 2003).

Kenneth Silverman is professor emeritus of English at New York University. His biography of Samuel F. B. Morse will be published this year by Knopf.