Conditions and Limits: Contemporary female biographers and the biographical paradigm.

An Original Contribution to Knowledge

by

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Abstract.

This thesis aims to interrogate the notion that biography is a 'traditional, old-fashioned' genre immune to change through an investigation of the work of contemporary female biographers. Whilst biography is constrained by what could be defined as an historicist definition of fact, evidence that is immutable and cannot be altered to make a psychological or artistic point, the genre has been transformed because women's life writing has taught us that conventional biography is inadequate for telling the narratives of women's lives. Women writing biography have made experiments. Whilst some have failed, female biographers have demonstrated that the form can be adapted to incorporate a post-modern understanding of the self and the role of the author, and act as a valuable medium for telling the stories of the lives of women who have been hidden or ignored by history.

The first two chapters provide a theoretical and historical framework for the writing of individual female biographers. Today a feminist epistemology has emerged- a more sophisticated post-modern form that is concerned with the theories or grounds of knowledge rather than with the politics of feminism that dominated the biographies of the seventies. Chapters Three to Seven are devoted to contemporary female biographers who have made a significant contribution to the genre and thus helped to redefine the form. The final chapter is a synthesis of the conversations undertaken with women biographers for this thesis in order to provide a conceptual framework for my conclusions.
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Introduction.

My purpose in writing this thesis is to question the notion that biography is 'old-fashioned' and immune to change. Biography is subject to incontrovertible conditions and limits because it is based upon events that are real and verifiable, events that cannot be altered by the writer for a psychological or artistic purpose. However, women's life writing has had a significant impact upon our perceptions of the role of the biographer and the possibilities of the form.

Biography has been derided for its inability to accommodate a post-modern understanding of the author and the self, this derision compounded by the ethical irresponsibility of 'tell all' biographers who invade and exploit the privacy of the subject. Clearly individuals do not own the facts of their own life. Moreover facts are only events under definition and open to multiple readings. There is no single immutable self that can be defined as the 'real' essential self, but rather numerous selves subject to social, political and ideological forces that are culturally determined. With this understanding one would expect that a genre that traditionally spotlights a single exceptional individual, uses a comfortably familiar chronological narrative structure, and specifically makes connections between the life and the work in an age when the author has been declared dead, would appear to be obsolete. The biographer is subject to certain conditions and limits. Nevertheless a sophisticated post-modern understanding and post-feminist consciousness that positions women as the 'other' on a biological, psychic and social level and in which there is not a fixed and stable identity, has meant that significant developments have occurred within the form.
Biography is 'traditional' and 'old-fashioned' in the sense that it is based upon fact and this influences the biographer's textual practice. However much the biographer may wish to transform the genre and enter the world of the subject, the facts of the life are what determine the narrative, and while these may be dealt with imaginatively they cannot be transformed or altered to serve an artistic purpose. The biographer's task is not to trace connections between the fictional and the real but to tell of the real so we can see how the fictional was created. In a post-modern age in which the signified of any text is, by its very nature, unstable meaning is no longer fixed or constant. The biographer's authority now lies not in what they know of their subject but in what they choose to reveal of this knowledge. The biographer has also been viewed as a guide in an age where we look to others lives for meaning because of a lack of religious or moral precepts. The process of selection has become a self-conscious practice as biographers act as their own moral barometers.

A traditional, chronological biographical paradigm could not accommodate the balance of public and private, outer and inner that is particularly problematic when writing the lives of women. Current feminist consciousness has its roots in a post-structuralist dialogue that has informed recent literary criticism and developed since the 1960s from the deconstruction of patriarchal discourses. Gaps and breaks in a text are significant and can be seen as marks of resistance or repression that the critic was meant to decipher, thus it is the force of the things not said that the biographer must focus on when writing of women. Post-feminism is part of a conversation that seeks the empowerment of women through the celebration of difference and the exploration of the complexities inscribed in the construction of the sexual subject. Deconstruction offered feminists new ways of exposing and dislocating the
foundational patriarchal binary oppositions—such as the privilege of male over female. Influences such as this have meant that female biographers have looked at subjects in new ways. For example looking at the male subject through his relationships with women, making connections that a male biographer may not make to explain previously ignored or lost areas of the life. Female biographers are more self-reflexive in their textual practice, entering the narrative and walking through areas of the life with the subject, examining the subject at the same time as they examine themselves. Women’s biography has been criticised for focusing on the more personal and domestic details of the life whilst men deal with the big ‘important’ areas of the career and public achievement. In writing the lives of women a focus upon the quotidian is essential. Much of the recovery work that has been done to reclaim the hidden lives of women, for example by feminist historians, has been particularly valuable because of this sort of attention to the details of ordinary life. Lives previously lost to history have been recovered through this approach and lives once considered outside the scope of the biographical paradigm have been investigated.

In order to interrogate the epistemologies of females writing within the genre nine interviews were conducted. These interviews were informal conversations. The conceptual and thematic conclusions reached through these wide-ranging and open discussions form the final chapter of this thesis. The purpose of the interviews was to listen to the writer’s account of their work and perceptions of the form in order to assess whether female biographers have in fact made significant developments in a genre that has been considered reactionary. The interviews enabled me to evaluate the underlying themes and preoccupations motivating women writing biography. The
work of these writers formed the basis of my understanding of the contribution that women were making within this field but the interviews gave me a unique view of how those questioned see the role of the biographer in the contemporary world. I have privileged the authors’ accounts of themselves to the extent that their comments helped me to ascertain why they chose their particular subjects, whether their writing was undertaken with a specifically feminist agenda, and their understanding of the conditions and limits of the biographical paradigm. The interviews were the starting point for chapters 3 to 7 that present the work of five key female biographers. The purpose of these chapters is to view the writer’s presentation of their work in the context of the wider critical and historical review of the genre undertaken in the first two chapters. The interviews gave me an original and very necessary perspective from which to view the work of women writing biography. My central question was whether female biographers have expanded the possibilities of the form. What became evident was that these biographers have discarded, questioned, or drastically revised, plot lines, familiar key moments, and interpretative paradigms in identity and personality formation in their writing. Their work has helped to define how iconic subjects such as Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath are judged, and has thus contributed to a revision of the self-image of these writers.

Since Virginia Woolf suggested that the biographer was a ‘craftsman and not an artist’, writing in *The Art of Biography* that:

“The artist’s imagination at its most intense fires out what is perishable in fact; he builds with what is durable; but the biographer must accept the perishable, build with it imbed it in the very fabric of his work. Much will perish; little will live.” (p. 229)²
critics have been divided as to the nature of the biographer's task. Throughout the past two decades texts such as *The Craft of Literary Biography*, *The Troubled Face of Biography*, *Biographers at Work* and *The Art of Literary Biography* and numerous articles and conferences have discussed the role of the biographer and the nature of the genre. Biography has been alternately viewed as utilitarian and pedestrian compared to the freedom and experimentation of more 'creative' genres such as fiction and poetry; and as an art form reflecting the complexities of our post-modern consciousness. Biography is not about creation but recreation. Within the parameters of the recreated life the modern biographer cannot reach an essential inner 'reality', but an imaginative reconstruction. Narrative and the narrator are no longer transparent; instead biographers are more aware of their own artful practices. The epistemologies underlying the biographer’s portrait have been integrated into their textual practice. Dr. Jessica Martin said to me in our interview that biography is certainly an art because, 'It's such a tightrope walk between observable fact on the one hand and of making something on the other.' For Martin:

"It's the most complex thing we will ever do- try and understand another living person, and to be able to demonstrate that with somebody who is no longer there seems to me one of the aspects, one of the definitions, of art."³

One of the joys of biography is the sense of interaction with another that both reader and biographer experience. However, art is creation, vision expressed in such a way that a truth becomes universal. The biographer can help us understand how that truth was realized but they cannot create it. Biography can evoke empathy through a shared sense of experience but it is constructed within parameters that are defined by
the conditions and limits of the genre. P. N. Furbank has written of 'chatty, long-winded, circumstantially detailed' biographies, arguing that:

"It is best to think of biography in this manner as a craft rather than an art (and, one might add, changing its style much slower than an art). A craftsman is not a free agent as an artist is, or at least since the Middle Ages has become. Utilitarian expectations are formed of a craft object. A clock may be in the rococo style or in the Art Nouveau one, but it must tell the time; a teapot has to pour, and in the same way, and very properly, there are numerous practical requirements made of a biography- dates, facts, genealogies and the like." (p. 14)

Conventional biography, as defined by Furbank, has remained relatively unchanged in style. The craftsman is not the free agent that the artist is and this is the fundamental difference between fiction and non-fiction. Victoria Glendinning stated in our conversation that:

"I don't think there are endless possibilities for the genre because it is bounded by the story of a life, one is born, one does what one does and one dies. You can have variations on the theme, you know, but you've got to come back to the theme again."

Whilst Glendinning is right in pointing out that the genre does not have endless possibilities within these bounds women have, through necessity, changed the style of biography much more rapidly than Furbank's assessment suggests. In so doing have challenged our utilitarian expectations of the form.
Post-modernist views of the self as complex and 'multiply given' have had to be integrated into the biographer's textual practices and female biographers have used this knowledge to create increasingly sophisticated biographical portraits. The biographer no longer looks for a 'core self' but writes of aspects of the self that have been discovered through research and selected within the parameters of the biographer's own cultural construction. Georges Gusdorf, believes that:

"Certainly events influence us; they sometimes determine us, and they always limit us. But the essential themes, the structural designs that impose themselves on the complex material of exterior facts are the constituent elements of the personality. Today's comprehensive psychology has taught us that man, far from being subject to ready-made, completed situations given from outside and without him is the essential agent in bringing about the situations in which he finds himself placed." (p. 37)

What the contemporary biographer is conscious of is the 'structural designs' which constitute both their own and their subject's personality. An understanding of these 'complex materials' is what female biographers have brought to their textual practice, specifically because of a feminist awareness that individuals are gendered and this is part of the 'structural design' of the personality. Justin Kaplan has commented that:

"We tend to assume, without too much questioning, that we are looking for a core in biography: a naked self, Aristotle's 'unmoving mover'. This is what Walt Whitman called the 'real me', the 'me, myself'- although he did not believe in it either. The 'real me' is probably an illusion, or at least convention. Instead of something organic and integral, it may only be the sum of many presentations
Kaplan's comments encapsulate a post-modern understanding of the nature of the self that has been absorbed into contemporary biographical practice.

The paradox of modern biography is that there have been experiments; however these occur within the context of the form's inherent constraints. There are certain parameters inherent to the genre. Narrative in biography is dependent upon events that cannot be changed or altered. The biographer can arrange and interpret these events as imaginatively as they desire: they are the cores around which the story is told. However, these facts are a given and cannot be invented as they would be in fiction to suit the artist's purpose. Virginia Woolf wrote in *The Art of Biography* that:

"Biography imposes conditions- must be based on fact- facts that can be verified by other people besides the artist. If facts are invented as the artist invents them facts that no one else can verify- and tries to combine them with facts of the other sort, they destroy each other."^8

The biographer is reliant on facts whilst the novelist is dependent upon creation and imagination. The literary biographer is there to explain the writer rather than the work. However, in explaining the writer the work is enhanced for the reader. Even when the central premise of a novel is pure fiction, elements of it are almost always drawn from experience. Still, often the 'truth' in a work of fiction has only the tiniest connection to reality. John Batchelor's thesis is that:

"in practice the reading of literary biography gives us a different intellectual process from that indicated by the New Critics, one in which literary understanding is progressive. We read the work."
Then we read the biography. Then we read the work again and we see more.  

There is a point to knowing about authors because although the life is separate from the work it always impacts upon it. For Homberger and Charmley biography has not yet been transformed by:

"the self-reflexivity, ontological uncertainty, distrust of the structures of explanation, the uncertainty over 'the real' and 'the fictional' - of contemporary fiction."  

It is precisely the awareness of a post-structuralist 'uncertainty' that has informed the work of contemporary female biographers. It is the 'certainties' that post-structuralism challenged that makes conventional biography inadequate for the stories of women's lives. Biography in its traditional form has always been a recognizably safe and comfortable read. As Stefan Collini commented:

"The current taste for the biographical equivalent of the Whopper or Big Mac seems to be fuelled by a quite other appetite...It is a taste for the concrete details of everyday life, the minutiae of the mundane, arranged into the simplest and least troubling form of order, the chronological. Biography in this vein, a biography so big that you can live in it for quite some time and come to feel familiar with its characters' quotidian doings, surely serves some of the same needs as soap operas do."

It is this familiarity and comfort that has meant that biography has been criticized as complacent. There is still a huge market for the 'trade' biographies described by Collini, however, this simple and 'least troubling' form was first challenged by Virginia Woolf who found conventional biography inadequate for telling the stories
of women's lives. Hermione Lee writes that:

“The inhibitions and censorship's of women's life writing is one of her most urgent subjects. It was still possible for her to say, in 1927, out of her reading of history and biography, 'Very little is known about women.'”

Woolf wanted to find new forms for, in her own words, 'women's as yet unnarrated lives', and for Lee, she, 'does this from the moment she starts to write.' Woolf's:

“curriculum vitae is, in public terms, full of gaps...Her exploits and adventures are in her mind and on the page. And here too, in her writing life, she is intensely private.”

So Lee's task as Woolf's biographer is to find a form that will allow her to move beyond the gaps to the private self beneath. Lee argues:

“To others, she may look like an 'insider'- inside a family, inside a group, inside a class. To herself, she feels like an 'outsider'.”

As Woolf understood, biographers of women are by definition writing the biography of an 'outsider' and the conventions of traditional biography are inadequate to this task. The textual practices Lee employs when telling Woolf's story are a legacy of this understanding.

Anthropologists have made us aware 'that our conception of biography is culturally determined, an ethnocentric assumption.' It is this knowledge of ourselves as 'cultural artifacts', that underlies the new feminist epistemology. Feminists have made us conscious of the gendered nature of all writing and incorporated this knowledge into their discourse. Barbara Caine argues that:

“Feminist historians are concerned to show the particular points at which these women came into conflict with oppressive gender structures which were intolerable or which prevented them from
following their own interests and desires. The problematical nature of women's lives and the gendered nature of every aspect of experience is emphasized through this approach.”

This is precisely the sort of discourse that feminist biographers have brought to their own textual practice. Laura Marcus reaffirms this view when she states that:

“Most recent work in and on feminist autobiography and biography shows a focus on issues of identity, now seen less as something to be disinterred or captured and more as something to be made; cultural and gender hybridity, embodiment, and the transgression of generic and other boundaries.”

Biography is inherently subjective and the biographer now takes a much more self-conscious approach to life writing because of an understanding of the subjectivities they are bringing to their work. The advent of feminism within the academy has changed our concept of subjectivity within academic discourse. Laura Marcus argues that:

“The current climate, at least in Anglo-American criticism, appears to have moved strongly toward the subjective pole.”

For Marcus:

“it is undoubtedly important that women bring the personal into places in which it is constituted as inappropriate.”

The concept of the personal as political was obviously essential to the changes women have made within biography. It meant that women were examining their own lives through other women's stories and it allowed areas of women's lives, previously unrecorded, to be written. Carl Pletsch maintains that:
“The oppositions between the purportedly weak, feminine, covert knowledge of subjectivity and the potent, masculine, and linear knowledge of objectivity must be called into question.”

There has been an acceptance of subjectivity within a scholarly context. The women I spoke with all confirmed that their wish was not to link the literature, 'exclusively with the life' but to demonstrate how life experience informs the literature. The central question was one of possibility. Key themes and relationships form the structure around which many of these texts are constructed and these events and relationships are then linked to the body of work. How can we really understand the work unless we understand the life context from which it sprung? If we are 'culturally constructed' then surely the investigation of that construction must illuminate the creation of the artist's imagination. John Batchelor claims that views of biography as a, 'conservative and reactionary genre' suggest that it is immune from deconstruction but argues that:

“This does not mean there will not be theory- there will be theory, either consciously or by default, informing the nature of the biographer's relationship with his/her material.”

Female biographers have investigated their relationship to their subjects and incorporated this into a new theory of biography. Part of feminist history has been a search for role models and women have had to acknowledge the dangers of an over identification with their subject. Women have been criticized for idealizing their subjects, creating icons such as Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, who are either revered as victims or claimed as role models with feminists battling for ownership of the life for their own political purposes. Ascher, DeSalvo, and Ruddick, view part of the biographer's task as a report on, 'the process of women's identification with their
subjects', asking, 'If we submit to identification self-consciously and reflect on the
process rather than fighting it, what do we learn?' 22 They state that:

"However carefully they work, their portraits are ultimately their
creations - a blend of their subjects' lives and their own." 23

This can be taken to ridiculous extremes. For example Carol Ascher justified
including sixteen pages of autobiography about her own life and feelings in her
biography of Simone de Beauvoir because she had come to an impasse and needed
to clarify her long intense involvement with her subject. She believes that people
only see objectively when they clear out ignored and unresolved emotions. This kind
of narcissistic delving caricatures what is a valuable point: that no criticism is
neutral, and that we therefore have a responsibility to make our position reasonably
apparent to our readers. This has been used very effectively in feminist discourse as a
way of both looking back through our foremothers and identifying the connection the
writer may feel with the subject. Female biographers have acknowledged that whilst
one needs to be empathic as a biographer, it is sympathy, rather than empathy, that is
their best creative tool.

What must be addressed in this thesis is Liz Stanley's contention that:

"feminist biography is in many respects conventional and
indistinguishable from the best products of the mainstream,
following the conventions of a genre rather than challenging
them." 24

What Stanley demands as a 'defining principle' of feminist biography: an attention to
social location and in particular to subjects' positions within, not apart from, their
social networks, has in fact been integrated into the textual practice of contemporary
female biographers. They challenge the genre from within a mainstream context. In response to Stanley's comments Laura Marcus states that she:

"would want to question her claim that feminist academics should 'reject the subjective/objective dichotomy, recognizing instead that 'objectivity' is a set of practices designed to deny the actual 'subjective' location of all intellectual work.' Even if the positions from which we understand the world are necessarily 'subjective', can we not talk meaningfully about subjective perspectives on an objectively given world?" 

Marcus believes that what is important:

"is not only that a story or a history is being recounted, not even how it is told, but its varying content, contexts and import."

A number of 'seminal' biographies form our conception of the genre and biography, as with everything that surrounds us, is a reaction to what has gone before. Traditional biography could not accommodate a post-modern understanding of the nature of the self, the role of the author, the duplicitous nature of fact and the social, political and ideological factors that shape the individual. Anthropologists have taught us that we are 'cultural artefacts' and view the world from a framework that is gendered and classed. Contemporary female biographers have redefined the genre because armed with this knowledge they have reacted against tradition. Demand for narrative will not diminish. This is the chief means by which we understand a life, and endow it with coherence or meaning. Nevertheless contemporary female biographers have experimented with how much weight family, experiences, society, history, and talent are given in constructing the person and therefore the text.
Notes to Introduction.

3. Jessica Martin, Interview with Nina Cook (Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, 1 September, 1998).
13. Ibid., 16.
18. Ibid., 283.
19. Ibid., 283.
23. Ibid., xxiv.
26. Ibid., 288.
CHAPTER ONE

Contemporary biography and the post-modern world.

This chapter aims to identify specific issues in contemporary biography to demonstrate the parameters within which the female biographers, whose work is closely read in later chapters, are writing. Examples from male biographies are used in this chapter as a counterpoint to the discussion of female biographers that follows. Women have had to work from within the context of a traditional, masculine paradigm and in this chapter I will examine issues such as aspects of ownership, that have emerged from this model and which any contemporary biographer must confront when writing a life.

i. Conditions, limits and the contemporary biographer.

Using the work of Peter Ackroyd, a biographer who is an 'experimenter' within the genre- including imaginary conversations in his work, starting his narrative with the death of his subject and thus undermining chronology- I wish to identify the inherent conditions and limits of the genre. Whilst experiments can be made biography is dependent upon fact- and whilst a post-modern consciousness recognizes that a fact is only an event that is under definition- certain facts are immutable, and define the narrative structure of a biography.

Peter Ackroyd published several imaginary conversations in his biography of Charles Dickens (1990), conversations that were interestingly dropped from the paperback edition of the biography. In one particular conversation Ackroyd describes a meeting between Dickens, Little Dorrit and her companion Maggie, on their way to visit William Dorrit, imprisoned in Marshalsea Prison for debt. This conversation deals
with important themes in the life of Charles Dickens. His lifelong fascination with London; the influence of his childhood experiences, particularly being sent to work at the blacking factory at Hungerford Market while the rest of his family was in Marshalsea; and the shadow Dickens' father cast over his adult life. The imaginary conversations, whilst providing illumination on the importance of these themes in Dickens' life, in fact have no place in a biography and must be considered as 'fictional asides' that would be best employed within a different genre and narrative context. This is evident if one looks at Ackroyd's first novel, *The Great Fire of London* (1982), seen as a blueprint for his later biography of Dickens. In this novel Ackroyd uses *Little Dorrit* as the basis for a work of fiction that deploys a Dickensian technique to create a cast of characters that are immediately recognizable. Characters that inhabit a London as menacing and surreal as anything Dickens created. The point is that in this work of fiction, which is both modern and shadowed by the past, the world that Dickens inhabited comes alive because the characters walk through a London that still echoes with his words. This can be seen when Ackroyd describes his character, Spenser Spender, leaving the prison he hopes to use as the Marshalsea in the movie he is making of *Little Dorrit*:

"Such places will always exist—once the Marshalsea, now here. Only a small time— an historical moment— separated the two; and they represented the same appalling waste of human life. Nothing had really changed in a society which had such places as its monuments." \(^1\)

The imaginary conversations in Ackroyd's biography reveal the conditions and limits of the genre because the form cannot accommodate writing that places a subject in situations that did not occur, and which includes dialogue that did not take place.
These limits are particularly evident when viewed alongside the images that Ackroyd creates in his novel. The conversations also imply an almost autobiographical connection between Dickens and his characters that is not appropriate in biography. Little Dorrit is not Dickens as a child, just as William Dorrit is not John Dickens. The biographer's task is not to trace connections between the fictional and the real but to tell of the real so we can see how the fictional was created.

In the main text of this biography Ackroyd argues that everything in Dickens' mature life 'became a kind of flight from his childhood', the time in the blacking factory 'immeasurably' deepening and hardening him. Ackroyd believes that to be fed and to be loved were the:

"twin claims of the young boy moving through London,
looking in the window of the pastry cook and remembering
the affection, however slight, of the adults who pitied him."  

In adult life this manifested itself, 'in his enormous appetite for applause, his boundless need for admiration, his continual desire for money'. In this portrait we see a man haunted by his past, seeking fame, adulation, and above all money, in order to exorcise these ghosts and yet continually drawn back to his roots and the restless, seething mass of humanity through which he wandered. As Ackroyd states, the novels leave us not only with a, 'celebration of Dickens' imaginative authority' but also with the image, 'of the child who still dwells somewhere within it.' This child is: 'Insecure. Maltreated. Starved. Frail. Sickly. Oppressed. Guilty. Small. Orphaned.'

Dickens becomes real to us, alive in our imaginations. The 'fictional aside' that Ackroyd provides straight after these words seems, whilst beautifully written, to be redundant and inappropriate in a narrative that has already allowed the reader to enter
Dickens’ world and empathize with him.

The imaginary encounter between Dickens and Little Dorrit and the subsequent meeting with William Dorrit serves to highlight the themes that Ackroyd has successfully explored in his main narrative. The writing is rich and evocative, bringing the characters and their environment immediately to life. We meet Dickens on one of his famous walks through London. He is, 'slender, middle-aged,' in a, 'tightly buttoned overcoat and shining stove-pipe hat.' A connection is made between Dickens’ real and fictional world when Little Dorrit asks: 'Why did you come here, Sir? Why did you come here as a child?' And Dickens replies:

"'My father-', He stopped, almost out of habit. Then he smiled. 'But I can tell you, if I can tell anyone in the world. My father was incarcerated in the prison close by here. In the Marshalsea.'"

In Dickens’ hesitation at the mention of his father, in the fact that Little Dorrit is reliving the Sunday walk that Dickens would have made to visit his family in prison, Ackroyd evokes the past to reveal how his childhood and his father's failures were what haunted and drove Dickens. He is also showing how Dickens recreated and exorcised these experiences in his fiction. Ackroyd does not go so far as to say that Little Dorrit is Dickens as a child but sees a close enough connection to create his own fictional link, drawing the two together in their shared childhood vision of the world. Ackroyd is able, through his vivid recreation of the London they walk through, to show how the city is for Dickens like another character in his novels, a living thing that comforted and drew him in all his life. We walk along with Dickens and his companions:
"In this last stretch of night there were still men and women to be found loitering in doorways, too, whistling to one another, slinking down the many alleys which led away from the High Street. There was an old man with a wooden leg, screaming 'Where am I?' at a dwarf who followed a few paces behind him; there was a thick-set man with the inexpressibly weary but determined face of a transported convict; there was a young vagabond, wearing a cloth topcoat a size too large for him; and, most curiously of all, there was an old woman dressed entirely in white."  

As we meet many of Dickens' fictional creations on this walk through the streets, we encounter the world from which these characters sprung, we see Miss Havisham lurking in his imagination as he strolls, Magwitch hiding in the shadows, but it is not real and it is not biography. As he approaches the Marshalsea Dickens muses, 'This is all as it was' but:

"how strangely altered. How much larger than I recall. How much darker and more permanent."  

Ackroyd is implying that the specter of the prison was an indelible mark upon Dickens. This grew the further he tried to run from it with success and adulation; underneath he was always the small boy winding his way to visit his imprisoned family, and the father who had put them there. When Dickens confronts William Dorrit his first thought is that, 'You are very like my own father...Very like.' William Dorrit's main concern is to wheedle money from Dickens, shaming Little Dorrit who turns to the window, 'in order to hide her face', in an echo of Dickens' own shame and of Dickens' novel. In his writing Ackroyd is as imaginative and
evocative as Dickens himself. We enter a world that brings Dickens, and the demons that haunted him, powerfully to life, but this is not biography. Instead of pushing the genre to new limits what the 'fictional asides' do is reveal the constraints under which the form must operate. However much the biographer may wish to transform the genre and enter the world of the subject, the facts of the life are what determine the narrative. While these may be dealt with imaginatively they cannot be transformed or altered to serve an artistic purpose.

Many critics view literary biography as a reactionary old-fashioned form, a staid, established genre, and immune to change. By its very nature biography would appear to be tied to narrative structures that follow a recognizable and inherently conservative chronological pattern that focuses primarily on a single, luminous individual. In The Art of Literary Biography Jurgen Schlaeger commented that biography is:

“in spite of its intertextual construction, fundamentally reactionary, conservative, perpetually accommodating new models of man, new theories of the inner self, into a personality -oriented cultural mainstream, thus always helping to defuse their subversive potential.”

and John Batchelor agreed that:

“There seems no doubt that the writing of biography is in some sense a 'conservative' activity in that it celebrates a known life of the past.”

Terry Eagleton has pointed out that biography has its 'robust and simple' shape forced on it by its subject matter, in that:
“even the most revolutionary of geniuses have to get
themselves born and educated, fight with their parents, fall in
love and die.”

The biographer can write in an imaginative fashion about the facts of a life, but they cannot transform these facts as the poet or fiction writer can, because they are not creating but recreating the circumstances of a life. A scene can be set, as Ackroyd does by beginning his narrative with Dickens’ funeral, but the biographer is then obliged to tell the story of the life to that point.

As well as being 'conservative' biography is also tied to a recognisable narrative structure because whilst being a storyteller the biographer’s text is constructed around a set of circumstances outside their imaginative control. Hayden White argued that the narratives of biography tend to exemplify recognisable literary plots (comic, tragic, romantic, and satiric), and the unity they attain is based on aesthetic or moral concerns. In other words the biographer's choices about what to include and exclude in the narrative are based upon recognisable plot structures that provide the most appropriate form for a story that is shaped by events that are real and verifiable. Biographers are currently being criticised for their desire to create a seamless narrative in an age that has long accepted that gaps and silences are inevitable in biography. For Georges Gusdorf, the biographer looks at an event from a single angle, creating an illusion that begins from the moment that the narrative 'confers a meaning' on the incident which, 'when it actually occurred, no doubt had several meanings or perhaps none.' Biographers are charged with filling the gap of what they do not know with speculation about what they do. As A.N. Wilson pointed
out in his biography *Tolstoy* it is only by telling the tale that we create the illusion that there is a tale to tell:

"Biography gave articulate beings the means of creating a shape, of holding on to words and moments which would otherwise be forgotten, of creating a barricade against death."

For Wilson the act of record is in itself an act of artifice. 'Artifice' in this context is the structure around which the biographer weaves their 'illusions', filling in the gaps in their narrative.

Contemporary biographers have also inherited a concept of what constitutes a biography that is deeply embedded within literary culture. Clifford Geertz views human beings as 'cultural artifacts', believing that, 'there is no such thing as a human being independent of culture.' Stephen Greenblatt refers to a, 'poetics of culture'. For Greenblatt the written word is, 'self-consciously embedded in specific communities, life situations, structures of power.' This implies that the human subject is remarkably unfree, 'the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society.' Biography can thus be viewed as a product of its culturally inherited traditions.

**ii. The contemporary biographer and the post-modern world.**

Richard Holmes has made great claims for the role of the biographer. In an interview with Hilary Spurling Holmes maintained that in a world increasingly deprived of religious certainties and institutional guidance, the biographer had magisterial, almost mystic powers:
“Perhaps that is one reason why writers' lives particularly interest readers now...is because people are themselves displaced, journeying figures in a landscape. That has become almost the norm. Everyone now has to explore for himself, to define the shape of his or her own life.

Biographies answer that: they speak to that.”

This claim must be placed alongside those who deride the genre for its inability to accommodate a post-modern understanding of the author and the self. Also the irresponsibility of 'tell-all' biographers who use society’s lack of religious and moral certainty as an excuse to invade and exploit the privacy of the subject.

In Footsteps (1985) Holmes comes to realize whilst following the tracks of Robert Louis Stevenson that as a biographer he can never fully recapture the past. Holmes has made huge claims for the role of the biographer and yet has had to reconcile his desire to be a prophet and guide with his knowledge that he can never fully recreate the past. In this desire for an omniscient understanding on the one hand and the knowledge that it can never be fully realized on the other, Holmes encapsulates the paradoxical status of biography today. We are fully aware of how limited our understanding of the past and the self can be and yet still look to biography to reassure ourselves that human nature hasn't changed, that the same struggles and triumphs will continue to be played out. Holmes describes a moment of revelation as an 18-year-old, in France, following Stevenson's journey through the Cevennes. He views this as an almost 'metaphysical' experience:

"here something strange happened. The feeling that Stevenson was actually waiting for me, in person, grew
overwhelmingly strong. It was almost like an hallucination. I began to look for him in the crowds, in the faces at the cafe doors, at hotel windows. I went back to the bridge, took off my hat, rather formally as if to meet a friend, and paced up and down, waiting for some sort of sign.” 18

It is at this point that the magic disappears and a crushing sense of reality rushes in:

“And then I saw it, quite clearly against the western sky, the old bridge of Langogne. It was about fifty yards downstream, and it was broken, crumbling, and covered with ivy. So Stevenson had crossed there, not on this modern bridge. There was no way of following him, no way of meeting him. His bridge was down. It was beyond my reach over time, and this was a true and sad sign.” 19

It is at this rather contrived moment that Holmes realizes that:

“You could not cross such bridges any more, just as one could not cross literally into the past.” 20

With this realization Holmes begins to reassess his vocation and to learn what he can realistically hope to achieve as a biographer:

“Even in imagination the gap was there. It had to be recognized; it was no good pretending. You could not play act into the past, you could not turn it into a game of make-believe. There had to be another way. Somehow you had to produce the living effect, while remaining true to the dead fact. The adult distance- the critical distance, the historical distance- had to be maintained. You stood at the end of a
broken bridge and looked across carefully, objectively, into
the unattainable past on the other side. You brought it alive,
brought it back, by other sorts of skills and crafts and sensible
magic."  

In this marvelous assessment of the biographer's task Holmes presents us with the constraints of the genre as well as its magic. For Holmes the biographer imagines a past that is conjured not from the unattainable, but from knowing what can't be done and then using this to recreate what can. In our present age the biographer can be seen as superfluous, scurrilous, at odds with a post-modern understanding of the nature of the self. But the dead will always exert some form of posthumous control over the living. The biographer's attempts to illuminate the past will always contain a little 'sensible magic' for those who desire the reassurance that human nature has not changed in an age when we are certain of little else.

Biographies have always been a reflection of the societies in which they were produced. Today biography represents a reassuring 'other' in an environment in which the genre is under siege, providing an alternative form in a time when so little else is certain. For some practitioners this climate has meant the growth of the biographer's task. Deidre Bair, for example, has maintained that the contemporary biographer, 'cannot follow older models because lives are no longer of interest when they present, let us say, a great person larger than life.' For Bair the biographer must be aware that lives are:

"not lived outside of and apart from society, but rather in the midst of all the complexities of modern life. The contemporary biographer must be critic, historian, cultural
observer, intellectual arbiter, psychiatrist, physician and minister."  

These comments reflect a new self-consciousness about biographical practice and a fresh awareness of the limits of the genre. Malcolm Bradbury views biography as a genre that has:

"clearly grown more skeptical of its subjects, more daring and critical in its treatment of them, and less sure of what constitutes their character or the truth and purpose of their lives."

It is this very self-consciousness that I feel female biographers are bringing to the form. Critic Phyllis Rose stated that:

"A translation, a reduction, a condensation, an approximation, a metaphor is the best that can be achieved in art, no matter how inclusive, as an account of life, and the same is true for criticism as an account of art. No matter how full we make our accounts of reading, no matter how hard we try to make our style sympathetic to the work under discussion and not to violate it by analysis, what we produce is less than the text it describes."

Within this paradigm biography is paradoxically caught between two opposite poles. There are biographers such as Richard Holmes who argue for the growth of the biographer's task and see the biographer as a guide in an age where we look to other's lives for meaning because of a lack of religious or moral precepts. Within this model the biographer takes on an almost mythic status. For example Jay Martin views the biographer as a modern Prometheus 'breathing fire into the dead'. He
reminds us of the fact that the Promethean epithet was most famously applied to Dr Frankenstein and that the, 'fancy to be creators has always been marked with the deepest ambivalence'. On the other hand there are those critics who remind us of the genre's inability to accommodate a post-modern understanding of the self.

111. Responsibility and the contemporary biographer.

The status of the biographer has shifted due to a more sophisticated post-modern understanding that the biographer's authority now lies not in what they know of their subject but in what they choose to reveal of this knowledge. Andrew Motion in his biography of the poet Philip Larkin (1993) had a choice whether to conceal or reveal information that would change our perception of Larkin forever. Previously, for example in a nineteenth century context, this choice would have been guided by the religious and moral precepts of the society in which the biographer was writing, today the process of selection lies with the individual. In a section of his biography Motion describes Larkin's relationship with his secretary, Betty Mackereth, at a time when Larkin was already having two other relationships with women. The biography was controversial because it portrayed Larkin in ways that he had never previously been seen. Larkin had a slightly saintly aura and one of the things that Motion reveals is that far from being a solitary bachelor he had several women in his life. In this extract Motion knows more than each of the three women does. This is a case of the biographer being in a position to wound through his revelations because he knows more than his subject. The gaps that previously existed in Larkin's life have been filled by Motion with material that in another age would have been silenced. Motion refers to the 'paradoxes' that he felt made Phillip Larkin. The, 'soul of shy modesty' was also a, 'self-promoter'; the man who, 'avoided bright lights' was
continually tempted to, 'step into them'; the, 'Hermit of Hull' was also the readers'
friend, 'telling them a good deal about himself'. These paradoxes are what Motion
sets out to explore, arguing that Larkin had an 'image' that he had prepared carefully
for his readers, and that looking at these dichotomies necessitates 'altering' this view
that Larkin had so carefully prepared. What is evident is that the decision here rests
with Motion. He can decide what version of Larkin we are given. Motion decided
that he wished to question the 'saintly' image of Larkin, and expose him, unbuttoned,
the better to convey the true sense of his poetry, which had at its heart the
relationship between 'high' art and 'ordinary' existence that made it 'remarkable' and,
'deserved to be made public'. This is demonstrated in Motion's comments on Larkin's
relationship with his secretary at the University of Hull Library, Betty Mackereth.
Motion states that for Larkin:

“Betty's great attraction lay precisely in her familiarity. Now
in her early fifties, and still an attractive and forthright
woman, she understood him better than virtually anyone else.
She had typed all his letters in the library, and these had
included many personal as well as purely business ones. She
had seen the pornography in the cupboard in his office. She
had watched him dozing off at his desk after lunch with the
top button of his trousers undone. She had heard him
lumbering round his room belching ('he was,' she says, 'a
very eighteenth-century man in some ways'). She had been
taken into his confidence as he slithered up and down the
rolling trough of his difficulties with Monica and Maeve.”

This is certainly not the 'saintly' Larkin that had been 'prepared' for readers. Motion
goes on to explain:

"He knew it was inevitable that Monica would rumble them in due course, but did nothing except hope that she would not feel threatened. As far as Maeve was concerned, he simply trusted that she would not notice anything different."  

It could be argued that this portrayal damaged Larkin's reputation as a poet and revealed truths that were uncomfortable and dangerous. In a sense the three women were still fighting a battle through the biographer. All three spoke to Motion and gave their version of events. What this passage demonstrates is that biographers now have greater freedom to expose and explore areas of a life that previously would have been censored. Biographies can become obsolete when they no longer reflect a particular ages concerns and preoccupations. Whilst recognizing these constraints we must also acknowledge that the ethical precepts guiding selection are now the biographer’s responsibility rather than societies. There has been a shift in the biographer’s authority, from what they know about the subject to what they may choose to conceal or reveal.

iv. Contemporary biography and creative unease.

This section will look at the attitude towards biography of Tom Stoppard and A.S. Byatt, who in their plays and novels have explored the creative writers' contemporary unease with the limits of the form and the role of the biographer. Creative writers have derided the biographer’s pursuit of an ever-elusive subject and the impotence of the form when compared to the power of the 'creative' or 'poetic' word. They believe in the power of the creative word when compared to what is perceived as the almost vampiric role of the biographer who spends their life living
vicariously through another's experience.

Tom Stoppard has called himself a biographer who tells the truth without being in thrall to the facts, claiming more insight and empathy in his dramatic portrayal of real characters than in conventional biography. In his play The Invention of Love for example Stoppard stages the Balliol scandal of 1876 in which John Ruskin's rival in the aesthetic debate of the period, Walter Pater, was discovered to have received 'indecent' sonnets from, and written letters signed 'Yours lovingly' to, undergraduate William Hardinge. This provides a context from which to understand his main character A. E. Housman. Stoppard has four men, Pater, Ruskin, Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol, and the Rector of Lincoln College, Mark Pattison, playing an implausible game of croquet, in order to present the main points of the debate. Ruskin believes that the artist should eschew self-indulgent sensuality and display their morality by a fidelity to nature, and Pater maintains that we must cultivate each moment to the full and seek experience itself, in order to establish the tradition from which Housman viewed his own homosexuality. Stoppard believes that in his portrayal of real life characters we learn more about them than we ever would in a biography. No doubt his subject would agree. Housman, in a letter to his would-be biographer Houston Martin, 22 March 1936, wrote:

"Do not send your manuscript. Worse than the practice of writing books about living men is the conduct of living men in supervising such books."

For Stoppard the playwright's ability to imaginatively recreate and transform reality allows for greater depth and empathy, enabling us to enter the world of A.E. Housman for example, in a more complex and thorough way than we ever could in
biography.

In her novel Possession (1990) A.S. Byatt derides the biographer's pursuit of an elusive subject and the impotence of the form when compared to the power of the creative or 'poetic' word. This novel clearly outlines the creative writer's attitude towards the biographer's task and in so doing illuminates criticisms that highlight contemporary concerns about the genre. Byatt explains that:

"there are things which happen and leave no discernable trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been."

Byatt believes that all biographical endeavors are flawed, limited by their own agendas. She explores literary possession, asking who speaks for whom? There is no direct line to a truth about the past. The Holy Grail can only be learnt through dispossession. For Byatt, there is always something that biographers don't have access to, they engage in a kind of shadow play. It is only imagination; creative writing that can illuminate your own inner secret life. In other words the truth of the artist lies in their imagination and thus in their creations. Her hero Roland discovers his own creativity and through this a sort of inner truth. Her rapacious scholar, Professor Mortimer P. Cropper, is a hunter, not a reader, a literal grave robber searching for that, 'major discovery that will confirm, or disprove, or change at the least, a lifetime's work.' Maud Bailey, the deconstructed heroine of the story, believes that Cropper had:

"a peculiarly vicious version of reverse hagiography; the desire to cut his subject down to size."
Maud sees her own 'prying curiosity' into another's life as a 'ghostly thing', 'feeding
on, living through, the young vitality of the past'. Byatt talks of how the scholar
becomes 'implicated', becomes 'defensive' of her subject, encroaches upon 'the
mystery of privacy'. Cropper in his desire to know everything about his subject:

"to know as far as possible everything he did- everyone who
mattered to him- every little preoccupation he had." 35

pursues what Byatt shows is an impossible dream, to know everything there is to
know about another person. He is thief, invader and vampire. As James Blackadder,
a rival scholar, realizes:

"He would end his working life, that was to say his conscious
thinking life, in this task, that all his thoughts would have
been another man's thoughts, all his work another man's
work." 36

For Byatt, 'the writer wrote alone, and the reader read alone, they were alone with
each other.' Language is shown to be beyond 'the reach of any single human, writer
or reader.' 37 The modern theories of the, 'incoherent self, which is made up of
conflicting systems of beliefs, desires, languages and molecules' teach us that
language is 'essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there, that it
only spoke itself.' 38 In a moment of revelation her hero, Roland, realizes that what
had happened to him was that:

"the ways in which it could be said had become more
interesting than the idea that it could not." 39

The words that name things, the 'language of poetry', is what makes reading 'heady',
'violently yet steadily alive'. There is no privileged communication, just a reader who
happens to be there at the time to understand it. Roland's anxiety, that finding himself
in a plot, he would be obliged to act in the way that the plot dictated, would 'compromise his integrity', is the biographer's dilemma. As Byatt states, 'Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable'. 40 But they are always enchanting and desirable. Out of a random tangle we try to create a coherent plot. In Possession the irony is that it is a letter from the nineteenth century heroine of the novel, Christabel LaMotte, revealing all to her married lover, the poet Randolph Ash, discovered in the denouement of the novel, that provides closure for the twentieth century protagonists. It is Christabel who states in the letter:

"All History is hard facts- and something else- passion and colour lent by men. I will tell you- at least- the facts."

After the group has read the letter it is Blackadder who says to Maud, discovered to be a descendent of both the lovers:

"How strange for you, Maud, to turn out to be descended from both- how strangely appropriate to have been exploring all along the myth- no the truth- of your own origins."

Truth and myth have been interwoven throughout the novel and closure is elusive. Beatrice Nest, the older guardian of Randolph Ash's wife Ellen's journal, exclaims:

"It's just so terrible to think- he can't ever have read it, can he? She wrote all that for no one. She must have waited for an answer- and none can have come."

The Postscript of 1868 provides a final ironic note. Randolph Ash meets his daughter, Maia, brought up by Christabel's sister, Sophie, as her own child and recognizes the connection. He asks Maia to pass a message to her 'aunt', a message that would have provided closure for Christabel, however:

"on the way home, she met her brothers, and there was a
rough-and-tumble...and she forgot the message, which was never delivered.”

Whilst the nineteenth century story ends in forgetfulness and confusion, the twentieth century protagonists are provided with closure, but the central point is that it is Byatt who is controlling it all with her novelist’s imagination. She can decide exactly what her subject’s fate will be. The characters in the twentieth century world now have the 'hard facts' but we question whether the 'passion and color' will ever be theirs. For Byatt this belongs to the creative writer, the poet thus Roland may achieve this with Maud. Byatt's biographer is acting in another's plot and endeavoring to achieve the enchanting and desirable that are forever out of their reach no matter what 'hard fact' they may possess. The creative writers’ main objection to the biographer’s task is this possession of the subject’s mind and imagination. The biographer does not have the ability to create for him or herself and thus seeks immortality through the genius of another’s art. There is no denying that biographers are in some ways attempting to live another persons life and think another persons thoughts, seeking to possess and brand their name alongside that of the genius, Boswell to his Dr. Johnson.

v. Ownership and the contemporary biographer.

Post-modern unease and uncertainty has made what is an inherently intrusive and invasive practice even more problematic. The contemporary biographer is negotiating throughout the narrative with a series of claims to ownership of the life that only serves to demonstrate that no individual owns the facts of their own life. The many claims to the life of the poet Sylvia Plath is a well-known biographical minefield and her story reminds us that there is no 'true' Plath, not even for her daughter Frieda. The battle for control and ownership of what Plath was and what
she meant are an extreme instance of the absence of a retrievable essential self in biography. The comments of living and heavily resistant subjects of unauthorized biographies, J.D. Salinger and Germaine Greer, also highlight the extremely complex issues that claims to ownership of the life evoke.

The problematic issue of ownership in biography is demonstrated by the experience of Germaine Greer and J.D Salinger, who have both suffered at the hands of biographers that they have found intrusive. Their stories raise the question of whether the biographer has the right to invade the privacy of an individual simply because aspects of their life have been lived within the public domain. Germaine Greer, a rabid anti-biographer, has referred to biographers as, 'flesh-eating bacterium', and 'brain dead hacks'. Greer stated that other kinds of biography might have some useful function; literary biography has none:

"Of all the biographical organisms, literary biography is the most predatory, the laziest and the least enterprising, for its subject is the most accessible and the most vulnerable."  

For Greer human beings:

"have an inalienable right to invent themselves; when that right is preempted it is called brainwashing...It might be argued that future generations have the right to reinvent celebrities for themselves, if there is no other monument. When it is done while the victim is conscious, it is an unpardonable violation of selfhood."  

Karl Miller has argued, however, that 'the events of Greer's personal life have been of decisive importance to her work.' While Miller believes that this is a view that may
offend Greer, he argues it is one to which her writings give full countenance.
 According to Miller the, 'primal scene of an estrangement from her parents' has
 shaped her work. Greer claims ownership of her own life, the right to, 'invent
 herself' and pursue her own 'selfhood' outside the spotlight and yet her writing places
 her in a position that means that 'selfhood' will always be under public scrutiny.
 However, in a post-modern sense there is no 'private individual', no 'real self'. This is
 a problematic issue, particularly in regards to women, and especially when
 discussing writers, because, as with the case of Virginia Woolf for example, so much
 of the life is lived in the mind and not upon the public stage. Thus the public record
 of the life will tell us very little about the subject. Even in this context there is no
 'real', live, 'private self' to convey, only the biographer's version. It is possible to
 legislate to protect a writer's work but it has become increasingly difficult to protect
 the individual from the 'version' of the self that the biographer chooses to present.

Paul Alexander interviewed Joyce Maynard, who is writing a memoir of her
 relationship with J.D. Salinger, that most reclusive of writers. At the time of their
 breakup Maynard resolved to keep quiet about their romance. Occasionally, though,
 she could not resist mentioning it. 'Jerry is a very private person, as I'm sure that
 you're aware,' she told a Toronto Star reporter in 1992:

 "I will always respect his privacy. I made that promise a long
 time ago. However, I do have ownership of our shared past.
 And yes, I can say that I was permanently changed by the
 relationship."

 'I don't for a moment think that he would want me to write this', Maynard told The
 Times, which as Alexander points out is putting it mildly. Maynard claims
'ownership' of a part of Salinger's life and uses this claim to ownership to exploit the relationship for her own ends. As Oscar Wilde said in 'The Critic as Artist', in his volume *Intentions* (1891):

"Every great man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography."

While ownership of a literary estate can be legislated ownership of private life cannot. Whether the biographer reveals intimate details gathered from individuals or through private papers are a gray area that depends upon the ethical sensibility of the biographer rather than on a legislative process. The question of whom owns a private, rather than a working life is increasingly problematic. In the case of Sylvia Plath her suicide after separating from her husband, Ted Hughes, and writing the *Ariel* poems that made her famous, was a bitter tragedy that led to an impassioned battle for ownership of her life and work that continues to be played out.

Accounts of Plath have tended to portray her as a feminist icon and her husband, Ted Hughes, as unfaithful bogeyman who drove Sylvia to her death. Feminists claimed Plath as theirs with novels such as Stella Duffy's *Calendar Girl*. Robin Morgan best demonstrates the extent of the antipathy leveled against Hughes as both Plath's husband and literary executor, in her book of poetry, *Monster*. In an interview with Morgan Susan Mitchell records Morgan's comments on the publication of her book. It contained a poem on Hughes that began, 'I accuse Ted Hughes of the murder of Sylvia Plath'. Morgan stated that she didn't say:

"that he actually shoved her head in the oven but I did say that because he'd been having an affair with another woman,
because he was a womanizer and a batterer and so forth, she
didn't really suicide. I pointed out that the next wife had also
done the same thing but in fact had taken her two children
with her rather than have him raise them.”

Six weeks before bound books were due from Random House Hughes heard of the
poem and stopped production. Morgan states, 'it became a cause celebre'. With
various Plath scholars 'rallying to her side' and sending her snippets of Plath's
journals:

“in which she herself accused him of rape, accused him of
trying to kill her, accused him of driving her to despair...”

In the end Morgan rewrote the poem by rephrasing it as a rhetorical question, as in,
'How can I accuse Ted Hughes of the murder of Sylvia Plath?' It passed the letter of
the law and Random House published it. But they had reached a 'gentleman's
agreement' with Hughes that he would not sue for libel or slander if all books were
withdrawn in the Commonwealth. Feminists spread pirated editions around the
Commonwealth and 'picketed Hughes, carrying signs with the poem on it, wherever
he went for about four or five years in the United Kingdom or in Australia or Canada
or New Zealand'. 51 In her novel Calendar Girl, Stella Duffy includes a scene in
which two women search for Plath's grave on a visit to Yorkshire. They ask
directions:

"Was she married to a poet?"

I turned white 'Mmm.'

'Well yes, we do have a note here. Under Hughes. He's a
poet, don't know about her. A Mrs Hughes is buried in the
Old Church- is that the one you mean?"
I turned red. 'Her name was Sylvia Plath. She was a great poet. A very great poet in her own right. You illiterate cow.'

The sun was nearly set and we followed the cat to Sylvia.

Again my sensibilities were stormed, in the dusk-light the tombstone wording read 'Sylvia Plath Hughes'.

I thought I was the first person to have been offended by it.”

Throughout this fierce battle for ownership of Plath's life and work Hughes maintained a very public silence until the publication of his book of poems, *Birthday Letters* (1998). This volume, published shortly before his death, broke his years of silence about his marriage and life with Plath. These poems added yet another public claim to ownership over Plath's story, and sparked further debate amongst the press about the Plath phenomenon.

One of the most distinctive features about this phenomenon is that Plath has featured so much in non-academic discourse. When Hughes himself challenged this myth with the publication of *Birthday Letters* the press reaction was immediate. The poems were published in *The Times* and editorials were written in all major newspapers speculating upon Hughes' motives and the new light the verse cast upon the 'Ted Hughes as monster' version of the Plath iconography. Libby Purves has talked of a 'dangerous empathy' with Plath:

"The angriest school of feminism seized on the images in her poems- the Nazi, the great marble weight, the heavy black shoe encasing a soft helpless foot- and made her a martyr."  

According to Purves her estrangement from her husband persuaded women with
private angers of their own that the real-life husband was the same black vampire as
the agonizing father of Plath's imagination. Hughes was, 'made a symbol of
domineering male evil and accused of murder', a view clearly expressed in the work
of Robin Morgan and Stella Duffy. For James Fenton Hughes' real sin was being
'keeper of the flame' when so many others were lining up for the job. 'Possessiveness'
is the Plath lover's problem. Ian Sansom commented that like most of us Hughes
does not own 'the facts of his life, or of Plath's'. The poems are 'an attempt to possess,
or re-possess, his own experience'. The book's 'clear and practical purpose' is to:

"correct distortions, setting the record straight, putting right
the gossips and the speculators, the detractors and the critics."

It will have 'numerous consequences for readers of poetry', but 'it is by no means a
final statement of fact.' What Sansom's comments illustrate is that the battle for
ownership of Plath's life is a clear reminder that individuals do not own the facts of
their own life. Katherine Viner continued, however, to claim Plath as a feminist icon
and victim of the 'monster' Ted Hughes. She believes that even if she had not
committed suicide, 'abandoned by her husband, weeks away from divorce, a single
parent at the peak of her literary powers', Plath would have been a feminist heroine.
'She articulated female experience and achieved fame in her own lifetime in a way
few women have done before.' The reason Ted Hughes has come to be seen as a
villain is not just because he left her to look after two children when she could barely
look after herself. It is his control of the estate that is resented. 'Plath lovers will
never forgive Hughes for failing to ensure that the blood jet continued to flow.' The
poems contain 'much tenderness' and 'passion' retrospectively, but they do not
explain:

"his 35 years of silence, they do not explain his abuse of the
Plath estate; and they mean of course, that Ted Hughes has

the last word. His dead wife cannot speak.”

James Fenton, in response to Viner's article, claimed that Plath only received a

modest amount of recognition in her lifetime, and her claim to fame as a poet lies

largely with her posthumous work. 'But the facts cannot be allowed to stand in the

way of a writer eager to blame Hughes for desertion.' As Nicci Gerrard comments,

'Doubtless some will read these poems as Hughes' continuing mastery over her, as

proof of his rightness after all'. After all 'these haunting, haunted elegies will not be

the last words.' The word 'haunting' is frequently used in conjunction with Plath

and is indicative of the hold her story has over the public imagination.

In her book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1992) Jacqueline Rose speaks for the dead

poet and against Hughes in a way no other writer has done. She objects to Hughes

ing the editing of Plath's work and Hughes' presentation of Plath as a high-art poet and of

*Ariel* as her only worthy achievement. For Rose Hughes' literary decisions about

Plath's estate are connected to gender. She maintains that Hughes suppressed much

of Plath's work that may have been considered 'unfeminine'; stating surely that it is

only:


“because Plath is a woman that images of violence, *even if*

inner and psychic, are read not as vision or insight, but as

perversity or illegitimate rage?”

Rose's thesis is based upon her belief that once writing is in circulation it ceases to be

the property of the author, except in the most material sense. It also cannot be

controlled or limited by the view of any one individual. Janet Malcolm's *The Silent

Woman* (1993) presents a different view of privacy and ownership. Malcolm tells the
story of Anne Stevenson, who found when she wrote her authorized biography of
Plath that she made the mistake of writing the wrong biography, the story people did
not want to hear, the story that feminists such as Morgan found abhorrent. Ted and
Olwyn Hughes accused Stevenson of being, ‘in with the estate’ and being ‘strong
armed’. As a poet from the same time and place as Plath she felt that she could solve
the mystery of her tortured genius, instead she found herself crossing a biographical
minefield, and being hit from all sides. Janet Malcolm explores Stevenson's
experience and comes out firmly on the side of Hughes, arguing for Hughes's right to
privacy and control over the version of his life that a biographer may choose to
present. In an article in The New Yorker Malcolm concluded that the biographer is a
violator, an unwanted intruder into private areas that do not belong to anyone but the
'owner of the life'. This analogy is similar to A.S. Byatt’s presentation of the
biographer as vampire in her novel Possession. Malcolm compares the biographer to
a burglar rifling the famous dead's drawers and bearing his loot away. She talks of
'voyeurism and busybodyism', obscured by an apparatus of scholarship as the
individual's wish to be left alone is always sacrificed to the public's 'inviolable right
to be diverted'. For Malcolm, Stevenson's experience as Plath's biographer is a
paradigm for the problems of biography in general and Rose represents what she
finds most abhorrent in contemporary biography, the invasive critic whom she feels
violates the privacy of the subject and those they left behind.

Both Malcolm and Rose are in agreement that the Plath story is paradigmatic of the
problems of biography in general. Malcolm points out in The Silent Woman that the
Plath story is, 'as much about the problems of biographical writing as about Sylvia
Plath' and Jacqueline Rose comments that Plath's story makes the biographer
confront difficult ethical issues:

“about the legitimate scope of interpretation; about the rights of literary interpretation to discuss the living as well as dead writers; about the difficulty involved in analysing textual figures when those appear to refer to real persons, both living and dead; about how or whether to use the material that has been omitted from Plath's published writings, given that to do so can involve an infringement of privacy, but not to do so is to accept uncritically a version of Plath's writings that is not complete, not her own.”

64

However Rose believes the problem lies with the estate trying to control ownership of a writer's work that belongs in the public domain. Malcolm maintains that biography is essentially a violation no matter how critics and biographers try to hide this under the banner of the publics right to know. Rose argues that clearly Plath does not own the facts of her own life:

“not just because she is no longer here to speak for herself but because even in relation to one's 'own' life...there can be no simple ownership of the facts.”

65

For Rose there are only two positions that can be occupied when writing on Plath-'retriever of Plath's voice against the censorship of her family, or participator, extender, repeater of this same violation.' 66 Clearly in The Haunting of Sylvia Plath Rose sees herself as a retriever of Plath's voice. In her introduction Rose talks of being 'silenced' by Ted and Olwyn Hughes. She sees Hughes's editing of Plath's works as a 'violation'. Rose defends her position by stating that she is not speaking of the life- she is interested only in writing- believing that writing a life bases itself,
particularly in the case of Plath, on a spurious claim to knowledge, to arbitration between competing—often incompatible versions of what took place.  

In *The New Yorker* Janet Malcolm labeled the genre of biography, like its progenitor, history, as a kind of processing plant where experience is converted into information 'the way fresh produce is converted into canned vegetables'. It is, 'taken out of its living context', with 'its blood drained out of it'. The 'information' of biography is seen as a 'shriveled, spurious thing'. Malcolm argues that every character in a biography contains within him or herself the potential for a reverse image, just as the publication of *Birthday Letters* altered the image of Plath that had been forged within the public consciousness. For Malcolm, 'The finding of a new cache of letters, the stepping forward of a new witness, the coming into fashion of a new ideology', can:

>“destabilize any biographical configuration, overturn any biographical consensus; transform a good character into a bad one, and vice versa.”

According to Malcolm the distinguished dead are:

>“clay in the hands of writers, and chance determines the shapes that their actions and characters assume in the books written about them.”  

Malcolm claims that the writer, like the murderer, needs a motive. So in *The Silent Woman* Malcolm sees Rose's book as, 'fuelled by a bracing hostility toward Ted and Olwyn Hughes' whilst Rose claims to be unbiased and simply interpreting Plath's work. Its thrust comes from the:

>“cool certainty with which (in the name of 'uncertainty' and 'anxiety') she presents her case against the Hugheses.”
Malcolm believes that if it had truly been impossible for Rose to take a side, her book would not have been written. Writing cannot be done in a state of 'desirelessness'. As Malcolm points out she too has taken a side, that of the Hugheses and Anne Stevenson, 'I, too, draw on my sympathies and antipathies and experiences to support it.' 70 The aim of the writer Malcolm believes is to:

“make a space where a few ideas and images and feelings may be so arranged that a reader will want to linger a while among them.” 71

For the biographer these ideas and images come from another's life, another's psyche and according to Malcolm this makes the biographer feel they have permission to, 'act boldly, even wildly, where ordinarily they would be cautious and tread delicately'. For Rose writing is a, 'place to explore what did not happen but is- say- most feared or desired as what did.' Plath is feared because of what she has most come to represent- 'violence', 'anxiety', and 'turmoil'. Both Rose and Malcolm have made claims through their writing to the life of Sylvia Plath and both, through their engagement with the discourse surrounding Plath, have put themselves firmly within the vortex of the Plath phenomenon.

Perhaps the last word on this conflict is best left to Frieda Hughes, the daughter of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, who reminds us that it is not just Plath's life that was involved when Plath became an icon and her father was demonized. When the public rewrote history it was their children who had to struggle with this new version of their family story and separate it from the story they knew as real. Frieda, too, claims ownership of her mother's story and adds another note to the cacophony that surrounds Plath. Frieda was asked in an interview with Libby Purves how it felt to
have these 'two histories'. The real history, the family history, whatever her father
told her when she was young, which is her own business, and at the same time the,
'fantastic sort of feminist interpretation, the industry'. Hughes firmly believes that
she must be her own person and takes immense pride in this. She was purposely
ignorant of the public view, just as she did not read her mother's poems until she felt
confident enough in herself that they would not influence her own voice. In a
poignant recollection, however, Hughes talked of visiting her mother's grave in
Yorkshire. The headstone was being repaired, there were flowers on the grave from
people, who hadn't even been born when she died, Hughes found that this bought the
situation home and felt usurped in some way. Gillian Slovo, in her memoir of her
parents Ruth First and Joe Slovo, has talked of experiencing similar feelings to
Hughes at her mother's funeral:

“They spoke instead of a cardboard heroine, a woman who
had given her life to the struggle. I didn't want to hear of that
Ruth. I wanted them to talk of the mother I had known.”

When she was young Slovo used to chant, 'Notice me for what I am, not for what my
parents do.' As Slovo stated her mother:

“was the kind of role model our generation was searching
out, a beautiful, well-dressed woman who had made an
impact on the world and who was fighting for a cause that
was indisputably just, but she was also our mother.”

Frieda Hughes, in her poem *Readers* sees Plath's public as:

“Wanting to breathe life into their own dead babies,
They took her dreams,
collected words from one who did their suffering for them.
They fingered through her mental underwear with every piece she wrote,
Wanting her naked,
Wanting to know what made her,”

This avariciousness on the part of the public is compared to the violation of Plath's grave:

“They dug mine up,
right down to the shells I scattered on her coffin.
They turned her over like meat on coals
to find the secrets of her withered thighs and shrunken breasts.
They scooped out her eyes to see how she saw,
and bit away her tongue in tiny mouthfuls to speak with her voice.”

Hughes concludes:

“They gutted, peeled and garnished her,
they called her theirs.
All this time I'd thought she belonged to me most.”

Through this poem Frieda Hughes reminds us that no one owns the facts of their own life. Frieda may wish to claim the right to the life of her mother but the reality is that she can only demand a 'share' of Plath’s story, a story over which there has been claims and counter-claims since her tragic death. Plath's story is a paradigm for the problems of biography because Plath has herself been lost within the discourse that has surrounded her since her death. In Hermione Lee's words when talking of
Virginia Woolf: 'positions have been taken and myths have been made.' From a biographical perspective what Plath teaches us is that through the continual battle for ownership of her life Plath 'herself' has retreated further from our reach. She is now a symbol, a figure that has with each appropriation receded further into the reaches of her own legend and become lost to the demands of immortality.

Notes to Chapter 1.

3 Ibid., 99.
4 Ibid., 101.
5 Ibid., 101.
6 Ibid., 102.
7 Ibid., 103.
8 Ibid., 104.
14 A.N. Wilson, Tolstoy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 89.
19 Ibid., 26.
20 Ibid., 26.
21 Ibid., 27.
27 Ibid., 451-2.
28 Ibid., 452.
29 At the Life Lines Conference on contemporary literary biography, London University (February 7 1998), Angela Thrwell argued that in Possession A.S. Byatt believes that only imagination and truth can illuminate the inner secret life. For Byatt in this novel all biographical endeavors are flawed and
limited by their own agendas. Thirwell believes this reflects the suspicious attitude to contemporary literary biography. She pointed out that for Byatt there is no direct line to the truth about the past. The protagonists, Roland and Maud, only find their Holy Grail through depossession—there is always something that biographies don’t have access to. Carole Walker, in her introduction to the conference, stated that many creative writers feel that biography is displacing the reading of literature itself and that the traffic between the two is perceived as problematic. For writers such as Byatt, Thirwell said that biography is ‘shadow play’; creative writing is seen as crushingly superior to biography. On the other hand Helen Garner commented in a recent speech to the Melbourne Writers’ Festival, published in The Sydney Morning Herald, (September 18 199): 6s, that people have been saying for years that the novel is dead, and that V.S Naipaul’s recent contention, ‘that the novel has had it—that non-fiction is where the energy is now’, may be the inspiration for ‘the dangerous and exciting breakdown of the old boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, and the ethical and technical problems that are exploding out of the resulting gap.’

In her speech Angela Thirwell argued that in The Invention of Love Stoppard uses ‘surreal devices’ and calls himself a biographer who ‘tells the truth without being in thrall to the facts.’ For Thirwell Stoppard is claiming greater insight and empathy than in conventional biography.


Ibid., 385.

Ibid., 250.

Ibid., 136.

Ibid., 96.

Ibid., 29.

Ibid., 471.

Ibid., 473.

Ibid., 473.

Ibid., 422.

Ibid., 499.

Ibid., 503.

Ibid., 504.

Ibid., 511.


Ibid., 8.


Ibid., G2.


Ibid., 17.


Ibid., 58.


Ibid., 67.

Ibid., 7.

Ibid., xiii.

Ibid., 176-177.
90 Ibid., 177.
91 Ibid., 205.
94 Ibid., 117.
CHAPTER TWO

An historical perspective of feminist biography.

This chapter will investigate the historical position of women’s biography. My purpose is to foreground the work of Virginia Woolf as a force with which all contemporary female biographers have had to reckon. There is a long break between Woolf’s work in the thirties and forties and the innovations of the late sixties and early seventies. Groundbreaking biographies by women are identified to provide a framework for the work of the contemporary female biographers that follows.

i. The history of the 'New Biography'.

The early biographies of Roman and medieval times were written to extol virtues. European biography derived from the lives of saints where the narrative was concerned with the all-important experience of holy dying and the subsequent miracles produced by death. In the eighteenth century biographers wrote of, ‘character and identity’. The Romantics shifted this focus to the singularity of the individual life. In the nineteenth century the ‘career’ or ‘life-course’ become seminal and the genre served a primarily eulogistic function. Then came Freud who still focused on achievement, but the will to achieve is seen as the sublimated expression of sexual desire, diverted from immediate gratification into tasks of culture and world improvement. This opened up private life—particularly the circumstances and techniques of early upbringing. It identified efforts at truth with investigations of the subject’s sexuality. Freud led the biographer away from the work to the life, because achievement is always something else displaced. With the iconoclasm and debunking of the moderns we see the impact of Freud coinciding with the cynicism and disillusionment of the First World War generation, and the pervading
scepticism of modernism. In the twentieth century the author's relations to the subject changed and point of view completely altered. The relationship between subject and author became more democratic with the biographer now seen as an equal.

The biographical canon is largely composed of texts that broke the mould and redefined our perception of the genre's contributions, possibilities and perimeters thus a number of 'seminal' biographies have shaped our conception of the form. Plutarch's work for example contributed to the development of biography as an apparently objective genre characterised by moral and cultural judgements. By Plutarch's time a conventional form of biography already existed. It began with an account of the subject's birth, family, and education, went on to delineate his character and recount the most important and typical events of his career, and concluded with an account of his posterity and influence. Plutarch followed this organisation fairly closely, but he employed it with far greater skill and variety than his predecessors. In writing the Lives it was not always the most famous events that he chose to record, but those that best illustrated the character of his subject. Plutarch had a clear moral purpose: to provide exemplars for himself and his readers, both to imitate if good and to avoid if bad. He worked on the assumption that a man's character is formed at birth and is revealed by his actions. Thus he opens his Life of Alexander by declaring that:

"For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities." ¹
Other canonical texts such as Samuel Johnson’s *Life of Savage* and James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* developed the form’s dual purposes of interpreting a unique individual and of making generalisations about human nature working upon Alexander Pope’s notion in *An Essay on Man* that:

“Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
The proper study of mankind is man.”

Virginia Woolf’s view in ‘The New Biography’ was that with Boswell, and his *Life of Johnson*, a life no longer showed itself in action that is evident but rather in that inner life of thought and emotion which, ‘meanders darkly and obscurely through the hidden channels of the soul’. With Boswell life consisted not only in actions or in works, but also in personality. Post Boswell, with Victorian biography, Woolf argues there is regression:

“Though truth was observed as scrupulously as Boswell observed it, the personality was hampered and distorted.”

The subject appears, ‘noble, upright, chaste and severe’. Character obsessed the Victorians but they were incurious about motives, lives were written as models for emulation, moral tales to show the connection between virtue and achievement. Thus Thomas Carlyle declared in, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*:

“The history of mankind is the history of great men: to find out these, clean the dirt from them, and place them on their proper pedestals.”

The break with this tradition came with James Anthony Froude’s *Thomas Carlyle. A History of His Life in London 1883-1881*(1884) in which Froude declared, ‘The sharpest scrutiny is the condition of enduring fame’. Froude argues that:
“No concealment is permissible about a man who could … take on himself the character of a prophet and speak to it in so imperious a tone.”

Thus Froude talks of Carlyle’s, ‘impatience, his irritability, his singular melancholy, which made him at times distressing as a companion’ because without these observations:

“his character cannot be understood, and because they affected others as well as himself.”

We can see here the link with Lytton Strachey’s credo in *Eminent Victorians*, ‘that there should be no reserve, and therefore I have practised none.’ For Woolf the ‘new biography’ of her contemporaries, such as Strachey, is refreshing in its lack of pose humbug, solemnity:

“they have no fixed scheme of the universe, no standard of courage or morality to which they insist that he shall conform.”

Man himself is the supreme object of curiosity. Laura Marcus sees ‘the new biography’ as defined as much by its reaction against Victorianism as by any positive identity of its own. Thus we can see that the canon is largely composed of texts that redefine our conception of the genre because they are a reaction to and a reflection of the societies in which they were written.

This raises the question of the historical place of women’s biography. All the canonical texts referred to are by men and it is not until Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Bronte* in 1857 that we see the first major work by a female biographer that breaks the mould and redefines our conception of the genre. This is a significant text as Gaskell
wrote to establish the reputation of her friend in death, to portray her as the dutiful
daughter, sister and wife in true Victorian fashion, but it also gave a glimpse of the
woman as writer, of the centrality of work in the life of Charlotte Bronte. The biography
thus focused upon, 'private life, relationships and character rather than on public
achievement'. However throughout the text the domestic is interwoven with work as I
discuss in the final section of this chapter.

If we concentrate on Charlotte Bronte as a subject a pattern within female biography can
be traced. Gaskell’s Victorian myth was never seriously challenged until Winifred Gerin
presented us with the imaginative, Romantic Charlotte she produced in the 1960’s.
Charlotte is no longer a Victorian but a product of her adolescence, which spanned the
years of the second wave of Romantics, such as Byron. This was a myth in line with the
freethinking, anti-establishment age in which it was written. It focuses on the more
gothic aspects of the life and presents a passionate, repressed Charlotte. In the eighties
Rebecca Fraser, influenced by the work of critics such as Elaine Showalter, introduced a
tough rebellious Charlotte, a visionary ahead of her time. Lyndall Gordon's Charlotte of
the nineties is a pilgrim, a strong and determined woman, continuing the feminist desire
for realistic and positive role models reflected in Fraser's work. The most recent
biographer of the Brontes, Juliet Barker, has presented us with a Charlotte that is a
product of our wish for 'truth'. It is not a flattering portrait, this Charlotte is resentful and
less than courageous, but it reflects our desire to 'tell all', and to hold nothing back.
There is a long gap between the work of Elizabeth Gaskell and Winifred Gerin. The
significant reshaping of the Bronte myth occurs as a result of the second wave of
feminism in the late sixties and early seventies and from this a new set of key texts
emerges. This pattern is reflected in the wider sphere of women’s biography, as it is not until 1970 and Nancy Milford’s *Zelda* that we encounter the next truly canonical feminist biographical text that significantly breaks the mould and redefines the genre for us.

However there is always an exception to the rule and the exception in terms of feminist biography is Virginia Woolf. It is only in the nineties that we have actually caught up with Woolf’s groundbreaking works of the thirties and forties with practitioners such as Diane Middlebrook and Hermione Lee absorbing Woolf’s thoughts about biography and introducing these into their own textual practice. So much of Woolf’s ideas about biography are reflected in a post-modernist consciousness in which certainties, such as language and gender, become problematic. Due to Woolf biography ceased to be the story of the lives of great men; a compendium of fact without context; a description of deeds rather than thoughts and motivations; the province of the extraordinary rather than the ordinary and quotidian. Woolf satirizes this propensity in *Orlando*. On returning to England in the early eighteenth century for example Orlando has Addison, Drydon and Pope pointed out to her as they talk in a coffeehouse. Woolf wrote in “The Lives of the Obscure”:

“It is one of the attractions of the unknown, their multitude, their vastness; for instead of keeping their identity separate, as remarkable people do, they seem to merge into one another, their very boards and titlepages and frontpieces dissolving, and their innumerable pages melting into continuous years so that we can lie back and look up into the fine mist-like substance of countless
lives, and pass unhindered from century to century, from life to life.”

Instead biography entered the inner landscape of the individual, bringing the past vividly to life by using an artist’s skill to recreate the details of everyday life to as truthfully as possible represent the past. Woolf was one of the first critics to really scrutinise the form and come to the conclusion that the traditional masculine model of biography could not accommodate the stories of women’s lives.

Woolf uses a fluid, diffuse, disseminated mode and style; and in this respect differs from anything rigid, conventional or realistic. Her ‘semiotic’ is opposed to anything fixed or static. Thus this ‘modernism’ meant a new emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity, that is, on how we see rather than what we see. This signifies a movement away from apparent objectivity provided by such features as: omniscient external narration fixed narrative points of view and clear moral positions. So in Orlando we experience a blurring of the distinctions between genres, a new liking for fragmented forms, discontinuous narrative, and random-seeming collages of disparate materials. There is also a tendency towards ‘reflexivity’ that Hermione Lee plays with so successfully in Virginia Woolf, in that poems, plays and novels and biographies raise issues concerning their own nature, status, and role. Woolf proposed that the meaning of any text is unstable. She sought out instabilities of attitude, the lack of a unified position, shifts in focus, shifts in time, or tone, or point of view, or attitude, or pace, or vocabulary. In Orlando Woolf made implicit and explicit reference to the unreliability and untrustworthiness of language. Woolf foregrounds parody, pastiche, and allusion,
because what is normally taken as a solid and real world is actually just a tissue of
dreamlike images. Woolf writes in the language of the unconscious.

Woolf rejected the eulogistic biography in favour of greater degrees of candour, and
substituted analysis and synthesis for the mere accumulation and enumeration of 'facts'.
In 'The New Biography' Woolf argues that truth of fact and truth of fiction are
incompatible, the biographer's imagination is always being stimulated and uses the
novelist's art of arrangement, suggestion, and dramatic effect to expound the private life.
Yet if he carries the use of fiction too far, so that he disregards the truth, or can only
introduce it with incongruity, he loses both worlds; he has neither the freedom of fiction
nor the substance of fact. ⁸ Historical truth for Woolf cannot ever convey the reality of a
life or time. To begin to sense another age: its smells, sights and sounds require the skill
of an artist. Yet this is complicated because the historian, and biographer, is constrained
by fact, fact that must be truthfully and accurately conveyed. Orlando contains
numerous lists. When Woolf details what Orlando buys to refurbish her mansion in the
seventeenth century she is parodying 'documentary exactitude', the piling of detail upon
detail as if the facts could speak for themselves. Whilst satirizing this form of
chronicling history, Laura Marcus has pointed out, the biographer's central task, for
Woolf, is to choose truths that 'transmit personality'. She wants to exploit the, 'richness,
the proper creativeness of 'fact'. The facts of life are not like the facts of science- once
they are discovered always the same. Facts are 'double faced'- open to more than one
interpretation and duplicitous in their claims to the status of a single truth. ⁹ This led to
an aesthetic emphasis that has meant biographers today are much more self-conscious
about their own practice and the process of selection and analysis that is the basis of
Woolf fore grounded the issue of gender particularly when looking at Victorian women who had to exist within a rigid code of femininity. Thus in her discussion of Charlotte Bronte in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf commented that it was one thing for Tolstoy to be soldiering around Eastern Europe gaining experience and seducing gypsies. However it was quite another for a middle class woman to express any sort of passion, or any suppressed desire for affection or a wider sphere in life:

“She knew, no one better, how enormously her genius would have profited if it had not spent itself in solitary visions over distant fields; if experience and intercourse and travel had been granted her.”

Woolf also suggests that language use is gendered, so that when a woman turns to novel writing she finds that there is, ‘no common sentence ready for her use’. The argument is that the female writer is seen as suffering the handicap of having to use a medium (prose writing) that is essentially a male instrument fashioned for male purposes. If normative language can be seen as in some way male oriented the question arises as to whether there might be a form of language free from this bias, or even in some way oriented towards the female.

An androgynous view of gender roles led Woolf to see that there is no single 'core' self that once discovered is the key to understanding the individual. For Woolf the self is much more fluid and indistinct, we are all made up of many selves and we can never truly 'know' another person. The biographer no longer looks for a single essentially
knowable individual and acknowledges, unlike the omniscient Victorian biographer, that parts of the subject will always remain hidden. As Laura Marcus claims Woolf's experiments in biography place generic and gender identities and boundaries at risk, radically disrupting the concept of the life course and breaking up, 'the fixities of Victorian biography.' For Woolf language and gender were arbitrary constructions around which the self was formed. In her focus upon personality rather than action Woolf led us into a post Freudian world in which the inner life became just as important as the outer life. This inner world is a world that exists beyond socially constructed roles and is a place in which mind has no sex. For Woolf the social self that houses this inner self has to be deconstructed in order to understand the subconscious desires and motivations that are the focus of this interior world. Structures such as language become indeterminate within this paradigm. Freud influenced Woolf's thoughts on biography in that she absorbed Freud's contention that unconscious drives and desires constantly exert a pressure on our conscious thoughts and actions. In psychoanalysis the human subject is a complex entity, of which the conscious mind is only a small part. This not only encompasses unconscious sexual desires, fears and phobias, but also a host of conflicting material, social, political and ideological factors of which we are unaware. Once one has accepted this view of the subject, however, it becomes impossible to argue that even our conscious wishes and feelings originate within a unified self, since we have no knowledge of the possibly unlimited unconscious processes that shape our conscious thought. For Woolf the task of biography was to deconstruct the external factors that form the individual's social self in order to gain some understanding of the unconscious processes that shape the inner life.
Each biography bears multiple relations to earlier works; each new work seems to encapsulate something of the history of the form. Contemporary female biographers have absorbed the past and gone on to redefine our conception of the genre through this engagement. The work of Virginia Woolf has been seminal in its influence and women writing within this field have had to respond to Woolf's thoughts on the nature and purpose of biography. In the seventies the response was to reject Woolf as the pre-eminent essentialism of this period meant that many feminists subscribed to the traditional notion that the identities of men and women are biologically, psychically, and socially fixed or determined. This has since been challenged by the argument that the patriarchy positions women as the 'other' on a biological, psychic and social level and that woman signifies sexual difference, but there is not a fixed and stable identity. Thus Woolf has taken on thematic and conceptual importance for the contemporary female biographer and her views have been absorbed into current textual practice.

ii. Essentialism and biography.

The representation of women in biography was an important form of socialization, since it provided role models, which demonstrated to women, and men, what acceptable versions of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations constituted. Nancy Milford's *Zelda* (1970) is the first canonical feminist biography to reflect this tradition and represents an important step in the development of a feminist epistemology. Milford's work reflects an essentialism with which we are no longer comfortable: subscribing to the traditional notion that the identities of men and women are biologically psychically, and socially fixed or determined. This does not
acknowledge a post-modernist perception that identity is constructed according to
difference. Nevertheless though the desire for role models is problematic Zelda is
significant because the subject was interesting as a victim, a woman 'kept down' by a
famous man. Milford used evidence from Zelda's psychiatrists to illuminate her thesis,
reflecting an interest in the pathology of female victims that was part of the new feminist
consciousness of the seventies. Scott's appropriation of their life for his art, and his
rejections of Zelda's attempts at self-expression, are seen as a feminist parable. What
Milford was doing in Zelda was fresh and exciting: questioning an icon and redefining a
well-established narrative. Zelda is a work that is grounded in the feminist politics of its
time. Reflected throughout Milford's narrative is the dictum of the personal as political
that allowed women to share private stories about issues such as abuse, sexuality,
madness, pregnancy, abortion and education. Much of what was revolutionary about this
period is now commonplace. Historically work such as Milford's was the starting point
from which a more sophisticated feminist epistemology has emerged.

Feminist critics have acknowledged the impact of Zelda. Carolyn G Heilbrun stated that
Zelda's significance laid above all in the way it revealed F. Scott Fitzgerald's assumption
that he had a right to the life of his wife as artistic property. She remained anonymous
until this biography, and was did not have a story until this point:

"Anonymity, we have long believed, is the proper condition of
women. Only in 1970 were we ready to read not that Zelda had
destroyed Fitzgerald, but Fitzgerald her: he had usurped her
narrative." 12

Margaret Anne Doody argues that the half-liberated women of the late nineteenth
century and the twentieth century were induced to accept a version of themselves as servants to the 'higher' male. The highest calling for a woman was not to be a creator herself, far less a 'genius', for of course women were not 'naturally' those things. Doody concludes that:

"The highest calling of a woman of considerable mental power and sensitivity is to serve the man of genius." ¹³

Elaine Showalter quotes Phyllis Rose as saying that there was a sense that in the late Sixties and early Seventies women were finding out things about women's experience they hadn't known before. *Zelda* is a perfect example of this sense of discovery. ¹⁴ Milford frames her opening remarks in terms of a quest:

"I had somewhat innocently- if a passionate curiosity about another life is ever innocent- entered into something I neither could nor would put down for six years, and in that quest the direction of my life changed. Ahead of me were encounters in this country, in London, Paris, and Switzerland I could never have dreamed of, never invented." ¹⁵

This 'quest' is a feminist one. In articulating the notions of femininity that made Zelda a victim Milford is outlining for other women social and sexual paradigms that may help them understand how women become victims and thus avoid that fate. The aim of this quest was to present possibilities. In deconstructing the prevailing modes of femininity feminists such as Milford were challenging women to look for new ways of being. Milford's study is dominated by the presentation of Zelda as a victim of a 'Southern-belle' notion of femininity that would eventually lead to her mental decline and the loss
of her creativity. Within this context Scott is portrayed as the patriarchal destroyer of
Zelda's narrative: the purveyor of a code of masculinity that did not allow Zelda to give
free reign to her own creative ability, thus effectively appropriating Zelda for his own
artistic purposes. Milford details the effect of the ideal of Southern womanhood upon
Zelda, and how this ideal shaped who she was and how she related to others, particularly
men. To give a picture of the social context in which she grew up, and against which she
was reacting, Milford describes a house party and dance at the Key-Ice Club at the
University of Alabama, which Zelda attended in January 1918. As the central ritual of
this club a ceremony was performed in which the men marched in solemnly, carrying
flaming torches, while at the rear of the procession four of them walked beside a long
cake of ice drawn on a cart. The toast on this occasion was:

"To woman, lovely woman of the Southland, as pure and chaste
as this sparkling water, as cold as this gleaming ice, we lift this
cup, and we pledge our hearts and our lives to the protection of
her virtue and her chastity." 16

Milford is making a political point: the denial of self that occurs when women are only
viewed by men as 'Madonna's or whores', and the role playing that is evident when
women adopt these personas to please men. Milford compares, 'the white Southern
woman's position' to 'the Negro's' and in so doing is continuing her political emphasis by
presenting Zelda as a slave within this feminine ideal: women are as enslaved by
femininity as people of color are enslaved by race. 17 She quotes Zelda as saying:

"it's very difficult to be two simple people at once, one who
wants to have a law to itself and the other who wants to keep all
the nice old things and be loved and safe and protected." 18
This, as Milford argues, was not only difficult but also called for contradictory definitions of self. What Zelda did not take into account was, that the code of femininity to which she adhered, 'was potentially destructive and that it would demand its own continual and wearying performance.'

The purpose of Milford's narrative is to rewrite the Scott and Zelda myth. Zelda was to be seen as the victim of Scott's ambitions rather than as the destroyer of them. Milford believes that Scott's bitterness towards Zelda was, 'stimulated by his feeling that Zelda had failed him, had used him financially'. His drinking and failures in relation to his art were all laid on Zelda's grave. This feminist analysis of her decent into madness, her reprieves and setbacks are all underscored by an image, laid in the twenties, gradually eroding and destroying, through jealousies and mutual dependence, two individuals who could not eventually live together, but could not let go. Zelda's desire to find something of her own: her attempts at dancing, painting and writing, become desperately tragic. On Zelda's release from Prangins, the institution she had been in for a year and three months, on September 15, 1931, her case was summarized as a reaction, 'to her feelings of inferiority (primarily toward her husband)'. She was said to have ambitions which were 'self deceptions' and which, 'caused difficulties between the couple.' Milford argues that the fact that Zelda's desire for something of her own, her attempts at self expression, were seen as delusional by the male doctors who treated her during this time is closely connected to the fact that Zelda defined herself through her relationship with Scott. That Scott resented Zelda's attempts at self-expression is carefully documented. Milford explains that:

"Scott felt that Zelda's dancing was executed in a spirit of
vengeance against him and needled her about her commitment to it." 21

Milford is at pains to show that it was, 'not simply vengeance that motivated Zelda; it was a desire to find something of her own that might give her release from her life with Scott.' The irony of the situation is highlighted by their letters that show that, 'without Scott Zelda's own existence and estimation of herself were impaired.' The only way to prove her 'normality', to herself and others, was to play an acceptable feminine role that reassured everybody, her ambition, anger and resentment all had to be repressed and her dependence stressed. Milford concludes with a discussion Scott had with Zelda's therapist in which he claimed she was a 'third rate writer and a third rate ballet dancer.'

Scott stated:

"I am a professional writer, with a huge following. I am the highest paid short story writer in the world."

Milford points out that throughout the discussion they continually came back to the point that Scott was the professional writer and he was supporting Zelda; therefore, the entire fabric of their life was his material, none of it was Zelda's. He believed:

"Everything we have done is mine...I am the professional novelist, and I am supporting you. That is all my material. None of it is your material." 22

For the purposes of Milford's narrative of Zelda as victim Scott could not have condemned himself more thoroughly. The irony is of course that Milford has also appropriated Zelda's story for political purposes and the figure that is portrayed is thus perceived from within this context.
In an era in which the personal became political women shared private narratives about issues such as abuse, sexuality, madness, pregnancy, abortion and education, that reflected the climate of consciousness raising and political mobilisation of this period. The feminist writing that emerged within this framework was part of a search for a new history, a new sense of what it meant to be a woman that would lead to a new social and sexual order. *Zelda* is representative of the feminist politics of this period in that it focused upon Zelda as a victim and is reductive in this context. However, whilst much of what was revolutionary in women's writing of this period is now commonplace, it has had a fundamental influence upon female consciousness, women were now talking and writing about matters that directly impacted upon their lives. Any form of political action requires a stable category of women in whose name it speaks and acts. Milford's narrative represents an awareness that the stories of women's lives had been lost within the patriarchal structures their political struggles were trying to dismantle. The 'life-writing' that followed was forever changed because of this knowledge and what has emerged is a more complex epistemology that reflects the subverting of traditional forms.

iii. Hidden Lives and a 'New Biography'.

Margaret Forster's biography *Hidden Lives* (1995) has its roots in the feminism of the seventies and the reclamation of the lives of women of the past who had been hidden and ignored throughout the centuries. Nevertheless represents historically the more sophisticated and highly developed texts that have emerged from this tradition and helped to redefine the form. Forster writes of lives that would be considered insignificant within the parameters of traditional biography and yet demonstrates it is
their very 'insignificance' that makes them relevant. This work illustrates how women's lives are being examined in new ways in order to provide the necessary narratives to help women break, in Barbara Caine's words, 'the bonds of womanhood' that so enslaved their foremothers. Forster subverts the traditional biographical form through using quotidian repetitions rather than chronological detail. Whilst feminists of the seventies understood Virginia Woolf's contention that the traditional masculine model of biography could not accommodate the lives of women, they adapted that same model for their own ends. Work such as Forster's takes this a step further by rejecting this model and searching for a new form that still reflects the preoccupations of their feminist roots.

It was Virginia Woolf in her article 'The Lives of the Obscure' (1938) who first articulated the relevance and importance of recording the lives of ordinary people. 'Second wave' feminists pursued this goal as part of a desire to write the history of their foremothers in order to gain a better understanding of their own situation and frustrations. The importance of Hidden Lives, Forster's biographical study of her grandmother, Margaret Ann, and her mother Lily, lies in the fact that while their experiences may seem 'trivial' and 'unimportant' in the scheme of things their lives were mirrored by thousands of other working class women. Thus these lives can help daughters who, like Forster, have so many unanswered questions about these women and the price they paid for their unquestioning acceptance of their lot. Virginia Woolf talked of, 'looking back through our mothers', and Forster's generation of 'second wave' feminists, looking back through 'liberated' eyes, used writing to try to understand and resolve their own complicated relationship to, and rejection of, their mother's circumstances. As Forster states at the end of her narrative:
"all the women whose lives and times I have touched upon,
would have been able to fulfil themselves in an entirely different
and much more gratifying way if they could have benefited from
the radical changes in the last half century from which I
benefited." 24

To forget this is, 'an insult to the women who have gone before', like her grandmother
and mother, who having been born working-class girls in 1869 and 1901, lived in times
we can be 'glad' not to have been born into. 25 Forster's description of the 'domestic
servitude' of these women is a metaphor for a deeper and more insidious imprisonment
of the spirit.

Forster tells a 'familiar, sad little tale', of the illegitimate daughter of a servant girl- her
great-grandmother, Annie Jordon, and her grandmother, Margaret Ann- a tale
suppressed and shrouded in mystery by her mother and grandmother. This tale is
'pathetic', 'banal', 'ordinary', 'disappointing', there is no great mystery just a tragic
commonplace, made even more bathetic by the revelation that Margaret Ann also had an
illegitimate daughter, Alice, whom she never acknowledged. 26 Forster shows the tale is
much more than this wanting to know would help her understand not only her own
history:

"but that of a whole generation of working-class women (and
perhaps of a great many middle-class women too, those who may
have had the means and education to be independent but who
believed their marital duty was to put their family first)." 27

As Forster points out her grandmother's life:
“was no harder than any other woman's in her position, the point precisely. The physical hardship, the sheer energy and strength needed to get through each day, was commonplace.”

Margaret Ann was only doing what was expected:

“down on her knees scrubbing, up to her elbows in boiling or freezing water washing and rinsing dishes, rocking on her feet with weariness after hours of rushing up and down stairs.”

To highlight this Forster gives an enlightening account of Margaret Ann's day as the servant of the Stephenson family in Paternoster Row, Carlisle, from 1893. Forster describes how Margaret Ann rose at six in the morning and was never in bed before midnight. She was, 'on the go all morning, making porridge, making tea, rushing backwards and forwards to the dining room laying and clearing the table and carrying heavy trays.' As the morning progressed Margaret Ann made beds, 'a laborious business with so many blankets and quilts and eiderdowns to shake and spread'; dusted scores of furniture with, 'cluttered surfaces and endless mirrors'; and then sorted the washing to be sent out. Then there was dinner to serve, mending and shopping to do tea to prepare and clear, and then the kitchen to be put to rights. Through Margaret Ann's very acceptance of its inevitability Forster's wonderful evocation of her grandmother's day makes the experience both poignant and universal, this was just the way it was, just as her daughter, Lily, later accepted her lot on wash day as being just the way things were. It may seem strange to find the account of such an ordinary activity so moving, but Forster’s description of this quotidian task again makes the banal universal. The scene feels like an ancient female ritual, an endless form of sacrifice that is inescapable a, 'tightly structured domestic slavery'. The, 'evil metal cauldron' bubbles away and
the women scrub, ‘everything viciously after the whole lot had been pounded by the dolly’. Then there is the, ‘back-breaking mangling’. As Forster explains early married life for Lily, and for thousands of other women was, ‘rather a sequence of giving up things’. In Lily's case she gave up a respected and well paid job as a clerk in the Public Health Department, a job she loved but had to leave on marriage as married women were not employed by the department. Forster shows how for Lily and her sister Jean, and again the thousands of other women of their generation, 'The further the two of them got into the life of a mother and a working-man's wife the more alluring their past careers became.' For these women the only real compensation was their sons:

“They doted on them and if they had not given up their jobs, they could not have had them, could they?”

What also remains is the lingering question of Alice, Margaret Ann's illegitimate daughter about whom Forster develops theories, 'the romantic, the melodramatic, the sordid', all of which can be made to work but none of which can ever be proved. Forster questions why it matters when it is all so trivial- 'when Margaret Ann and Alice were nobodies and it was so long ago?' In answer to her own question Forster replies:

“Because, somehow, my grandmother, in not recognizing Alice, in keeping her a secret from her other three daughters, was part of a pattern. Secrecy and suppression were part of the fabric of life for women who had illegitimate children then, and not to be able to know precisely why such secrecy was so vital robs me of the kind of understanding I want to have.”

Forster acknowledges that this pattern of secrecy and suppression caused her mother to
have a breakdown in the spring of 1943. An occurrence that had a stigma attached to it equal to the bearing of an illegitimate child. The breakdown was an event obscured by, 'a cloud of freezing ice', and that, 'deliberate suppression of the truth which my grandmother turns out to have been so good at.' Forster's narrative breaks this pattern. In acknowledging and recording these 'trivial' lives Forster is not only cracking through the ice to write her own history but the history of all the other women who lived the lives of quiet desperation that she so movingly recreates. In writing Forster gets closer to the kind of understanding that she wants and that has benefited her generation and the generations of women who can be 'glad' their lives are lived after the Margaret Anns and Lilys of this world.

In understanding the sort of life she did not want to live, that of her mother and grandmother, Forster was able to recognize the sort of life that she did want. Through her friends at Somerville College, Oxford, Forster met mothers who did appear to have everything- marriage, children, and career- and make it work. As Forster's states:

"What I'd always lacked and wanted were convincing role models and now I had them." Forster's knowledge of what she could do with her life only came through examining the lives of other women, which is why studies such as hers are so very necessary. They provide the models that could have made all the difference to women such as Margaret Ann and Lily, who accepted what was because they knew of no other alternative. As part of this paradigm there have been various biographies written about the wives of male writers that have rescued these women from obscurity and again provided a new perspective on female experience. Kathleen Jones, in her book about the wives and
daughters of the Lake Poets, points out that:

“in order to conform to society's notions of what women were supposed to be, much of a woman's real personality—particularly her longings and expectations was suppressed.”

Jones talks of the subversive female 'other'- 'a truculent, disobedient, independently minded, creative, sexual being, whose face rose towards them every time they looked in the mirror.'³⁹ In Forster's study domestic detail helps to crack through suppression and silence. In both cases the quotidian is used to convey realities that history conveniently ignored or forgot.

Forster's work can be seen as part of a new awareness that the model of biography as the study of great and exceptional people makes women marginal, as only very few can ever fit into its framework. It reinforces the idea that only public achievement is significant and that those women who lead predominantly domestic lives are of no particular interest. Barbara Caine believes that traditional biography is antithetical to some of the basic aims and approaches of women's history, particularly when looking at issues such as sexuality, the economic, domestic and cultural basis of women's oppression and the cultural and social relationships of women.⁴⁰ Forster's narrative demonstrates Caine's point and what is now constantly being emphasized is the need to recover, explore and understand the lives of women who have been 'hidden' from history:

“The very things that have rendered prominent women of interest to biographers— their exceptional nature, their unusual experiences, their great achievements— made them relatively useless to historians seeking to re-create and to understand the
day to day struggles of women whose lives were largely unrecorded." 41

The experiences of these women become important not just for what they tell us about themselves individually, but because, read in particular ways, they can illuminate the lives of women generally, albeit women only of a particular class or location, Forster's argument precisely. The problematical nature of women's lives and the gendered nature of every aspect of experience are emphasized through this approach. The interest in locating the lives of women within networks of friends, relatives, lovers or associates has been seen as a distinctive characteristic of feminist biography and is discussed in more detail in chapter 8.

iv. Politics and the personal.

This next historically relevant text I wish to examine is Deidre Bair's biography of Simone de Beauvoir (1990) to demonstrate how the dictum of the personal as political has been incorporated into a more sophisticated understanding of the biographical paradigm. Bair addresses issues that would have previously been ignored within a biographical context and which are a legacy of this dictum. Indeed the issue of the personal as political is complicated in the case of Simone de Beauvoir because her life was a reflection of this issue. Whilst feminism may have moved on the personal as political still has validity when writing female biography because for women the mix between the professional and the personal is still more problematic than for the male. Issues that were addressed because of this dictum, such as sexuality, abuse and violence, have dominated discussions about women writers. For example Virginia Woolf has been presented as a victim rather than a busy professional writer. However this balance has
been redressed through work such as Bair's, which does aim to show how difficult this mix between the personal, and professional is for women, and how a writer such as Beauvoir can help us to understand this.

As I pointed out in my discussion of *Zelda* the philosophy of the personal as political meant those issues such as sexuality, abuse and abortion were taken out of the home and became the subject of political debate and legislation. The emergence of this new agenda meant that the traditional objective, masculine approach to the writing of lives was challenged by a new form of subjectivity in life writing, adopted by feminists to best incorporate this new philosophy. This sparked a wider debate about the validity of objective scholarship in a variety of disciplines, such as history, that were under scrutiny because of new feminist thought and mobilization. Bair takes to heart this dictum by emphasizing personal details in order to understand the forces that shaped Beauvoir's influential feminist thinking and writing. Bair chose to write of Beauvoir because she saw her as a woman who had found satisfaction in both her professional and personal life, an issue that was of great concern to women such as Bair who were trying to find ways to satisfactorily combine both. In her introduction to this biography Bair states that she wanted to write a biography of a woman:

“but one whose professional life was intellectually stimulating to me and whose personal life was satisfying to her- if such a rare creature existed.” ⁴²

She believes that she was searching for a woman to write about:

“who had made a success of both life and work, since I and so many of my friends were having difficulty integrating satisfying
Bair interviewed Beauvoir over a six-year period from 1981, when she was 73, until her death in 1986, and stated that her questions ranged from, 'the introspective to the impertinent'. Bair wanted, 'detailed explications of her political theory, her philosophical perspective and the genesis of her writings.' In this context Bair asked for Beauvoir's definition of the meaning of love, and whether it changed with each of the three men with whom she was publicly involved. Beauvoir's partnership with Jean-Paul Sartre is a unique opportunity to examine how biographers, no matter how equal the relationship might have been in terms of the work produced, have approached the lives of men and women differently. In her introduction Bair provides an anecdote about the way Beauvoir's relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre dominated her text. Sartre became a 'secret sharer' of the narrative, in contrast to the brief appearance Beauvoir makes in a recent biography of Sartre. Bair describes a panel discussion at Harvard when she was speaking with Annie Cohen-Solal, one of Sartre's biographers. Bair points out that in her biography Cohen-Solal, 'speaks briefly and succinctly' of Beauvoir, whereas Bair found it, 'impossible to write about Beauvoir without referring to Sartre on almost every page'. Bair records how at the end of the question and answer session she couldn't help but comment, 'to her distinguished audience', that, 'every question asked about Sartre concerned his work while all those asked about Beauvoir concerned her personal life.' Bair had to admit that 'she was disappointed'. This highlights one of the most problematic influences the dictum of the personal as political has had on biography, that in opening up all areas of the life for discussion the work and achievements of women writers have often been lost in a mire of personal and intimate revelation. Bair defends her work by taking to heart the belief that, 'we must interpret the facts and events of'
women's lives in new and different ways', asking questions such as how menstruation and menopause affected Beauvoir's writing life. 46 According to Bair, Beauvoir, 'considered all these questions with equal seriousness and answered them carefully.' This intimate material is included in the book because Bair sees it as, 'central rather than gratuitous', believing that:

"the biography of women should include such information when it contributes to an understanding of the subject's decisions, her choices, and, in the case of a creative woman, her work." 47

For Bair this is a work of 'synthesis and analysis', rather than a traditional chronological biography, and one that has a specifically feminist agenda, reflecting, 'the excellent feminist scholarship' in many disciplines. 48 Thus Bair uses a methodology that crosses a number of disciplinary boundaries to answer her central question:

"how do X's life and work illuminate our cultural and intellectual history; how did X influence the way we think about ourselves and interpret our society; and finally, what can we learn from X's life and work that will be of use us once we have read his/her biography?" 49

To look at how Bair answers these questions in the context of the life and work of Simone de Beauvoir I will look at how Bair presents Beauvoir's relationship with Nelson Algren, the Chicago writer whom Beauvoir met on her first trip to the United States in 1947. The correspondence between Beauvoir and Algren has recently been published and thus renewed interest in their relationship. Bair uses her interview material to reveal intimate details of the relationship and then connects Beauvoir's behavior with Algren to the feminist understanding Beauvoir gleaned from analyzing herself within this union.
Deidre Bair introduces Nelson Algren into the narrative by quoting the first letter Beauvoir wrote to him in 1947. Beauvoir addresses Algren as 'Dear Friend', and tells him that after leaving Philadelphia she was on her way to spend her last two weeks in New York before her May 10 departure for Paris. She wanted to return to Chicago, but had too many engagements and she wanted Algren to join her at her hotel in New York. 'I will be happy to see you again,' Beauvoir concluded, with what Bair terms 'polite formality' before signing the letter with the customary signature she used for strangers and people she did not know well: S. de Beauvoir. Bair then relies on her interview material to report that:

"The signature disguised her shyness, because in the two days she had spent with him in late February Nelson Algren 'turned [her] life upside down.' They became lovers almost at once and with him, she remembered, she had her 'first complete orgasm' and she learned 'how truly passionate love could be between men and women.' "

Bair believes that for Beauvoir:

"suddenly everything changed: she who had refused all her life to play the traditional woman's role in a relationship with a man found herself doing everything she reviled and more with Nelson Algren." 

For example Bair records how when Algren arrived in New York she dropped all contact with her New York friends, 'she stopped going to parties, and she ended all previous liaisons.' Bair describes how on her return to Paris Beauvoir, 'was so disoriented that she actually took drugs for the first and last time in her life.' Bair then
looks at how this relationship with Algren 'cemented' Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre and the pact made by Sartre and Beauvoir to, 'last for the rest of their lives as a professional couple.' Bair argues that because they were both involved in contingent relationships, Sartre primarily with Dolores Vanetti Ehrenreich, the bond between Beauvoir and Sartre, 'was strengthened by knowing that they could turn to each other for comfort and, more important, for approval.' All the while, however, Algren and Dolores were bewildered 'by their lovers' seeming indifference to separation', while Beauvoir and Sartre were:

"congratulating themselves for the clarity of their vision which let them place fidelity to their pact and its importance within their lives ahead of everything and everyone else." 54

This new closeness between Beauvoir and Sartre 'encouraged' Beauvoir, 'to tell Sartre everything she felt for Nelson Algren, and to recount the development of their relationship in the same detail that he always used to tell her of his other women.' Because of Sartre's 'unstinting' approval Beauvoir:

"was able to find the necessary stasis to balance her role as French intellectual and companion to Sartre with the equally important role of that exotic creature, Nelson Algren's 'Frog wife'." 55

To take this further Bair looks at how Algren filled another important role in Beauvoir's life that of, 'mentor for all things American, especially the political and social history of the United States.' 56 Bair describes how in almost every letter Algren would recommend books that he particularly liked and wanted her to share, such as Edith Wharton's Ethan Frome, which reminded her of Hardy's novels, but without Hardy's intense sympathy for
his characters. Beauvoir often found these works, 'interesting and applicable to her own writing and thinking.' Algren also sent Beauvoir comic books, which he, 'adored for their humor and fantasy.' As Beauvoir had, 'a limited sense of humor and no liking for nonreality', she used comic books as a source for:

"intellectual comparisons about many things, including the gender roles that Americans expected their heroes to play. The comic books were excellent illustrations of the concept of dédoublement, or 'doubling': the hero and the average man are the same- Clark Kent is also Superman."

Bair maintains that while much of Beauvoir and Algren's correspondence during this time was 'loving and playful', beneath the teasing:

"lay the concerns which were coalescing in her mind and preoccupying her more and more, particularly the role of the female in a heterosexual relationship. She contrasted the two men she loved, her place in each of their lives, and the two societies in which they lived and in which she now had to function because of them." 57

Bair believes that coupled with, 'her own firsthand observations of women in the United States and France', the idea of, 'studying the condition of women grew slowly and steadily more appealing.' This analysis of Beauvoir's relationships with Algren and Sartre demonstrates how Bair views the intellectual and personal in Beauvoir's life as interwoven. Intimate details, such as Beauvoir's sexual gratification with Algren, show how Beauvoir's reactions within this relationship, atypical for Beauvoir but in many ways typically 'feminine', were used by Beauvoir to draw conclusions about the nature
Feminist biographers, such as Bair, have made us more aware of the importance of the biographer in shaping and presenting the life. Carolyn Heilbrun has pointed out that although feminists early discovered that the private is public previously most of the biographer's effort had gone into justifying female ambition and describing, or apologizing, for her unique achievement. Women of achievement, Heilbrun believes, could not previously have been seen to lead exemplary lives, because the writing of their life was always an apology for not being traditional:

"The public and private lives cannot be linked, as in male narratives. We hardly expect the career of an accomplished man to be presented as being in fundamental conflict with the demands of his marriage and children." 

A feminist biography such as Bair's can show how women can face the problems of achieving whilst trying to live successful personal and professional lives.

In *The New Feminism* (1998) Natasha Walter has argued that the personal as political is a concept that is no longer valid for feminists. Walter acknowledges that the link that feminists made between the personal and the political shattered, 'the complacency of the traditional masculine viewpoint'. This fusion of private and political issues, 'can never now be put aside. It transformed our lives.' But Walter argues the:

"mindset of the women's movement has become a shell we must crack. Feminism has overpersonalized the political and overpoliticised the personal, and in the process has lost sight of
its two great, longstanding goals: political equality and personal freedom.”

Walter believes that although the fusion of the personal and the political was once, 'our weapon for freedom'. It has now become a 'cage'. I would answer Walter by saying that Bair’s *Simone de Beauvoir* is a historically significant text that deserves its place in the biographical canon as what seems to belong to the personal sphere has both an effect and an importance in the political arena.

v. Feminist epistemology and the biographical paradigm.

Jenny Uglow's work on Elizabeth Gaskell (1993) is historically important as it provides a wonderfully complex view of the intricacies that underpin the biographical narrative of a writer, writing of a writer, who has also written the life of another writer- Charlotte Bronte. This complexity of vision, what I term the 'hall of mirrors' effect, is a more sophisticated, adult reading of what has gone before. Theoretical underpinnings laid in the seventies have helped us to understand issues such as gender more clearly, and thus freed us to act as creative individuals, unconstrained by the 'prism of gender'. Texts such as Uglow’s enable us to view women's lives from this more theoretical and very necessary perspective.

There has been a shift from practical feminism to a more theoretical analysis of the social, ideological and cultural forces that have made such a movement necessary. This has meant that writers and critics are more concerned with determining the theories, or grounds of knowledge, that constructed the self, or subject, that they are shaping, than they are in describing the deeds or actions that they feel make the life worthy of record.
The question is thus not one of outcome, but of the forces that produced a particular reading of a particular subject, by a particular biographer at a particular period of time. What we see is rather like looking through a hall of mirrors with the subject distorting and blurring with each new perspective on the self. From the point of view of this thesis I am writing about the biographer, who is writing about the writer, who might, for example in the case of Jenny Uglow writing of Elizabeth Gaskell, who was in turn writing a life of Charlotte Bronte, be writing about another writer. Each remove takes us deeper into the hall of mirrors. Feminist biographers are increasingly more concerned with this complexity of this vision than they are with the actual vision itself. They have become aware that a feminist epistemology is necessary in order to comprehend the problematic perspective through which the subject is imaged. For example the subject may be perceived as gendered and classed and framed by the particular theories or grounds of knowledge that create this mindset, but the narrative is also shaped by textual practices, influenced by these ideologies, that underlie the biographer's presentation of the subject. The question becomes not what women produced but how they produced it within the context of the gendered and classed society in which they are located and how this is incorporated in the biographer's own ideologically situated textual practices.

In a letter to me discussing this thesis Jenny Uglow wrote that:

"I rarely (never!) think in the abstract, or conceptually about my work, and wouldn't be comfortable doing so. Also women have written biographies for the trade, just as much as men, since the 1740s- so it hardly seems new, or different, though I'm sure it is. As a publisher I edit loads of biographies, by both men and women...and the difference in approach seems far more to do
Despite the fact that Uglow denies thinking in the abstract or conceptually about her work identity is complex and 'multiply given'. Regardless of whether she acknowledges it Uglow, as a woman and as a writer, is viewing her subject from a position that is problematic. The result of a complexity of social, cultural, and ideological forces that all impact on the way she as a biographer and as a woman views the world. Uglow's biography of Elizabeth Gasakieli is historically significant as it reveals this multiplicity, with Uglow commenting on Gaskelli, commenting on Bronte. Gaskelli, for her Victorian audience, wanted to show Charlotte as both woman and writer, Uglow in her presentation of Gaskelli, is in fact presenting Gaskelli with a similar balance. The domestic and the professional are intertwined in both and demonstrate that gender has played a significant part in both Uglow's presentation of Gaskelli and Gaskelli's presentation of Bronte.

In her chapter on Gaskelli's writing *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* Uglow quotes from Gaskelli's correspondence with her publisher, George Smith, to explain Gaskelli's hopes for the biography. In 1856 she wrote:

"I am sure the more fully she- Charlotte Bronte- the friend the daughter the sister the wife is known- and known where need be in her own words- the more highly will she be appreciated."  

Uglow comments that:

"the concentration on private life, relationships and character rather than on public achievement would make Gaskelli's book both conventionally yet subversively 'feminine', a contrast to the
In her biography of Gaskell, Uglow provides a mix of private life, relationships and character, as well as an analysis of Gaskell as a professional writer. Public achievement and domestic life are balanced in Uglow's biography, just as the woman and the writer are in Gaskell's. Uglow infuses her chapter on the writing of the biography with domestic detail; both work and life are interwoven, as daughter's copy and guests descend upon the household:

"Marianne and Meta copied piles of letters as they arrived and Snow Wedgwood, staying in October and November, was also commandeered. 'I am rather sick of writing,' Snow told her sister, 'as I have been copying for Mrs Gaskell." \(^{64}\)

Uglow continues, 'By 20 December 1855 the house was not only buried in papers but swamped by visitors.' Writing to an old friend from her time in Newcastle, Harriet Carr, Gaskell explained that between returning from Scotland and Christmas:

"we had nineteen people staying in the house. So I think you can imagine the necessarily quick succession...all this gaiety was but bad for the work I have in hand."

Uglow in writing of this domestic turbulence is looking at these events from a 'female perspective'. As a busy professional woman with a family, one can see Uglow recognizing the reality of Gaskell's life because she has faced similar upheavals. These are female, not male, realities and when writing on Gaskell, Uglow recognizes and responds to her situation, just as when Gaskell writes of Bronte she responds to the complexities of being both a woman and a writer. Uglow describes the actual manuscript of the \textit{Life} to illustrate this particularly feminine combination of the domestic and the
"The manuscript of the Life, now in the John Rylands Library, tells its own story. Some pages flow on untouched; others are heavily scored, with insertions scribbled on the back. Few lack corrections of punctuation, grammar and style in William's [Gaskell's husband's] neat writing. Often other hands appear—those of Marianne and Meta [Gaskell's daughters] copying in letters while their mother continues the narrative. Sometimes the gaps left for the daughters were too short and the final lines of a letter are crushed and cramped. Many of these letters were edited on the page itself."  

Uglow is careful to demonstrate that Gaskell edited to emphasize the womanly Charlotte, to protect her from charges of 'unfeminine' writing, arguing that this hid much of Charlotte's 'true' nature. When writing of Gaskell, Uglow is herself editing Gaskell's character through her own selections, emphasizing Gaskell's busy and restless domestic life and how this combined with her writing life. Uglow compares Gaskell's fully packed diary with Charlotte's more solitary existence. Uglow in turn emphasizes the 'friend' Gaskell, as well as the wife and the writer, using letters and anecdotes to balance her portrait of Gaskell, the wife, mother and busy writer. Uglow explains that Gaskell for example cut out details that related to Charlotte's comments on anyone's appearance and style of living, editing that Uglow points out, 'also edited Charlotte's character- we miss some of her humor, and much of her tartness'.  

Social and moral pressures also contributed to this editing, for example Gaskell didn't include Charlotte's desperate letters to Monsieur Heger, her Brussels's patron, because it would have destroyed her
reputation among the Victorian audience for whom Gaskell is writing. What is important to ask is what Uglow is editing of Gaskell's character in terms of our society's social, cultural and ideological constraints? To look at what Uglow emphasizes I would refer back to Deidre Bair's comment when writing of Simone de Beauvoir, that she chose Beauvoir because of her successful combination of a professional and personal life. Uglow, too, looks to how the Victorian Gaskell combined her position as writer and Minister's wife. What is fascinating is how these interwoven narratives reveal the 'hall of mirrors' effect. For example, Uglow comments on a particular moment in Gaskell's Life in which Gaskell points out how Charlotte put her domestic duties first, interrupting her writing to help her aged servant Tabby, yet conveying through the use of language the image of the pen still poised behind the domestic knife. Uglow quotes how Gaskell turns aside from Charlotte's own account of the:

“inspired, spasmodic composition of Jane Eyre to repeat a story told by others of how the servant Tabby, now over eighty, jealousy guarded her old household tasks, like peeling potatoes.”

Gaskell points out that as Tabby's sight was failing, she often left in the black specks, or 'eyes'. 'Miss Bronte was too dainty a housekeeper to put up with this', but couldn't bear to hurt Tabby's feelings, so she would quietly carry of the bowl and:

“breaking off in the full flow of interest and inspiration in her writing, carefully cut out the specks in the potatoes, and noiselessly carry them back to their place. This little proceeding may show how orderly and fully she accomplished her duties, even at those times when the 'possession' was upon her.”
Uglow views this jump as, 'deliberate and brilliant'. The picture of Charlotte with her sharp knife poised remains behind that of Charlotte, 'with her pen; her housekeeping and her writing', both 'silent duties', distinguished by 'scrupulous care'. As we have seen in her descriptions of Gaskell in the midst of her family and domestic upheavals whilst writing the biography Uglow herself poises Gaskell between pen and drawing room, and makes the same brilliant jumps between the two. This symmetry is evident at the end of Uglow's chapter on the *Life*. Uglow points out that by placing a quote from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* as an epigraph at the beginning of the *Life*: a woman who, 'had also struggled with a dominating father, but chosen not to stay', and ending with the words:

"Few beyond that circle of hills knew that she, whom the nations praised far off, lay dead that Easter morning. Of kith and kin she had more in the grave to which she was soon to be borne, than among the living." 68

Gaskell thus frames her biography of, 'the friend, the daughter, the sister, the wife,' at its beginning and its end with, 'hints of rebellion and self-exile', by the 'solitary fires' of a different kinship, 'the sisterhood of women writers'. The 'sisterhood' of women writers is evident in the theme of the woman as writer and as domestic being that travels through the web of narrative in Uglow's text.

As I pointed out in my introduction I wish to dispute Liz Stanley's contention that feminist biography is 'conventional' and 'mainstream'. I believe Uglow's work demonstrates that it is neither. For critics such as Stanley biography has failed to innovate as genres such as autobiography and fiction have done because of its traditional
form. What I am attempting to demonstrate is that textual practices such as Uglow's show how feminist biography whilst adhering to inherent conditions and limits is far from being the conventional form Stanley presents. Stanley insists that works of biography should be seen as composed by, 'textually-located ideological practices'- this includes any biography produced by the feminist biographer and analytically engaged with as such. As we have seen Deidre Bair is occupied with issues that concerned her as a contemporary female biographer whilst at the same time observing de Beauvoir's feminist consciousness and experience as a way of understanding her own. It seems to me that Bair clearly 'analytically engaged' with her material. Stanley refers to 'intellectual autobiography': a textual recognition of the importance of the labor process, of the biographer as researcher in reaching interpretations and conclusions. This practice is viewed as open, rejecting a narrow version of 'self' and arguing instead for the social construction of the self within a network of others. For Stanley this is an analytic, not just a descriptive concern. Feminist autobiography, she argues, has produced interesting and innovative approaches to 'self', to 'narrative', and to connections between biography and autobiography, fiction and fact, reality and fantasy and that these innovations have had little impact on feminist biography. 69 Stanley points clearly to the limits of the genre without privileging the impressive work being done within these parameters by contemporary female biographers, who are part of a tradition of 'life-writing' that has emerged along with a more complex feminist consciousness. As this consciousness has become more sophisticated so has textual practice. For Stanley, biography poses problems for the construction of a specifically feminist form in a way that autobiographies do not because of the boundaries set by the facts:

"Once 'fiction' and 'fantasy' enter, then biography as 'the truth'
about a self is seen to depart.” 70

Stanley feels that biography, as a genre is by no means separate from the autobiographies of those who produce it. Throughout this thesis I have pointed out that biography is constrained by fact and within this context fact is immutable but interpretation is culturally determined. Stanley is stating what feminists have long incorporated into their discourse- the centrality of subjectivity. Stanley views the 'spotlight' approach to a single individual as quite unlike life, where peers populate the lives of even the famous and the infamous:

“Only on paper does one person alone occupy the stage; and only on paper is the person in the limelight seen through the views of one commentator alone, who selects the evidence presented, decides what to include and exclude and which of the friends and lovers and enemies and acquaintances are significant and which not.” 71

Chapter 7 provides a reading of the work of Victoria Glendinning, who in her biography Vita deals specifically with this problem by looking at how to present a personality as strong as Vita Sackville-West within a complex network of relationships whilst still providing a balanced portrait of her subject. Stanley suggests that a distinct feminist autobiography is being constructed, characterized by a self-conscious and increasingly self-confident traversing of conventional boundaries between different genres of writing. A feminist form of biography is less well developed:

“because innovations in form are less easily accomplished and derive more from a feminist concern with epistemology.” 72

Whilst biographers are less able to transcend genres there is still a strong sense of
experimentation and discovery within the form. The historically important work outlined in this chapter points clearly to a well-developed form of feminist biography. Feminist biographers are much more self-reflexive about their biographical practice, thinking about gender relations for example, while also thinking about how you are thinking, or could be thinking about them. I feel that Stanley is in fact dismissing much of the very subtle readings of biography being done by critics, such as Laura Marcus, who whilst acknowledging the limitations of the biographical paradigm also articulate the sophisticated epistemology that underlies it. According to Marcus the most recent work being done in and on feminist autobiography and biography shares a focus on issues of identity:

"now seen less as something to be disinterred or captured and more as something to be made, cultural and gender hybridity, embodiment, and the transgression of generic boundaries." 73

Feminist biography is no longer so much the product of a political movement and thus in some respects part of its 'propaganda', but of a philosophical recognition that all individuals are 'multiply' determined and thus cultural constructs. Any attempt to define a feminist epistemology is in itself problematic. Self-reflexivity requires recognition of the paradoxes that underlie this search. We are forced to recognise the partiality of all standpoints, the complexity of perception, the fragility of the psyche and the ubiquitous nature of power. What is now important is the extent to which one is self-reflexive, whether such identifications are made knowingly and that the difficulties of articulating any stable notion of female identity are recognised. Contemporary female biographers understand that gaps and breaks in a text are significant and can be seen as marks of resistance or repression that the critic is meant to decipher. This includes an exploration
of the complexities inscribed in the construction of the sexual subject and the discovery of new ways of exposing and dislocating foundational patriarchal binary oppositions—such as the privilege of male over female.

Notes to Chapter 2.

3 Ibid., 4.
10 Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1945), 70.
16 Ibid., 21.
17 Ibid., 21.
18 Ibid., 21.
19 Ibid., 323.
20 Ibid. 191.
21 Ibid., 141.
22 Ibid., 302.
25 Ibid., 307.
26 Ibid., 15.
27 Ibid., 14.
28 Ibid., 33.
29 Ibid., 29.
30 Ibid., 29.
31 Ibid., 142.
32 Ibid., 99.
33 Ibid., 95.
34 Ibid., 100.
35 Ibid., 108.
37 Ibid., 134.
38 Ibid., 247.
41 Ibid., 250.
43 Ibid., 12.
44 Ibid., 14.
46 Ibid., 14.
47 Ibid., 18-19.
48 Ibid., 17.
49 Ibid., 17.
50 Ibid., 333.
51 Ibid., 333.
52 Ibid., 340.
53 Ibid., 340.
54 Ibid., 334.
55 Ibid., 345.
56 Ibid., 365.
57 Ibid., 366.
59 Ibid., 24.
61 Ibid., 62.
64 Ibid., 396.
65 Ibid., 402-403.
66 Ibid., 403.
67 Ibid., 408.
68 Ibid., 408.
70 Ibid., 60.
71 Ibid. 60.
72 Ibid., 65.
CHAPTER THREE

Lyndall Gordon: Transformation and the genre.

Lyndall Gordon is a self confessed experimenter within the genre. She is at her most successful when looking at the life of a male writer through his relationships with women. For example her two studies of T.S. Eliot, *Eliot's Early Years* and *Eliot's New Life*, are structured around Eliot's relationship with five significant women, including the illusive character of Emily Hale: a companion of Eliot's from New England, who Gordon convincingly argues played a significant role as muse and catalyst in the spiritual quest she perceives at the heart of Eliot's poetry. In reclaiming these women Gordon is able to make connections and illuminate issues, such as Eliot's misogyny, that a more traditional biographical paradigm would overlook. These women would have been overshadowed, or ignored, in favour of a focus upon the public achievements of the man. For example Peter Ackroyd's biography of Eliot (1984) pays only passing mention to Emily Hale, as a friend with whom he had a, 'close and sympathetic relationship' and who offered him the, 'attentive but respectful affection of which he had experienced so little with his wife.' Gordon, in contrast, paints an illuminating portrait of Emily's influence upon key poems such as *The Four Quartets* that I will discuss in detail in this chapter. Gordon has, however, made great claims for her work that I don't feel her experiments have lived up to. Gordon's failures are failures of form. In her most experimental work, the memoir *Shared Lives* (1992), Gordon is quite simply unable to settle on a format to fit her subject. She drifts between memoir, diary, social history and biography and the result is an uncomfortable mix that leaves the reader baffled as to what Gordon is actually writing. As Gordon's work is self consciously experimental it highlights both the key strengths and the weaknesses of women writing within the genre.

Lyndall Gordon has made enormously ambitious statements about her role. In our conversation Gordon stated that her wish is to 'transform the genre of biography' by looking at the gaps and silences within the life rather than its external events. In her
desire for transformation Gordon makes extravagant claims for her work that she hopes will raise the status of biography to an art form. Comparing her role as biographer to that of Shakespeare creating *Hamlet* amongst, 'the crude, bloody revenge tragedies' of the Elizabethan period, Gordon searches for the Jamesian 'figure in the carpet', in the hope of finding the, 'significant form of the life'. So with the force of Shakespearean tragedy and the subtlety of Henry James Gordon hopes to create an art form that will open gaps and silences and reveal the hidden lives of her subjects. One can scrutinise these desires by looking at the section of her biography *Charlotte Bronte: A Passionate Life* (1994), in which she presents her reading of Charlotte Bronte's letter to the poet Robert Southey when she was a young and ambitious writer. In her first letter to Southey Gordon explains that Charlotte confided that she lived in, 'a visionary world', and assumed that Southey did too, stating her ambition to be, 'forever known a poet'. Southey's famous reply:

"Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be." and Charlotte's response: 'In the evenings, I confess I do think, but I never trouble anyone else with my thoughts', have been subject to numerous readings. Most recently in a volume of Bronte letters published in October 1997 is a newly discovered letter from a successful and celebrated Charlotte, giving permission for her early correspondence with Robert Southey to be included in a volume of his letters. Kathryn Hughes has pointed out that feminist scholars had long argued that Charlotte was sending up Southey for his pompous patronage, but a letter to the poet's son, written at the end of her life, shows that Charlotte may have been playing it quite straight, truly valuing Southey's, 'benevolent yet stern advice'. In her reading of the letter Gordon sees a, 'creative fire under the public mask of perfect docility.' Charlotte, 'appropriates Southey's discourse', the only language available to her, 'and returns it to him in a more polished form.' In doing so she is, 'taking command of the structures within which women of her time must live.' Charlotte plays, 'the obedient girl who did not presume to think', and in so doing, 'mimics the
accents of subjection'. She responds with a:

“caricature of feminine obedience as it takes shape under the
injunctions of the Laureate who reserved creativity for men
alone.”

She learns the appropriate discourse quickly. In her first letter she presented herself as a romantic enthusiast. By the second letter she has become, 'the dutiful daughter of a clergyman.' For Gordon, these alternative selves allowed Bronte to, 'play with legitimate utterance versus secret script.' Utterance and writing are contrasted, utterance is smooth, logical and drives to a point of consensus; it mimics the given structures. Writing is a serious activity from which women were barred:

“throbs with an energy that deviates from the contemporary
image of a lady as delicate and passionless.”

What Gordon claims is that the letter allows us to see how Charlotte could maintain 'alternative selves', the 'romantic enthusiast' and the, 'obedient girl who did not presume to think', and that she could slide from one to the other, 'with practiced, almost professional facility'. 5 Throughout her reading Gordon is reaching beneath a mask of docility, to a more private and passionate self. Gordon's Bronte is, 'impatient, sarcastic, strong in spirit, with an unquenchable fire.' 6 Obviously a straight reading of the 'legitimate utterance' of the letter does not portray Charlotte in this light. Gordon's reflections do withstand scrutiny because we see the dutiful self but also the possibility of a more complex and demanding Charlotte beneath. In a letter to me on this point Gordon wrote:

“how shallow or deep that constructed self went is for each of
us to decide. One can't ultimately know- it would seem naive
not to realise that Victorian submissiveness at least co-existed
with a nature that was stronger and more complex.” 7

The question is does Gordon's work allow Charlotte to speak where she may previously have been silent? We can accept the alternative selves that Gordon presents. Her reading of Charlotte's correspondence with Southey may show that
beneath the utterance, in her appropriation of Southey's discourse, writing emerges that reveals a determined and passionate woman, as well as a dutiful Victorian.

Although she voices extravagant hopes for her role as experimental biographer a contradiction exists between Gordon's radical agenda and the language she has chosen to express this in. Her choice of non-confrontational language to expound her feminist and artistic desires for the genre is at odds with her transformational objectives. Gordon spoke to me about, 'avoiding traditional biographical choices' and, 'focusing upon female influences in the lives of her subjects'. Yet when confronted with the feminist question of whether to come forward strongly in terms of the language she used as a feminist Gordon decided:

“not to signal with language so clearly that I was a feminist that I wouldn't actually have male readers.”

Looking at Gordon's comments on Charlotte Bronte's appropriation of Southey's discourse she could be seen to be using a similar strategy in her decision not to publish her intentions through her language. The question is whether the sliding in of a feminist agenda compromises the radical aims that Gordon proclaims for her art. In her first biography, *Eliot's Early Years*, Gordon discusses Eliot's mother Charlotte, and made the conscious decision not to do the traditional thing and put the father's family first. Instead she focused upon the mother as the important figure in his life and as an inspiration for his work. In this case Gordon edited the more overtly feminist language she used in the first draft of the biography. Gordon's thesis is that:

“throughout his life Eliot was fascinated by the motives, the behaviour, the achievements of saints.”

His mother Charlotte Eliot, who inspired his religious quest and the conflict in Eliot between an Emersonian ideal and a religious Unitarian upbringing, sparked this fascination. Gordon begins by exploring the images in Charlotte Eliot's poetry that she felt were later reflected in her son's work. For Gordon her poetry is, 'that of a preacher', she is 'didactic', she writes of the lives of the chosen, 'the prophet's warning
cry', using images her, 'son later rescued from triteness', the light, the fires of lust purgation, images that appear most powerfully in poems such as *The Waste Land*, with:

“Burning burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest.”

It is possible to see how an understanding of Charlotte Eliot's poetry can throw light on her son's preoccupations. His Unitarian upbringing, a religion retaining:

“Puritan uprightness, social conscience, and self-restraint, but
which had been transformed by the Enlightenment.”

was at odds with the Emersonian thinking his mother had steeped him in which gave, 'final authority to the individual's private light.' Gordon shows how his early training in self-denial and public service meant he could not enjoy harmless pleasures.

Eliot's desire to be closer to the saints is tied directly to his mother and the preoccupations of her poetry. Gordon believes that Eliot did not think one approached God through love of one's kind as his mother did:

“but that love of God intensifies, evaluates and informs human affections that 'are otherwise little distinguished from the animals.'

By beginning with the mother Gordon sets up the tensions within Eliot that then later inform all his other relationships with women and are communicated through his work. For Gordon, in *Eliot's New Life*, these relationships are absorbed into what seems an almost predetermined pattern. His relationship with his wife Vivienne reflected his, 'sense of sin and guilt', and allowed for his 'living martyrdom', with his New England friend Emily Hale, 'his sublime moments', and 'sensible efficient' Mary Trevelyan, 'support during the years of penitence.' As a writer who wants her books to last as long as possible, Gordon said in our interview, that language dates and that not using, 'the jargon of patriarchy' will allow work that is really feminist to infiltrate the minds of men, 'who have not got guards for that automatically'.
Looking at Eliot through his relationships with women does allow us to see him in a new way and to understand the preoccupations and tensions that inform his work. But this does not mean there is not a conflict between the transformational goals that Gordon expounds and the traditional language choices that she makes. Like her reading of the Southey letter, however, it may be possible to see beneath the utterance and let the non-traditional presentation of a male poet give a new angle of vision on his life and work.

One of Lyndall Gordon's main biographical concerns, along with her ambition to 'transform' the genre, is her desire to understand 'women's nature'. Through her writing Gordon claims to be looking at 'who women are really: What is it in our powers to be that isn't yet answered?' In order to explore these possibilities Gordon has stated that she has found it increasingly productive to explore the lives of nineteenth century women:

"nineteenth century lives show how the largest imaginations draw on their own experience in order to propose a new model of womanhood." 16

What Gordon is implying is that by studying these lives she is in fact proposing her own, 'model of womanhood' that will explain to us who women 'really' are. She calls this the 'vital centre' of her biographical project. As nineteenth century women were 'social constructs', Gordon questions:

"then what was their nature? Where were women to seek themselves if not in the unexplored reaches of their own lives?" 17

In *Virginia Woolf* Gordon wrote, 'Victorian women looked like eggs: round, featureless, smooth.' 18 Gordon is claiming that her form of biography will crack the shell of the 'socially constructed' woman to discover her 'true' nature. Gordon said to me that what interested her is the fact that even though, 'there is weakness in all of us', and Bronte could have dwelt on the, 'weakness of Jane Eyre, say, or Lucy
Snowe', she instead comes, 'down on the strengths, on the possibilities, in these women.' In her biography of Charlotte Bronte Gordon interrogates Brontes use of the term 'Resurgam', translated as 'I shall rise'. The term 'resurgam' seems particularly tied to this concept of strength and possibility. Gordon points out that:

“This promise recurs at least six times in the course of Charlotte Bronte's career: first, in the 'Roe Head Journal' where the difficulty of rising is used quite literally but resonates as an emblematic condition of Charlotte Bronte's restricted existence at the school; in a letter of December 1840, Charlotte Bronte speaks of her 'rising talent'. In her fiction, the promise to rise appears in the image of Elizabeth Hastings as she turns from the grave of Lady Rosamund. In Jane Eyre, 'Resurgam' is engraved on the tombstone of Helen Burns. Finally in Villette, her heroine describes herself as a 'rising character.'”

In her discussion of Elizabeth Hastings Gordon shows that Bronte was providing 'new models' or possibilities for women. Gordon then uses this to help us to understand who women 'really' are.

In the novella 'Henry Hastings' (1837), Elizabeth Hastings, 'emerges from the shadow of a beloved brother who has become an outlaw.' Gordon's thesis is that the novella 'coincides' with the start of the decline of Charlotte's brother, Branwell, into opium addiction and alcoholism. Gordon is claiming an autobiographical connection between Charlotte and her character, suggesting that at this time Charlotte was feeling isolated from Branwell, her creative 'other', and looking for new ways of expressing herself from within the paradigm of Victorian womanhood. As Branwell sunk further away from Charlotte she had to search for new imaginative and creative possibilities. At the same time, for the character of Elizabeth, 'as her brother fades from the story her initiative grows and, with it, her visibility.' At first, she appears, ‘a
nonentity'. Townshend, the man-about-town, travelling with her by coach, observes a, 'quiet aspect and a plain and demure dress' and a great reserve, 'that pale undersized young woman dressed as plainly as a Quakeress in grey.' Elizabeth goes on to found a school and Bronte writes, 'She was now...dependent on nobody-responsible to nobody.' For Gordon it is at this point:

"as she discovers her agency, the narrative abandons the onlooker's point of view and Charlotte blends with Elizabeth."  

Elizabeth is thus exploring the possibilities that Charlotte is also pondering. For Gordon Elizabeth, 'proves the existence of something stronger than instinct', having had the strength to remake herself, to make a choice between surrender and independence of spirit. This sense of 'Resurgam' or resurrection is suggested on several levels: in the choices made by Bronte's characters, such as Elizabeth Hastings, pale creatures who discover their own strength and agency for survival; in Gordon's biographical portrait of Charlotte as she attempts to separate herself from Branwell, in efforts to support herself when she is finding her own strengths along with her characters; and in Gordon's linking of the characters and the life through the notion of resurrection. This is the 'vital core' of Gordon's biographical aim to explore the notion of women's nature.

Traditionally biographies have been based on what is often termed, 'hard verifiable fact', the officially recorded and sanctioned moments of a subject's life. Gordon said to me that she is developing a new style of biography by avoiding structuring her narrative around the external events, birth, marriage, public success, death, that provide the linear path of the standard biography. Instead she is searching for, 'the perceptive or imaginative truth' of the life. Gordon defines this as, 'distilling the suggestive fact', recording the, 'interior feeling', seeking the secret transforming moments that she feels are left unrecorded within the formal biographical paradigm. For Gordon this begins with the work of the writer. She argues that if you read the
work you actually already know quite a bit about the subject. Gordon, 'invites the reader into the text with her', to 'work together', to imagine, 'with whatever materials can be put together what is happening here.' The reader has to make 'imaginative connections' along with the biographer, and go beyond 'hard fact' to the 'suggestive fact' that emerges from links made between the work and the life. It is important to establish whether this technique is successful in illuminating the life of the writer, and if reading back from the work to the life in this manner allows us access to the, 'secret transforming moments that were crucial to the subjects as artists.' In *Virginia Woolf* (1986) Gordon describes Woolf as a writer whose imaginative life, 'ran parallel with but distinct from the well known facts of her public life.' Gordon has provided the 'outer facts', but, 'only as a prop for the unfolding creative side.' The biography is structured around what Gordon marks as 'turning points', that she maintains do not coincide with external events:

"1892 when a ten-year old child spied the monumental characters of her parents; 1897 when the sisters learnt to walk alone; her novels; 1907-8 when she discovered the uses of memory; 1912-15 when she set up her private life against all marital and mental odds; the fertile spring of 1925; the 'fin' of 1926; and the 'soul's change' of 1932."

In her discussion of the 'fin' of 1926 Gordon has taken what she considers a core creative moment, not one of the traditional incidents around which traditional biography is usually framed, and used it as a central incident in her narrative.

Gordon begins by stating that:

"The year 1926 marks a change in Virginia Woolf's career, though outwardly the surface was still unbroken."

This 'turning-point' was sign-posted by Woolf, herself, when she stated in her diary:

"No biographer could possibly guess this important fact about my life in the late summer of 1926; yet biographers
pretend that they know people.”

Gordon, realizing that no significant external event is recorded for that year, looks for the 'important fact' in the imaginative life of the writer. What she traces is a connection between a dream that Woolf recounts in her diary and the creation of Woolf's complex and ambitious novel *The Waves*. Gordon's thesis is that:

“the change was as momentous in its own way, as the series of family deaths, [her mother, Julia Stephen's, her father, Leslie Stephens and brother, Thoby] that, between 1895 and 1906, had closed off childhood as a buried well of memory.”

She begins her explanation with an account of the dream that haunted Woolf and fed her imaginative life. Woolf:

“awoke one morning at about three to face, quite without warning, a gigantic wave that seemed to swell, crash and spread out over her. Shocked and baffled, she could yet say, wryly: 'I am glad to find it on the whole so interesting, though so acutely unpleasant.' She knew that it was not an illness but some sort of vision, not the artist's vision of her own powers, but something beyond the self, in the natural universe. She glimpsed a fin passing out far amidst the waste of waters, some mighty submerged creature which she must stalk through her own gloom.”

Gordon believes that *The Waves*, begun three years later in 1929, and completed in 1931, is, 'the strange result of this encounter'. How does Gordon make the connection made between this 'vision' and the creation of a novel? The structure of the book, 'nine episodes in the course of six lives, linked by impersonal interludes describing the flow and ebb of the tide in the course of one day', is an attempt; Gordon believes, to place human beings in, 'their natural universe'. Through the ebb and flow of a normal day, we see beyond the self of each of the six characters to the universal traits
that they share with all humanity. For Gordon, the book is, 'a map of human nature', with a 'scientific motive' \(^\text{30}\), to see:

> "what shape life spans have in common and, if there were a classic shape, whether its crucial marking points necessarily coincide with the biological markers of birth, growth, mating and death." \(^\text{31}\)

The dream, Gordon maintains, led Woolf to search for an underlying phenomenon in human nature, with the fin, symbolising aspects of the psyche, the only thing not submerged. The image of the tide, the continual ebb and flow of human life, the unceasing, unchanging aspects of human nature that Woolf is exploring in the novel can be seen as imaginatively connected to her vision. Gordon comments that fictional lives, 'turn on possibilities of change, but the six people in The Waves do not change.' In:

> "fiction, characters are transformed by experience, but The Waves starts from a biological premiss that the course of life is determined by endowment, in the sense not of countable genes but more dimly felt innate attributes, always present in the species." \(^\text{32}\)

So the dream evoked the haunting submerged form, and Woolf then used this to give shape to the map of human life. To the unchanging aspects of human nature that are as present as the tides, the submerged depths that live within us all, and at times, as the wave in the dream, rise up and overwhelm us. Even though the originals of the six characters may be found in Woolf's Bloomsbury companions, they are, 'transformed into voices speaking for permanent aspects of human nature.' \(^\text{33}\)

Gordon then takes this a step further by claiming that at, 'no time were the two levels of her consciousness more distinctly separate than during the gestation of the novel.' Woolf was in a state of 'stasis' in 1926 and this novel was a form of 'renewal' that allowed her to, 'understand and overcome her own depression'; she had to see how it
fitted into the 'lifespan'. So on one level she was looking at the universal, unceasing aspects of human nature, and on another trying to place herself within this lifecycle, make sense of her own life within this context. From the use of the 'fin' episode we can see that Gordon's biographical practice has been influenced by this novel's structure. As Woolf wished to see whether, 'crucial marking points' in a life, necessarily coincide with 'biological markers', so Gordon attempts to establish the imaginative or perceptive moments that allow access to 'interior feeling', but which may not connect with the verifiable facts of the life.

Gordon did acknowledge in our conversation that the biographical method she is aiming to evolve would only work with certain subjects. Her approach to biography depends upon finding a writer whose, 'work is very close to the life.' The hypotheses upon which she bases her narrative, 'come from the work', and so the, 'work must be central to the life'. What she is looking for is a subject that allows you entry to what T.S. Eliot termed the 'unattended moments', the moments in which the interior life of the writer is translated into art. Gordon argued that:

"Every life has form of its own and there's no way that you can put down a grid or formula on a life. You have to look at each life and see what its organizing ideas are."

The 'organizing idea' of a life is at the heart of Gordon's thesis. For example as I have mentioned Gordon views the whole of Eliot's life as a spiritual quest, a 'saint's ideal', and constructs her discourse around this. Gordon's method of choosing subjects whose work she considers close to the life does allow the form of that life, its 'organizing ideas', to emerge. However in taking this approach, Gordon is in danger of imposing her own pattern upon the life by finding connections between the life and the work that may be unsustainable when examined closely.

Gordon is unable to sustain her claim for a connection between the work and the life. In *Eliot's Early Years* Gordon maintains that, 'There is no use denying that many of Eliot's early poems suggest sexual problems', and uses an extract from an Ode, 'about an immature couple's disastrous first sexual intercourse', to support this assertion.  

Gordon suggests that Eliot's 'sexual problems' were due, not to, 'lack of libido, but inhibition, distrust of women, and a certain physical queasiness.' She argues that he was offended by blood on the marriage-bed and French perfume- hiding 'female stench'. The man in this poem is viewed as inexperienced, wanting to achieve a 'golden apocalypse' but instead prematurely ejaculating. He is left, 'indignant/ at the cheap extinction of his taking off.' To support this Gordon quotes the lines:

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"O Hymen! O Hymenee! Why do you
tantalize me thus?
O why sting me for a swift moment
only?"
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The husband tries to remake his facade and experiences guilt at seeing the wife as a 'succubus eviscerate', 'a sexual creature deprived of her force.' The ode is used as a paradigm for Eliot's view of women and the connection is made between what Eliot says in the poem and what actually occurred on his wedding night. Gordon argues that even though, 'it is impossible to know how far the Ode recalls Eliot's own experience', the poem is a re-enactment of events that took place during Eliot's, 'disastrous pseudo-honeymoon at Eastbourne', when Eliot's wife, Vivienne, was, 'not far from suicide'. Apart from what she believes Eliot is saying in the Ode Gordon's only other evidence for this assumption is the fact that Bertrand Russell had some memory of this 'disastrous honeymoon.' As John Haffenden has stated:

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"Since Eliot obviously took pains to depersonalize the poem, it is dismaying to find an otherwise astute critic such as Mrs Gordon citing it as evidence of autobiographical utterance."
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Gordon has made too broad an imaginative leap. We can reconstruct historically that
Eliot had a honeymoon in Eastbourne but we cannot make the leap from this to speculate upon Eliot's 'sexual problems', his poor performance and his supposed physical squeamishness.

The second, and far more successful example of this practice, is from Eliot's *New Life* and involves a visit Eliot made to Burnt Norton in Chipping Campden, with his New England friend Emily Hale, which Gordon believes took place in late August-early September 1934. Gordon views this visit as 'momentous' for Eliot's poetry. This is an instance in which a specific event is transformed into art with the birth of the poem, *Burnt Norton*, part of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. The visit that was so 'momentous' can be physically recreated through Eliot's description of their movements in the poem, as can the emotions the visit engenders and the disappearance of Emily from the narrative to become Eliot's, 'silent faceless companion'.

Gordon begins by setting the scene and describing the garden where Eliot experienced his 'transcendental' moment. As Gordon explains:

> “it was the garden, not the house, that they explored: a formal, timeless garden with box hedges and processional path leading to two great pools set squarely in the centre of a sweeping semi-circle of lawn.”

The 'brown edge' of the pool in Eliot's poem is, 'its covering of old green moss'. A, 'deeply emotional encounter' with a first love, occurs as, 'literally they walk the aisle of roses towards a pool filled with sunlight.' Gordon argues that the rapport is so acute:

> “that the ghosts of their former selves seem to walk towards a moment that transcends love with a glimpse of eternity.”

The man is, 'drawn from un-being into full being'. Gordon states that the, 'poem records the darting, breathless, unforgettable bliss':

> “Quick now, here, now, always-.”

Writing nine months after the event, Eliot is certain that the, 'now silent woman'
shares this moment that, 'called up the ghostly selves of their youth'. Gordon comments that, 'As their footfalls continue to echo in their memories, so, now', as Eliot writes, 'My words echo/ Thus in your mind.' For Gordon:

“It is the most moving of love letters: the experience was over- it seems they will never know such bliss again- but the poetry recreates the experience for her, he tells her, as well as for others. His gift to her, perhaps his consolation for fading feeling, was to recreate their experience with such verbal sublimity that it will outlast time.”

Walking in the rose garden with Emily, Eliot is able to experience a moment when, 'through human love, he could apprehend divine love.' The feeling cannot be sustained, 'the moment passes', 'a cloud shuts off the sun, the pool is dry once more.' Eliot laments, 'the waste sad time/ Stretching before and after.' But he has recreated the moment for eternity in his verse and so attempts to close the gap between, 'flawed and ideal' life. Eliot was awakened for a moment to the 'heart of light'. But as Gordon points out, the companion, Emily, at Burnt Norton who ignites this feeling is, 'not the woman as a person, but love's transforming power.' Emily's gradual removal from the narrative is traced:

“The whole sequence begins with 'we', a shared experience, but the woman's power to generate this rarefied feeling in Eliot worked largely through memory and imagination...Whatever Eliot did to re-initiate the 'heart of light' was part of Eliot's hidden life, a crucial source of creativity as well as religious striving...The drafts of the later Quartets suggest that she continued to preside over his imaginative life, as he came to see how their love might be used to sustain religious effort.”

What this does, as Gordon rightly shows, is allow the 'public face' of Eliot's poetry to 'obliterate' Emily Hale, 'not only by an appropriate conversion of personal life into
impersonal art', but by deliberately subsuming her voice in the 'voices of temptation' at the end of the poem. Gordon's thesis rests upon the fact that what Eliot needed most was not love in the usual sense, 'passion and care', but love's 'transforming power', partly based upon, 'the model of Dante and Beatrice', and their 'momentous drama'.  

Through her careful recreation of the actual setting of the visit, the emotion that it unleashes, the final conversion of this into 'impersonal art', and the silencing of Emily Hale, Gordon is able to recreate a 'transformational moment' that can be both historically and imaginatively recorded.

Gordon has taken up Virginia Woolf's claim that women's lives, 'deviate from the set stories of traditional biography.' Her 'transformational' ambitions for the genre involve developing a new form of biography that looks beneath:

"The surface, collectable facts of women's lives- their social lot, their occupations, the platitudes in many of their letters and even their set dramas of feeling and fantasy" to 'spaces in the mind', where women are, 'more insidiously and deeply enslaved' than through more obvious restrictions. Gordon believes that she has developed an:

"eclectic form, which fused genres of letter, diary, oral history, public history and dream', in order to 'give expression to the limited lives of women."

Gordon's most non-traditional biography, Shared Lives (1994), is, however, her least successful. Shared Lives is the story of five girls, friends of Gordon's, who met at the age of twelve at the private school, Good Hope, in South Africa in 1954. This is 'primarily' the story of Gordon's friend Flora the most 'vital' member of this group. Gordon views the book as Flora's, 'biography, as exact as if she had public importance on the stage of history.' Gordon believes that codes of femininity evoked a silence and passivity within her friends. It is this code that creates 'the platitudes' and 'set dramas' that Gordon wishes to get beyond with her 'eclectic' biographical writing. Thus Gordon begins the biography by introducing the reader to
the structures that shaped the lives of these girls:

“It is impossible for any outsider to understand fully the rites
that governed our lives, their anthropological rigidity, all the
more primitive for the fact that they were, for the most part,
unstated- imprinted in preverbal habits of mind, deeper than
language, and therefore unquestioned.” 52

The contradiction between something that is 'imprinted' upon the girls and yet at the
same time 'unstated' is interesting. Gordon talks of the, 'comic fixity of the stale roles
that girls of the '50s chose to play' 53, games 'of compliance' that Gordon believes
emerged because the, 'rigid ethos of femininity' developed as an alternative, 'to the
stupefaction produced by force feeding: the glum hours of homework instead of
reading for pleasure', that was employed by establishments such as Good Hope. 54
This included a, 'reliance on boring textbooks', the purpose of which was to teach the
girls:

“our future role of obedient passivity- that we had nothing to
offer, and had best attend to the judgers and doers.” 55

They were being taught to, 'defer to opinion' and 'remained silent for years to come.'
Gordon provides two anecdotes, in the form of recorded memory, to support her
thesis. The first involves Flora and the English teacher Miss Tyfield, described as,
'not unlike the older women in certain primitive societies who identified with the
dominant order in its suppressions.' Gordon claims it was Miss Tyfield, 'who first
forbade us to take risks.' The incident begins with Flora daring:

“to pour out her feelings in a rush of essay writing after a
class in which Miss Tyfield's insights had tantalized hopes of
empathy.”

Gordon reproduces the scene of Miss Tyfield's response:

“'Will you please inform me what is the meaning of this-
this- rubbish?' Miss Tyfield demanded in her iciest tone,
holding up a page of Flora's writing scarred with red slashes.”
Gordon goes on to explain that Flora was 'crushed', and promised, 'never, never...to do it again.' Nor from that moment on, 'did anyone else make the same mistake'. In this almost novelistic extract Gordon effectively conveys the silencing of Flora, and the rest of the class, by defying biographic convention: she recreates conversation; she allows herself a voice in the piece; and she is using her own memory to recreate the scene. She vividly illustrates how the, 'vital core of honesty' that made Flora the, 'acknowledged leader of the year' was effectively shut off. To further prove her thesis Gordon takes another break from biographical tradition by recounting an experience of her own whilst a graduate student at Columbia University in the mid sixties. At a seminar Gordon tells of how 'she forgot' herself when Professor Ahab stated, 'the truism that Henry James could not treat erotic tension.' Gordon asked:

“But what about that scene in the carriage in *The Golden Bowl* when Maggie must resist the situation of her adulterous husband?”

She states that, 'I thought James had shown with great sympathy a woman's struggle not to lose her integrity in oblivious surrender.' Professor Ahab, 'astonished by this interruption', stopped short and, 'gazed balefully into the distance,' to eventually respond with, 'I'm getting a pain in my balls.' As Gordon says, 'that shut you up'.

Gordon provides vignettes that are striking, such as descriptions of attempts to develop the group, 'as regulation women', but as a complete text the experiment represents a confusion of form. When discussing attempts to make the group conform to a feminine ideal Gordon provides interesting insight. For example only one thing mattered to the girls: 'physical sophistication'. Gordon provides an extract from her diary of Wednesday 2, November 1955, to illustrate the pervasive nature of this ethos:

“There is a craze sweeping through the school of peroxiding one's hair. Thelma Tyfield says that it is very vulgar and gave
a lecture against it at assembly this morning.”

Gordon comments, 'many were such futile assemblies.' To become blonde, 'even if the limp white produced by cheap bleach', was the sign of the girl who aspired to become a 'sex object'. Gordon points out that in the exclusively female society of Good Hope, boys were:

"in truth omnipresent- their ghostly mores, tastes, desires

trailed in whispers up the stairs and along the lavatory green

corridors."

It was, 'the absence, more potent than the presence, that haunted the imagination.' 58

As the girls fulfilled the obligation to go to parties, they put on, 'a mask of glamour'. Gordon argues that she, 'needs a freedom to push biography beyond its standard form' in order to get beyond this mask of femininity, and the response it is meant to engender, to the character beneath. To do this she has had to develop her particular style of 'eclectic' biography in order to tell stories that cannot be told with 'linear simplicity.' For Gordon there are aspects of women's lives that remain as yet 'undefined', and this is her attempt to give them meaning. Gordon's biographical project does allow us entry to areas of silence and passivity. The voices she records, through the letters, diaries, conversations and memories she has chosen, evoke the universal female experience of this, 'last generation of Virgins'. 59 However, the disconcerting narrative style demonstrates the limits of the form in terms of crossing genre boundaries. Gordon is unable to do with her own life what Virginia Woolf does so convincingly in Orlando.

Notes to Chapter 3.

1 Lyndall Gordon, Interview with Nina Cook, (Oxford 23 April 1998).
3 Ibid., 65.
5 Ibid., 66-67.
6 Ibid., 4.
Interview with Nina Cook (Oxford 23 April 1998).


Ibid., 5.

Ibid., 8.

Ibid., 8.

Ibid., 123.


Interview with Nina Cook (Oxford 23 April 1998).


Ibid., 90.


Interview with Nina Cook (Oxford 23 April 1998).


Ibid., 71-72.

Ibid., 73-74.

Ibid., 74.

Interview with Nina Cook (Oxford 23 April 1998).


Ibid., 281.

Ibid., 203.

Ibid., 203.

Ibid., 203.

Ibid., 233.

Ibid., 206.

Ibid., 221.

Ibid., 233.

Ibid., 203.

Interview with Nina Cook (Oxford 23 April 1998).


Ibid., 75.

Ibid., 76.


In *An Imperfect Life* (London: Vintage 1998), vii. Gordon states that her biography ‘explores the divide between saint and sinner’. To this purpose she ‘resolved to focus on primary sources’, most notably manuscript poems which, ‘when dated, lit up the trajectory of Eliot’s course’. Gordon perceives *Eliot’s Early Years* as a portrait ‘of a confessional poet’, ‘reversing the view of the older generation, who, hanging on Eliot’s lips had stressed his impersonality.’ It also ‘challenged the dismissive view of Eliot’s wife, Vivienne.’ *Eliot’s New Life*:

“turned out to be a biographical experiment in drawing forward the unseen collaborative element in a writer’s life. With Eliot, as with Henry James, women who were vital to the creative life were kept under wraps. Eliot had four quite different relationships with women who were all remarkable and, in various ways, entered his work. The more I come to know of Eliot’s life, the surer I am that these four women - together with his high-minded mother, Charlotte Stearns- provide essential clues to a guarded, even elusive character who at times and especially with women, would be a simple- a combination so tantalising that throughout his life, and well into old age, women fell in love with him.” (p. viii)

Gordon believes that between 1933 and 1946 Eliot’s relationship to Emily Hale would have ‘established a settled pattern of occasional meetings, fondness, and jokes, all of which sustained their understanding.’ From the time of Eliot’s conversion to the time of Vivienne’s death ‘she provided a chaste love that could be sustained, it seems indefinitely.’ The unexpected death of Vivienne challenged ‘the stable bond.’ Eliot ‘retreated at once from the possibility of action, asserting that
was too late.' (p. 410) For Gordon Eliot 'froze Emily Hale into art so that he could possess her in memory as one might possess a statue of poignant beauty.' Eliot's poems 'invariably lock her into silent poses, though the facts of Emily's history tell us that here was a girl who was lively, humorous, and capable of extravagant devotion.' (p. 82) Gordon writes:

"It is difficult, particularly for a woman, to set aside an impression that Eliot distorted women's actuality in feelings warped by fear. But so distant a judgement cannot absorb the whole truth. To get even a glimmer about the 'affair' it is vital to let go of our usual terms of sex, love and friendship. As Eliot went 'beyond poetry', so his relationship with Emily Hale, closely associated with his poetry, also defies definition. Their attachment was for many years bound up with the fate of his soul." (p. 433)

42 Ibid., 46-48.
43 Ibid., 48.
44 Ibid, 95.
45 Ibid., 96.
46 Ibid., 99-100.
49 Ibid., 94.
50 Ibid., 96.
52 Ibid., 5.
53 Ibid, 38.
54 Ibid, 46.
55 Ibid, 48.
56 Ibid., 49.
57 Ibid, 48.
58 Ibid, 45.
59 Ibid, 38.
CHAPTER FOUR

Hermione Lee - The biographer, past and present.

Hermione Lee whilst writing a very respected 'trade' biography for a mainstream audience, has at the same time subverted the traditional biographical form through her particularly female concerns and identification with her subject. Lee's work reveals how a feminist biographer, whilst wishing to subvert the form to accommodate a feminist agenda, must still confront the inherent conditions and limits of the genre outlined in chapter 1. For example Lee did not want to write a traditional 'linear trudge', but found that this was the outline around which her text could best be constructed. However she successfully subverts this through narrative excursions into significant areas of Woolf's life, such as her thoughts on biography and the importance to her of reading, that take the genre beyond what can be achieved within a traditional format. In her new introduction to the recently reissued 1981 work on Elizabeth Bowen, Lee outlines significant changes in her own approach to life writing and scholarship in general. These highlight how an emerging feminist awareness has enabled contemporary female biographers to adapt a traditional biographical paradigm to better tell the stories of women's lives.

The opening chapter of *Virginia Woolf*--appropriately entitled 'Biography'--is a perfect example of how textual devices employed by Lee, such as the 'narrative breaks' I mentioned, help to undermine the traditional biographical form. Through starting her biography with a discussion about the genre itself Lee immediately establishes a shared self-consciousness about the genre and the problems facing the biographer. Thus from the beginning Lee is self-reflexive, with Woolf's views on biography being articulated and Lee's response to them being woven into a narrative that shifts between biographer and subject, the personal and the public in a demonstration of the very issues Woolf raised about the genre: a clear example of the 'hall of mirrors' effect outlined in the discussion of the work of Jenny Uglow. Lee is a writer, writing about a writer who, through her investigation of the act of writing,
changed that very act forever. The 'mirror' is thus reflected back and forward. Connections are made between Lee as biographer of Virginia Woolf 'the writer', of Lee in relation to Woolf 'the writer', of Virginia Woolf's private 'self', and Lee as biographer of that person. This allows Lee to immediately engage with issues that are at the heart of a biography of Woolf. She is able to articulate the divide between Woolf 'the writer' and the private 'self', always problematic for the biographer. Lee employs textual practices influenced by Woolf's thoughts on biography and successfully helps break down the traditional linear format through this engagement with a subject who had a significant impact upon the genre in which Lee is working.

Lee begins her biography by questioning the efficacy of the traditional linear format. Lee poses Woolf's question: 'My God, how does one write a Biography?' then sets out to answer by quoting various openings to previous biographies of Woolf:

“They can start at source, with her family history, and see her in the context of ancestry, country, class. They can start with Bloomsbury, fixing her inside her social and intellectual group and its reputation. They can start by thinking of her as a victim, as someone who is going to kill herself. They can start with her own words about her own sense of the past. They can start with a theory or a belief and see her always in terms of it, since, like Shakespeare, she is a writer who lends herself to infinitely various interpretations. What no longer seems possible is to start: 'Adeline Virginia Stephen was born on 25 January 1882, the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, editor of the Dictionary of National Biography, and of Julia Stephen, née Jackson.' 1

Lee undermines comfortable commonplaces about the genre, and she does this having being influenced by her subject who also challenged the accepted parameters of the form. For Lee, 'There is no such thing as an objective biography, particularly not in this case.' As Lee suggests in the case of Woolf, 'Positions have been taken and
myths have been made.' A subject as complex and well known as this, who has helped to transform the act of writing, requires a textual approach that will allow the biographer to engage with these complexities. As Lee claims, 'it began to seem that everyone who reads books has an opinion of some kind about Virginia Woolf.' Lee talks of how the 'immense extent' of Woolf's life work has only revealed itself gradually:

"changing the twentieth-century perception of her from delicate lady authoress of a few experimental novels and sketches, some essays and a 'writer's' diary, to one of the most professional, perfectionist, energetic, courageous and committed writers in the language."  

It is Woolf's investigation of these problems that enabled Lee to devise a text that could accommodate such a subject. Lee points out that in both fiction and biography Woolf is, 'aware of writing in a period of transition: and she herself partly makes that transition take place.' Woolf began writing in an era of what she termed the 'draperies and decencies' of Victorian biography, what Lee views as, 'censored, reverential, public Lives of 'great men'. Lee points out that in Woolf's lifetime, 'psychoanalysis, wars, social changes and the reaction against nineteenth-century habits of mind meant a revolution in biography and memoir-writing.' 

So for Lee:

"Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries are poised on the edge of the revolution which has turned biography into the iconoclastic, gossipy art-form it is now, when the only taboo is censorship."  

Lee argues that Woolf's thoughts on biography, 'are comparable to the work being done by the painters she knew.' Work that, 'sought the essence of character through colour and form.' This reflects one of the features of Woolf's circle: the breaking down of the division between, 'public and private, official and secret lives.' This was a way of, 'crossing genres and exploring new forms.' It could, however, also lead to:
"the impression of cosiness and elitism which has caused, retrospectively, much reproach."

For example, Lee argues that in writing *Orlando*, 'as a private message to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf was laying herself open to charges of elite practices.' But:

"she was also making the kind of connections between the public and the private which she wanted for biography and autobiography."

As Lee states:

"Biographers are supposed to know their subjects as well or better than they know themselves. Biography sets out to tell us that a life can be described, summed up, packaged and sold. But Virginia Woolf spent most of her life saying that that idea of biography is- to use a word she liked- poppycock." 6

What Lee, and Woolf, are both articulating here is the impossibility of reaching the 'essence' of a subject within a traditional format, particularly when writing the lives of women. Lee mentions that when Woolf was working out in the 1910s and 1920s what kind of novelist she wanted to be and what she thinks modern fiction ought to be doing, 'she always talks about how to get at the essence of personality.' Finding, 'the essence of personality' becomes Lee's task as Woolf's biographer, the irony being that as both Lee, and Woolf, acknowledged this essence is always elusive.

Lee and Woolf share self-consciousness about the act of writing. The self-reflexivity that Lee employs throughout the narrative helps to subvert the traditional biographical paradigm and is directly attributable to Woolf's self-conscious dissection of the act of 'life-writing'. For example Lee, in opening her discussion of Woolf's diaries in this chapter, looks at how Woolf is perpetually looking at 'myself'-quoting her as exclaiming, 'How I interest myself!' Lee believes that Woolf was, 'an egotist who loathed egotism.' The biographer must engage with Woolf's intense
investigation of the self. Lee points out that Woolf felt:

"The life-writer must explore and understand the gap between the outer self ('the fictitious V.W. whom I carry like a mask about the world') and the secret self. In her diaries and memoirs and fiction she is always insisting on the difficulty of knowing people: 'She would not say of anyone in the world now that they were this or that.' The diary spends as much time trying to get inside other people as it does discussing the 'soul'." 7

In the complexity that emerges through writing of a writer who has written so much about writing we see that investigating this gap is the task that faces Woolf's own biographer.

Woolf's problems with biography become Lee's problems as her biographer. Lee who has to accept her own frustrations with the form also faces the constraints Woolf encountered. The breaks within the linear format of the text are a successful way for Lee to overcome some of the limitations she confronts when trying to reach the 'essence' of Virginia Woolf. For example when Woolf comes to write her biography of Roger Fry, Lee points out that, 'she finds herself as constricted as the Victorians'. Woolf discovers:

"Biography, which she so loves to read, turns out to be the most terrible 'grind' to write. She starts full of ideas for sabotaging the traditional form: she might begin at the end and work backwards? or give lots of 'specimen days'? or have it 'written by different people to illustrate different stages'?

But she ends up frustrated by the need for discretion, and by the clash between the facts and her 'vision'." 8

Lee spoke to me of her own desire to, 'sabotage the traditional form' and the frustration she encountered at the conditions and limits of the genre. When she began
her work on Virginia Woolf she wished to break down conventions and not write a 'linear trudge'. Her first idea was a thematic biography. In the end she had to compromise. She found that she had to have a story, the linear narrative, but broke this down into what she termed, 'structures for memory', digging out, 'caves or pools of time' where the narrative stops and she collects together ideas, such as her chapters on biography and on reading. Lee maintained that the 'compromise' she reached, between the comfortably recognizable linear format and the sudden pause to focus on an idea or theme, was an effective way of getting close to this, 'essence of personality'. This allowed her to emphasise what mattered to Woolf, to direct attention to important areas of the life that may be lost in the narrative sweep from birth to death. In Lee's chapter 'Reading' these 'structures for memory' are strategically placed within the biography in order to pause and examine more closely significant areas of the life. Lee places 'Reading' at the centre of her text: at the conclusion of the second part of the four part biography which is organised in a traditional linear pattern with the second part looking at the years 1904-1919 and the fourth part ending with Woolf's death in 1941. This demonstrates how central reading was in Woolf's life. 'Lee's thesis is that:

"confident enjoyment of the intimacy which comes from reading is one of the main sources of happiness in Virginia Woolf's life."

Lee argues that for Woolf, 'reading, quite as much as writing, is her life's pleasure and her life's work.' It is on this basis that Lee outlines how reading helped to shape Woolf's life, showing that Woolf:

"is always comparing it to other forms of behaviour and experience- relationships, walking, travelling, dreaming, desire, memory, illness."

This source of pleasure is why Woolf thought about and wrote about the act of reading, why, 'her novels are about the difficulties of reading people', of saying of anyone that they were 'this or that'. The understanding that Woolf gains through
reading reminds us of her comments about 'myself' in her diaries and her self-conscious investigations about how one can portray the self in writing. Narrative breaks such as this allow Lee to engage with these preoccupations in order to reach the 'essence' of Woolf's character in a way that would not be possible in a conventional narrative. Lee points out that there is something alarming about someone who needs to think of people as if they were books. 'It is a sign of self-defensiveness, perhaps of coldness and fear.' But for Lee it also shows interest. Woolf's readings of people after they have gone are like 'after readings' that she makes of books, 'once they are closed and settling in the mind.' For Lee reading is fundamental to Woolf because Woolf argued that books were a school for character because they change as we read them, and change us as we read. 'Books read us.' This is why Lee maintains that the reading Woolf did in the transitional years between Night and Day and Jacob's Room is, 'as important to her life-story as any of her relationships.'

Lee argues that writings about readings, 'were at the heart of her life's work.' To illustrate this point, Lee refers to several of the articles, 'part polemic, part criticism, part fantasy, part history, part confession', that Woolf wrote for various periodicals. 'An Unwritten Novel', written for the London Mercury in July 1920, is the piece that Lee argues turned Woolf, 'into a modernist', and in which she raises, 'all the perils of modernism'. While writing the article Woolf asked, 'Did she deal in autobiography...and call it fiction?' She questioned:

"Would a fluid form let self-indulgence and egotism leak in, which she saw as the ruin of Joyce and Richardson?"

These thoughts, 'made possible the novels she would now write, but it also opened up possibilities for her non-fiction writing.' The idea of a pursuit, 'a relinquishing and refinding' of the self through the entry into another life, that Woolf spoke of in this article, 'suggested a whole theory of reading'. In this chapter Lee is able to pinpoint one of the most influential areas of Woolf's life, and yet one that would have been
lost within the traditional narrative format. Woolf is shown to be as self-conscious about the act of reading as she was about the act of writing. Reading is shown to be not only fundamental to Woolf's intellectual life but her window to the world and thus one of the most important things about her.

In the light of Lee's textual practices the problem of distance is something that needs to be evaluated. When the biographer is present in the narrative, as Lee is, the question that needs to be asked is whose voice are we hearing? Lee said to me that writing about writers is different from writing about artists or musicians:

"we have the writer's words. You have to negotiate between the life and the writing."\(^{13}\)

Lee spoke of a, 'crucial document', a letter from Virginia Stephen to Leonard Woolf, of May 1, 1912, about whether or not to marry him. In *Virginia Woolf* Lee quotes the document in full. Here we have both a complete document, and the biographer's weaving of it into the narrative. Lee explained to me that she felt this was a document that needed commentary, but that she wanted to provide this, 'as unobtrusively as possible'.\(^{14}\) In her biography Lee calls the letter, 'an extraordinary, touching, and admirable document', that has, 'to be read in full if the marriage is to be understood.' The letter was, 'open about her sexual feelings, and about all the other difficulties of this courtship.' Lee asks is this:

"the letter of someone who does, or does not, want to marry?...All the reasons for saying yes are made to sound like no. And she signals with brutal honesty the danger areas: his desire, his Jewishness, his instability."

Woolf says in the letter:

"I feel angry sometimes at the strength of your desire. Possibly your being a Jew comes in also at this point. You seem so foreign. And then I am fearfully unstable. I press from hot to cold in an instant, without any reason; except that
I believe sheer physical effort and exhaustion influence me.”

Lee comments that:

“She was truthful and she was right: these *would* be their difficulties. It was brave and honest for her to say that she was angry at his desire, and half wanted to be left alone. If Virginia Stephen was to marry, she would need a great deal of solitude and privacy.”

Lee does view the letter as 'self-absorbed', but feels that it, 'suggests the freedom and intimacy of the conversation they were having.' Taking the reading a step further Lee points out that its author is not 'the author' 'Virginia Woolf:

“but a young woman of thirty who felt she had not achieved much, who was still struggling to complete her first novel, and who felt that he was the more successful and superior person.”

Lee then supports these suppositions about Woolf's emotional state by a close reading of the language she employs in the letter:

“As she takes her own temperature in the letter, she passes from cold (cold fingers, fog, a rock) to hot (always alive, and always hot). She changes from 'I' to 'we'. She moves towards an idea that the marriage might be possible because they are both capable of creating new terms for it.”

This point is reinforced by Lee comparing Woolf to, 'the heroine of a Restoration Comedy laying down her provisos', or, 'the New Woman of an Ibsen play', as Lee believes Woolf is determined, 'that this will be the kind of marriage in which human character has changed.' This is to be a 'pioneering' and a 'modern' marriage. Lee's thesis is that the letter, 'ignores material matters of careers, money, or habitats. It is about reshaping the possibilities of marriage, rejecting the standard issue.' Through this letter Lee lets Woolf speak. She presents her dilemma openly and honestly,
whilst at the same time shaping the text to fit the image of the 'pioneer' the searcher 'for new possibilities' that is the Woolf who is most present to us today. Lee is able to get beyond the sense of distance she has experienced as Woolf's biographer and draw us closer to a Woolf. Through the letter Woolf exposes her own vulnerabilities and desires in such a way that we sense as readers that we are closer to the elusive 'essence' of her character.

One of the problems of biography that Lee shares with Woolf is the desire to avoid labels or fitting a subject into a fixed position, the 'poppycock' version of a life that is, 'summed up, packaged, and sold'. Lee declared to me that her intention as Woolf's biographer, was not to, 'write a biography that took a particular angle', and to, 'wherever possible to let Woolf speak'. Lee has addressed the battering Woolf is now taking in Britain from critics such as Tom Paulin and John Carey, who view her as reactionary and elitist. Lee's believes that in Virginia Woolf's lifelong argument with herself and others about the effect of class on her imagination, 'she excoriates and defends herself better than anyone else can.' For Lee this means, 'swallowing the character whole' and, for example, not excusing Woolf's offensiveness; she was: 'selfish, disagreeable, misanthropic, but had a passion for human life'. She argued that Woolf was capable of defending herself, speaking for herself, and of shaping her own narrative. Lee commented in our conversation that, 'a good biography will have the character's voice running through it.' Lee's comments in the biography on important family relationships, with Woolf's parents and sister Vanessa in particular, and on issues such as madness and abuse, show how Lee is able to let Woolf speak for herself and defend herself. For example Lee maintains that the image of Woolf's mother, Julia Stephen:

"as Virgin, young mother with child, mater dolorosa, muse beloved- is a political image, embodying the acceptable roles for a beautiful middle class woman in the nineteenth century."
Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen's very bad habits, 'have become legendary, mythologized.' They provide a wonderful example of the, 'Victorian patriarch on whom revenge has been taken by the daughters writing.' Readings of the Father as Monster, 'can easily portray the women in his life as his victims.' But:

"Leslie as Bluebeard does not do justice to the extraordinary characters of many of these women." 21

The relationship between Virginia and Vanessa Bell has been, 'romanticised and heroinised' by feminism. It was an extremely interesting 'deep and unusual' relationship. Both, 'constructed versions of the other' and:

"Vanessa's own caricature of her sister as a malicious, mischievous, crazy genius has powerfully affected the posthumous life of Virginia Woolf."

As for Woolf's celebrated relationship with Vita Sackville-West Lee feels this made Virginia, 'most aware of how little we know of the people we are closest to.' Lee does not, 'know Woolf either. Only what, 'emanes from her.' 22 Attitudes to abuse and madness are just as clearly articulated. The evidence of abuse is, 'strong enough and yet ambiguous enough, to open the way for conflicting psycho biographical interpretations'. What matters most is what Virginia Woolf made out of what happened:

"Here the commentator can only point to the gap between the avoidable evidence and the story she drew from it."

Lee states:

"there is no way of knowing whether the teenage Virginia Stephen was fucked or forced to have oral sex or bugged...But Virginia Woolf thought what had been done to her was very damaging. And to an extent her life was what she thought her life was." 23

As for her madness Lee sees Woolf as, 'a sane woman who had an illness.' She was, 'often a patient, but not a victim'. Nor was she 'hysterical', 'self-deluding', or 'guilty'
or 'oppressed'. As Lee argues our versions of her will depend upon, 'our own attitudes to feminism, medicine and mental illness.' Interpretations of her life have kept pace with, 'changes or fashions in attitudes to psychiatry as well as with shifts in terminology.' All we can do, 'is look at what it did to her, and what she did with it.'

What is significant in Lee's portrayal of Woolf is that she is self-consciously avoiding a reductive reading of her subject and incorporates this into her text. Whilst Lee is commenting on Woolf's madness for example the reader is always aware of the attitudes and influences that she is bringing to her analysis. This allows Lee to avoid one of the criticisms of feminist biography that is a legacy of the seventies: an over identification with, and idealisation of, the subject.

In updating a work her work on Elizabeth Bowen, originally published in 1981, Lee outlines many of the important changes that have taken place in 'life-writing'. Lee originally wrote the book to claim a place for Bowen within the academic canon. Due to work such as Lee's Bowen has taken her place as one of the twentieth centuries most respected writers. When Lee wrote the book eighteen years ago Bowen had become:

"(certainly in England) a marginalized and undervalued figure. She was certainly not part of any academic canon (unless as an example of an Anglo-Irish tradition). She was never placed alongside Virginia Woolf or Katherine Mansfield- or, for that matter, Evelyn Waugh or Graham Greene- as one of the 'important' writers of the century."  

Lee points out that in 1981 it was hard for her to find a publisher, 'or an audience', for a book on Bowen. Lee makes her agenda clear. She 'began and ended' the book with the belief that Bowen, 'deserved a higher estimation, a bigger and different reputation: that she had been undervalued and misread.' Lee wanted to show:

"what a significant, dramatic, interesting historical narrative her fictions make. I was anxious to rescue her from being
identified 'only' with personal and emotional concerns. I didn't want her to be diminished as a woman's novelist, inhabiting only private spaces.”

One way for Lee to do this was to give Bowen, 'her rightful place in literary history, to look at the reading and the influences that lay behind her writing.' So Lee set out to map Bowen's, 'relationship to more than one fictional family', connecting Bowen to Flaubert and James:

“and the well-made, deeply observed, minutely crafted novel; to Forster and the English tradition of fiction as a formal vehicle for self-awareness; to Woolf's exploration of inner lives- often women's lives- in tension against the political pressures of a changing world; and to something more grotesque, extravagant and unstable, the Anglo-Irish tradition of social comedy and ghost stories.”

Lee wanted to take the reader beyond Bowen's, 'highly formal, contrived, oblique, often elusive style' to show that this style was, 'an essential part of what she had to say about civilization and society.' Most significantly Lee left the book much as it was but points out that since 1981 a lot has changed:

“in the work done on Bowen, in the wider area of feminist criticism and writing about women, and in my own writing and thinking.”

Lee refers in detail to work that has been done in feminist approaches to the novel and Anglo-Irish studies that have influenced perceptions of Bowen. Lee points out how feminist critics, such as Harriet Cheeseman, have, 'prioritised the attention to women's lives in Bowen's work.' For example Bowen's interest in female friendships that female figures in Bowen, 'have no language that works for them, are inarticulate or silent.' This criticism places, 'her treatment of women's roles at the centre of her work.' Lee contends that some critics, such as Renee Hoogland, have argued for a re-reading of Bowen in, 'only one permissible- hitherto impermissible- way', that is to
read 'the issue of lesbian sexuality' in most of her texts. For Lee this seems, 'a flattening, intractable model of Bowen's slippery and complex fictions'\textsuperscript{28}, which reflects Lee's perception throughout \textit{Virginia Woolf} that she wished to avoid a reductive reading of Woolf and an over identification with her subject. Lee tells of the important changes in her own critical thinking during this period:

"Working on Virginia Woolf's biography, and developing an interest in different kinds of 'life-writing', has made me less embarrassed, as a critic, about crossing between the personal and the fictional. Critical writing by and about women now moves much more freely between different approaches: cultural and gender studies, autobiography, historical analysis. Fiction writers have taken to confession like ducks to water; biographers let fictional manoeuvres trickle into their 'factual' enterprises. I am much less anxious about saying 'I' when I write. And I don't any longer think it a weak position to write about the 'merely' personal in women's writing."

Lee mentions that today she would emphasise Bowen's:

"brilliant use of trivia, of domestic and social detail, on things in Bowen: clothes, furniture, decor, the cinema, travel, meals, drinks, shopping, suburbs."

In 1981 Lee argues she was writing a, 'modern critique- a dramatic and disturbing one'- of what Bowen sees as, 'a period of loss and diminishment', a society which Bowen views, 'ironically, as dislocated and uneasy, cracked across with treachery and bad faith.'\textsuperscript{29} Lee's portrait is of, 'a political, realist, socially observant and self consciously controlled Bowen.'\textsuperscript{30} For example Lee's reads Bowen's novel \textit{The Death of the Heart} (1938) as a sharp criticism of the English and Anglo-Irish middle-classes during the 1940s and post-war years, rather than as simply an emotionally plotted text. \textit{The Death of the Heart} is thus:
“an ironic expose of the inauthenticity of the English middle classes, among whom Bowen spent most of her time. And more painfully about the confrontation between innocence and experience than any other of the novels.” 31

What is most significant in Lee's comments when revising this edition is the changes within Lee's biographical practices: her willingness to enter the narrative, to blur genres, that is obviously tied to Virginia Woolf's thoughts on biography. The narrative of *Virginia Woolf*, whilst following to some extent the traditional linear format, is constantly being subverted because of Woolf's own work and the changes that Lee outlines in her new edition on Elizabeth Bowen. Lee faces the same constraints, the same desires that Woolf faced in her own 'life-writing' and in attempting to both articulate and overcome these manages to help transform the genre just as Woolf herself did.

**Notes to Chapter 4.**

2 Ibid., 4.
3 Ibid., 9.
4 Ibid., 9.
5 Ibid., 12.
6 Ibid., 12-13.
7 Ibid., 6.
8 Ibid., 12.
9 Ibid., 402-403.
10 Ibid., 404.
11 Ibid., 407.
12 Ibid., 407.
13 Hermione Lee, Interview with Nina Cook via telephone (2 March 1998).
14 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 312.
17 Hermione Lee, Interview with Nina Cook via telephone (2 March 1998).
19 Hermione Lee, Interview with Nina Cook via telephone (2 March 1998).
21 Ibid., 73.
22 Ibid., 118-119.
23 Ibid., 158.
24 Ibid., 199.
26 Ibid., 2-3.
27 Ibid., 3-4.
28 Ibid., 10-11.
29 Ibid., 3.
30 Ibid., 13.
31 Ibid., 104-106.
CHAPTER FIVE

Diane Middlebrook: The biographer and artist.

This chapter will provide a reading of the work of Diane Middlebrook, academic and biographer of the poet Anne Sexton (1991) and the jazz musician Billy Tipton. Middlebrook's writing is a reflection of the more sophisticated readings of women's lives that have emerged since the seventies. In her biography of Sexton Middlebrook followed in the footsteps of Nancy Milford in using transcripts of Sexton's psychotherapy sessions in order to illuminate her subject's pathology. Middlebrook, however, does not portray Sexton as a victim in order to make a political point as Milford does; rather Middlebrook is interested in how Sexton's pathology was instrumental in the creation of her art. Middlebrook's awareness of her own political stance reflects a greater self-consciousness in both her feminism and textual practice. In her work there is an awareness of the interaction between the biographer, subject and the social world that has only emerged since the seventies. For example when Sexton acts in a manner that is disturbing Middlebrook's aim is to place in context the social, cultural, and personal grounds from within which Sexton acted whilst at the same time helping the reader to understand why she herself interprets these actions as she does. In her work on Billy Tipton Middlebrook's writing on the nature of gender can be traced back to Virginia Woolf's thoughts on biography and her exploration of androgyny in *Orlando*.

Middlebrook sees her role as that of interpreter of the creative process. Her biographies are attempts to see how, 'artists get their work done.' She believes that biographies can help to explain how artists ever happen, the social, cultural, ideological and personal circumstances within which the artist was formed. As
Middlebrook said to me in an interview:

"how artists get from knowing that that's what they want to
do to becoming known for it." ¹

In order to explain this process Middlebrook has, in Richard Holmes's words pressed biography into, 'new areas of intimate exposure' by using tape recordings of the poet Anne Sexton's therapy sessions with the psychiatrist Dr. Martin Orne. ² In her biography of Sexton Middlebrook argues that Sexton understood that her:

"magical transformation from housewife into poet would
itself attract the broader interest of social and literary
historians."

She anticipated a biography that would clarify the relationship between Sexton's life, her illness, and her work. Middlebrook claims that Sexton:

"took an active role in making sure that her biographer would
draw from very full documentation." ³

Believing that the, 'whole last twenty years of medical ethics has been devoted to giving patients more autonomy and more control', Middlebrook maintains that Sexton's case history is culturally important. The period of Sexton's therapy (1956-1974) coincided with:

"vast ongoing changes in the understanding of mental illness,
including the evaluation of psycho-pharmacology and the
development of political analysis in the field of diagnosis." ⁴

The fullness of Sexton's medical documentation, 'therefore licenses wide, informed speculation'. The question I wish to address is whether Middlebrook's use of the tapes helps us to understand the creation of Sexton's art, thus confirming her claim that biography can help to explain the creative process. Middlebrook aimed to
investigate what was wrong with Sexton, and in a diagnostic sense did not, and could not, fully answer this question, as the patient is dead. But with so many artists 'psychologically unstable' in this era of American culture, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, to name a few, the question of how madness is connected to genius must be asked. A biography of Sexton would need to contain an exploration of the illness that she struggled against all her life, and that she firmly believed made her as a poet. The section of Middlebrook's biography in which she investigates Sexton's emergence as a poet, whilst in the midst of her therapy with Dr. Orne, helps us to understand Sexton the artist through the therapy tapes. Middlebrook's comments on the connection between Sexton's illness and her art, and specific quotes from the tapes explain where Sexton is artistically at this point. Middlebrook claims that Sexton's career posed:

"big, interesting questions: How did a mad housewife become a star? What connected her madness and her art?"  

and sets these questions up as the main focus of the biography. Maintaining that in, 'the years that Sexton was making herself into a poet, her psychiatric illnesses also generated numerous records', and that, 'the years of taping coincided with Sexton's maturation as an artist' 6, Middlebrook shares Sexton's view that her suffering, 'gained meaning through communication to others' through the poetic. Within this paradigm:

"psychotherapy constructed a bridge between the girl's creativity and the woman's commitment to a vocation in art."

7

If Sexton herself saw her emergence as a poet in terms of a fairy story, often evoking the plot of *Snow White*, Middlebrook supports this view by portraying the therapist
as Prince Charming. The queen in the story Sexton often told:

"was the impressive mother, the daughter of a writer. The poisoned apple was society's pressure on Anne to lead a conventional life in the suburbs of Boston...The poison took: she became sick, attempted suicide. The magical transformation came in treatment by a psychiatrist who, something like the prince in the fairy tale, stumbled onto a remedy that woke her into a new life as a poet."  

For Middlebrook:

"the seeds of her identity as an important American writer were sown in the rich mess that spilled from her first mental breakdown in 1956. The poet's life starts here."

Starts, in other words, with the prince, Dr. Orne helping her:

"to find ways to rechannel her impulses, to analyse- without merely intellectualising- the private meanings coded in significant gestures and inner states."  

Middlebrook points out that writing reinforced the effects of psychotherapy, and, 'the two activities almost interlocked.' Sexton's earliest poems were about her therapy, 'directly and descriptively', all that was 'sick' or 'hysterical' about her behaviour in, 'day-to-day life could be turned into something valuable through the act of writing poetry.'  

Middlebrook describes Sexton, 'poring over her rhyming dictionary', 'working out elaborate sound patterns and rhyme schemes', that led to feeling that, in Sexton's phrase, 'begat images', that would gradually, 'coalesce into a work of art'.  

These images were often taken from her therapy sessions and emerged from the feelings they evoked. The almost biblical language employed by Middlebrook to
describe this process illustrates the importance she places upon the powers of creation within the artist. Her comments on the connection between Sexton's emergence as a poet and her therapy are made to create the link between madness and art that Middlebrook believes explains her birth as a poet, 'reborn at twenty nine', creation becomes a fairy story.

How do the therapy tapes help to explain this rebirth? To take one example, Middlebrook identifies a therapeutic crisis in 1962 that led to the development of her play *The Cure* and to, 'the creative use of the experience of transference' for her next book of poems, *Live or Die*, (1966). Middlebrook establishes her thesis by explaining that Sexton discovered a childlike dependence on Dr. Orne. For Middlebrook Sexton let, 'the energy of these themes feed her creativity.' She began attending a playwriting workshop with a neighbour and was 'hooked', she:

“splurged on forty dollars worth of avant-garde plays in paperback and began reviewing her 1961 journal of therapy for ideas.”

Sexton forgot about the play for three years after a staged reading at the Charles Playhouse and unfavourable reactions. However, the crisis highlighted in the extract, led directly to poems on this theme in *Live or Die*, and to *Mercy Street* the play that emerged from *The Cure*. Sexton used to listen to the tapes of her therapy sessions and make notes because she was often unable to remember what had occurred during her meetings with Dr. Orne. In this instance Sexton then used these notes directly to create her work. Middlebrook is able to show how in Sexton's case treatment directly influenced the creative process. Her judicious use of the tapes illustrates that Sexton then employed themes emerging in therapy, such as transference, as images and
metaphors in her art.

Diane Middlebrook's portrayal of Anne Sexton's illness demonstrates a development in her own feminist thinking and feminism in general away from the narrow 'woman as victim' discourse of the seventies reflected in *Zelda*. In a speech Middlebrook explained that Linda Sexton offered her the project in 1980, at a time when she, 'had recently undergone an intellectual resocialization by feminist scholarship', and:

"was fascinated by the improbability of Sexton's career: a suburban housewife with a high school education, two small children, and a major mental illness had, almost overnight, turned herself into an important American poet."  

Middlebrook's aim, to explain the relationship between what disabled Sexton socially and what she made of it by becoming a poet, is part of this 'resocialization'. It also represents a wider feminist perspective than Milford's in that Middlebrook is focused upon Sexton's transformation, the process through which she turned herself into an artist, and is investigating this process within a wider social context. For example Middlebrook, in her essay "Telling Secrets", is most interested in the connection between Sexton's complex pathology and her poetry, pointing out that Sexton was classified 'somewhat scornfully' by critics, as one of the American post war 'confessional' poets, artists who wrote candidly about experiences of the kind many people thought should be kept entirely private. Middlebrook writes of how Sexton described her mental illness, her hospitalisations, and her addictions:

"just as unusual in those days of the early 1960's, she wrote about women's experiences of intimacy with men, with other women, and with children."
Middlebrook provides a short list of titles to, 'convey the kinds of embarrassment Sexton's poetry caused': 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further.' 'The Abortion.' 'Housewife.' 'For the Year of the Insane.' 'Menstruation at Forty.' 'Wanting to Die.' 'Cripples and Other Stories.' 'The Addict.' 'In Celebration of My Uterus.' 'For My Lover Returning to his Wife.' 'The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator.'

As Middlebrook is writing of Sexton through intellectually resocialised feminist eyes there is the obvious danger of the 'author theology', mentioned in chapter 8 of this thesis that is evident in biographies such as *Zelda* and in many of the portrayals of figures such as Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, subjects who have taken on emblematic importance for feminists. Nevertheless in her discussion of Sexton's feminism in her biography Middlebrook acknowledges that Sexton did not claim to be a feminist herself and gives a clear account of Sexton's attitude and relationship to the feminist movement whilst at the same time claiming a position for Sexton as:

"one of the first American poets whose bold art made feminist issues accessible to middle-class white women."

For instance in 1961 when Sexton was appointed as a Radcliffe Scholar- a program instituted to, 'harness the talents of intellectually displaced women whose careers had been interrupted'- and gave interviews to psychologists as part of this 'social experiment', Middlebrook records that:

"The interviews Sexton gave these researchers provide an index to the life narrative she was evolving for public consumption, which included not mere information but consciousness about the significance of her transformation from housewife into poet. Though she never affiliated herself
with the politics of women's liberation, these interviews indicate that she viewed her own development as shaped by economic and social processes that defined women's lives."  

Sexton was asked whether she had ever felt at a disadvantage in her profession because she was a woman. Sexton's reply was:

"That's a very big subject. Oh terrific. Yes. Definitely."

Middlebrook argues that Sexton's attitude to the 'woman question' had first been influenced by Robert Lowell's seminars that she attended at Boston University, 'where the 'lady poets' were consistently distinguished from the 'greats'. In a Radcliffe interview Sexton expressed the view that poetry was 'essentially feminine', so a, 'female writer had to compensate by avoiding subjects too identified with women.' For Sexton the best compliment a female poet could receive is that, 'she writes like a man.' Middlebrook believes, however, that by 1969, Sexton had changed her mind:

"asked to comment for a feminist journal, she wrote to the editor, 'My comment is this: 'As long as it can be said about a woman writer, 'She writes like a man' and that woman takes it as a compliment, we are in trouble.'"  

Middlebrook argues that Sexton's poetry is:

"imbued with the era of her coming-of-age as a wife and mother, under the Eisenhower presidency and the ambiance of conformity it shed: grey flannel for men and compulsory domesticity for women, the cold war, nuclear politics. Sexton's work offered the mental hospital as a metaphorical space in which to articulate the crazy-making pressures of
middle-class life, particularly for women." ¹⁹

Thus for Middlebrook Sexton's poetry, in forcing discipline upon madness, fed opposite types of cultural appetite:

"the truth about the feel of illness, and the somewhat more disturbing truth about shifting ground between the sexes."

Discussing Sexton's teaching at Boston University Middlebrook comments those women, 'often responded to what they interpreted as the anger in Sexton's work: the drive for self-definition and independent psychological strength.' ²⁰ However, Middlebrook feels that the question of whether she was a feminist bothered Sexton, 'possibly because of the word's associations with anger.' Sexton is recorded as writing to a woman on the faculty of the University of California at Santa Cruz, 'Just remember that women are human first', and to another scholar:

"I have always first tried to be human but the voice is a woman's and was from the beginning, intimate and female."

²¹

Middlebrook's main concern was the feminist question of how a housewife became a successful and commercial poet whilst writing about issues that were embarrassingly intimate. This emphasis along with the 'moral re-education' she refers to means that a far more complex feminist portrait emerges. Sexton is a writer placed historically in the first stirrings of Betty Friedan American feminism. A biographer is writing about Sexton with her own historically precise version of feminism to convey which is why Middlebrook is so careful to place her feminist position in context within her discourse. In contrast Milford, from within her own political agenda, is writing about a subject who was historically without access to the feminist ideas that influenced Sexton.
Middlebrook's text is not propelled by the political discourse inherent in a biography such as *Zelda* the focus of the narrative is upon Sexton as a poet, rather than as a victim. For Middlebrook, while the whole range of Sexton's behaviour had a role in the plot of her biography, she:

"chose to be an advocate of the highly disciplined artist Sexton was, an artist who believed that the whole purpose of art is the disclosure of what is REAL- a word she often wrote in caps."

So, for example, Middlebrook comments on Sexton's use of the first-person pronoun, particularly from insights Sexton herself gained at the Antioch Writer's Conference in the Summer of 1958, in order to depict Sexton's creative development as a poet. Middlebrook argues that at Antioch in 1958 Sexton gained insights into the role of the poet that helped to shape Sexton's attitude to her work and the development of her art. Sexton wished to attend the week long workshop at the Writers' Conference at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, because she had learnt that W.D. Snodgrass was scheduled to head the gathering and she had just read his poem 'Heart's Needle', singled out by many critics as the first 'confessional' poem. Middlebrook argues that this poem, 'provided a model of truthfulness that was also carefully artful', and that it was in this environment Sexton began to think of herself as a real poet. 22 For Middlebrook Antioch revealed to Sexton 'a deep insight' that 'poet' is, 'an identity extrapolated from a published poem.' (p. 83) As Middlebrook pointed out in our conversation:

"when she wrote a poem and signed it and it was in print other people read it and thought that was someone named
The first-person in her poetry, 'which was a construction of hers', stood in for a whole person and, 'she knew it didn't exist but other people thought it did and they thought it was she.' Thus, Middlebrook argues in her biography the poems 'I' is:

"real because it has become visible in the medium of print and circulated among hose who are positioned to recognize it."

Middlebrook believes the better the journal in which the poem appears; the more secure the identity, 'deflected onto its [the poem's] maker'. The first-person pronoun, 'has a value established in a cultural marketplace.' The autobiographical, or 'confessional', mode of poetry with which Sexton is associated, is no, 'less literary for seeming less literary', Middlebrook maintains, and it invited the reader, 'to equate word with person'. Middlebrook's conclusion is that at Antioch Sexton, gained an understanding of the commonplace that in praising the poem readers create a, 'poet by projection', that was fundamental to Sexton's artistic development.

Middlebrook's exploration of the emergence of Sexton's poetic 'I' is important because through this process Sexton transformed her madness into art. Sexton was able to stand outside herself and observe her psyche through this creative persona. It also allowed her to separate from her more aberrant behaviour and write poetry. This is most evident when Middlebrook is presenting ethically problematic material about her subject.

Middlebrook is an advocate for Sexton, presenting her as a woman who was gravely ill. She has to tread the delicate balance between showing how behaviour that we consider unacceptable was a result of her illness and falling into the trap of becoming
an apologist for Sexton by using her illness as an excuse for behaviour that she
herself is uncomfortable with. Middlebrook explained to me that:

“I had to learn to recognize the temptation to excuse as
pathology behaviour I didn't like. And I found I also had to
solve these problems at the level of style: to be genuinely
curious about what happened to her and why, rather than to
be judgemental or diagnostic-discursive practices that
position both writer and reader at a distance from the
subject.”

In one of the most ethically problematic revelations in the biography Middlebrook
provides evidence that Sexton acted in a sexually inappropriate manner with her
daughter, Linda. Middlebrook quotes Sexton describing a game called 'Being Nine'
to Dr. Orne:

“Linda got in bed with me Sunday, and we spent about an
hour pretending I was nine. She'd talk to me and I'd tell her
everything just as I used to be. I was cuddling her, down
lower in the bed than she was with my head on her chest,
with her arms around me. I want to be nine!...' The game
went on, until finally Linda tired of it. She really wanted me
to be thirty-four; and I'd say 'Oh, I want to be nine,' I wouldn't
do it. She started crying...I really liked it, was acting for
about an hour and a half.”

Middlebrook writes that, 'apparently she [Sexton] felt equally justified in climbing
into Linda's bed now and then when she couldn't sleep'; Sexton had claimed to Orne,
'her body wants my body, she loves to cuddle.' Middlebrook records that in later life:
“Linda Sexton remembered these as some of the most disturbing experiences she had with her mother: The image lingered of a giant head pressing against her chest, insisting on being the baby, making her the mommy; and the sense lingered of being asked for too much physical intimacy.”

In even more disturbing revelations, Middlebrook writes of how when working on her play *The Cure* and writing the poem *Little Girl* in 1964, Sexton's cuddling began to feel different to Linda: 'clingy and furtive'. Only later, 'did Linda realize that her mother must have been masturbating as she lay beside her.' Middlebrook quotes Linda as saying, 'I would be turned on my side, and I would lie there like a stone, pretending to be asleep, waiting for something to be over.' As a biographer Middlebrook is aware that she must justify her use of this material and in so doing must present an interpretation of Sexton's behaviour. Middlebrook asserts:

“Sexton never acknowledged to her daughter that she was conscious of transgression, but how could she have failed to see how wrong this was? The most generous interpretation is that she may have been very dissociated when she made sexual use of Linda. Sexton identified deeply with this daughter, through whom she relived her own psychological development.”

Middlebrook comments on the disappointment felt when an artist does not live up to their creation, pointing out that, 'it is always disappointing to find that a work of art is wiser than its maker', and reads these events in light of the work Sexton was doing on *The Cure*. For Middlebrook, 'Anne Sexton's play was both wiser and more compassionate than Anne Sexton the person.' Middlebrook argues that:
“Sexton's complex relationship with Linda, who celebrated her eleventh birthday on 21 July, was drawn powerfully into the play's vortex.” 27

The poem Little Girl, Middlebroolc claims, 'seems to have enabled Sexton to make artistic use of her confused erotic feelings toward Linda', converting them into, 'a poem of celebration that she read proudly in public whenever Linda travelled with her.' Middlebroolc maintains that the poem’s theme, 'a mother's protective pride in a daughter's sexual budding', is the best example in all of Sexton's writing, 'of the way she resolved in one work feelings that she was permitting rampant license in another.' 28 In deciding whether to include these events Middlebroolc faced a huge dilemma. Her solution was to show how Sexton transformed her own disturbing acts into art. Middlebroolc's problem as Sexton's biographer is that Sexton committed these acts; they cannot be transformed or changed by an artistic vision. As a poet Sexton is able to distance herself from her behaviour and explore her conflicts in art. Middlebroolc cannot do this and is forced as biographer to accept the woman as much as the artist. In our interview Middlebroolc argued that there is real danger in holding attitudes and making judgements and these attitudes, 'really do have immense social consequences.' Her job in this context is to interpret events for the reader. Middlebroolc’s more self-conscious and analytical approach to biography helps her avoid a reductive or narrow reading of her subject. Yes Sexton was a victim of a mental illness but she was also a creative artist and a unique individual. The individual is a combination of a variety of complex social, cultural, ideological and physical interactions that in turn create a multitudinous self. Biographers have had to integrate this knowledge into their textual practice. One of the formal problems the biographer faces is that they are constructing a narrative that is based upon real
events that cannot be transformed or altered as the artist can transform the events of their own life in order to express a more universal truth. The 'I' of the poet is a formal device that allows the writer to transform life into art but the biographer is not separate from the events they are recounting. Every judgement is a reflection of the biographer's own ethical and moral position and a separate persona cannot exist within this context. In the case of Anne Sexton, Middlebrook had to incorporate this understanding into her own feminist discourse and reconcile herself to the fact that at certain times Sexton did not live up to the promise of her art. Middlebrook's view is that as a biographer she must use empathy to penetrate and account for the motivations of subjects, but attachments must not be permitted to, 'occlude the otherness of those about whom we write.' For Middlebrook respecting the dead requires, 'not averting our gaze but paying attention'; arguing that the biographer 'holds in trust' what she or he has learned about the dead by granting them their 'actuality'. It is this sense of 'otherness' that creates the distance necessary for interpretation, it has also been incorporated into Middlebrook's textual practice as she foregrounds Sexton's behaviour whilst at the same time making the reader aware of her position as she shapes the material.

Diane Middlebrook's recent biography of jazz musician Billy Tipton is an excellent example of how issues such as gender are being interrogated within the context of feminist biography. Jazz musician Billy Tipton was born Dorothy Lucille Tipton in Oklahoma City in December 1914. She lived as a man for over half a century, dying at the age of 74 in a trailer park in Spokane, Washington, leaving behind five ex-wives and three adopted sons. Middlebrook brings to her text to the feminist assumption that all gender behaviour is a mask, saying to me in our conversation
that:

"I wanted it very clear the degree to which your own gender
is a construct, and how much your identity reinforces it, how
all your cues are designed to show that you are a woman or a
man, and that the world will generally accept whatever cues
you give off." 29

Middlebrook's view is that Billy drew her material from, 'the gender fundamentalism
of everyday life'. Middlebrook, as do all readers of the biography, wishes to
understand why Billy made the choice she did, how this choice allowed her to
achieve as one sex what she could not achieve as another. How she sustained the role
she had chosen to play for such a significant period of time. In Orlando we watch as
Virginia Woolf has her character shift between genders and through absorbing
masculine or feminine stereotypes meld into the fabric of that society by adopting the
guise of whatever sex she may be at that time. Orlando and her future husband
recognize one another regardless of gender, 'You're a woman, Shell!'... 'You're a man,
Orlando!' 30 Legally Orlando has to be one sex or the other and this is determined by
the vagaries of the law. Orlando's identity becomes a matter of legal agreement, not
biological fact. Orlando, up to this point:

"had scarcely given her sex a thought. Perhaps the Turkish
trousers, which she had hitherto worn, had done something to
distract her thoughts; and the gypsy women, except in one or
two important particulars, differ very little from the gypsy
men." 31

Woolf implies that gender is a social construct. There is no stable, single identity that
can be labelled as 'female', rather a number of identities that include a 'feminine' or
'masculine' self. Sexual identity becomes a 'teasing disguise', a 'device', similar to an actor taking on a role. Orlando:

"had, it seems, no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. For the probity of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally." 32

Just as Woolf perceives gender as role-playing Middlebrook bases her biography around the notion that Billy's character is the character of the actor. Tipton's hoax is a 'masquerade'. Billy was socially a man and physically a woman and Middlebrook’s text is an investigation of this dichotomy.

As she had very slim primary source material Middlebrook’s narrative relies heavily upon imaginative recreation and speculation on Billy's state of mind. Middlebrook explained that in terms of materials she had to base the biography almost entirely on interviews, 'just a few letters in Billy's own words.' Because of this lack of primary source material Middlebrook stated that as Tipton's biographer she, 'permitted' herself to, 'imagine what Billy might have been feeling.' 33 As Billy is about to die Middlebrook imagines that Billy knows her sex will be discovered, and assumes that Billy wished her achievement to be known. Middlebrook surmises that the way Billy surrendered her secret at the time of her death suggests that Billy wanted the disguise to become part of the record too. In the opening pages of Suits Me Middlebrook
imagines the scene at Billy's death claiming that Billy was, 'an adept illusionist to the end', describing how she had done away with her sex-concealing gear, 'for the trailer was empty of the jockstrap and bindings familiar to Billy's wives and sons.' And then exclaims:

“Billy had prepared to emerge from behind his screen like the Wizard of Oz, to dissolve the magic into wisdom, revealing by her nakedness in death that the 'difference' between men and women has little to do with biology. And locked away in Billy's office closet, along with the carefully worded and updated will, was the record of a lifetime's achievements: clippings and photographs documenting the transformation of Billy from she to he and the annotated routines, musical arrangements, and program notes in which Billy makes eye contact with posterity.” ³⁴

Middlebrook has produced a very creative 'fantasy' that employs our modern preoccupations in order to overcome the textual problems left by the black holes in Billy’s story. It also suggests that Middlebrook was very aware that she was shifting the focus to make Tipton's life a social study of gender issues. For Middlebrook in *Suits Me* Billy was:

“anticipating our admiration of her skill, our curiosity about her strategies, and, yes, our pursuit of her secrets.” ³⁵

As gender is theoretically a rich terrain of taxonomies for the contemporary biographer Middlebrook cleverly makes up for her lack of material by pragmatically shifting her focus to this issue. She is able to explore through this subject Woolf's androgynous argument in *Orlando* that gender is socially constructed.
Notes to Chapter 5.

1 Diane Middlebrook, Interview with Nina Cook (London 4 August 1998).
4 Ibid., 205.
5 Ibid., xx.
6 Ibid., xxii.
7 Ibid., 3.
8 Ibid., 3-4.
9 Ibid., 44.
10 Ibid., 52.
11 Ibid., 174-175.
12 Middlebrook argues in Anne Sexton. A Biography (London: Virago 1992) that in some ways Dr. Orne played ‘Nana’, Sexton’s Great Aunt Anna Ladd Dingley, who was Anne’s ‘refuge’, and who ‘offered a parent’s unconditional love’ when she moved in with the family when Anne was 11. Dr. Orne was planning a trip, and Anne transferred her feelings of loss when Nana had her own breakdown to what she saw as Dr. Orne’s abandonment. Middlebrook argues that the ‘fierce unreasonable emotion of loss’, could only be undone by Nana or a substitute. Sexton ‘acted out Nana’s return’ by retreating into girlhood. In the doctor’s office this often took the form of wanting, ‘to curl up and sigh ‘Don’t leave me.’ An extract from the tapes follows to support this point of view:
   “A.S: I never want to go beyond that moment, I want to lie on the couch and be with Nana, where I was loved...I wouldn’t have stayed married to Kayo for all these years: what he means to me is that he’s like Nana. Therefore you must be Nana.
   Dr.: And if you became aware of sexual feelings about me?
   A.S: I must have seemed more awful to Nana than I ever was to my father.” (p. 168)
13 Ibid., 167-168.
14 Ibid., 168.
18 Ibid., 153-154.
19 Ibid., 274.
20 Ibid., 387.
21 Ibid., 365.
22 Ibid., 78.
23 Diane Middlebrook, Interview with Nina Cook (London 4 August 1998).
25 Ibid., 204.
26 Ibid., 223-224.
27 Ibid., 222.
28 Ibid. 223.
29 Diane Middlebrook, Interview with Nina Cook (London 4 August 1998).
31 Ibid., 147.
32 Ibid., 211.
33 Diane Middlebrook, Interview with Nina Cook (London 4 August 1998).
35 Ibid., 11.
CHAPTER SIX
Claire Tomalin: Literary detective.

Claire Tomalin's works foreground issues about what it means to be a woman in a particular society. Tomalin has shown that she is able to make connections and have a special empathy for her female subject that may elude even the most sympathetic of male biographers. Tomalin's biographies have been dedicated to 'speaking up' and rescuing women from silence and obscurity. She does not write traditional chronicle biographies but is concerned with detailing the powerful patriarchal forces that conspired to hide women from posterity. One of Tomalin's most significant biographical aims is to rescue women from, 'the enormous condescension of posterity'. What is important is not just that Tomalin acknowledges the gaps this condescension has created in the narratives of women's lives but that she puts forward a very convincing story to account for these long silences. In so doing she makes connections and creates a narrative that is particularly female. A biographer is confined only to what they can find out and as so many women's lives have been lost to this condescension. There are always going to be more gaps and silences in the lives of female subjects, whose stories are largely unrecorded, than in the lives of most men who are the subjects of biographical investigation. Since the beginning of Tomalin's career her work has been celebrated because of her ability to act as literary detective and piece together the fragments of women's lives. Tomalin's sensitivity as a biographer is best displayed when Tomalin is exploring the lives of lost women such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Nelly Ternan and of the actress and royal mistress Dora Jordan. Also when she is making connections, as in the case of Katherine Mansfield and Nelly Ternan that make sense of a gap in the life.

In Katherine Mansfield. A Secret Life (1987) Tomalin discusses the year 1909, and argues that the events of this year determined the course of the rest of Katherine's life and in effect caused her death and undermined her posthumous literary reputation. Tomalin believes that as a woman she was able to make connections and draw
conclusions about these events that may have eluded a male biographer. In her foreword Tomalin states that:

“I am the same sex as my subject. It may be nonsense to believe that this gives me any advantage over a male biographer. Yet I can't help feeling that any woman who fights her way through life on two fronts- taking a traditional female role, but also seeking male privileges- may have a special sympathy for such a pioneer as Katherine, and find some of her actions and attitudes less baffling than even the most understanding of men.”

When talking to me Tomalin claimed that she, 'was very dubious' about saying this, and, 'people took that up a lot'. Tomalin argued, however, that it does make sense:

“if you think about something like venereal disease or abortion or something I think women probably do have a slightly different take.”

While Tomalin agreed that the chain of events begun in 1909 were, 'quite melodramatic, rather surprisingly melodramatic actually', she believes that lives are. Tomalin explained that she found Katherine Mansfield, 'a difficult subject', that she thought about her, 'Canadian mother-in-law, who was a sort of rather wild young woman on the edges of Bloomsbury', and her mother who, 'came from Liverpool to London on a scholarship and was a composer.' This sort of empathy, the tradition of looking back through the mother referred to by Virginia Woolf, has given Tomalin an understanding of the 'pioneer' Katherine that eluded her male biographers, such as Jeffrey Myers and Antony Alpers. This allows her to look at the events of 1909 and the effects of Katherine contracting gonorrhoea in a new and enlightening way.

On June 10, 1909 her mother took Katherine, 5 months pregnant and unmarried, to the spa town of Bad Worishofen in the hills of Munich, and left there to have her baby. In June/July she suffered a miscarriage. Tomalin points out that because
Katherine destroyed her own records of this period, and because there is almost no other testimony available, Katherine's experiences in Bavaria remain 'partly conjectural.' Tomalin believes, however, that this was an absolutely crucial time for Mansfield, 'without an understanding of what happened to her in 1909, the rest of her life simply does not make sense.'³ After her miscarriage Katherine moved to a flat of a woman who ran a lending library above the post office, Fraulein Rosa Nitsch. There she made friends with a group of Polish intellectuals- among them Floryan Sobieniowski. Tomalin writes that:

"In a work of fiction, the part played by Floryan in Katherine's life would appear so extraordinary and melodramatic that one might shrug it off as improbable. In a biography, the problem is one of documentation; it is not possible to prove every detail of the story I propose to trace, but it does fit all the facts we know, and has an inner logic which makes sense of everything else that happened subsequently in the lives of both Katherine and Floryan."⁴

The story is 'complicated' and divided into two - 'cultural and medical'. Floryan, when he fell in love with her, 'as he undoubtedly did, and when she responded' was, 'offering her poison gifts'. The first of these 'gifts' was Floryan's introducing Katherine to the work of Chekhov, who had died only a few years earlier, in 1904, in Germany, and was still relatively unknown in Western Europe. Tomalin supposes that Floryan showed Katherine a German translation of one of Chekhov's stories. However it happened, Katherine:

"produced as her own work a story she called 'The Child-Who-Was-Tired', which was, in essence, Chekhov's story 'Spat' khochetsia, a highly sensational account of child slave-labour and baby murder. Different critics and apologists have seen this as an adaptation or a plagiarized version, but there can be no shred of doubt that Katherine's story is drawn
directly or indirectly from a specific Chekhov story, and
should properly be described as a free translation."  

In 1920 Sobieniowski approached John Middleton Murry, Katherine's husband, 'a
figure of some considerable repute in literary London', and suggested that it might be
worth Katherine's while to pay him £40 for letters in his possession. He made some
reference to 'goods received'. Tomalin's belief is that it is perhaps likely that
something in the letters threatened to damage her professional reputation: 'and the
most likely area might be references to her old plagiarism.'

Tomalin then describes Floryan's other 'poisoned gift', writing that medical evidence
given by Katherine later suggests that she was infected with gonorrhoea late in 1909.
For Tomalin, 'it is hard to see any other candidate for this particular honor, unless we
believe that she was totally promiscuous, which seems unlikely.'  

Tomalin goes on
to explain that in March 1910 Katherine was then operated on for peritonitis.
Tomalin points out that this is exactly what specialists in gonorrhoea advised against
because of the risk of spreading infection into the bloodstream:

"Evidently this is exactly what happened: soon afterwards,
she began to suffer from gonorrhoeal arthritis, which affected
her hip joints, feet, hands and back at various times. Then one
after another she suffered the symptoms of systematic
gonorrhoea: her periods were markedly irregular, allowing
her to believe herself pregnant more than once; she became
infertile, after the peritonitis she began to suffer from heart
trouble and then later repeated attacks of pleurisy. These
attacks have been described as warning signs of impending
tuberculosis of the lung, which no doubt they were, but they
were also very possibly one of the effects of gonorrhoea."  

Tomalin believes that we have only to study her letters and look at her account in
1920, in which she said she was, 'never quite well' from then on, to see that:
“from 1910 she was a chronic invalid. As such her vulnerability to the tuberculosis bacillus must have been considerably increased.”

In tracing these events back to Katherine's meeting with Floryan and revealing what had not been fully disclosed before, the effects of gonorrhoea on Katherine's subsequent health, Tomalin has shown a particularly feminine understanding. This empathy has allowed Tomalin to do what a male biographer could not do: understand how Katherine may have felt as a woman contracting a venereal disease. She recognizes the vulnerability Katherine may have been experiencing as a woman having just had a miscarriage and been abandoned by her family and how Katherine may have been attracted to the bohemian world that Floryan represented as a reaction to this. Tomalin is the first biographer to link these two significant ‘gifts’ that determined the course of the rest of Katherine's life and in effect caused her death and undermined her posthumous literary reputation.

In contrast Antony Alpers in his Life of Katherine Mansfield (1980) does not make the connection between Sobieniowski, the story and the gonorrhea. He acknowledges the relationship between Katherine and Sobieniowski, commenting, that Katherine remained in Worishofen until the end of 1909 because though, 'the facts are few':

“there is not much doubt about the reason: she had a love-affair, of sorts, with Sobieniowski. When they met, how it began, what Kathleen saw in him, and why she trusted him at all- all lost.”

Whilst Alpers refers to Sobieniowski's blackmail:

“Floryan Sobieniowski, now married and working for the Polish Embassy in London, must have seen the advance notices of Bliss. He had therefore, from the most considerate of motives, approached the now substantial Mr Murry with the suggestion that a packet of Katherine's Worishofen letters
might be worth, say, £40 (or exactly what Constables had paid as her advance)" 10  

At no time does Alpers link the gonorrhea to Sobieniowski or to the tuberculosis that later killed her, and he does not suggest that it was Sobieniowski who introduced Katherine to Chekhov's work, just that she read it at this time. Alpers writes:

"At the time- it was just when Edward VI1 died- she understood that she had 'rheumatic fever,' as her mother once did, and for several years she suffered from rheumatic pains attributed to that; the pains which she had always called her 'rheumatiz.' In fact the infection was gonorrhea, and the pains were caused by the arthritis that occurs when the disease goes untreated." 11

Claude Rawson view that Tomalin’s:

"sympathetic and unsentimental account, a rich narrative portrait rather than an exhaustive chronicle, does not pretend to supersede, except in certain emphases on Mansfield's medical history or her relations with Lawrence, the elaborate and massive biography of Antony Alpers." 12

may appear complimentary. However it highlights one of the perceptions of female biographers, that they provide a 'sympathetic' portrait of the subject, whilst leaving the 'elaborate' and 'important' detail to the male biographer. Men write the big, long, scholarly books, whilst women write the heartwarming narratives that go alongside them. This condescending perception is contradicted by Tomalin's work. She is able to provide rich narrative detail, and make important factual connections at the same time. What Tomalin's work reveals is that a life can be illuminated with sympathy, and demonstrate a scholarly amount of research and perception, without the necessity of recording every chronological detail of the life to prove her credentials as a biographer.
In writing her biography *The Invisible Woman* (1990), the story of the actress Nelly Ternan, companion and possibly mistress of Charles Dickens, Claire Tomalin chose a subject who had almost disappeared because her silence and obscurity were essential in order to protect the good name of Dickens. Why Nelly almost disappeared, and indeed conspired in her own silence, is the substance of Tomalin's narrative. Because of Nelly's liaison with Dickens so much of her life remained invisible, and for the contemporary biographer frustrating gaps and silences will always surround her life. Tomalin said to me in our interview that:

“There is a particular empathy that is important for a biographer. I've said this too about E.P Thompson's remark about the condescension of history and the working class [sic].¹³ He wanted to save them from the condescension of history, and I've felt that about women and now of course it is a commonplace.”

Tomalin went on to say that:

“Mary Wollstonecraft was not well known when I wrote about her, Nelly Ternan no one had heard of at all and Mrs Jordan virtually no one had heard of. I'm more pleased with having written those books than having written about more famous people because of trying to show people something that they don't know at all.”¹⁴

Tomalin openly acknowledges these gaps. But she is also, as can be seen from her work on Mansfield and the connections she makes back to 1909, able to look at the evidence and as a woman provide an insight into these gaps that would elude a male biographer. Tomalin's belief that one of the reasons for Nelly's disappearance during the years 1862-1865 may have been because she was pregnant by Dickens illustrates this point. In the traditional chronicle biography not knowing your subject's movements and whereabouts for a number of vital years leaves a huge and glaring blank in the narrative. This may suggest to the reader, who in this style of biography
expects a nice ordered tale, some failure on the part of the biographer. Tomalin is, however, not writing a chronicle but is concerned with detailing the powerful patriarchal forces that conspired to hide Nelly from posterity in the first place. What is important is not just that Tomalin acknowledges the gaps this condescension has created but that she puts forward a very convincing story to account for these long silences, and in so doing makes connections and creates a narrative that I would argue is particularly female. As Tomalin points out in the opening lines of *The Invisible Woman*:

“This is the story of someone who-almost- wasn't there; who vanished into thin air. Her name, dates, family and experiences very nearly disappeared from the record for good. What's more, she connived in her own obliteration; during her lifetime her children were quite ignorant of her history. Why and how this happened is the theme; and how-by a hair's breadth- she was reclaimed from oblivion despite strenuous efforts to keep her there.”

Tomalin commented to me that the story of Nelly and Dickens casts a very interesting light on nineteenth-century life. However, the fact that, 'the story had been so long and so well concealed' (after Dickens died everybody who had known Dickens was questioned and kept quiet about Nelly) meant that there was obviously going to be gaps. For Tomalin:

“what you are doing is you see a possibility. You look at someone's life, or you look at a story and you see a possibility of a narrative here, you see a way of approaching a subject.”

Rescuing women from the condescension of posterity means that Tomalin has had to recognize that some of that history has inevitably and sadly been lost due to that very condescension. The story of that loss is what matters. The gaps in the story thus become as important as the known facts. Tomalin stated that she been struck by how
often the story of a great person, 'I mean in a way with Shelley and with Dickens, it struck me- you're looking at the cost to other people for this greatness.' As a woman Tomalin understands the cost to Nelly of Dickens' greatness. The silence she finds in her narrative is part of this price. In the chapter entitled 'Vanishing into Space' Tomalin looks at Nelly's life during the years 1862-1865, years that invite, 'conjecture and speculation', in which Tomalin theorizes that Nelly may have been pregnant by Dickens in order to explain her disappearance during this time.

After exhaustive research Tomalin points out in her biography that Nelly vanishes completely between 1862 and 1865, 'conjured into thin air'. For four years she remains invisible. Her name does not figure in any surviving letters. Nelly and her mother are not even at her sister Maria's London wedding in June 1863: 'a striking absence in a small, mutually devoted family.' She has become 'a perfect blank'. Tomalin records that when Nelly reappears in the summer of 1865:

"she is travelling in a private first-class carriage in a 'tidal-train', part of the rapid service between Paris and London. She is beautifully dressed, wearing a gold watch and trinkets, and is sitting next to Dickens and opposite an elderly lady, almost certainly her mother. They are accompanied by luggage, including several hatboxes. She is by now an excellent French speaker; her hair is darker and no longer arranged in curls; she is thinner, more elegant, a little hollow-cheeked. She is coming from abroad and where exactly remains conjectural." 18

Tomalin proposes that at a guess Nelly has been living in France. It is only a guess. For Tomalin

"This is to be a chapter of guesses and conjectures, and those who don't like them are warned."

Tomalin continues that no one has come up with any proof of Nelly's residence in or
near Bologne, or Paris, or anywhere else on the Continent. Tomalin records that, 'Something was happening during these carefully blotted out years; and it was happening somewhere discreetly distanced from prying eyes.' 19 Tomalin suggests, 'a simple outline of a narrative' to fit the known facts and concludes that:

"Nelly became pregnant by Dickens and that to minimize the possibility of scandal he moved her to France, probably somewhere in the Paris area; that she had her baby there, with her mother in attendance, some time in 1862; that the baby died, probably during the summer of 1863; and that she then stayed on in France or spent most of her time abroad until June 1865, when the Staplehurst accident happened." 20

It is this conclusion that is particularly feminine. It is obvious that if Nelly was pregnant it would have had to be hushed up and that Dickens was powerful enough to have orchestrated this.

For both Nelly and Dickens, as Tomalin points out, silence was imperative. On her reappearance in 1865 Nelly, Dickens and possibly her mother were on the Folkstone to Charing Cross train on 9 June 1865. It was in an accident at Staplehurst that was reported in all the newspapers, with engravings of Dickens shown helping the wounded and dying and reports being made of the famous novelists travelling companions. Tomalin points out that whilst Nelly may not, 'have had a baby; she may not have lived in France but only visited it for brief holidays', Staplehurst however, is incontrovertible, and it, 'put Dickens into a panic.' Staplehurst, Tomalin argues, also enforces the point that, whatever the truth was, there had to be an innocent version of Nelly's activities:

"The Staplehurst accident brutally threatened Dickens' privacy and brutally brought home to Nelly the humiliations of her position; for whatever physical injuries she received, (Nelly was thrown about and jammed into a broken corner of
the carriage, badly enough to have her jewellery torn from her in the struggle to extract her; and, like many of the passengers, she seems to have sustained an injury to her upper arm, possibly a fracture) his fear of exposure and his inability to give her help and comfort openly when she most needed it must have been painful too. It made very clear to Nelly and her sisters that, whether she was guilty or whether she was innocent she was obliged to live her life somewhere in the gap between what could be said and what really happened. The gap was a wide one in mid-nineteenth century England, but that did not make it any more comfortable."  

John Worthen has commented that Tomalin is, 'a model of how to incorporate, not to hide absence and ignorance.' Worthen quotes Tomalin's comments in *The Invisible Woman* that she:

> "has tried to make some sense of the known facts of the years between 1861 and 1865, and suggested a simple outline of a narrative to fit them."

He argues that whilst this is what biographers nearly always actually do, very few confess to it. When Tomalin says, 'some or all of this may be wrong', Worthen argues these 'words might be usefully affixed to all literary biographies.' Tomalin said to me in our interview that:

> "to some extent you are simply telling a story the way people do in fiction, but you've got to confine yourself to what you can find out."

Here Tomalin is revealing an interesting point about writing the lives of women. Her speculation about Nelly's pregnancy demonstrates that it is not just that female biographers are more willing to acknowledge these gaps but that they make connections that may elude a male biographer in order to explain them. Tomalin's next biography, of the actress Dora Jordan, is also the story of a woman subject to
the condescension of posterity because of her liaison with a powerful man, in this case a future king, William IV. Dora Jordan’s achievements as an actress were worthy of a biography on her own. However, due to her long liaison and many children with the Duke of Clarence, later William IV, Dora was either completely ignored or willfully misunderstood by history. Due to this she had almost completely disappeared until Tomalin, following her research on actresses for *The Invisible Woman* discovered the triumphs and tragedy that were Dora Jordan's life. In the case of Nelly Ternan and Dora Jordan we are seeing Tomalin at her best as a literary detective uncovering the hidden lives of women.

In writing the story of Dora Jordan Claire Tomalin is in fact rewriting history. In *Mrs Jordan's Profession* Tomalin clearly documents just how enormously condescending posterity has been to Dora Jordan as both a royal mistress and an actress. Tomalin said to me that when she started writing about Mrs Jordan she hadn't realized how much she was going to have to work in the Royal Archives:

"where I was wonderfully treated and given access to everything but I didn't realise how much I was going to have to sort of live with the royal family. But it didn't make me feel any better about the royal family." 

Tomalin's portrait of Dora Jordan is both moving and revealing. We see Dora at her best with the Duke of Clarence, later William IV, and their children at Bushy, their estate near Hampton Court, and alone and abandoned at the time of her shocking death in France. In writing of Dora at Bushy Tomalin creates a portrait of a busy professional actress and mother, sympathetically illuminating the realities of life for women of this period. Tomalin believes that the time at Bushy (1797-1806):

"gave Dora a place of comfort, beauty and continuity such as she had never known, an idyllic world within the busy outer world, an enclosed and self-sufficient rural paradise. Whatever the demands made on her by her profession and
whatever the Duke's frustrations in attempting to pursue his, their domestic happiness, increased by their new home, was deeply felt. It brought out the best in both of them. Neither had enjoyed an easy childhood, both set out—at first at any rate—to ensure that their children's experience should be different. For a man of his class and generation, he gave his young children an unusual amount of fatherly love and attention.”

Tomalin points out that in thirteen years Dora produced ten children, all survived, 'and all were healthy and good looking'. She comments that:

“No sooner did she get back to Drury Lane, accompanied by the new one, than she was pregnant again; small wonder that Sheridan was not always polite about the Duke.”

Tomalin writes of the dangers of pregnancy at this time arguing that, 'she must have felt, in common with all her contemporaries, that she was embarking on something hazardous and unpredictable with each pregnancy.' For women:

“there was no way of reducing pain, other than alcohol; and since antiseptic procedures were unknown, the best thing by far was for the mother to remain at home and for the doctor to intervene as little as possible.”

On one occasion Dora had a fever and had to be 'blooded and blistered'. Dora, 'rarely stayed in bed for long, and did not expect to take more than a few weeks off from work.' Tomalin points out that:

“The fact that every one of the babies arrived during the busy winter season in the theatre was a major inconvenience to her professionally, as well as an annoyance to Sheridan; it meant she usually missed the Christmas productions at Drury Lane, and may partly explain why she became willing to travel out of London to perform in the provincial theatres in the
Yet Tomalin shows that if you look at the record of her Drury Lane attendance during her first ten years at Bushy:

"you would not easily guess she had another life as a mother in the country: during the years 1798 to 1805 she was still acting several times a week through the spring and the autumn."

It is, however, the picture of Dora at the end of her life that sticks with the reader as much as the portrait of the valiant actress. As Tomalin states, 'All biographies come to sad ends, but this must be one of the saddest.' With great sympathy Tomalin shows us Dora exiled in France due to debts accrued by her son-in-law, Frederick Edward March, illegitimate son of Lord Henry Fitzgerald. As Tomalin explains:

"Dora had always had a soft spot for Frederick March, and when he mentioned that he was in slight financial difficulties, she gave him some 'notes' that appear to have allowed him to draw on her bank account. It was the sort of generous gesture she was used to making without a second thought; and it was a mistake."  

March proceeded to borrow in her name and, 'run up a terrifying tangle of debts that were now out of control and impossible to conceal any longer.' John Barton, a friend and advisor of the Duke, encouraged her to go abroad whilst the matter was sorted out, Tomalin points out that the:

"obvious truth is he was eager to get her out of the way before she and her awkward children and her crooked son-in-law could bring more embarrassment on the royal family."  

The Marches lived in Dora's house in Englefield Green, and since none of the debts accumulated were in his name March was safe from arrest. Barton, Tomalin explains, did nothing, 'He did not attempt to clear the debts or to pin down March; and apparently did not even inform the Duke.' March:
“was no better. He accused Barton of dragging his feet, claimed to have written to his mother-in-law himself, and later said his letters must have been prevented from reaching her by some persons unknown.”

It is clear, 'that this, like almost everything March said was a lie.' Dora was left alone in France, 'sinking into illness and despair'. She died in Saint-Cloud, 'lonely' and 'distressed', 'none of her children was with her, nor anyone she loved.' 30 As Tomalin writes so movingly:

“The Duke defended himself later, half-heartedly, by insisting that her allowance was always paid. So it was; but how little that signifies. It is the failure of love, friendship, imagination and simple decency that appalls. A woman who should have been honored and supported, surrounded by her family, comforted in her illness, was instead first driven from her home, then separated from the sons who were her natural protectors, and divided from her young daughters, who were encouraged to forget about her while she lived. No one took up the case against her swindling son-in-law; no one lifted a finger to help her in practical matters; no one spoke for her in her isolation and illness.” 31

We leave Dora 'broken hearted', 'with no real friend even to understand what she said'. What Tomalin achieves here is a particularly fine example of feminist biography. She helps the reader to understand what it would have been like to be a woman in this period, addressing issues such as childbirth that have been ignored by history and rescuing a fascinating and complex woman from the condescension of posterity.

In her foreword to *Mrs Jordan's Profession* Tomalin clearly outlines her reasons for writing the biography and details the past treatment of Mrs Jordan by historians and
biographers. Tomalin points out that:

“Mrs Jordan has evoked embarrassment, jocularity, reverence and abuse; according to the writer's prejudices.”

Tomalin has based her biography on Dora's letters, letters that cover at least 25 years of her life. These are letters to her children and theatrical friends and many hundreds from Mrs Jordan to the Duke of Clarence. Tomalin explains that during the first three decades of this century letters appeared in various sales. Dora’s eldest son, George’s, great-grandson, the fifth Earl of Munster, who presented about 270 of them to the Royal Archives; acquired some and about 600 more went, in two batches, to the Californian collector Henry Huntington. These letters are important because as far as Tomalin knows only one other scholar, Professor Arthur Aspinall, Professor of Modern History at the University of Reading, has looked at them. It is Aspinall's use, or rather misuse of the letters that Tomalin wishes to correct. Tomalin details the edition of the letters produced by Aspinall in 1951 at the request of the fifth Earl and demonstrates how Aspinall's portrait of Mrs Jordan is both distorted and incomplete. Important letters have been left out and a version of her character presented that is at odds with the facts. Tomalin records that Aspinall had already achieved the colossal task of editing the complete letters of King George III. He was engaged on an edition of the complete letters of his son, first Prince of Wales, then Prince Regent, then King George IV; also those of Princess Charlotte, grand-daughter of George III and daughter of George IV. Aspinall published all these letters in full, with copious notes. But as Tomalin points out:

“when Professor Aspinall came to edit and publish the correspondence of Mrs Jordan he adopted a different style. To begin with he made a great many unexplained cuts; and as well as being cut, the letters were incorporated into a curiously unsympathetic narrative. There are mistakes— for instance in giving the dates of the children— and Aspinall also omitted without explanation a crucial letter in the Huntington
collection which proves that Mrs Jordan was innocent of accusations made against her in royal circles that she had threatened to blackmail her royal lover.” 35

For Tomalin, Aspinall's cuts do Dora Jordan other disfavors and distort the picture of her character:

“He removed, for instance, much of the good and sensible advice she gave the Duke. He also removed all her warm expressions of sympathy for the troubles of the royal family—the King's madness, the illness and death of his youngest daughter. He removed a mass of evidence of her conscientious care of her children and descriptions of daily life at Bushy, their house and estate near Hampton Court. He removed most of her humor. Professor Aspinall, so at ease in the world of politics and the royal family, was clearly not at ease in the world- or the mind- of Mrs Jordan.” 36

Tomalin believes that Aspinall's approach is 'generally condescending'. A view, which Tomalin argues, is misplaced:

"for although she was no more highly educated than other women of her generation, her letters are intelligent and full of good sense, and she was by no means uncultured.” 37

Tomalin concludes that whilst Percy Fitzgerald, the 1884 biographer of the two volume Life and Times of William IV, entirely omitted to mention Mrs Jordan, Professor Aspinall allowed her to exist, but, 'ignored or devalued large areas of her experience, notably the domestic side of her life.' Tomalin is clearly at ease in the mind of Mrs Jordan having a special empathy for Dora as a professional actress and as a woman that allows her to expose Aspinall's picture of Dora Jordan for the distortion that it is. Posterity condescended to paint Dora Jordan in a particularly bad light because she was a woman, an actress and above all a royal mistress. As a woman Tomalin has the desire and the understanding necessary to both acknowledge
and seek to redress the picture history has left us of Dora. There is no denying that in presenting Dora to the public in a new light Tomalin has her own agenda, to reclaim the hidden lives of women. Nevertheless the factual evidence that Tomalin presents—Aspinall's deliberate leaving out of letters and distorted narrative—suggests truths about Dora and her life had been lost. Their stories had been quashed or distorted because the reputations of the powerful men they were associated with depended upon this.

In her foreword to *Mrs Jordan's Profession* Claire Tomalin stated that when writing of Dora Jordan Professor Aspinall had devalued large areas of her life, 'notably the domestic.' Tomalin's next biography, a life of Jane Austen, through focusing on what it meant to be a woman in Austen's particular world, looks at areas of Austen's life that have been devalued or overlooked by male critics and biographers. Whilst successful in this regard this is not the biography in which Tomalin's skills are best employed. It is, however, interesting to look at Tomalin's biography as it was published at the same time as another biography of Austen by male biographer David Nokes. The themes that Tomalin emphasizes in her biography such as Jane's separation from her family at significant moments in her life: as a baby being sent to a wet nurse, as a child to school and as an adult from her beloved Steventon to Bath. Her writing on what it meant to be a woman in Austen's world and deal with everyday female problems such as menstruation illustrate that Tomalin's emphasis is undeniably female. She looks at the inconveniences and realities of being a woman in that man's world in a way that Nokes simply does not. It is also true, however, that this is not a new story and despite the emphasis on being a woman at that time this is essentially version of what has been an oft-told tale. It was what was lost and neglected that was so shocking in Tomalin's previous work and it is that element that is missing here. In her introduction Tomalin states:

"It is not an easy story to investigate...The uneventful life of Jane Austen has been the generally accepted view. Compared
with writers like Dickens or her contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft, the course of her life does seem to run exceedingly quietly and smoothly. Jane Austen did not see her father beat her mother, and she was not sent to work in a blacking factory at the age of twelve; yet if you stop to look closely at her childhood, it was not all quiet days at the parsonage. It was, in fact, full of events, of distress and even trauma, which left marks upon her as permanent as those of any blacking factory. That she was marked by them will become clear in the course of her story; and that she overcame them and made them serve her purposes.”

Making an 'uneventful' life eventful is precisely the problem for a biographer of Austen. Though Tomalin tries valiantly to put some sparkle into her narrative the, 'events, distress and even trauma' she reveals are only part of the volume of opinion on Austen, that has today swelled to huge proportions. Tomalin does, however, emphasize what are essentially feminine themes in her narrative for example the effect of separation and banishment at significant moments in Austen's life. When asked by Hermione Lee what she could possibly write that was new about Jane Austen, Tomalin replied that she felt that she had suggested something new by focusing on an event in childhood that formed or shaped the personality. In Jane Austen's case she felt there was childhood trauma that made her what she is. Austen's clever family was what Tomalin calls meritocrats, there was a great deal of expectation laid upon the children. Mrs Austen breast-fed her babies until they were three or four months old then sent them out to a wet nurse from a laboring family. The children stayed there until the age of reason and then came back. Brother George never came back. Tomalin maintained that:

“We cannot know what we know about child development without seeing this as significant. At seven Jane Austen was sent away to school. At her first school she becomes ill,
nearly dies and comes home. She is then sent away to another school. Four times she was sent away. The system was a tough one. Looking at the life one can see a pattern. In 1808 her sister-in-law Elizabeth died and her young daughters were sent off to school as well."

This, Tomalin believes, was difficult and painful for her to deal with. Jane Austen never talks about her experience at school. For Tomalin this makes sense of what happens at twenty-five when she had no choice but to go to Bath with her parents. Ten empty bleak years follow. One can speculate that depression hit her—referring back to the traumas of her childhood. In her biography Tomalin argues:

"that a baby of fourteen weeks will be firmly attached to her mother, and to be transferred to a strange person and environment can only be a painful experience. Bonding between a mother and child 'is largely a modern concept, and babies were handed about freely."

It does not mean, 'that they did not suffer, both in going and in coming back.' Tomalin believes that in Jane's case, the emotional distance between child and mother is obvious throughout her life; and not only between child and mother:

"The most striking aspect of Jane's adult letters is their defensiveness. They lack tenderness towards herself as much as towards others."

Tomalin feels that you are:

"aware of the inner creature, deeply responsive and alive, but mostly you are faced with the hard shell; and sometimes a claw is put out, and a sharp nip is given to what ever offends. They are the letters of someone who does not open her heart; and in the adult who avoids intimacy you sense the child who was uncertain where to expect love or to look for security, and armored herself against rejection."
Tomalin points out that Austen described herself as a 'shy child', and shy children:

"withdraw into themselves when they are unhappy; one thing
a seven-year-old can retreat into is reading, any and every
book that comes to hand. Other people's worlds offer an
escape." 45

On Austen's enforced removal to Bath at the age of twenty-five due to her parent's
reduced circumstances Tomalin argues that there is a 'briskness and brightness' in
Jane's letters of this time, 'much keeping up of spirits, but no enthusiasm.' For
Tomalin Austen is:

"doing what she has to do, making the best of a situation over
which she had no control, watching the breaking up of
everything familiar and seeing what was left eagerly taken
over; fitting in with plans in which she has no say, losing
what she loves for the prospect of an urban life in a house not
yet found; no centre, no peace, and the loss of an infinite
number of things hard to list, impossible to explain." 46

Tomalin believes that Austen went on to create young women somewhat like herself:

"but whose perceptions and judgements were shown to
matter; who were able to influence their own fates
significantly, and who could even give their parents good
advice."

Austen's, 'delight in this work was obvious.' She was:

"pleasing herself at least as much as she was impressing the
family circle, and the possibility of reaching a wider audience
was a further excitement and spur."

Tomalin concludes that to remove Austen from Steventon was to destroy the delicate
pattern she had worked out, 'in which she could take her place within the family but
also abstract herself from it when she needed to.' The fact that:

"This new exile was brought about by the same people as
before, her parents, against whom she could neither rebel nor complain, must have made it worse." 47

Tomalin focuses upon women's life stories and reveals what it would have been like to be a certain type of woman in a certain period. Tomalin makes us see what it would have been like to be them in their houses, landscapes and times. In her biography Tomalin records that the Austen parents were also running a boys' school:

"Boys' talk and boys' interests dominated the breakfast and dinner table, and even in the nursery you could hear the sound of boys' voices and boyish activities inside and outside the house." 48

Tomalin continues that a:

"household of young men meant noise, the clumping of boots in and out of the doors and up and down the stairs, it meant shouts and laughter from the garret rooms where they slept, and sometimes groans and giggles from the parlor where they sat preparing their lessons."

Tomalin believes that for Austen growing up in a school meant that Jane knew exactly what to expect of boys, and was always at ease with them; boys were her natural environment, and boys' jokes and boys' interests were the first she learnt about. Tomalin views Austen in this context as, 'a tough and unsentimental child'. 49

This is a very feminist story with Tomalin focusing upon particular predicaments of the female: menstruating in a family of big boys, the restrictions of the weather. Tomalin sympathizes with the constrictions; the powerlessness of Austen's life, Tomalin commented to me that, 'she was so dependent, even in things such as journeys and presents.' This sympathy for the confines of Austen's life is evident throughout her biography. Tomalin records that however much Austen lived in her imagination, in books and stories, she had to, 'make the transition from child who observes adult life to woman who experiences it.' Tomalin observes that Mrs Austen
was in her fifties before Jane reached fourteen, 'a wide gap between mother and
daughter.' Tomalin believes that:

"Menstruation started late for most girls in the eighteenth
century, at fifteen or sixteen; they had to learn to deal with an
awkward and unpleasant process just when they were being
told to prepare for the crucial years in which they were
expected to attract admirers and most wanted to appear
elegant and imperturbable. Imagine coping without running
water or indoor plumbing, and being obliged to conceal, wash
and dry your napkins, while a lot of teenage boys thundered
about the house. This is another piece of lost, unrecorded
history; but even in the most brisk and practical families, girls
must have felt themselves vulnerable, and at a disadvantage
in the cumbersome arrangements they were obliged to
make."50

Tomalin points out that elegance required:

"the denial of most of the physical facts of life, like sweat
blood and tears; every young lady who aspired to take her
place in society was required to defend herself perpetually
against them." 51

It is the exploration of themes such as this that makes Tomalin's work uniquely
female. Tomalin's sex enables her to empathize with the femaleness of Austen's life
in a way that Nokes's narrative does not. The themes in Tomalin's biography of
Austen demonstrate her sensitivity in depicting the lives of women. This sensitivity
is best displayed when Tomalin is exploring the lives of lost women such as Mary
Wollstonecraft, Nelly Ternan and Dora Jordan, or in making connections, as in the
case of Katherine Mansfield and Nelly Ternan, that make sense of a gap in the life.
Tomalin is a first class literary detective and the drawback of her biography of Jane
Austen is that there was very little to detect.
Notes to Chapter 6.

2 Claire Tomalin, Interview with Nina Cook (London 10 March, 1998).
4 Ibid., 71-72.
5 Ibid., 72-73.
6 Ibid., 73.
7 Ibid., 77.
8 Ibid., 77.
10 Ibid. 319.
11 Ibid., 115.
14 Claire Tomalin, Interview with Nina Cook (London 10 March, 1998).
16 Claire Tomalin, Interview with Nina Cook (London 10 March, 1998).
17 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 136.
20 Ibid., 148.
21 Ibid., 149.
23 Claire Tomalin, Interview with Nina Cook (London 10 March, 1998).
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 174-175.
27 Ibid., 293-294.
28 Ibid., 288-289.
29 Ibid., 290.
30 Ibid., 295-296.
31 Ibid., 304.
32 Ibid., xvi.
33 Ibid., xix.
34 Ibid., xix.
35 Ibid., xix.
36 Ibid., xix-xx.
37 Ibid., xx.
38 Ibid., xx.
39 In the introduction to his biography, *Jane Austen* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997), 5, David Nokes stated:

“Often the most beguiling of literary forms, biography may also be the most complacent. Unlike a novel, which relies upon the arts of invention of surprise and to tease out expectations with a narrative whose conclusion is unknown, a biography is a story whose plot and characters are often disconcertingly familiar- In a sense, a biography is like a novel written backwards; taking as its starting point the well-known achievements of its subject’s maturity and tracing back the hints of
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inspiration which brought those great works into being. Blessed with the comfortable benefits of hindsight, a biographer may be tempted to describe the steady progress of genius from earliest childhood glimmerings to full adult brilliancy. Awkward gaps in the record may be invisibly repaired in the interests of a seamless narrative; discordant notes may be ignored as irrelevant to the central themes. Yet life itself is not lived backwards, but forwards, with no foreknowledge of what the next day, or the next year, may bring. The girl of fifteen, whatever her dreams or fantasies may be, has no predestined sense that she is to become a famous author. Her mind is filled only with the thought and imaginings of a girl of fifteen. Accordingly, in this biography I have sought, as far as possible, to present each moment of Jane Austen's life as it was experienced at the time, not with the detached knowingness of hindsight."

So Nokes's is a 'biography written forwards'. In formal terms, it does not adopt the 'objective' view of a modern biographer, but, like a novel, presents events through the perceptions of its principal characters. Whilst there is no 'incident presented for which there is not documentary evidence.' But 'in the disposition of a character's thoughts, as in the interpretation of his or her actions, there is some degree of invention.' (p. 6) I would argue that with this philosophy underpinning his narrative Nokes is in fact putting thoughts and feelings into the mind of his subject and that this is not the role of the biographer. Arguing that there are no incidents present in the biography for which there is no documentary evidence is all very well, but these documents depend upon context and Nokes's novelistic approach does not provide the context necessary to properly interpret the document. There is no room for a 'degree of invention in biography'; novels are about invention whilst biography is about interpretation. I would refer the reader back to my comments on Diane Middlebrook's biography *Suits Me*. Nokes feels the need to invent rather than admit, as Tomalin does, the areas of silence within the narrative. In fiction you can achieve the excitement of writing forwards, but biography is not about the present tense but about providing a particular perspective on a life from whatever information can be gathered. In the Writers' Master class Tomalin stated that:

"I'm not sure that biographers are so much set apart from other kinds of writer because you are actually using the same material as writers of fiction. You are using the incidence of human life, the shape of human life. You have the constraint that you don't imagine these, that you are actually always drawing on the material you can find, but essentially you are covering the same area as fiction."

Tomalin went on to state that:

"There is a truth that nobody likes someone else to sum them up, nobody likes to feel that they have been reduced in some ways. John Updike said about biographies, which is very good: 'The trouble with literary biographies is that they mainly testify to the long worldly corruption of life as documented deeds and days and disappointments pile up and cannot convey the unearthly human innocence that attends in the perpetual present tense of living the self that seems the real one.' I think that's a very good statement of people's objection to the idea of someone else writing about them."

Tomalin is right in pointing out the necessary constraint of biography, that you don't imagine your material but draw from what you can find, but I would disagree that the biographer covers the same areas as fiction. Biography, as I have stated, is a craft and not an art. This means that whilst both may tell the story of a life, there is the fundamental difference of the creative versus the suggestive fact between them.

Critics generally praised the 'sympathetic' portrait of a woman's life provided by Tomalin whilst admiring the scope of Nokes's narrative. Fay Weldon, in the *Independent Saturday Magazine*, (20 September, 1997), commented that:

"Both books cover more or less the same new ground, dwelling on the extraordinary nature of the Austen family, beset as it was by scandal and drama, and the very un-Englishness- if we associate Englishness, that is, with stability and gentility, not perfidy- of England's Jane."

Nokes's biography is 'all gusto, wariness and reappraisal.' It is 'a brave man's book, stuffed with the things that biographers are, I believe, not supposed to do, putting thoughts into his subjects heads,
words in their mouths'. The book is 'scholarly', 'carefully and well researched.' Whilst Tomalin's book is 'sweet, tender, slimmer, sober and thoughtful.' It is a 'woman's book'. Tomalin 'cares about things Nokes doesn't'. She broods on the trauma of childhood experience on the young writer's psyche. Tomalin takes a 'therapeutic approach'. Nokes argues that Mrs Austen sending her babies away bred 'a healthy independence'. For Weldon Nokes does not:

"lead or interpret, he presents and dramatizes: he is, I fancy, more interested in the family than in the writer, in the writer than in the books."

Tomalin is 'interested in the books, the writer and the family.' For example Nokes 'loves Eliza: Tomalin loves her fictional equivalent, Lady Susan.' What Weldon finds so amazing 'under the circumstances, is how readable both books are: how similar the subject matter, yet how little the repetition.' Tomalin:

"is at pains to point out a rather remote reference to the slave trade in Emma, which, she claims, demonstrates Jane Austen's disapproval of the business. Thus Tomalin, too, in the end joins in the process of beautification, which began at Jane's death."

Weldon argues that 'Of course, in Tomalin's eyes Jane Austen disapproved of the slave trade. How can she possibly be a contemporary heroine if she did not?' Tomalin 'veers towards Jane as a 'goody-goody'. Nokes 'longs for drama'.

In *The Times*, (18 September, 1997), Peter Ackroyd commented that Nokes describes a 'restless, reckless undercurrent of frustration', within Austen. Viewing Nokes's biography as 'copious', and 'written from the perspective of the family, standing by and watching their reactions.' Nokes is good 'on Jane Austen's relationship with others' whilst Tomalin is seen as good on 'Austen's relationship with herself.' Tomalin's biography is described as 'controlled-dispassionate and combative', an 'economic romance', that describes 'the dryness and coldness about her heart.' In *The Daily Telegraph*, (27 September, 1997), Carmen Callil believes that Tomalin 'Pays us the compliment of assuming that we readers of Jane Austen never supposed she was the genteel, secretive creature her descendants, critical gentlefolk and myth have claimed her to be.' She sees the 'marvel' of Tomalin's life as the connection she traces between the writings of Austen and Dr. Johnson: 'an influence perfectly obvious once developed by Tomalin but-such are our prejudices of gender-rarely thought of.' Tomalin is 'intelligent, feeling, suggestive, very well illustrated and of perfect length', 'as near perfect a Life of Austen as we are likely to get.' Tomalin is viewed as undogmatic, taking 'us with her as she reaches her conclusions.' Tomalin's Jane Austen is 'remarkably clever, sensitive, but unsentimental; tough, yet observant; guarded; and a woman with the devil of genius in her.' For Callil both Nokes and Tomalin 'liberate Jane Austen from the usual misreading', both illuminating the two great constraints upon women's lives at that time: death in childbirth- 'and quoting Tomalin, 'money, money, money again.' However Callil argues that 'where Tomalin leads by the hand', Nokes 'inserts a ring through our noses and drags us puffing after him.' Nokes's biography 'is not conventional biography'. He has 'inserted himself into it, recasting his formidable research in fictional mode.'

Caroline Moore in *The Sunday Telegraph*, (17 September 1997), commented that 'The overexcited present tense always makes me disbelieve, or at least want to question, all of the facts of a biography.' Moore points out that of course, every biographer speculates, reconstructs, intrudes; 'most, however, at least make some gesture of hesitating upon the threshold of an unknowable inner sanctum.' Whilst Nokes provides 'novelistic description of every character's most private and unexpected thoughts', and his biography is 'imaginatively overcoloured.' Tomalin is seen as 'sense to Nokes's sensibility.' Tomalin's narrative is 'tauter, crisper, better shaped.' Tomalin, Moore argues, looks for 'psychological drama.' Tomalin has a 'Robust attitude to Life Without Men', the 'manuscript upstairs became as much the adventure of Austen's life as finding a husband would have been.' In Tomalin information that menstruation started late for most girls in the eighteenth century, at fifteen or sixteen, provides information that puts a woman's life in context. Moore views Tomalin's admission that in the end she was 'half-defeated' by Austen in the end, 'is a fine admission by a writer committed to achieving posthumous intimacy.'

Hillary Mantel, in the *New York Review of Books*, (5 February 1998), stated that 'Men do not know what are the events of women's lives'. Mantel points out that Tomalin reminds us that Austen was brought up in 'an atmosphere of turbulent masculinity, of camaraderie and (controlled, clerical) wildness.' For Mantel Tomalin's only implausible passage is Phila Walter's reaction to Jane as 'prim', 'not at all pretty' and 'whimsical and affected'. Mantel believes that Tomalin is reacting against 'two
centuries of mincing Jane-ites' and 'cannot accept' a Jane who was 'prim'. Tomalin has 'firmly fixed in her mind her own version of Jane.' Mantel believes that Tomalin is not merely an attentive reader, but a good listener. 'She can live with Jane's silences.' Mantel points out that there is no reason to assume that Jane, a member of a bustling and worldly family, was unconcerned or ill informed about larger issues. But Tomalin 'limits herself to the woman's story, her men and the world they inhabit, are seen as if through a mirror. Their outlines are clear and their likeness is true, but the world behind the glass can only be observed, one cannot step through the glass.' Mantel concludes that Tomalin's biography is scholarly, 'yet empathic'. Tomalin captures Jane's struggle, 'of striving against limitation, and its contrary- the struggle to subdue a nature to what society ordains it must be.' Tomalin is 'the finest and most disinterested of biographers, because in her pages she has given Jane Austen her liberty and freed us, Jane's readers and hers, to enjoy the ile of the land and the cut of a uniform, and 'sofa conversations' and the 'glow worms in the lane.' In contrast Mantel argues that Nokes's belief that life is lived forward- Jane at 15 doesn't know what she will be at 35- may help the historical novelist, 'if he is writing about a real person before his or her days of fame.' That person, for Mantel, is 'in a way a pre-character, not yet seen by the world.' By an:

"authorial sleight of hand which refuses hindsight a novelist can create a sense of possibility which corresponds to possibilities of real life."

But when a biographer tries the same trick, 'the result can be vaguely embarrassing.' Nokes wishes to 'rescue Jane Austen from the frozen portrait in which she is 'saintly and serene.' But 'few discriminating readers of her work can ever have believed her to be so.' Mantel argues that the work Nokes has set himself has 'been done, and his biography is accordingly strenuous, flamboyant, and unnecessarily argumentative.'

Marilyn Butler, in the *London Review of Books*, (5 March 1988), asks:

"How can the Nineties reader, so often resistant to history, gain access to this most secretive and parochial of writers?"

Butler argues that while Tomalin's publishers credit her with the discovery of an Austen who is the heroine of a modern story, 'one of a family of meritocrats struggling to get ahead in a competitive, money-driven society', as it happens, 'much academic work on the Romantic writers, Austen included, has been obsessed with money for over a decade now.' For Butler Tomalin's strengths are of another kind, 'to do with her modern, matter-of-fact tone of voice and her narrowed focus on Jane Austen as the story's heroine.' Tomalin 'tells each well known incident of the life, and instantly follows up with Austen's response or, rather, what we might feel in such circumstances, a response couched in the language and shaped by the attitudes of today.' Butler calls Tomalin's 'boldest innovation', a 'reconstruction of Austen's inner life.' Butler believes that this is a 'risky' move, as 'arbitrarily' chosen characters from the novels- Lady Susan, Marianne Dashwood, Mary Crawford- 'speak for the authors suppressed desires.' Unsupported guesses, strategically placed in the story, take the weight' of Tomalin's argument. Butler maintains that the 'Big Idea', the world of the novels as open and animate compared to the 'house arrest' of her real life, the 'organizing principle' of Tomalin's book, nowadays 'comes almost too readily to hand in writing any artists life.' A:

"highly stylized genre doesn't necessarily express a particular writer's inner life: how can it, when the features of plot and character Tomalin lists are standard in classic comedy, romance and fairy tale?"

Thus Tomalin's 'psychoanalytic use of the novels reduces the effect of the letters, where Austen at least speaks for herself.' The biography 'goes someway towards a mixed mode- fictionalized memoir or biographical novel.' Both biographies 'connive with the Janeites in isolating, provicialising and domesticating this sophisticated writer.' For example 'they fill in her reading as a girl but afterwards cut her off from intellectual intercourse with her contemporaries, though we know that Austen carried on reading their books. Butler also believes that a consequence of avoiding printed sources in these biographies is that 'key personalities are promoted like soap-opera characters and given too big a role. Cassandra acts in both biographies as a foil to her more talented sister; the exotic Eliza is built up, as if we can't otherwise account for Austen's (relatively limited) portrayals of sophistication, ambition, sexuality or rebelliousness.' Both biographies credit Eliza with 'shaping Austen's imagination and fantasy life in late adolescence.' For Butler 'domestic biography is unable to explain Austen's outstanding technique.'

41 Ibid., 284-285.
42 Claire Tomalin, Platform with Hermione Lee (Royal National Theatre London 6 October, 1997).
44 Ibid., 6-7.
46 Ibid., 171-174.
47 Ibid., 174.
48 Ibid., 22.
49 Ibid., 29.
50 Ibid., 74-75.
51 Ibid., 124.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Victoria Glendinning: The challenge from within.

With each successive biography Victoria Glendinning has challenged the traditional biographical paradigm until with *Jonathan Swift* (1998) we have a form of biography that is completely removed from her earlier endeavours. Glendinning's biography of Vita Sackville-West (1983) cemented her reputation and allowed Glendinning the opportunity to take risks. Glendinning's work on Swift, towards which her whole career has been moving, reflects a number of significant developments made by women within the genre. There is a greater balance between the outer and the inner; a willingness to acknowledge the gaps and silences within a life that contain their own significance within the context of the narrative; a desire to place the subject within the complex network of their relationships whilst being aware that the focus of biography is essentially on a single individual; realising that sex does make a difference and that women will look at a subject from a different perspective than a man because of gender. Glendinning commented to me in our interview that:

“I no longer believe those chronicles, the day-by-day and then and then chronicles. I believe them because they're well documented, but I don't think they're telling me enough. They're like the raw materials of something else.”

Glendinning related how after Roy Forster read *Jonathan Swift* in proof, he said: 'I'm a dates and facts man myself'. Glendinning's work has moved naturally from the more masculine and traditional form of biography, endorsed by Roy Foster, to a more fluid and less ordered narrative that could be viewed as feminine. It would appear that as her confidence and maturity as a biographer developed so did her awareness of the limits of the traditional model within which she had been working.

Glendinning is well aware of the irony that the biographer's task is to keep her subject in focus whilst at the same time recognizing that it is essentially wrong, 'to see one person as central in the scheme of things.'
was as engaging as Vita Sackville-West's can be overshadowed by a figure of Virginia Woolf's stature. Glendinning said to me that:

“I think that the difficulty is having two pairs of eyes, or two perspectives, one seeing them as other people saw them in the thick texture around them, and one seeing through their eyes, what it felt to them, what they felt like, which might be completely different.”

This reflects a new awareness of the artificial nature of the spotlight portrait and the complexity of perspective through which the biographer must view their subject. In her Introduction to Vita Glendinning states that:

“This is Vita Sackville-West's story. One of the 'lies' of all biography is in that fact. (Another is that any story can ever be the whole story.) The people around Vita are in shadow except where their stories touch hers. They are distorted or diminished by this effect, especially as Vita's personality is unusually strong.”

Glendinning’s aim is to realistically depict a relationship that has been mythologized by feminists. The affair with Virginia has tended to dominate the story of her life and Glendinning wishes to remove this ‘spotlight’ by placing the relationship in its proper context. Glendinning shows that while the relationship with Virginia was important it was only one of a series of relationships that Vita was involved in. Glendinning mentions Vita’s letters to Harold Nicholson, pointing out that:

“one would assume that the Nicholsons’ marriage was a miracle of sustained romance- as in a sense it was, except that Vita was writing love-letters of a different kind to other people as well, nearly all the time.”

She outlines the beginnings of the friendship: its most significant moments; their trip to France in 1928; the publication of Orlando; and their gradual drifting apart as other relationships and interests developed. The difficulty for Glendinning as Vita’s
biographer is to balance her portrait so that a relationship that has been so celebrated by feminists is realistically depicted. Woolf is now more celebrated than Vita and yet Vita's intense personality could have thrown her in 'shadow' or, alternatively, Woolf could have been allowed to dominate sections of the narrative. This finely balanced text shows Glendinning's sophistication as biographer- in writing of this at the outset and allowing the reader to absorb the problem along with the story.

In the portrait of Anthony Trollope's wife Rose in *Trollope* (1992) sex, or in any rate gender, has meant that Rose is not simply the silent accompaniment to Trollope's life she appears in other biographies, but rather an active partner in a long and productive marriage. When I asked Glendinning if she had a particular audience in mind when she wrote Glendinning replied:

"I have several audiences in mind, some of them who are rather threatening, fearful. Because I am not an academic, I mean I write for ordinary people and yet I write on subjects that academics might well write about, I'm very aware of all the Professors behind me. So with academe I feel both defensive and defiant because I think I'm more fun and yet I want to write correctly enough, I want to be accurate and shrewd enough that they aren't disgusted."  

This 'defensive and defiant' attitude towards academe comes across quite clearly in Glendinning's introduction to *Trollope*. Glendinning explains that when she began her research in early 1988 there had been no full-length biography of Anthony Trollope since James Pope Hennessy's (1971), 'and I believed that I was the only person to be embarking on such a project.' Glendinning subsequently discovered that three American academics- R.H. Super, Richard Mullen, and N. John Hall- were all writing full-scale scholarly biographies of Trollope, and had been for some years. Glendinning points out that all three are authoritative 'chronicle' biographies, and, 'each professor has his area of special expertise.' Glendinning then states:
“It may well be imagined however that my confidence was shaken as news of the threefold wave of new Trollope biographies broke over me. But my book has turned out to be unlike the others. Sex, or any rate gender, may account for the difference. Women critics have written about Trollope's work, but no woman had written his biography.”

‘Sex, or any rate gender’ makes all the difference in Glendinning’s selection and presentation of her material. Glendinning comments that when learning of Trollope, ‘the private man’ she found herself involved in family dynamics—particularly:

“his relationships with his dominant mother, his hopeless father, his tubercular sisters, his two sons, his three nieces—and his eldest brother Tom, for whom I conceived a hostility which I have made every effort temper with fairness.”

But above all Glendinning became interested in Anthony's wife, Rose:

“about whom neither Anthony nor any of his friends and relations ever said much; his previous biographers, while in agreement that she was a good and loyal support to the great man, as indeed she was, have not found much to say about her either. Nathaniel Hawthorne's son Julian said of Trollope, surprisingly, that 'his wife was in his books'; listening for her as I read them I have found this to be true. Her presence in my own book became stronger and stronger. The nature of marriage and the balance of power between the sexes, a central question in much of Trollope's fiction, is central to this book too.”

Rose is frequently mentioned in the most recent biographies of Trollope by male academics. Richard Mullen (1990) has 101 references to Rose compared to James Pope Hennessy's 46 references in 1971 for example. It is, however, only in Glendinning's work that Rose becomes a subject outside the context of her
relationship with Trollope. In biographies of Trollope written by men, Rose is acknowledged as the backbone of Trollope's private world, but it is the public world that is the focus of these texts and Rose becomes increasingly shadowy as Anthony's public stature grows. In Trollope- A Biography (1991) N. John Hall states:

"I have often been asked whether I have a particular slant or angle on Trollope. I have always answered that, no, mine was not a 'thesis' biography. On the other hand, I do have leading ideas about Trollope, which, while not straining to solve all the mysteries of the man, inform this work: I think that Trollope was more of an intellect than is usually recognized; that his genius, while capable of depicting tragic figures, was essentially a comic one; that he was a writer of care and judgement- in spite of the fact that he seldom had to rewrite a line. And I think that he himself, for all the satiric self-depreciation he practised, knew he was one of the giants of English fiction." 9

This biography is obviously focused upon emphasising Trollope's intellect and in moving away from the 'comic' Trollope to a more serious image of the writer and Hall weaves Rose into his text only within this context. He mentions that she read his manuscripts, made fair copies of his writings and their travels together but compared with the nature of the relationship that Glendinning depicts Rose appears as an adjunct, rather than a personality, and disappears as Hall places Trollope within the context of the literary world.

In his biography Richard Mullen states that his:

"purpose in this biography is to place Trollope clearly in his world. His life and forty-seven novels can only be appreciated by understanding the issues and politics of his time. In particular I was struck with the importance of
religion to Trollope, something that had received surprisingly little attention.”

Mullen claims that as he proceeded with his research:

“I became convinced that there were two central figures in Trollope's life: his mother, who launched the family business writing novels, and his wife, Rose, when I have tried- I hope successfully- to rescue from the shadows. Without these two women I do not think the nineteenth, let alone the twentieth, century would have known the name and the genius of Anthony Trollope.”

Mullen points out that Trollope had a great regard for Rose’s views, that she was the only person with whom Trollope discussed his novels whilst writing. He emphasises her sense of humour; their shared private jokes and records their travels together. Mullen still views the relationship very much within the context of Trollope's Victorian public world. Rose is present throughout Mullen's biography but the vital core of the relationship is missing. Mullen is looking at Trollope in the context of the public world within which he moved and wrote. The reality is that however important Rose was to Trollope this emphasis on the public man necessarily precludes any real understanding of Rose as she was a Victorian wife and thus separated from this public world. After all one must remember Anthony would never have taken Rose to meet George Eliot. The difference is that Glendinning penetrates the divide between the public and private man by placing the relationship at the forefront of her narrative. In Glendinning's biography Rose and the marriage is a theme that runs throughout the text, she is central to it. In the male biographies mentioned Rose is viewed within a wider thematic context that is based upon Trollope either in relation to the literary world or the Victorian society that he inhabited. No matter how frequently she is mentioned it is always within the parameters of this wider narrative emphasis, a part of the private life that created the public man, but never as separate or distinct, as in Glendinning's narrative.
In *Trollope* Glendinning introduces Rose Heseltine by explaining that she was born in Rotherham, her father a bank manager who was later discredited because he stole from the bank. Anthony met Rose while she was on holiday at Kingstown, Ireland. Glendinning points out that, 'Anthony was a good match, in worldly terms, for Rose Heseltine'. Rose had no fortune to bring to the marriage. She spoke 'naturally enough' with a local accent. Glendinning records that the only memory of Rose as a child to have come down through the years is a story that she and her sisters once stitched lace round the bottoms of their father's trousers as he slept in a chair. 'It sounds as if they were lively girls.' Glendinning continues that there are no photographs of Rose as a girl:

> “and the one that survives from later years does not suggest that she was beautiful. Sexual attraction- which is what it was, plus some instinct for the right person- does not depend on beauty. Since Anthony loved Rose, we may be sure that she was 'nice' and neat, and proud of it, and that her whites were whiter than white, and that she scorned anybody's that were not.”

Throughout the biography we are given glimpses of Rose and of her marriage. We see, for example, Rose at 40 when she and Anthony moved back to England finding it hard, 'to know what note to strike'. Her:

> “taste in clothes and decor, now that they had more money and moved 'in society' had to be discovered.”

Glendinning depicts Rose with hair that, 'went white early' and arranged, 'simply, which in itself made her conspicuous in the 1860s and 70s.' We see Rose on her travels with Anthony through Australia and America, putting up cheerfully with the:

> “hard labour and gross discomforts of such journeys with Anthony because the alternative- being left behind in England- was even less appealing.”
We are shown her 'upset' at her husband's infatuation with the American suffragette, Kate Field, and having her, 'ample say about it in the privacy of their bedroom, in her deflationary north-country way.' What we are never allowed to forget is that Rose was essential to Anthony. It is the theme of marriage as much as Rose that fascinates Glendinning. Glendinning points out that Anthony:

“said so little about marriage in his autobiography, that what he chose to say is all the more telling.”

She quotes Anthony as writing in his autobiography that; 'My marriage was like the marriage of other people, and of no special interest to anyone except my wife and me.' For Glendinning this obviously raises the question:

“what is marriage like? No reader of his novels can ever again imagine there is only one way of seeing what we are and what happens to us, or that contented and satisfied husbands (or wives) may not at some level be discontented and dissatisfied. Marriages, like books, are open to multiple readings.”

The question of Glendinning's reading of the Trollope's marriage thus arises. Glendinning argues that, 'Anthony and Rose were thoroughly married, for better or worse; and in marriage something other than love was at issue, at least for the man.' Glendinning quotes from Trollope's novel *The Claverings*:

“not from love only, but from chivalry, from manhood, and from duty, he will be prepared always, and at all hazards, to struggle ever that she may be happy, to see that no wind blows upon her with needless severity...and that her roof-tree be made firm as a rock. There is much of this which is quite independent of love,- much of it that is done without love. This is devotion, and it is this which a man owes to a woman who has once promised to be his wife and has not forfeited her right.”
For Glendinning, there is a, 'mild threat, and many masculine assumptions in that formulation.' She points out that Anthony's father had not given his mother the devotion and security that Anthony posited as due from a husband to a wife:

"Anthony's marriage was not going to be like his parents. He would be master in his own house. Sweetness and dependence in women attracted him and reinforced his own feelings of manliness. Dutiful, adoring wifeliness was what Anthony wanted from Rose."

Glendinning does argue that the primary woman in his life, his mother, was a strong-minded and resourceful woman, 'and in another part of his mind Anthony despised female submissiveness', quoting from *Castle Richmond* to support her view:

"The obedience of women to men- to those men to whom they are legally bound- is, I think, the most remarkable trait in human nature. Nothing equals it but the instinctive loyalty of a dog."

As Glendinning records late in life Anthony met intelligent, exciting young women, such as Kate Field, whose self-image did not include:

"clinging or dog like wifeliness, and with fascination he began to write them into his novels."

But for Glendinning at the time Anthony married Rose, he could not have entered with such acuity and sympathy into the hearts of such women. At the beginning it was Anthony, 'who needed emotional support':

"Rose was bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, a phrase he used repeatedly when describing strong marriages. He wandered off- geographically, in his endless journeys, and in fantasy, in his fiction, and he often wrote about marriage as slavery both for men and for women. He loved the company of women. 'There are men who, at their natures, do not like women, even though they may have wives and legions of
daughters... Others again have their strongest affinities and sympathies with women, and are rarely altogether happy when removed from their influence. Paul Montague was one of the latter sort (The Way We Live Now). So was Anthony Trollope. He remained susceptible, and Rose knew it, like Mrs Grantly in The Last Chronicle of Barset; and whenever Mrs Grantly was made aware of 'the influences of feminine charms' she loyally blamed not her husband but the other woman.” 15

Glendinning believes that:

“Anthony could not have survived without the marriage, any more than Rose could. Rose gave Anthony the authentication and support he needed from his self-esteem.”

Rose made Anthony's 'little world' a comfortable one. However, as Glendinning states in conclusion, 'their bedroom door is not open to us.' What is known is that:

“For thirty-eight years Rose was to Anthony everything traditionally associated with the word 'wife', with all its implications of comfort, trust, permanence, history, habit, irritation, boredom, limitation, affection, private references, family secrets- and the shared memory, like the foundations of a house, of passion. Bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh. He wrote in his autobiography, 'I have dishonoured no woman.' That must mean something. It must mean he was never technically unfaithful to Rose.”

He was, as Glendinning shows, 'honest and true', but, 'in the virtual reality of his fiction he was free.' So we see Rose minding his absences, 'acts of abandon, and of abandonment', not a 'dormant wife- in private', defending Anthony, married to a:

“loving man. That is not so common. Whatever the strains,
Rose was lucky. So was he.” 16
Glendinning's focus on the theme of marriage and the glimpses we get of Rose at various stages throughout their union is a uniquely female perspective on Trollope. Throughout the text, whilst following a rather traditional chronological narrative pattern, Glendinning subverts this discourse by 'writing as a woman' and allowing us to see the blend of the inner and outer Trollope through the perspective of his marriage. Her gender did influence the themes and preoccupations that underpin her narrative, just as her open and frank acknowledgement of her dislike of Tom Trollope and her 'defensive and defiant' attitude towards academia, are also a reflection of her sex and her move away from a traditional narrative style.

The chapter entitled 'Fathers' in Jonathan Swift, in which Glendinning explores theories about the paternity of Swift and his companion, and possible wife, Stella, is a perfect example of the changes that have taken place in Glendinning's style and attitude towards biography. Two recent hypotheses are referred to: that Swift's father was his Patron, Sir William Temple's father—Sir John Temple, Master of the Rolls in Ireland, and Swift's Uncle Godwin's powerful friend, and the speculation that Stella was in fact Sir William Temple's daughter by his housekeeper Bridget Johnson. As Glendinning points out, 'This would make Swift Sir William Temple's half-brother—and, if Stella was Sir William's daughter, her uncle.' This would explain why Swift and Stella never married, or if they did why they kept it secret. Glendinning sets out to explore the evidence for these hypotheses, writing that:

"Sir John would have been in his sixties at the time of Swift's conception. The case rests on the precise date of the death of Swift's legal father, Jonathan Swift the elder, of which there is no record. It has to be deduced from the Black Book of King's Inn in Dublin, wherein Jonathan senior, an attorney in his early twenties, entered accounts and the minutes of the benchers' meetings as Steward of the Inn." Glendinning continues that no minutes were kept between mid-November 1666 and
mid-April 1667, when they recommenced in a different hand, thus, 'it may reasonably be inferred that Jonathan the Steward died in that interim.' A ruling on a petition to the benches from Swift's mother, Abigail about her deceased husband's finances is dated 15 April. There is also evidence from Swift's friend, the writer Laetitia Pilkington:

"Laetitia Pilkington frequently heard Dean Swift say that his father had died suddenly, poisoned by mercury he took for 'the itch'...contracted while on circuit- Deane Swift asserted that the circuit was for the spring assizes of 1667. If he died in March or April, he would have had time to father our Jonathan, born at the end of November."

Glendinning also records that Laetitia's account implies that Swift did not lead his friends to suppose that his paternity was anything but legitimate. In summary Glendinning records that:

"the case for disbelieving the obvious rests on Jonathan the Steward's absence from his clerical duties from the previous November, and an arbitrary assumption that he died well before March. But it is quite unprovable, either way.

There is nothing in Sir John Temple's will to support the theory that he was Jonathan Swift's father. He died in 1705, leaving everything to his four legitimate children. If he was Swift's father, he was not going to acknowledge it, or help him any more than he already, perhaps, had."

As Glendinning is treating these theories ironically she reminds us that:

"For every scenario about Swift and Stella's origins there is just enough material to make a case, and not quite enough to make it conclusively. That is why speculation has gone on for two and a half centuries, with biographers scouring the
available documentation for evidence to fit a pet theory.”

Taking her irony a step further and marking the introduction of her next hypothesis with an emphatic 'Stop', Glendinning writes of another theory about Stella's parentage: that Stella was not Bridget Johnson's daughter, but in fact the daughter of Sir William Temple and his sister, Martha Giffard, who had been widowed almost as soon as she was married and had lived ever since with her brother. Glendinning asks: what evidence can be adduced for this incest theory? Replying:

“Enough. Martha Giffard spent much time with her brother acting as his hostess, companion and confidante when he was en poste in the Low Counties, while Lady Temple was at home in England with the children. Martha Giffard's biographer, Julia Longe, the epitome of genteel Edwardian discretion, went so far as to stress the unusually close bond between brother and sister.”

Glendinning points out that Lady Temple lost all her children. After her son John's suicide, she lived away from her husband and sister-in-law, at their house in London. Sir William also apparently boasted that he had an, 'amorous temperament'. Lady Temple died in 1695, aged sixty-six. Glendinning explains that Lady Giffard stayed on at Moor Park with her brother, whom she always referred to as 'Papa'.

Glendinning then goes on to explore Bridget Johnson, writing that in the incest scenario:

“there would need to be an early acquaintance and a close bond of trust between Bridget Johnson, the foster-mother, and Martha Giffard, the real mother.”

She provides evidence of bequests in Lady Giffard's will that would support this bond. But almost as if she has lost patience with this increasingly absurd speculation Glendinning exclaims:

“Stop again. You do not have to believe the incest story. I
had much rather you did not. It is a wilful biographical vagary. Readers confronted with a sufficiency of puzzles will find it just one too many. I am absolutely not putting it forward as the truth, nor even as a possible truth.

My point is this: by showing that the case can be made, I am demonstrating how almost any hypothesis about the parentage of Stella- or Swift- can be reasonably well documented and, momentarily, knock the rest out of the water.” 22

Glendinning continues that as Swift's friend, John Boyle, 5th Earl of Orrey, wrote, 'There are actions of which the true sources will never be discovered. This perhaps is one.' Glendinning claims, 'I am prepared to accept that, and to accommodate this mystery as a mystery, along with the others.' But almost as if to mock this acceptance Glendinning then qualifies this assurance by stating:

"Yet there is something in us which makes us want to form a view, or to have one convincingly formed for us. The right solution is often the most remarkable one. Swift's father may well have been his mother's lawful husband, the young man who died sometime in spring 1667.

Or not. What one chooses to believe about other people's private lives is a matter of temperament. For example, in any question as to whether two people were actually lovers (ie., Swift and Vanessa), the world is divided between those who assume they were, and those who assume they were not.

The belief, whichever way, derives from one's own experience and practice and from the defensive hope that
one's own experience and practice is the norm. There is a similar divide, for the same reason, between those who latch on to conspiracy theories and complications, and those who take life and events at their face value. We can make up our own minds, from the evidence, whether Stella and Swift were married, and whether there was anything unorthodox about his parentage, or hers, and if so, what."

But the truth, as Glendinning ruefully points out, is that, 'no one can know for certain.' Glendinning has accurately pinpointed one of the biggest ironies about biography: that we all desire closure, to know absolutely what happened, the loose ends or partial theories are as difficult for the biographer as they are for the reader, but, as Glendinning points out, there are always going to be areas where we simply 'cannot know for certain.' Glendinning has matured, as her readership has matured, and we are far more able to 'stop' and acknowledge that in the writing of a life there are always going to be areas where the only certainty is uncertainty.

Glendinning's career provides an important perspective upon how a female biographer, working within an essentially masculine model, has been able to gradually subvert this model. At the same time Glendinning recognises that the conditions and limits that frustrated within that particular paradigm will still constrain the new model because the narrative they have to tell still relies upon fact and must accommodate this.

Notes to Chapter 7.

1 Victoria Glendinning, Interview with Nina Cook (London 30 June, 1998).
3 Victoria Glendinning, Interview with Nina Cook (London 30 June, 1998).
6 Victoria Glendinning, Interview with Nina Cook (London 30 June, 1998).
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78 Ibid., xviii-xix.
81 Ibid., viii.
83 Ibid., 133-134.
84 Ibid., 265-266.
85 Ibid., 146-149.
86 Ibid., 511-513.
88 Ibid., 238.
89 Ibid., 238-239.
90 Ibid., 239.
91 Ibid., 242.
92 Ibid., 243.
93 Ibid., 243-244.
CHAPTER EIGHT

A thematic and conceptual synthesis.

This chapter is a coalescence of conversations undertaken with female biographers in order to explore the central question of whether they have expanded the possibilities of the form. Women have discarded, reconsidered, or drastically revised plot lines, familiar key moments, and interpretative paradigms in identity and personality formation. They have shown that just as every strong biography expands the possibilities of the form, so some biographies have the power to define how a person will be judged, contributing to maintaining, revising, or shaking the subject’s self-image. Female biographers spoke freely with me about the possibilities of the genre and their occasionally problematic engagement with the form. This chapter will be divided in to the four clear areas of difference that emerged from my interviews.

i. Relations.

One of the outcomes of my conversations with contemporary female biographers is the conviction that women look at their subjects relationally. All the writers spoken to agreed that one of the important innovations that women had brought to the genre was the reading of canonical male figures through their relationships with particular women. This is evident in the work of all the practising female biographers interviewed. The interviewees also agreed that women used this emphasis on relationships to address issues of what Hermione Lee defines as ‘questions of definition’ and Elaine Showalter refers to as possibilities’. Hermione Lee said to me in our interview that:
“In women's memoir writing and autobiographical writing, women's narratives move between being a daughter, a mother, a wife—there is more explicit writing about what roles you inhabit. Men have inhabited public roles more securely. There is a self-consciousness in women about roles, how do I define myself? Questions of definition seem important.”  

In response to this Brenda Maddox stated in her conversation with me that women did tend to look at their subjects relationally and that this was a preoccupation she certainly bought to her writing:

“It's my prejudice. It's how I see things. I wouldn't expect some male biographer to look at it in the same way.”

Maddox talked of this as a, ‘feminine rather than feminist’, distinction, arguing that there is a uniquely feminine way of writing:

“I think there is a difference between the sexes and they notice different things.”

Maddox gives examples of excisions, such as that of Arthur Powers' editor, which would fit well into a feminist tract, yet she claims not to have set out with a specifically feminist objective, regardless that Nora is a part of a feminist paradigm—illuminating the life-of-the-wife of the writer. Maddox declared that, ‘feminism is a preoccupation certainly being brought to current biography.’ This:

“in Joyce studies was a revelation to me. I started to go to these academic conferences and heard the feminist reading of *Dubliners* and realised that the thing is full of serving girls,
mothers, music teachers, boarding house keepers, and they were actually making the whole thing go. All these men are at the pub shooting their mouth off, and meanwhile totally silently women are running the whole thing. Then you move forward and you realise that Joyce realised it. He realised that it was women that made the world go round and this was the voice that counts.” ²

This ‘revelation’ is evident in Maddox’s most recent biography of the poet W.B Yeats as it focuses upon the poet’s relationships with significant women, particularly in the last years of his life when Yeats was surrounded by an adoring coterie of female supporters. This approach is reminiscent of Lyndall Gordon’s biographies of T.S. Eliot discussed in chapter 4 and her recent work on Henry James in which the narrative is structured around the role played by significant women as muses for the art created. In A Private Life of Henry James. Two Women and his Art (1998) Gordon argues that James’s relationship with his cousin Minny Temple is at the heart of his creation of Isabel Archer in Portrait of a Lady (1981). James is quoted as stating that, 'I had [Minny Temple] in mind...and there is in the heroine a considerable infusion of my impressions of her remarkable nature.' Gordon writes:

“Now, at last, at the age of thirty-seven, he was ready to engage fully with an unusual young woman who emerges from the New World (in fact, from what is patently the Dutch House, in Albany, where Minny had lived with their grandmother). Minny's longing for other forms of life across the sea is projected
into Isabel Archer landing in England with 'the determination to see to try, to know.' 

Minny was, 'the real-life heroine' of James's youth in Newport, Rhode Island. Gordon believes that James saw her as a, 'free spirit, a plant of pure American growth'; amongst the polished ladies of their time the very air of Newport was, 'vocal with her accents, alive with her movements.' Gordon's belief is that James could not have written as he did without partners. Thus Gordon states:

"It was necessary to his purpose to engage certain women in ways that remain to be defined." 

Gordon's text is concerned with an exploration of this relationship and its centrality to the art of Henry James. This focus is a significant part of the work of contemporary feminist biographers and provides new ways of reading the works of canonical male writers such as Eliot and James. Gordon, for example, proposes that for James Minny, 'was freer, more familiar' than anyone would be again. Minny was set apart by James as, 'a soaring spirit with no place in a warped society.' Minny, 'epitomized, for him, her sex and nation: the free American girl of his fiction.' After Minny's death from tuberculosis Gordon's view is that, 'Mary Temple left behind the mystery of those with promise who die young. An unfinished life cries out for form' and this challenge, 'took hold of James with Isabel Archer'. Gordon maintains that Minny's:

"eagerness, her unformed longing for fullness of life, was to be diffused into various of his heroines who are either orphaned, like Isabel Archer or Milly Theale, or lack parental care, like Daisy Miller, and although none is an exact portrait of Minny
Temple, all suggest that lack freed them to be spontaneous— not finished like other girls, but always in the making.”

Gordon asserts that James, ‘vowed in his twenties to become the medium through which she would persist.’ Isabel Archer came, ‘from the indescribable quality of her [Minny’s] being, as though she, not James, were the author.’ Reading from the life to the work through key relationships has value with writers such as James and Eliot whose relations with women were particularly problematic, and in Eliot’s case recognizably misogynistic. This allows us to understand the genesis of a character such as Archer and the process through which the muse is transformed by the male gaze into text. In George’s Ghosts Brenda Maddox has taken a similar approach. For example she addresses the question as to why Yeats, born in 1865, found, ‘spiritual communication so compelling, and love and marriage so difficult’ through, ‘the least examined of the important women in his life: his mother, Susan Pollexfen Yeats.’ She addresses the issue of Yeats’ marriage through a close examination of the Automatic Script that has so intrigued Yeats scholars in the nineties. Her conclusion is that this was an:

“oblique form of communication between a young wife and an aging husband who did not know each other very well and who needed it for things they could say to one another in no other way.”

She looks at the 1930s and his, ‘operation for sexual rejuvenation’ through the, ‘succession of senescent love affairs’ that colored these last years and led to an extraordinary outpouring of verse."
Miranda Seymour endorses the view that female biographers are far more relational in their approach to their subjects. In the introduction of her biography of Robert Graves, Seymour mentioned that nobody had examined Graves' relationships with women in any detail and that this was a, 'key that needed to be turned'. In her conversation with me, Seymour outlined her belief that in Graves' case this, 'couldn't have been more striking, 'because the nephew was writing a book at the same time', the 'three volume life' written by Perceval Graves. Seymour describes this tomb as, 'a great one for the pudding effect', where the biographer, 'puts all the facts in'. To Seymour it was, 'absolutely staggering how anybody could be putting so many facts in and asking so few questions.' Seymour's point was that, 'women are extremely good at asking questions'. Seymour argued that what makes women good biographers has to do:

"with the times and because we are nowadays tremendously interested in programmes on television about somebody's reputation or reading long articles in *The New Yorker* about somebody's life. We're very much geared to looking at characters and to asking a lot of questions about them and we're much less interested in discretion than we used to be. It just happens to suit everything that women are particularly geared to do."

Talking to me, Seymour said women, 'enjoy the actual process of going in and just entering somebody's life'. What is interesting is that Seymour was offered the Robert Graves biography because his family had just read *Ottoline* and:
“they only knew one editor in London who happened to know
me and they wanted a woman to write the book most
specifically.”

They didn’t want a man doing it, ‘because they thought a man wouldn’t understand his
love relationships’. They were, ‘absolutely insistent, it had to be a woman, because they
felt that women ‘look into characters quite carefully’. For Seymour this is a central
‘division’ between male and female biographers:

“The female biographers I know are absolutely fascinated by
what makes the character tick and the men are fascinated by
facts.”

Seymour’s comments reflect current perceptions of feminist biographers: the fact that
they write of character rather than action, that they investigate relationships rather than
individual achievement, and that they are far more adept perhaps at entering the psyche
of their character through the asking of questions. John Carey sums up what has been the
gender divide within biography. Carey is obviously one who believes that there is no
biography ‘only chronology’ and in his criticism of Glendinning derides as weakness
the model of biography that the females interviewed have evolved. Carey comments that
if we want a, ‘full and responsible’ life of Swift the, ‘obvious place to go would be the
standard three-volume biography by Irvin Ehrenpreis.’ For Carey:

“by comparison, Glendinning’s book is short and amateur. Its
value lies in her feeling for people, and her aliveness to their
complexities.”

Carey argues that where Glendinning scores is, ‘in noticing the everyday’. For example
he believes that she is, 'good on Swift's poverty', describing his 'shabby lodgings' and, 'his humiliating eagerness to get a free dinner.' Carey maintains that:

"Glendinning does not say enough about his books, or why they have retained their meaning and immediacy."

She is also criticized for being unable, 'to reproduce Swift's conversation', as Swift, 'was enormous fun to be with.' Carey views Glendinning's book as working best on a 'personal level' where she is both 'acute and imaginative', for example when discussing Swift's relationship with women and the question of who was the child and who was the adult within the relationship. Here is the criticism in a nutshell: women are good for the small and personal detail, whilst men handle the more 'responsible' and important public sphere of the life.

In contrast to Carey a humanist critic such as Elaine Showalter states that:

"Writing is a very personal activity. I mean it is a humane and humanistic activity whatever literary theorists want to say about it."  

As the humanist believes that human self-improvement and progress must be unlimited, what becomes central for Showalter is the realisation of how images are significant for women. It becomes vital for the biographer to combat these and question their authority and coherence. As was shown with the study of Zelda in chapter 2 the representation of women in biography was an important form of socialisation, since it provided role models, which demonstrated to women, and men, what acceptable versions of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations constituted. This is obviously at
odds with a post-modern rejection of ‘metanarratives’ or the great ‘myths’ such as Christianity or Marxism which historians such as Francois Lyotard argue purport to explain and reassure but which are really illusions, fostered in order to hide difference, opposition, and plurality. These ‘Grand Narratives’ of progress and perfectibility are dismissed and what is looked for is a series of ‘mini-narratives’, which are provisional, temporary, contingent and relative. What the anti-humanist tends to emphasise is the social, economic and psychological structures that determine and limit the ways in which individuals can act. Humanists claim equality for all human beings. As this does not acknowledge a post-modernist perception that identity is constructed according to difference Showalter’s claim that men and women are equal for example is criticised by some feminists because sexual difference becomes erased. Taking this into account in her interview with me Showalter explained her perception that today; ‘people look to the life, the other life, as a sort of an inspiration and a model’. What is important for Showalter when looking at the life:

“is to be able to see the contradictions and those contradictions can be very beneficial for people who are trying to deal with their own tensions and conflicts.”

For example, Showalter discussed Simone de Beauvoir and how very brilliant women, when it comes to their personal lives, ‘can make mistakes and be driven by other kind of factors’. This, ‘is something that’s important to understand’ because it can help other women in their emotional lives. Thus understanding the relationships of the subject becomes an important way to help women understand their own emotional responses. Showalter believes that, ‘biographies are very inspiring’. Allowing women to see:
“the options, the imagination broaden. And then you see women
daring to try it. Sometimes they fail- sometimes they get through
and that's really important. I don't know anything more important
than that.”

Showalter discussed her interest in Mary Wollstonecraft in order to expound upon some
of the preoccupations she felt feminists were bringing to their subjects. Mary
Wollstonecraft ‘just tickles’ Showalter ‘to death’ because:

“I get interested in her and then I want to know how much actual
cooking did she have to do and how much did you buy ready
made. I'm curious as to how it was managed. I'm very interested
in the domestic.”

Showalter’s interest stems from the domestic and quotidian aspects of the life that so
absorbed Virginia Woolf in her studies of female lives and of which John Carey was so
dismissive in his criticism of Victoria Glendinning. As their writing demonstrates
women have used this device to open up the possibilities of the genre to investigate what
Elaine Showalter would term ‘possibility’, and what Hermione Lee has defined as
‘problems of definition’. It has also provided a means of reading the work of canonical
male writers in innovative ways that help to illuminate aspects of their work previously
dismissed or ignored by male critics.

ii. The market.

An important realisation that emerged from my conversations with female biographers
was the inherent force of the marketplace in determining and shaping the work of the
professional writer. I believed that these biographers revised plot lines, familiar key moments, and interpretative paradigms in identity and personality formation in their texts. What I discovered was that whilst biographers had become much more self-conscious about biographical practise over time, questioning the nature and role of the biographer and biography, underlying this was the demand for a saleable ‘readable’ text. The demand for narrative had not diminished and was perceived by publishers as the chief means by which the public understands a life and endows it with coherence or meaning over time. Whilst much of our conversation was based around the possibilities of the genre the reality was much more prosaic and the market appeared omnipresent in the formation of text.

Brenda Maddox quite clearly takes a pragmatic and market driven view of her work. She is first and foremost a journalist who sees the role of biographer as both objective and reportorial. Her job is to tell a story, and to tell it so well that it is of interest to readers and sells. In a letter responding to my request for an interview Maddox stated that she did not take a theoretical approach to her work and did not see biography as a category separate from other forms of writing. Maddox takes a matter-of-fact, businesslike view of biography. She claimed in her conversation with me that, ‘I don't write lives, I write books, a complete well shaped package’. For Maddox the central fact is that she is a ‘professional writer’ who works to contract:

“'I know when my contract is overdue. The publishers ask you 'when can we have it?' There is no airy-fairy communication about it, you've got to plan and you have to deliver it.”
Maddox’s object is not to make her subjects ‘human’ but to, ‘make the book readable’. What is noticeable from Maddox’s comments is that she shares Victoria Glendinning’s ‘defensive and defiant’ attitude towards academic biographers and views herself as the narrator of a tale that is both ‘entertaining’ and contains enough of interest to sell and be attractive to publishers. Glendinning herself said to me that she wanted to write books:

“for people who are sitting with a glass of wine in the evening. I think if people don't want to read it then there is no point in me writing it. I know that's not a very poetic way of thinking about one's work, you should be satisfied just as perfectly if nobody ever reads it, but that's not for me. I write to be read. I think it's my first duty to be read. I think it is the first duty of a writer to be read, to be readable, though not everyone would agree with that.”

This desire to above all be ‘readable’ is a common theme in the conversations undertaken for this thesis. Decisions about what is ‘readable’ are directed by what Hermione Lee referred to as ‘timorous’ publishers who decide on who will sell as a subject and therefore what sort of advance they are prepared to offer. This obviously affects the professional biographer’s choices. Claire Tomalin acknowledged in our conversation that:

“Sadly one's publisher's response when one says one wants to write about Jane Austen is 'Hooray! At last you're doing somebody everybody knows'. I have to say that Mrs Jordan in hardback sold 11000 copies, Jane Austen has sold 40 000 copies.
I think Mrs Jordan is a better book. I think Jane Austen is very fine and it is true that Mrs Jordan goes on and on and on selling in paperback. It is very difficult mixing up commerce and you do have to live.”

Maddox claimed that the biographer’s job is to convince the publisher that their subject, ‘is worth doing’ so that they will:

“actually give you the money to do it and then hope that people might want to buy it.”

Maddox’s pragmatism is evident in her comments on her biography Nora, a clear example of a text that touched a feminist nerve whilst at the same time being written from a purely market driven and pragmatic perspective. Part of a feminist paradigm-illuminating the life-of-the- wife of the writer Maddox claims it was written from outside this particular pattern of feminist literary practise. Maddox explained in our conversation that this book she certainly, ‘wrote as a journalist’. She read Ellmann’s ‘great biography’ of James Joyce and discovered Nora Joyce, whom she refers to as, 'Our Lady of the Footnotes'. For Maddox the interesting thing about Nora was that she was an, ‘ordinary person leading such an extraordinary life’. Maddox self-depreciatingly says that she, ‘joined the bandwagon without knowing that there was one’. As a journalist Maddox argued that she noticed things, such as the fact that Nora ‘was so fashionable’ that an academic biographer would not: things that, ‘you could have seen it if you had looked at the photographs’, but, ‘not the kind of thing that an academic looks for’. This is what helped to make the biography ‘popular’. Maddox believes writing
biography is about meeting a professional deadline. Her statements are made to reflect a particularly journalistic objectivity. A comment such as:

"People say about Nora Joyce that you must feel that you know her better than anybody you ever knew in your life, well I don't!"

is made to highlight this journalistic detachment.

When talking to me Miranda Seymour expressed a similarly pragmatic view of the life of a professional biographer. For Seymour:

"you have to think about who is going to be marketable,
biography is something you can get paid a lot for or very little."

She explained that she had been trying to do a biography of Casanova ever since she 'began doing books' and could not get a publisher to offer more than £15000. Seymour believes that there are very few biographers writing from purely romantic ideals or a driven need to take on a subject, 'there is usually some very strong market research going on behind that'. Like Maddox and Glendinning Seymour stated that, 'I write to be read'. Therefore it stands to reason that:

"You need to choose a book on the whole which a publisher is going to be very enthusiastic about because otherwise it won't go into the shops and they won't be reading it. And there is that rather ugly truth, that if they pay you a lot of money, then they must take a lot of trouble because they have to get their money
back. Therefore it will go into a lot of shops. So all those things
are at work too and they matter quite a lot."

What ‘matters’ are the rather ugly truths of the market place, realities that help
classify the work of professional female biographers.

Paradoxically whilst stating that her principal aim is to be read Victoria Glendinning has
also allowed herself, through the status she has acquired as a respected and prize
winning biographer, to offer certain critical judgements about the biographer’s craft.
Thus we see her make the recent comment to Erica Wagner that, ‘she does not believe in
biography any more’. Therefore:

“The kind of authoritative tone that reckons to give you the
whole picture of somebody’s life is a complete code.”

When I asked Glendinning her response to Bernard Malamud’s comment in Dubin’s
Lives (1979) that:

“There is no life that can be recaptured wholly; as it was. Which
is to say that all biography is ultimately fiction.”

she said, ‘a single life seems to me too artificial, too much of a stricture now’. Her
attitude was that:

“If I could be happy to write big, solid, good and well selling
trade biographies until I dropped into the grave, bringing one a
good income I would be delighted. I can’t do that anymore.”

Glendinning can afford to make a statement such as this precisely because she is
successful, her books sell and she has become something of a biographical icon.
more experimental approach in *Jonathan Swift* is the result of twenty-five years of professional writing that has helped establish her as an elder statesman in the field. This has allowed her to determine to some extent the textual approach she wishes to take. Glendinning has moved from a position in which whilst she did not regard biography as truth she certainly did not think it was fiction. She now doubts the legitimacy of biography and the reliability of biographical research. She no longer considers the biographer capable of producing a recognisable or verifiable life. What makes her work important is that she has taken this understanding and incorporated it into her narrative. This creates an almost fictional tension in her work. In *Jonathan Swift* Glendinning plays with the reader’s desire for closure, and her own, by constantly reminding us that this is simply not possible. The biographer is no longer omniscient but as eager and frustrated by the gaps in a narrative as the rest of us. The scepticism evident in her comment to Wagner is already present in her description of the form written for *The Troubled Face of Biography* (1988). Glendinning argued that 'truth' in a biography is dependent upon sources. In *Jonathan Swift* Glendinning shows just how evidence from various sources can be formulated to fit a theory that may hold up to a certain scrutiny but be far removed from the truth. In *The Troubled Face of Biography* Glendinning pointed out that a source such as diaries can be written with publication in mind. They may also be selective so the subject is presented in a certain light. Another source such as letters can be written in different moods and for different purposes. ‘On the whole one may be nicer and more affectionate in letters than one actually feels’. Glendinning argues that novelists are 'licensed liars' and that writing a novel can have the same function as a wish fulfilment dream, or a nightmare. For Glendinning the danger is that
the biographer will serve up as hard fact what is in reality the creative life of the
novelist:

“Creative writers have also often prepared the ground, and laid
down their own myth, by writing autobiography. As much
selection is involved—nearly as much as in a work of art—or
creative lie, as in a novel.”

Glendinning’s problematic relationship with the genre raises the question of how a
practical and realistic professional writer faces these difficulties within the context of the
marketable and ‘readable’ text they wish to produce.

During my conversations with female biographers there was a lot of interesting talk
about the possibilities of the genre but underlying this was the reality that biography is
still market driven. As I outlined in my chapter on her work Hermione Lee found that
whilst wishing to break out of the traditional narrative trudge she had to compromise in
order to make the text ‘readable’ or in other words marketable. Miranda Seymour spoke
to me in a very post-structuralist way about the use of fact and the narrative design of
biography but all her texts are written within a traditional biographical paradigm. She
argued that there is, ‘a story that has to be told and that’s the story of somebody’s life’.
The biographer’s skill is to, ‘not only tell the story but do things with the story’.
Seymour believes that this means biography is becoming, ‘more artificial, but keeping
that plot there’. Seymour discussed how many different ways she could approach her
current subject, Mary Shelley:
“Do you start before her birth? Do you look at the political brotherhood? And of course you look at this amazing great shrine that grew up after her death - the Shelley shrine - let us bless Percy and Mary and sanctify them forever and all the lies that got told around that. But you also have to tell the straightforward narrative, because people don't know it well enough and otherwise they'd just be confused.”

Seymour argued that whilst the biographer must stick to a ‘basic outline’ it, ‘doesn't have to be very long’. There is, ‘no need for a story to start here and go to the end of the book’. The biographer:

“could tell the story in three chapters and then spend the rest of the book just developing certain angles of the life which interested them.”

When asked nonetheless whether she would in fact take this approach with Mary Shelley Seymour replied that she would not as it would not be as ‘readable’ a narrative as the traditional approach she would continue to take.26 When faced with this conundrum in our conversation Brenda Maddox responded that this comes down to a matter of selection. When questioned on her approach Maddox stated that rather than finding, ‘pivotal moments in the life’ she would do it the other way round.

“I would find some bit of evidence that was just revealing, and it wouldn't have to be their Twenty First Birthday, or what Joyce called the 'epiphany'. I mean something that illuminated for you - like finding the coat with the fur trim for Nora and you think, ah,
this shows why she did this, or in this case where all the money was going.”

So Maddox is, ‘looking for anything that will reveal’. Technically, explained Maddox, ‘most of the time you are trying to decide where to stop and start chapters’. For example Maddox does not want, ‘to wade through all those lists of the ancestors and where the family money came from’. She likes, ‘to get right into it’. When gaps appear in the life the biographer must reconcile the needs of the narrative and the black hole that this silence produces. When Maddox hits a ‘black hole’ she stated that ‘like in the movies’, she just picks ‘up the camera’ and looks ‘someplace else’. For Maddox, ‘you can’t watch everything anyway, you have to talk about what you do know’, so, ‘you just shift the focus and be glad’.27 My conversations revealed a paradox between textual desire and textual practice: what the biographer wished to achieve in terms of possibility and what could be published as ‘readable’. Narrative is the way in which the public understands a life and the market is ever present in the formation of text.

iii. Rejection of the magisterial.

It became evident through the interviews that female biographers are uncomfortable with the magisterial position adopted by biographer Richard Holmes and outlined in chapter 1 of this thesis. This unease stems from the awareness that there is often the danger of female subjects, such as Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, taking on emblematic importance and losing their humanity through idealisation. This discomfort with the prophet like role outlined by Holmes also stems from the problematic relationship many of the professional female biographers I spoke to have with academia. There is a
‘defensive and defiant’ stance taken by many of the women who feel the steely gaze of the male academic on their back and often spoke in very prosaic terms about their texts because of this. They did not diminish their work exactly but spoke of accessibility and readability and their role as the purveyor of a text that was both publishable and had enough of interest to keep the average reader happy. Brenda Maddox for example said to me that she tried to put enough in her work:

“so that the non technical reader knows what was going on with the person, why he's important and his various intellectual achievements.”

Nevertheless, she felt that this was her ‘weak point’ in that she did not perceive herself to be, ‘a great literary critic or cultural historian’, claiming that she always felt that she hadn’t dealt well enough with, ‘this that or the other change’ in the subjects ‘intellectual development’. This is complicated by the fact that a myriad of possibilities has opened up for the biographer with Robert Skidelsky’s contention that biography is following fashion in the substitution of the democratic notion of 'fulfilment' for the aristocratic notion of 'achievement'. This has made the exemplary lives of our age those that may look to enlarge the possibilities of living. Biographies today focus more upon the life, the ‘adventure story’, than the words. The biographer is thus viewed as a modern guru, writing lives that will provide a means of fulfilment or ways of living that act almost in the manner of self-help guides or pop psychology books. The women I spoke to all admitted the importance of feminist foremothers and role models in their lives but felt uncomfortable with the role of guide or prophet, stressing the fact that their main aim was to tell a story- a real life ‘adventure story’.
Miranda Seymour was very sceptical about the position of biographer as modern day messiah that Richard Holmes has proposed. In her introduction to *Ottoline* Seymour claimed that she was presenting the 'definitive' story, showing how Ottoline was hard up, revealing Phillip's affairs and how obsessively generous she was amongst other things. This notion that the biography was 'definitive', the complete and unabridged story, was the major selling point of the book, here was the aristocratic Ottoline as she really was. This was the 'David' Seymour taking on the 'Goliath' of Bloomsbury, and rescuing her subject from our false perceptions by revealing her true nature. Yet when I asked Seymour whether a biography could ever be definitive she was adamant that it could not:

"I don't go along with that one at all. I find it profoundly disturbing that when I'd written Ottoline I actually got cascades of letters from people saying 'she is an inspiration to me, I am now going to try and live like Ottoline'. I thought this is not what biographies about at all, I didn't mean this to happen. I don't actually like the idea of exemplary lives or inspiring lives or biographer as this kind of special person whom has a unique insight into everybody's lives."

When asked about Holmes' belief in the 'magisterial' power of the biographer, discussed in chapter 1, Seymour stated that she thought Holmes was a 'wonderful writer' but that she was:
“actually quite frightened by his attitude to the biographer because to me it's much too extreme and it goes far too far in the direction of not only the definitive but the almost God given right of the biographer to interpret, to possess, to hand down this person who has become them.”

For Seymour:

“You choose the person and you do the very best you can with understanding them and explaining them but they shouldn't be somebody who is there for a purpose.”

Seymour pragmatically explained that, ‘It's just a life, which is very interesting for whatever reason. But I don't think there should be the idea that that is a life that should inspire or be followed, or become a model.’ Seymour finds definitive ‘one of the most stupid words ever’ as:

“It means somebody has actually been unimaginative enough to put in everything, too terrified that something might somehow escape and go into another biography. It all goes in and then it's mine, and it belongs to me and I will call it definitive. In fact that is the least definitive of all the biographies, because there's no person left, there's just this great pudding sitting on top of them with no view at all. I think the most interesting lives are the ones where you can look at 10 different biographies and each one will be different.”
The concept that for Seymour 'it is just a life' underscores the fact that the women I spoke to referred to commercial demands, rather than notions of exemplary or inspiring lives because they felt uncomfortable with the sort of status that Holmes affords the biographer.

Elaine Showalter expressed the opposite view in our conversation, arguing that a lot of the reason why people read biography is for 'certainty'. The central question for Showalter is how people manage. This involves, 'looking at somebody else's pattern' and asking could I have done that? Might I be like that? Do I agree with that? This means comparing, but not 'modelling'. What biographies do for women is provide stories that 'give you a feeling of reassurance'. Showalter argues that, 'there is a trajectory if you like, but sometimes you feel you are in a world without maps'. The same things, 'like work, love will always preoccupy' us and so we can use another's experience as a road map.  

The danger of Showalter's position is that it can lead to what Hermione Lee and Victoria Glendinning refer to as 'author theology'. Glendinning has called 'author theology', a term which refers to writers of the past, 'who take on emblematic importance' who, 'provide role models for dissenting, aspiring, modern women'. Glendinning stated to me that she views this as, 'worse than idealization which is quite sweet really', believing that female biographers, 'hang on to these figures'. Like, 'a deity in a primitive society', Glendinning maintains that many female biographers, and she singled out Lyndall Gordon on Virginia Woolf for particular mention, hang onto the subject, 'all sorts of
bundes of luggage, little emblems of their own'. They project onto this figure 'all sorts of stuff that has nothing to do with it at all'. Glendinning sees:

"Virginia Woolf getting smaller and smaller and smaller, and the critic getting more and more puffed up and overblown and overblown and overblown."

The real problem about author theology for Glendinning is that:

"it is incredibly diminishing to the iconic object, how about listening to her, just focusing for a moment hey! Drop all this stuff. You end up destroying the thing you're hanging all these little burdens on." 35

Lee stated in our conversation that when working on Virginia Woolf her aim was to, 'write for now, for the 90s', in order to 'rethink Woolf'. Lee felt that in some models she had to be either a saint or a saintly victim. Lee wanted to present her as a working professional woman, 'a terrifying, courageous and stoical figure'. 36 The question that arises from this response is if Lee's textual practices enable her to present this version of Woolf and escape the clutches of 'author theology'. In her opening chapter Lee claimed that when Woolf is talking about biography she is also talking about feminism. As has been pointed out, Woolf argued that traditional biography could not accommodate the narratives of women's lives. How does Lee avoid, 'summing up, packaging and selling' Woolf, particularly when it comes to an issue such as feminism that is problematic for the biographer because Woolf has been appropriated as a role model within this context?

Lee said to me that:

"I wanted to get away from what men say about women who do
not have a traditional sex life, that she was frigid. She was sensual, emotional much more complex." ³⁷

In *Virginia Woolf* Lee points out that for the contemporary reader Woolf can:

"take on the shape of difficult modernist preoccupied with questions of form, or comedian of manners, or neurotic highbrow aesthete, or inventive fantasist, or pernicious snob, or Marxist feminist, or historian of women's lives, or victim of abuse, or Lesbian heroine, or cultural analyst depending on who is reading her, and when and in what context." ³⁸

Lee's portrayal of Woolf's feminism is underscored by the awareness that she herself is taking a position. Nevertheless this is incorporated into the text and made part of the fabric of the narrative so that Lee is thinking about Woolf's feminism whilst at the same time making the reader conscious about how she is thinking about it. Lee has commented that the difficulty when writing about Woolf is:

"to do justice to a feminism that was subtler and more complex than the feminism of the 1970s and 1980s which locked Virginia Woolf to a simplistic ideology of women's anger versus male power." ³⁹

Lee argues that particularly in the States feminist scholars have been rescuing Virginia Woolf from identification with an elite group and replacing her as a heroine of revolutionary socialist feminism:

"She has always been appropriated for a wide and conflicting variety of feminist positions. Most readers feel a need to take a
Lee wrote of Woolf's relationship with Ethel Smyth in order to show a more 'complex' figure, and to 'repoliticise' Woolf. Lee wanted to rethink Woolf's relationship with Smyth, which had always been regarded as humorous, to illustrate how important she felt this friendship was in shaping Woolf's feminism. Lee believes that Woolf's feminist work in the 30s was greatly influenced by this. For example in her biography Lee comments on a speech that Woolf gave at the 'London and National Society for Women's Service', on Wednesday 21 January 1931, an engagement she shared with Ethel Smyth and that Lee argues was, 'of great significance in the history of twentieth-century feminism.' Lee believes that this speech led to the writing of *Three Guineas* and *The Years*. Ethel was the, 'joke lesbian-feminist', the, 'absurd Edwardian dyke-composer', who has always been treated as a 'comic spectacle'. Instead Lee wished to show just how important Smyth was in shaping Woolf's feminism. As evidence Lee quotes a diary entry in which Woolf wrote:

"I have this moment, while having my bath, conceived an entire new book- a sequel to *A Room of One's Own* about the sexual life of women; to be called *Professions for Women* perhaps-

Lord how exciting! This sprang out of my paper to be read on Wednesday to Pippa's society."  

Lee comments that Woolf noted in the margin in May 1934 that, 'This is Here and Now I think'. Lee then makes the connection between these jottings and the development of the texts and their relevance to us today:

"*Here and Now* was the working title for *The Years, Professions*"
*for Women* was the working title for *Three Guineas*. So, in the evolution of these two books, financial independence for women, and women's 'sexual life', were indissolubly linked.”

Lee views Ethel Smyth's influence as 'paramount', and demonstrates how Woolf paid fulsome tribute to her in the speech:

“She is one of the races of pioneers, of pathmakers. She has gone before and felled trees and blasted rocks and built bridges and thus made a way for those who come after her.”

For Lee this image of Ethel as heroic pioneer, 'provided the opposing female figure (or alternative mother) to the Angel in the House.' Lee points out that in the speech Woolf argued that once she had become 'herself', the woman writer needed to develop:

“an unchecked and unconscious imagination, but that she was still checked and hindered by male prurience and censorship.”

Thus, Lee argues, 'the professional career of a woman writer was indissolubly linked to issues of sexuality.' Woolf described herself as having won the first battle with the Angel, but not the other- 'telling the truth about my own experiences as a body.' Lee links the speech to our concerns today by stating that:

“A Room of One's Own had looked back on the history of women's silencing and exclusions. Virginia Woolf's speech to the Society looked ahead to a later twentieth-century world where women would be established in the professions, and began to ask what the implications of this would be for women's independence of mind.”
The energy of the speech is seen as due to, 'Ethel's gallant example', and pointed to a 'fiercer and abrasive' manner in Woolf's writing. Lee concludes that Ethel, 'influenced her imagination'. Ethel's life story 'confirmed and enriched' the feminist material of *Three Guineas* and *The Years* that had been, 'central issues for many years'. Lee points to the, 'movements between satirical polemic and case-histories', in *Three Guineas* that were not unlike the more, 'random, garrulous structure of Ethel's combative memoirs.' I view Lee’s attempts to 'repoliticise' Woolf and to reclaim Smyth as part of this rejection of the magisterial position that male biographers have appropriated. Lee’s concern is with avoiding the idealisation and deification of her subject through over identification. Female biographers have become skeptical of the exemplary lives of our age that may look to enlarge the possibilities of living, but may also create a text in which the emblematic importance of the subject replaces the real 'adventure story' which is the life itself.

**iv. Admiration for the subject.**

My conversations with female biographers also led me to the conclusion that women have shaped their texts from within the framework of a profound response and admiration for their subject. This reaction has created particularly strong biographies that expand the possibilities of the form, and have helped to define how a person is judged, significantly shifting our perception of the subject’s self-image. I demonstrated in my section on the marketplace that female biographers are compelled to produce texts that must be competitive within the, 'Faustian' parameters of commercialism'. However beneath this pragmatism one of the main thematic concerns to emerge from the
conversations undertaken for this thesis is the strong connection many female biographers felt with their subjects. Conceptually, as was apparent in my chapter on the work of Hermione Lee, a special kind of self-reflexivity is evident. In her biography of Virginia Woolf Lee employs a self-reflexivity that allows her to investigate Woolf's elusive sense of both presence and distance for the modern reader. In Lee's discussion of Woolf's diaries in her opening chapter Lee talks of the, 'extraordinary sense of intimacy' felt by the readers of the diaries:

“They will want to call her Virginia, and speak proprietarily about her life. She seems extremely near, contemporary, timeless. But she is also evasive and obscure...and, obviously, increasingly distant from us in time.”

This sense of the elusiveness of character that Woolf herself articulated is self-reflexively communicated throughout the narrative by Lee as she investigates her own sense of connection and disconnection to Woolf. Lee maintains that whilst Woolf, 'speaks to us of issues and concerns which are vital to us and are not yet resolved', she is also, 'a late- Victorian, bringing into her own work the concerns and mental habits of a previous century.' Lee is able to give the reader a sense of Woolf as being both close to part of a past that is lost, by entering the narrative and walking through those spaces with us that Woolf occupied with the reader. Lee comments that:

“Virginia Woolf's lifelong argument with the past took its central images from the leaving and the memory, of the Victorian House, when, in the 1920s and 1930s, she devises a metaphor for a younger generation of women setting out on their professional
lives, it is famously of a room. This modern room- a bed- a bed-
sitting room, a college room, a sound proof room- is a substitute
for the rooms which women have lived in the past; drawing
rooms, nurseries, kitchens, rooms with no privacy.” 47

In writing *Virginia Woolf* Lee talks of, ‘moving towards the life of a person which was at
once locked in past, distant history, and touchably close.’ 48 Standing in the garden of
Talland House, the childhood holiday home of the Stephen family in St. Ives, Lee felt
like a, 'biographer, a tourist and an intruder.' She can however suppose:

“that I am seeing something of what she saw. My view overlays
with, just touches, hers.” 49

Lee talks of her connection to the subject. Of growing up in London in the 1950s and
60s, living in South Kensington and Westminster, of the walks in Kensington Gardens,
taking Mrs Dalloway's walk to school, past Buckingham Palace, up through Green Park,
across Piccadilly and up Bond Street, without realizing it. 50 It is this paradoxical
nearness and distance that Lee finds striking. The alternation between the public self and
the private interior self seems crucial to Woolf's life story and the metaphors and her
connection to Woolf's landscape help her to catch a glimpse of the subject as she recedes
behind a public persona. Her knowledge of the physical landscapes of Woolf's life
allows her to enter her mental landscape. Lee points out that at the same time Woolf's
public famous self became increasingly established, her life could be seen as a
complicated range of performances. 51 There is, 'no deep, essential, silent self, neatly
divided off from the superficial, garrulous social self'. Subjectivity is openly and
honestly acknowledged, as is the impossibility of ever finding that, 'deep, essential,
silent self. 52 Lee realizes that no matter how much we let the subject speak there are always going to be parts of the life that are beyond the reach of the biographer. All that is left are the words and images the subject has left behind that are filtered through our late twentieth century eyes. The self-consciousness involved in this self-reflexivity- Lee thinking about Woolf whilst at the same time analyzing what factors, social, cultural, ideological, are making her think this way- creates the particularly strong connection between biographer and subject that has had such a profound affect upon our perceptions of the individuals self image.

In her interview with me Brenda Maddox claimed that she:

“takes a more objective approach than just getting interested in a person and wanting to tell about them whatever the form.”

For Maddox the advantage of being a journalist when writing biography is:

“faith that you'll finish and that you'll select the relevant detail’, understanding that ‘you can't put it all in but you get the essentials in’, and that you’ll offer ‘a little bit extra to make it fun, or your own as well.”

She views biography from a journalistic perspective and argued that what she is trying to do in her work is, ‘to find the adjective, the anecdote, the thing’. Maddox’s approach when writing a biography is to, ‘try to figure out what's the story, what's the question that I want to know that the material doesn't answer?’ She does this by asking herself what she knows:
“about life from my children, my family, my friends? Why do they do this? Whether they are keeping something back. What are they worried about that they're not saying or that they're trying to achieve?”

Maddox believes that we all live our lives this way, ‘rationalizing what we’re really up to’ and that her job is to, ‘peel off the layers, see that little bit more’. Maddox views her job as one of investigation and revelation rather than admiration and celebration and these are the skills she brings as a journalist to her work. They are also the skills that she argues will make it readable. Nevertheless, throughout our conversation Maddox expressed great admiration and affection for the subjects she has chosen. When writing of Nora Joyce Maddox stated it became clear, ‘that there was somebody there’ whose story deserved to be told. Maddox pointed out that she, ‘grew to like her more as the book went on’. What appealed to her was:

“realistic things like meeting old people in Zurich who knew her, the fact that she'd learnt German and Italian.”

Maddox admired the fact, ‘that somebody that uneducated had changed language three times’ and that Nora was, ‘very knowledgeable about Opera, knew all the words’. Maddox ‘loved that’. Maddox’s admiration for D.H. Lawrence is also evident throughout her biography. Maddox commented that she hadn't liked Lawrence’s writing before she began her research but that she, ‘learned to like him in the poems and the travel writing. I was just so moved by it’. What Maddox appreciated was Lawrence’s way of writing:

“his way of describing how to write: with the adjectives fitting.
The way he could describe faces, very hard to do—journalists don't describe faces and I've never picked up the knack. When Lawrence describes Hermione 'gliding along with a peculiar fixity of the hip' you can see it."

Regardless of how pragmatically Maddox may view her role as biographer her text is enriched by an underlying appreciation of the subject that colours and enlivens a narrative rich in details gleaned by a sharp journalistic eye.

Some biographies have the power to define how a person will be judged and Miranda Seymour's biography of Lady Ottoline Morrell demonstrates how a female biographer through her admiration for the subject is able to fundamentally alter our perceptions of that individual. Seymour had a passionate desire to reclaim Ottoline from the brutal hands of Bloomsbury and it is this wish that gives Seymour's text such rich narrative force. Seymour wrote in her introduction to the biography that she had, 'tried to remain objective' but found it impossible to keep her admiration of Ottoline, 'entirely out of the book'. Seymour points out that Ottoline was viewed as 'pretentious', 'hypochondriac' and even 'demonic' and that her desire was rewrite this 'travesty' in order to show that she could be seen from a different angle. In her interview with me Seymour stated that the case of Ottoline, 'was really quite unusual and special because it so obviously was one where the picture had been distorted'. Seymour explained that she had an:

"absolutely passionate sense that here is somebody I'm not going to be objective about. I'm going to take their side because the other side has been taken to such a horrifying degree."
In this case she felt, 'a bit like Galahad riding to the rescue', and that 'right' was on her 'side'. She pointed out that with Ottoline she, 'could not have been more subjective, and more determinedly subjective', because she was 'a special case'. Seymour felt she was very up front even in the introduction, where she felt her position was clearly outlined and she had made it plain that she, 'really liked her' and that her purpose was to show, 'she's had a rotten deal' and, 'I'm here to defend her'. 55 The heroic language that Seymour indulges in here is indicative of the powerful admiration for their subject that helps define the narratives of the women interviewed.

Claire Tomalin has gone so far as to suggest that as a female biographer she has a particular empathy for her subject that may elude even the most sympathetic of male biographers.56 This empathy goes beyond admiration and could be defined as a particularly feminine connection which develops because biographer and subject share an awareness about what it means to be a woman within a particular patriarchal context. A biographer such as Tomalin then uses this awareness to enrich her textual focus and redefines the subject in subtle ways for the reader. In a rewardingly wide ranging conversation with me Tomalin explained that she felt a particular connection with Mary Wollstonecraft, the subject of her first biography, when she found out that Mary worked on the Analytical Review, after having worked herself for a number of years on The New Statesman. Describing how Mary had arrived in London Tomalin commented that:

"She hadn't got any work and she was given a job on a magazine, which was really like The New Statesman of its day. When I got a job on The New Statesman I did think: 'goodness things haven't
changed.' I could feel how excited she was because I'd been terribly excited when I got a job on *The New Statesman*. It seemed to me that you were suddenly in the middle of this wonderful world of literature and politics."

As a part of this tradition of 'literary woman' Tomalin has insight into the world that Mary inhabited. This sense of connection, of being part of a tradition is also evident in Tomalin's biography of Katherine Mansfield. In my chapter on Tomalin I investigated some of the unique insights Tomalin was able to provide about Mansfield because of this shared experience of being part of a female literary tradition. As Tomalin herself stated in a radio broadcast, discussing the friendship of Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, both Katherine and Virginia:

"were aware of themselves as part of a tradition of literary women, which goes right back to the eighteenth century and Mary Wollstonecraft, women who had worked on literary journals and written their own books. I think this is something that we all value in them. They are one of the high points of this tradition which has been terribly important to women because it's been one of the very few ways in which women have been able to feel that they stood in some sense as equals with men. That they could achieve as much as men, that they could earn and that they could be valued in society."

In *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1974) Tomalin discusses Wollstonecraft's relationship with the American army captain, Gilbert Imlay whom she
met in Paris in 1793. Tomalin’s sympathetic depiction of this relationship is a particularly good example of the empathy Tomalin brings to her work through the connection she feels with her subject. Tomalin describes the relationship with a shrewd and accurate eye, pointing out clearly Wollstonecraft’s idealization of her lover. Mary, ‘constructed a mental image of him, which bore little relation to his true character.’ Tomalin believes:

“Inlay’s behavior, the freedom she saw around her in Paris, and her sense that she was growing old, must all have played their parts in allowing her to respond to his advances. He was probably attracted by her fame; perhaps he enjoyed cheering her up, seeing this woman who was not used to sexual flattery grow animated as he applied it.”

Here Tomalin accurately depicts how an intelligent woman attracted sexually to a practiced and experienced ladies man would react to this flattery. Tomalin goes on to describe Mary’s ‘inevitable’ pregnancy; her determined moves to keep the child and Gilbert and to continue her work: writing A Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution whilst being, ‘a creature almost entirely at the mercy of emotional impulse’.

The narrative covers Imlay’s betrayal, Mary’s indefatigable travels on his behalf, immortalized in her Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, and her eventual suicide attempt. Tomalin concludes that:

“Mary had protected herself in the past from minding about her sexual failures by claiming indifference to the sexual aspect of love. Now she could no longer do this; the wound was hideous
and exposed. And although she never acknowledged it, she must have known that Imlay's desertion was perfectly in accord with their agreed theories about the importance of freedom and immorality of maintaining a tie once feeling had ceased to sanction it."

The pregnancy, Imlay's desertion, Mary's clinging to the relationship despite all evidence to the contrary, the conflict between publicly expressed belief and private experience all seem inevitable and yet the story has an immediacy and poignancy because of Tomalin's empathy with her subject. An empathy that allows Tomalin to present to the reader a woman who had long been forgotten by history and whose story has now become a feminist archetype. Nevertheless this text, like Zelda, was published more than thirty years ago within a very different perceptual framework. Elaine Showalter has proposed that biographies such as these have constructed new models based on female experience, determining factors that help shape women's lives and placing the female subject within the context of these constraints. These biographies provide a tradition of empathy, of understanding. This convention is obvious in contemporary texts such as Hermione Lee's Virginia Woolf in which the biographer self-reflexively responds to her subject, thus changing our perception of that individual through a personal connection that is woven into the fabric of the narrative.

Notes to Chapter 8.

1 Hermione Lee, Interview with Nina Cook via telephone (2 March, 1998).
2 Brenda Maddox, Interview with Nina Cook (London 4 March, 1998).
3 Lyndall Gordon, A Private Life of Henry James. Two Women and His Art (London: Chatto & Windus,


50 Ibid., 768.
51 Ibid., 529.
52 Ibid., 577.
53 Brenda Maddox, Interview with Nina Cook (London 4 March, 1998).
57 Claire Tomalin, Interview with Nina Cook (London 10 March, 1998).
60 Ibid., 210-211.
61 Ibid., 233.
Virginia Woolf was the first critic to suggest that traditional, chronological biography was not suited to the stories of women's lives and that a new form could emerge within the conditions and limits of the genre. For feminist biographers Woolf's deconstruction of this paradigm opened up enormous possibilities for the depiction of the lives of women. Experiments continue to be made, many of them influenced by Woolf's thoughts on biography, and whilst some have failed female biographers have without doubt had a lasting impact upon the form. The gradual emergence of feminism within the academy and its absorption of much of the post-structuralist philosophy that has influenced criticism in many disciplines have meant that feminism has grown up since the seventies. Post-feminism, like post-structuralism, is a more sophisticated, adult reading of what has gone before. In the seventies feminism had to be practical, legislation needed to be fought for and passed and changes had to be made. The essentialist notion that identities are fixed or determined has been challenged by the concept of women as the 'other' on a biological, psychic and social level. There is no longer a fixed and stable identity and meaning itself is seen as inherently changeable. What we look for are an unreliability of attitude, and hence the lack of a constant and unified position. This foregrounds techniques such as parody and pastiche in which biographers focus on their own ends and processes. There is no longer an external absolute standard by which we can judge others or ourselves, but internal rules and criteria. What have become important now are the theoretical underpinnings that help us to understand issues such as gender clearly and thus free us to act as creative individuals, unconstrained by the 'prism of gender'.¹ The frustration of key female biographers, such as Victoria Glendinning, with the constraints of the traditional 'trade' biography, and her

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breaking of these conventions in Jonathan Swift, is an example of the work women are doing in finding new ways of depicting lives to incorporate a more sophisticated post-modern understanding of the nature of the self and the writing process. As Glendinning recognizes, 'the same man is not always the same man.' Thus:

"The living, breathing, joking, suffering Swift remains a lost original." ²

The notion of the unique mind of the individual writer inscribing some quintessential inner truth has been rejected. We have come to see that there must be a relationship between obscure areas of personality- 'the soul'- and forces like class and social pressure.

For feminist biographers the issue of gender is central, questioning the very nature of the 'masculine' and 'feminine' within our culture. Individuals are no longer viewed as isolated beings but as 'cultural constructs' or 'cultural artifacts'. The individual is placed in context. Everything is referential. We are fashioned by the control mechanisms within which we live. Conventional biography collects the facts about a subject and out of these aims to construct a 'real' X or Y. Feminist biographers do not see this as reality, but artful construction, written into this form out of a much messier and incomplete process of finding out and puzzling over. This led to the subjective exploration of the female experience within writing in order to understand and deconstruct the weight of the 'feminine'. This has introduced a passionate present voice. The rejection of the distanced, analytical, masculine academic notion of objectivity has produced what feminists have termed 'intellectual biography', or a life of the mind. The phrase 'biographies of empathy' ³ has also been coined to describe the emergence of an awareness of the relationship between subject and author that
has brought the issue of female writing and subjectivity to the forefront of biographical discussion.

Essentialism has always been compatible with the traditional biographical form because it provides a comforting model, which allows for an essential ‘femaleness’ that is at the core of the self the biographer is attempting to portray. Nancy Milford’s biography, *Zelda*, is an example of the sort of essentialist biography that was being written by feminists of the seventies, who, eager to attack prevailing patriarchal notions of femininity, either presented women as victims or as role models in order to create the feminist consciousness necessary for change. What biography has had to struggle to accommodate is a more fragmented, gendered, complex multiplicity of self than the genre, with its traditional narrative style, can readily embrace. For feminists, struggling with this troubling discourse, biography has become an area in which issues of gender could be explored. Diane Middlebrook’s recent biography of jazz musician Billy Tipton is an excellent example of how gender is being interrogated within the context of feminist biography. Middlebrook argues that a current preoccupation with the concept of gender is part of a mass culture change, not just an intellectual change. Roles have become muddled, so people are desperately attempting to position themselves in terms of their own sexuality. In our conversation Middlebrook referred to, ‘the gender fundamentalism of everyday life’. Her text is an exploration of contemporary society’s deeply held ideas about sex difference. The problematical position of women has been separated from sexual femaleness and ‘woman’ is now seen as a construct.

We have come to understand that ‘stars’ do not simply exist but are created through a
process that is social, class-related and gendered. The aim of many female biographers, for example Victoria Glendinning, is to remove the spotlight approach, the focus on a single exceptional individual. They aim to locate women within the social, political and intellectual context in which they lived and worked. The model of great and exceptional people makes women marginal and reinforces the idea that only public achievement is significant. Women's domestic lives thus held no interest.

The shift in women's history, to the day-to-day struggles of women whose lives are largely unrecorded, has influenced female biographers. This can be seen in the work of Margaret Forster for example, who demonstrates how the ordinary can be made to have universal significance because the experience depicted gives a voice to generations of lives, previously unrecorded. There has also been an exploration of exceptional women through the framework of ordinary female experience, as can be seen in the domestic depictions in the biography of Mrs Gaskell by Jenny Uglow.

Female biographers have defined their role as the 'sharing intelligence' of the life, being viewed as a facilitator rather than an authority. This is evident in the rejection by contemporary female biographers of the magisterial role assigned by writers such as Richard Holmes. Claire Tomalin's sympathetic portrayal of women such as Dora Jordan and Nelly Terman, subjects previously lost to the condescension of posterity, demonstrates how feminist biographers are willing to openly and frankly acknowledge the gaps and silences in the lives of their subjects. This is necessary as much of their history has been distorted, ignored, or unrecorded. These 'black holes' become like the, 'pauses in a piece of music' with the biographer orchestrating the rhythm of the piece around these breaks. On the other hand professional biographers such as Brenda Maddox pragmatically shift the focus for the reader in order to
provide the seamless narrative that they believe the ‘readable’ biography demands.

The importance of individual women and their achievements is a starting point, but the focus has now shifted to the social and cultural relationships of women. Critics such as Liz Stanley have argued that knowledge producers are white, middle class, first world men, who have misrepresented the lives and experiences of women. To overcome this female biographers have included a lot of intimate personal material in their biographies, facts about menstruation and clinical details. They believe that biographies of women should include such details when it contributes to an understanding of the subject’s decisions, choices and work. This is precisely the point Deidre Bair made as a feminist biographer writing on Simone de Beauvoir. Intimate material was used to make sense of a life that was lived upon the principal that the personal is political, but also to help other women understand their own frustrations, for example in trying to combine satisfying personal and professional lives. For some feminists the bringing of the immediate self into writing, or the very subjective approach adopted by female biographers, is seen as a strategy of liberation; others feel that such ‘intimiso’ and confessionalism are limitations that prevent the female from achieving power. They see a, ‘rhetoric of petulance’ that locks women into their victim status and the personas socially expected such as mothers, lovers, virgins, daughters and wives. What female biographers, for example Lyndall Gordon, have been intent on uncovering are the hidden unknown modes of being that lie behind the protective social mask that women have felt they had to wear. Gordon’s work on Charlotte Bronte and her fascination with the lives of nineteenth century women illustrates how feminist biographers are penetrating the social shells women wore in order to depict the imaginative life beneath. The important question is one of
possibility or of ‘definition’. What roles do women inhabit?

There is commercial pressure on biographers to make their work more accessible and fun. Julian Borger suggested that the biographical industry might be entering a, ‘Faustian bargain with the market place’. However, female biographers are experimenters who keep breaking the barriers imposed by the commercial demands of the genre. Biography has been criticized as being:

“largely in the hands of amateurs, that is, writers who have made a profession of biography, but are not trained academic historians.”

One cannot help but question whether the amateur status assigned to biography is in fact a male academics fit of pique because females are succeeding so well at it. This sort of criticism has led to defensiveness in women who feel a rigidly objective male academic standard is judging them. Success depends upon readability. Readability may come from what the author chooses to reveal, from the interest their subject generates, or from an unorthodox approach that provokes a response from the critical establishment. Within this climate biographies have to generate some sort of reaction to sell. Andrew Motion’s new ‘biography’ of Thomas Wainewright is not a biography or a novel. Written in the form of a nineteenth-century first-person confession made by its protagonist it is an attempt to redefine the form against whose limitations Motion was quailing. Motion argues that biography is a ‘democratic art’, and thus it is:

“high time that there was a proper, well-ventilated conversation about what on earth biography thinks it is doing, both formally and with regard to the sort of people it thinks
it's equipped to write about. Because if it's only pursued by orthodox means, it will endlessly go round the same small wheels of people who left papers behind that we can re-read and reinterpret." 10

With this sort of statement the issue of art versus privacy takes on new urgency. In our society there is a hunger for connection with other people that springs from a peculiarly modern lack of intimacy. Tied to this are an expansion of the media, its pursuit of true stories and a consequent loss of privacy for public figures. Indeed, as in the case of Sylvia Plath, writing often involves an invasion, a theft, and an exposure of something private. Female biographers have had to be aware of the dangers of appropriating key women writers for their own ends. Myths have been made as Hermione Lee has said and cast down again.11 'Author theology' fulfills a desire for emblematic figures whilst subsuming the individuals right to privacy within a wider political framework.

Nevertheless a private interior realm must be entered when writing about women as their lives have little public record. Female biographers have had to explore the artful practices employed by women in order to move beyond the 'feminine' to an expression of the 'female', but they have also had to become aware of their own use of such practices. This self-reflexivity has become a natural part of women's writing. The biographer explores the divided life of the female self, her interior world and public face, but also the fact that she herself is writing from a particular, culturally constructed perspective that impacts on her own artful practices. She is thus maneuvering among these subjectivities. Hermione Lee's work on Virginia Woolf is a fine example of the writer walking through the work with the subject. For instance
Lee's interactions with Woolf's thoughts on biography, whilst she is creating her own text, are then incorporated into her narrative. It is now recognized that we can never fully 'know' another person and that the language available to express this 'knowing' is limited. It is the gaps and silences, evident in female writing, because of this lack of an appropriate vocabulary through which to express female experience, that is being explored through self-reflexivity. This knowledge is being used to help us further understand the accomplishments of key women writers who can speak to women and for women even within the constraints of language and convention.

Female biographers, looking at the process of their own writing, are able to respond to women speaking a private language whilst playing public roles. Lyndall Gordon, commenting on the discourse in Charlotte Bronte's letter the poet Robert Southey, is an example of this practice. Female biographers do not claim an authoritative 'masculine' voice, presenting a whole essentially knowable individual. What they have realized is that the complexities of female experience make this impossible.

They see that by writing about a woman you are legitimizing the personal as political. In making the private, domestic world a political arena, hidden lives were put on the public stage, where power, and the ability to facilitate change, rests. These texts were self-conscious in their challenge to the values and priorities by which public life is conducted. Questions about the nature of the self, the discontinuities of narrative and the writing process have been allowed into the fabric of the narrative. As feminism has rethought the boundaries between genres and the stories told biographers became less wary of the first person. As many of the fictional mainstays fell into disrepute with character and plot giving way to fragmented narratives questions have had to be asked: Who is writing the life and why? How important is one's relationship to the work? How do you write about the ordinary subject when there is little
documentation? It has been the job of the women interviewed to address these issues and the result is the redefinition of a form that originally could not accommodate their stories.

Notes to Conclusion.

4 Diane Middlebrook, Interview with Nina Cook (London 4 July 1998).
5 Victoria Glendinning, Interview with Nina Cook (London 30 June 1998).
6 Ibid.
10 Andrew Motion, “Diary of a Nobody,” The Sydney Morning Herald (22 April 2000): 9s.
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