

The Eye Expanded

Life and the Arts in Greco-Roman Antiquity

EDITED BY

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ELEVEN

Autobiography and the Hellenistic Age

Frances B. Titchener

It is no bad thing, once in a while, to stand back, take the long view, and meditate upon the sum of things.

PETER GREEN, *Alexander to Actium*

Mimesis, the “representation by means of art,” was the particular interest of Hellenistic artists and philosophers. Though history and biography may have strong claims to the title, the preeminent example of literary mimesis in Greek literature is autobiography, for in that genre alone do the authors predominate as their own subjects. Hence, the individual stands forth in a fashion unlike in history or biography. There, the accumulation of facts outweighs critical analysis and astute observation. For its usefulness, written history depends greatly upon the acuity and writing skills of that observer, whose inspiration is held in check by the documents that constitute the data, even when plentiful and contradictory. Biography, on the other hand, revolves around the accumulation of events, which are more susceptible to subjective interpretation, particularly since we are at such a remove as we are from ancient evidence. Powers of observation and critical analysis become central. While there are certainly ways of verifying a biographer’s interpretation, especially when there are multiple sources, in the case of autobiography we are at the mercy of the author. How does one verify what was in the subject’s heart or mind at any given time, or what was a true intention and what was *prophasis*, or excuse? How can we criticize or disagree with an autobiographer’s assertion that he hated or feared or admired someone? And, although Momigliano asserts correctly that “biography became a precise notion and got an appropriate word only in the Hellenistic age,”¹ the literary form that best reflects the Hellenistic age’s preoccupation with common individuals and everyday lives proves to be neither history nor biography, but autobiography.

ORIGINS OF HISTORY, BIOGRAPHY, AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Scholars have long attempted to describe and analyze the origins of history, biography, and autobiography. Typically, such studies examine extant works and fragments, classify the texts by genre, draw conclusions from the textual similarities within a genre and the differences one text exhibits from another in a different genre, and factor in any authorial statements of intent.² Ideally, this clarifies the parameters of and distinctions among the genres. However, in the case of autobiography, even the most critically rigorous of these studies descends inevitably to hairsplitting. If any use of the first personal singular may be taken as autobiographical, answering questions like what is or is not autobiography, or where it first arose, becomes a futile and not particularly useful exercise. Momigliano sums up the problem well:

Any account in verse or prose that tells us something about an individual can be taken as preparatory to biography; and any statement about oneself, whether in poetry or in prose, can be regarded as autobiographical. . . . But it seems reasonable to restrict the search for the antecedents of biography to works or sections of works whose explicit purpose is to give some account of an individual in isolation (instead of treating him as one of the many actors in a historical event). Similarly, I shall look for the antecedents of autobiography among accounts, however partial, of the writer's past life rather than among expressions of his present state of mind. In other words I incline to take anecdotes, collections of sayings, single or collected letters, and apologetic speeches as the truest antecedents of either biography or autobiography.³

This is a compelling case. Although biography and autobiography existed in various forms during the fifth century B.C.E., they were not what Momigliano calls "prominent literary genres" until the fourth (see above). But when he traces the actual term "autobiography" back to 1797 C.E., making it thus a modern invention unknown to antiquity, he shows that his interest in autobiography's roots centers for the most part on the question of the extent of Peripatetic influence on the genre's development.⁴ His conclusion, that "Aristotelianism was neither a necessary nor a sufficient presupposition of Hellenistic biography....The educated man of the Hellenistic world was curious about the lives of famous people,"⁵ is an unfortunate overstatement, since a prime characteristic of Hellenistic art is its interest in every-day people and situations. Theophrastus's *Characters*, whatever purpose they may have been written to fulfill, are not kings and generals, but friends, neighbors, colleagues, relatives, and (*horrendum dictu!*) our own selves. So are the individuals described in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. But the most obvious example of the everyday nature of Hellenistic art is New Comedy, particularly in the hands of the playwright Menander, whose work forms most of the extant corpus of that genre. Menander's stock characters,

such as the Old Man, the Parasite, and the Braggart Soldier, lie closer to the Hellenistic hearth than the noted figures who people the comedies of the fifth century. It is simply easier for an audience to identify with Smicrines, the miserly, "small-minded" old man of New Comedy, than with Pericles, Lamachus, Demosthenes, Nicias, Alcibiades, Cleon, or Socrates, to name just a few statesmen lampooned (be it openly or semi-transparently) in Old Comedy. Not so much of style or fashion, this change was the result of the social and political upheavals that reshaped the Greek world and engendered what we call the Hellenistic era.⁶ As the grander, epic *Weltansicht* gave way to a smaller, more seemingly realistic vision, escapism edged out public service. Peter Green points to "the central criterion of visual art throughout the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman period: deceptively realistic naturalism" and later extends this criterion to literature as well.⁷ And as in New Comedy, details of people's lives predominate and aid the reader in illuminating the ethical species of characters that are seen "through their actions." In both cases, we study the person to learn the lessons of life. Interesting though such analogies may be, however, in light of the topic, the interrelationship of life and art, the focus here must remain strictly on the literary genres of history, biography, and autobiography.

COMPARISON OF HISTORY, BIOGRAPHY, AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

These three genres are often identified with confidence, but defined with difficulty. By the first century C.E., Plutarch, attempting to deflect anticipated criticism, asserted that he was writing biography, not history: "Because of the large amount of pertinent material, we say nothing beforehand other than to entreat our readers not to slander us, should our narrative of noteworthy events not be exhaustive, nor in each case absolutely complete, but for the most part summarized. For we undertake to write not histories, but *Lives*" (*Alex.* 1.1; Loeb ed.).

This statement is significant for a number of reasons. The passage itself is often cited in discussions of Plutarch's biographical method, and he makes a clear distinction between history and biography. Distinction, however, may not be really the right word, since Plutarch is almost defensive in his request that his readers not hold him responsible for what he does not intend to do. Yet perhaps most interesting is Plutarch's use of the word *sykophantein*, which has associations not only of blame or complaint, but of slander, by definition undeserved. Plutarch insists not only on what his genre is, but that he not be accused of false intentions. However rhetorical that passage, the conclusion is unavoidable that he sees a difference between history and biography, and that somehow biography is an enterprise less worthy than history. In the introduction to the *Life of Nicias*, Plutarch expresses a similar fear that his intentions may be misinterpreted, particularly that he

may appear to be challenging Thucydides by dealing with the same time period and events covered by the great historian in his *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*. Plutarch states that such a challenge would be undignified in any case (*mikroprepes*), and in the particular case of the matchless (*amimeta*), senseless even (*anaistheton*). Again he attempts to forestall criticism: "In any case, since it is not possible to pass over the events which Thucydides and Philistus have narrated, especially since these events lift away the veil of his great and mighty sufferings from the nature and character of the hero, I will run through them quickly and out of necessity, lest I appear to be completely careless and lazy" (*Nicias* 1.4–5; Loeb ed.).

In both these passages, the expected criticism centers on incompleteness. Comparison to Thucydides would reveal that the great classical author was more complete than Plutarch, and thus better. Plutarch argues that this is a case of apples and oranges, since he is, after all, not writing history, and should not be compared to one who is. The standards of one genre do not necessarily apply to another, particularly in questions of "truth" and "completeness."

"An intelligent person reads autobiography for two things: for the facts and for the lies, knowing that the lies are often more interesting than the facts," Joseph Epstein observes.⁸ The more unflattering the information, the more likely it is to be taken as true, and the reverse. That is why interviews in which the interviewer can elicit information that the subject would not necessarily have volunteered are considered the most successful, and those interviewers are held to be the most skilled. Modern autobiographies written by public figures, often aided by a professional co-author, are not read with the lip-licking zeal afforded "unauthorized" biographies, presumed to contain unflattering and therefore incontrovertible material, sure to have been omitted by the subject. For modern readers as well as ancient, then, completeness carries less weight than "truth." And yet many ancients would likely agree with the statement that in biography what an individual did was much less important than what he was likely to do. Even Thucydides, when dealing with individuals in his *History*, had recourse to "likelihood" to characterize their speeches. "A fact of our existence is of value not insofar as it is true, but insofar as it has something to signify," says Goethe.⁹

Needless to say, this element of likelihood can compromise the use of autobiographical material for traditional historical purposes. Marc Dolan lists five formal objections to the "indiscriminate use of formal autobiographies as primary sources of historical evidence."¹⁰ These are as follows. First, a single viewpoint distorts and limits historical perspective. Second, the nature of autobiography emphasizes the life of an individual rather than a group (i.e., community, nation, era). Third, autobiography almost always follows a linear narrative. Fourth, the "literariness" of autobiography is

obfuscatory. And fifth, autobiographies are of necessity some distance away in time from the events described.

Dolan sets these problems in the context of the historiographic debate over “the relative merits of so-called ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ approaches to history.” But the key to this dilemma lies in his use of the word “indiscriminate,” a problem he sets out to resolve by explaining: “Another way of putting this would be to say that, in order to employ formal autobiographies as historical evidence we must read them as myth, not fact; as simultaneously personal and tribal myths; as myths not just of the self or the age, but myths of the relation between the two.”¹¹ So there is no reason to reject autobiography as a historical source so long as the document is used with care and awareness of its nature. Since this caveat should apply to almost any kind of historical evidence, our misgivings about autobiography amount to a non-problem for the careful historian.

Another reason autobiographies have the undeserved reputation of second-rate historical sources is that the reader often has “only” the author’s word for the veracity of the detail, and the author’s motives are suspect since an autobiographer has a vested interest in presenting him- or herself in a certain light. Indeed, the willingness of an autobiographer to include unflattering details stands in direct proportion to the audience’s willingness to accept the more flattering material as true (see above).

The main difference between biography and autobiography is the lack of closure in autobiography. The end can never be written. “The best time to write one’s autobiography, surely, is on one’s deathbed,” Epstein suggests.¹² In Plutarch’s biographies, for instance, the circumstances surrounding the death of his subject make important contributions to the overall moral effect that Plutarch claims as one of his principal impulses for writing biographies in the first place. So important does he find this that he gives it as the prime reason for comparing Nicias to Crassus (*Nicias* 1.1) and for finding the former the less worthy: “When it came to death, however, Crassus was less blameworthy in that he did not surrender himself nor was he constrained or tricked, but yielded to friends who begged him and was done in by enemies, treacherous although under truce. Whereas Nicias surrendered himself to his enemies out of hope of a shameful and inglorious safety, and made his death the more shameful” (*Comp., Nicias and Crassus*, 5.3).

It is amusing to contemplate one exception to the dictum that autobiography cannot include the end of the subject’s life, and that is the sole surviving *fabula praetexta* in Roman literature. As genre dictates, the plot of *Octavia* derives from a historical event. It comes down to us in the corpus of Senecan writings, despite its inclusion of Seneca’s death within the play. Clearly, so successful was Seneca at intruding himself into his dramas in autobiographical fashion that it seemed appropriate to someone to credit

him with writing about his own demise in a play composed after and including his death, a feat that one might note the detailed records of his suicide come very close to achieving.¹³ After all, deathbed autobiographies have at least one great attraction, the avoidance of consequence, or in Epstein's words "—oh, screw it, let 'er rip, I shall tell the truth at last."¹⁴

Another difference between autobiography and related genres is the presence of a certain element of performance in autobiography that is, ideally to some, lacking in biography. The biographer traditionally should not intrude on the subject of the biography, but rather recede gracefully into the background.¹⁵ Conversely, the autobiographer is, by definition of *protagonist*, the star of the show. What autobiographers say about themselves cannot be controverted. Every statement in some way must echo a truth of a sort, even if it just "protests too much." This makes up a bit for the fact that no autobiography can ever be the final word on the subject, since someone else will always get in the last word. There comes at some point, after all, a finality of sorts.

Autobiography is the literary version of individuals' life stories expressed in their own words but shaped for a reader. Or, more elegantly, in the words of V. S. Pritchett, "All autobiography is a selection of the past written from the standpoint of the present."¹⁶ These definitions, however, fail to consider interesting questions. What motivates an individual to write an autobiography? Why do people like to read them? The answers of course are as different as the number of readers, but are worth pursuing.

WHY DO PEOPLE READ THEM?

People read autobiographies for many of the same reasons that people write them, for instance, as Pritchett says, to "[fall] into the mysterious sea of memory and [struggle] to find out who *he* is and who *he* was."¹⁷ G. W. Bowersock argues persuasively that Momigliano, while searching for the *persona* in literary works, was in reality seeking for himself, concluding that "Momigliano's quest for the person, in the sense that Marcel Mauss had tried to define it, was in part, as Momigliano's writings had shown it had to be, a quest for one particular person. That was himself."¹⁸ This view of autobiography as a voyage of discovery for both author and readers is attractive, and it is easy to agree with Richard White that "a true autobiography will...still [provide] us with a relevant model of self-disclosure which may illuminate the meaning of our life."¹⁹ This is not quite the same as the ancients' attitude toward biography. Plutarch states clearly that he chose the subjects of his biographies to provide good examples for men to emulate, believing that contemplation of their noble deeds would instill in readers the desire to act likewise (*Pericles* 1.1–5). He later concluded that bad examples would be just as useful in teaching men how not to act (*Demetrios* 1.2),

although he naturally would prefer his readers to emulate good men rather than discover their own, possibly bad, natures. But perhaps this is all too analytical, and the truest reason why people read autobiography, or any literature for that matter, is because, as Eudora Welty says simply: "It's entertaining when it's done well."²⁰

WHY DO PEOPLE WRITE THEM?

"Telling the truth" is one reason why individuals feel compelled to write autobiographies. But more usual is a desire to find a deeper truth and unity in one's life, to define one's place in the greater scheme of things. It may well be that, as Richard White says, "Every true autobiography is an attempt to answer the question, 'Who am I, and how did I become what I am now?'"²¹ All of us are or should be interested in this question, and the answer, when deftly rendered, will be universally intriguing.

Advanced age is not necessarily a requirement for an autobiography to be interesting. Epstein cites the example of *Keeper of the Moon: A Southern Boyhood*, whose author Tim McLaurin "already, in his thirties, [has] shored up experience out of proportion to his years."²² Specifically, McLaurin's development of cancer provided him with time and material to contemplate, and imbues his opinions with a gravity unusual in a young man in his thirties. Adversity can certainly make young people old before their time;²³ so can tremendous success at a young age. The autobiography of Martina Navratilova, for instance, although produced with the help of a professional writer, is captivating because of the professional heights Navratilova had already reached by age thirty, when she wrote her book, and because in her case, the experience of defecting from what used to be called an Iron Curtain country also matured her outlook.²⁴ Thus we may say that although autobiographers do not know the end of the big story (his or her life), they can often see the end of some defining experience.

CONCLUSION

Autobiography has, it seems, always existed in one form or another. The inscriptions of ancient Mesopotamian kings describing their exploits and conquests are in some way autobiographical; so, in some ways, is the *Book of Job*. The so-called "Narmer Palette," which stands on the very dawn of literacy and records the exploits of an early king of Egypt, shows that autobiography begins with writing itself and may, paradoxically, even predate it. The poetry of Archilochus has many autobiographical elements. The "Leagros Kalos" inscriptions on red-figure vases can be called autobiographical. Nevertheless, it is not until the fourth century B.C.E. that autobiography begins to exist in any modern sense of the word. Because the quality of or level of

interest in a given autobiography is largely dependent on the skill of the author, much more so than in the related genres of biography and history, the role of the individual is proportionately magnified. One explanation for this increased interest in autobiography is that Hellenistic art, in contrast with that of the classical age before, was characterized by an interest in the small, everyday, and ordinary. Audiences who wanted to escape from political reality identified with the individuals about whom they were reading or hearing. Yet although the attention of an average fourth-century Greek was focused largely on himself, he proved willing to focus it on others like himself as part of the growing cult of ethos, and to see himself in others, be they "characters" in comedy or philosophy or history, as long as in some way he caught his own reflection in their pool. And since, with or without verifiable truth, it is in autobiography that personality most effectively emerges, because there the author or individual by definition reigns supreme, it is autobiography that is the most essentially Hellenistic form of literature.

NOTES

1. A. Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography*, expanded ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 13.
2. Any representative bibliography of such works in chronological order would have to include F. Leo, *Die griechische-römische Biographie nach ihrer litterarischen Form* (Leipzig, 1901); D. R. Stuart, *Epochs of Greek and Roman Biography* (Berkeley, 1928); W. Steidle, *Sueton und die antike Biographie* (Munich, 1951); A. Dihle, *Studien zur griechischen Biographie* (Göttingen, 1956). Momigliano, *Development of Greek Biography*, 123–32, gives a good if somewhat Eurocentric overview.
3. Momigliano, *Development of Greek Biography*, 23.
4. *Ibid.*, 14.
5. *Ibid.*, 120.
6. For lengthy discussion of this important idea, see Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium*, and Erich S. Gruen, *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991).
7. Green, *Alexander to Actium*, 92, 243.
8. Joseph Epstein, "First Person Singular," *Hudson Review* 45 (1992): 370.
9. Goethe, *Fiction and Truth*, quoted in Epstein, *ibid.*
10. Marc Dolan, "The (Hi)story of their Lives: Mythic Autobiography and 'The Lost Generation,'" *Journal of American Studies* 27 (1993): 35.
11. *Ibid.*, 36, 39.
12. Epstein, "First Person Singular," 367.
13. I am indebted to my colleague Mark L. Damen for this example.
14. Epstein, "First Person Singular"; see also Peter J. Bailey, "Why Not Tell the Truth?": The Autobiographies of Three Fiction Writers," *Critique* 32 (1991): 211–23.
15. Naturally, there are notable exceptions, like Janet Malcolm's struggle with literary executors over *The Silent Woman*, her 1995 biography of Sylvia Plath.
16. V. S. Pritchett, "Autobiography," *Sewanee Review* 103 (1995): 24.

17. Ibid., 25.
18. G. W. Bowersock, "Momigliano's Quest for the Person," *History and Theory* 30 (1991): 27–36; see also C. Ginzburg, "Momigliano and De Martino," *ibid.*, 37.
19. Richard White, "Autobiography against Itself," *Philosophy Today* 35 (1991): 291.
20. Sally Wolff, "Some Talk about Autobiography: An Interview with Eudora Welty," *Southern Review* 26 (1990): 81.
21. White, "Autobiography against Itself," p. 291, which also contains a good bibliography of modern works on "philosophical autobiography" (302 n. 1).
22. Epstein, "First Person Singular," 389–92.
23. For one perspective on this idea, see Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York, 1978) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, (New York, 1989).
24. Martina Navratilova, with George Vecsey, *Martina* (New York, 1985).