

XI

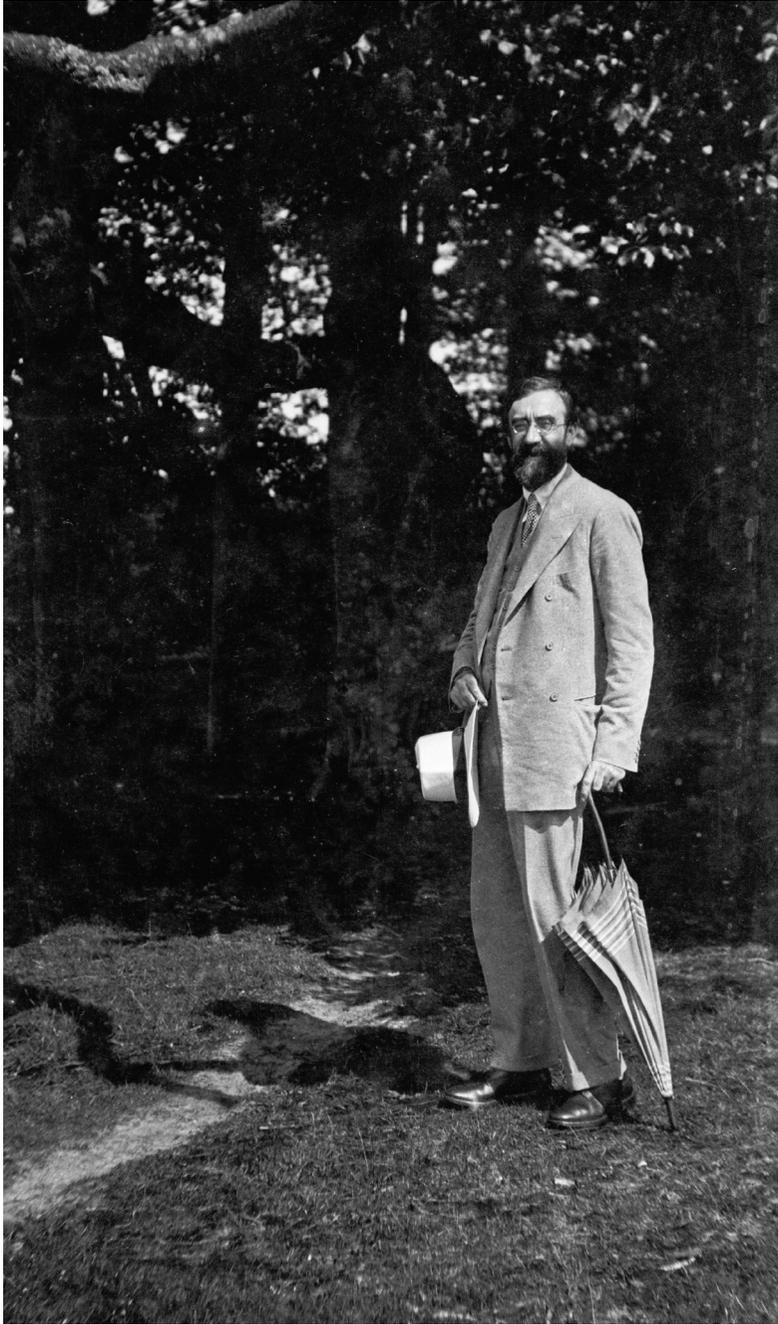
I read biographies with the absorption of a car mechanic, repair manual in hand, peering under the hood at a steaming engine: *What's gone wrong here? And how do I fix it?* In order to write a biography, I had to know how the thing was done.*

I read without system the massive multivolume biographies: Leslie Marchand's *Byron*, Joseph Blotner's *Faulkner*, Richard Sewall's *Emily Dickinson*. P. N. Furbank's two volumes on Forster occupied me for weeks. I snailed through them pen in hand, scribbling notes in the margins. I had the British edition, published by Secker & Warburg,[†] with a painted portrait of Forster as a young man on the cover in a crisp gray suit, seated in a willfully casual pose that somehow managed to intimate his timidity, and a quote from Pindar on the back that was a favorite of Forster's: "Man's life is a day. What is he, what is he not? Man is the dream of a shadow. But when the god-given brightness comes a bright light is among men, and an age that is gentle come to birth."

The most compelling details, I began to notice, were the ones that instantly made you want to flip to the citations at the back in order

* I also read biographies by novelists, of which there were a surprising number: Graham Greene on the Earl of Rochester, Virginia Woolf on Roger Fry, Evelyn Waugh on Edmund Campion, Anthony Powell on John Aubrey. They were all great books—sturdy additions to the writer's oeuvre rather than eccentric departures from it. They were writing nonfiction as if it were fiction, in their own distinctive styles, but adapted to the conventions of biography. After a while you forgot it *was* nonfiction.

† By now, I could distinguish British from American editions of books at a glance, the way it's possible to identify an Italian or a Spaniard or a Frenchman on the street with the briefest of glimpses; one isn't even able to put the variation between these outwardly identical European types into words. In books, to start with, there was the typeface, the British dark and formal compared to the lighter American type; also the minuscule type of the index in the British editions. Maybe, in the end, it was simply an aura, a distinction that over the years had become unconscious.



Lytton Strachey

to find out where they came from. At lunch with the historian G. M. Trevelyan, who talked a great deal but ate nothing, Forster brooded about the food: "On his own plate, in the middle of a very warm helping of lukewarm mince, mashed potatoes and brussels sprouts, was one sprout which was quite raw, and he kept wondering, as the inspiring torrent poured over him, 'What a very curious thing. How could it have got in? And how impossible to interest my host in the subject.'" Where could the biographer have possibly dug up this odd tidbit? I flipped eagerly to the notes in the back, only to find . . . no note! The meditation on the raw sprout was on page 70, but there was a barren tundra of notelessness that stretched all the way from page 44 to 77. I clucked in frustration. Why was it so often the most salient bits that went unsourced? And always without apology—no explanation of why the very citation you had interrupted your reading to look up had gone missing. Why did biographers, so conscientious that their notes often took up fifty or even a hundred pages of text, feel they had the right to blithely omit the origins of some obscure and tantalizing—tantalizing *because* obscure—detail? The sprout that arrested Forster's attention, for instance: had Furbank gleaned it from someone's journal? A letter? A report on the lunch to a friend, who put it in *his* journal? And why did it matter? In part, I suppose, because it was a feat of research: how could the biographer possibly know this?

Furbank is especially good on his subject's physical features, which he registered with unpying specificity. That Forster had "a queer pedantic of speech" was the least of it. The most damaging descriptions were supplied by the subject himself. An entry from Forster's journal, written when he was forty-six: "red nose enormous, round patch in middle of scalp . . . Face is toad-like . . . The anus clotted with hairs." (And how was this proctological detail obtained? One doesn't want to know.)

Then there was the milieu—the social world, the ancillary characters, the manner of dress and traits of speech. The rector of Stevenage, Mr. Jowitt, "a genial, out-of-doors style of parson, who rode to hounds"; Forster's tutor, Oscar Browning, who napped while Forster read his weekly essays, a red handkerchief draped over his face; R. C. Trevelyan, the brother of G. M., who fancied himself a poet and "lived his chosen part wholeheartedly, striding about the country with a knapsack, his hair flying, or writing poems in a furrow": it's E. M. Forster and His World that Furbank wants to evoke, a particular stratum of English society that he depicts with anthropological exactitude. He shows us the

house in Abinger where Forster waited out World War II, “an intensely old-fashioned household” with no electricity or phone or baths; Agnes, the “parlourmaid,” who lugged hot water up to the bedrooms in heavy brass cans; a church fund-raising pageant that contained “ancient Britons in skins gathering fuel in the Abinger woods”—a scene as alien to the American reader as a Nambikwara burial rite.

I also had to consider how to start the book. In-the-beginning chronology was the safest course, especially after the reader had been forced to scrutinize one of those eye-glazing family trees that preface so many biographies. The standard method would go something like . . . let me pull a book down from the shelf: “Ann (b. 1747) was the daughter of William Cookson, a successful linen draper in Penrith, and of Dorothy, sister and heiress of James Crackenthorpe of Newbiggin Hall.” This dry and unrewardingly informative sentence occurs on the first page of *William Wordsworth: A Life*, by Stephen Gill. No throat-clearing here, just a clipped let’s-get-on-with-it.

Or you could start, as Walter Jackson Bate did, with a general observation: “Samuel Johnson has fascinated more people than any other writer except Shakespeare.” Bate’s purpose here is to make it clear that, despite Johnson’s great and universal fame, there is still much to say about him that is new (which, in this instance, there emphatically was). But I was looking for a more dramatic way into the narrative. I wanted, above all, to tell a story.

“A writer of lives is allowed the imagination of form but not of fact,” Leon Edel pronounced in *Principia Biographica*, his useful if somewhat humorless edict on the limits of biography. The “fact” part I got (though I would come to question the whole notion that there *was* such a thing as fact). It had never occurred to me that the “form” could be so elastic—that, in effect, you could construct a biography however you liked. Richard Holmes had a useful term for this method: “nonfiction story-telling,” biography that has “a protagonist, a time-sequence, a plot, and a dramatic pattern of human cause and effect.” *Nonfiction story-telling*: that’s what I was after.

Edel himself had gone about as far as you could in this direction. I couldn’t stop reading his biography of James—two thousand pages, five volumes in all. It went down easily; I ceased work on Delmore for two weeks while I gobbled it up. They were handsomely designed, handsomely made books, with comfortably large type and interleaved folios of photographs. I also liked the way Edel broke up the chapters

into manageable size, then broke them up into still smaller bits separated by roman numerals; it didn't make you feel, as so many biographies did, that you were traversing an arid desert of type. The narrative was well paced; clearly a lot of thought had gone into the beginnings and endings of sections. Most often he would start with a scene, as in the chapter on James's friendship with the minor writer Hugh Walpole: "They faced each other for the first time in February 1909 when James came up to London to attend a matinee of *The High Bid* [a play by Walpole]. He gave the young Hugh dinner at the Reform Club." This terse stage-setting is followed up with an entry from Walpole's diary; then a letter from James to Walpole. On their first weekend together at Lamb House, the power of James's presence renders Hugh mute—normally a problem for a biographer but not in the case of the energetic Edel, who conjectures that "if he did not speak in his diary," we can turn to a tale of Walpole's called "Mr. Oddy," in which "the emotion of their meeting" is represented. Here the obese novelist, "his large Johnsonian body set on his short legs," is evoked both in his physical form and in his speech, inflected with "the reverberation of the late style." Note Edel's agility in giving Walpole the space to invent—to write fiction—while at the same time making the connection between James and Walpole's fictive protagonist unambiguous. This is how James spoke, he's informing us; it "rings true."

Collecting the data wasn't even the hardest part. As Boswell noted, it was putting the thing together that really took it out of you. The biographies on my shelves were finished products, printed and bound: there were no facsimiles of biography like the facsimile of *The Waste Land*, with its cross-outs and additions, whole stanzas revised word by word. I would pick up a handsome finished book—say, volume three of Marchand's *Byron*—and marvel at its beauty as a physical object. The elegant cover with its drawing of the poet, the glossy paper of the illustrations insert, the sewn binding, the rough-cut pages: it was a joy to hold in the hand. But it yielded no directives as to how the contents had been made. That I would have to learn for myself.

As with any trauma, the emotional and physical pain caused by the composition of a biography fades over time. The letter misfiled, the tape recorder that failed to record (this was one reason I took notes), the quote you'd forgotten to write down and now couldn't find: these lapses a biographer could weather. But what happened when you sat down to write?

I was drowning in documentation. Manuscripts, clippings, transcriptions of interviews, and Xeroxed articles lay strewn about the floor. I crawled around amid the notecards laid out as if for some immense game of Solitaire until I developed rug burns on my knees. “Omission, generalization, intensification: that’s your clue,” Macdonald had advised me—advice I chanted to myself like a mantra as I faced my chaotic archive every morning. Delmore had never thrown anything out, and my original fear that I wouldn’t have enough documentation soon gave way to despair about how I would get it all in.* My study looked as if it had been ransacked. Papers were strewn about; five-by-seven notecards were arranged in little piles; books were scattered everywhere. Of manila folders there were many: some contained xeroxes of Delmore’s typed journals, others his handwritten letters, still others articles from old literary journals yellowed by time.† The biographer’s task, said Lytton Strachey, was to collect every scrap of data he could and then “row out over that great ocean of material and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity.” The challenge was to keep from falling overboard myself.

* Years later I came across this sentence from E. M. Forster’s biography of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson: “His other university activities are not important.” Now there’s a basic lesson for biographers! If it’s not important, leave it out. The trouble is that to the biographer everything *seems* important.

† Reviewing Philip Davis’s fine life of Bernard Malamud, Joyce Carol Oates described biography as a literary edifice “constructed out of a small infinity of letters, drafts, notes, manuscripts, printed texts, interview transcripts, etc.” How tidy she makes it sound. My own experience conformed more to Virginia Woolf’s evocation of biographical chaos: “How can one make a life out of six cardboard boxes [the exact number I faced on my first encounter with Delmore’s papers] full of tailors’ bills, love letters, and old picture postcards?” And what do you do with gems that you just can’t find a place for, like this quote from a review of John Haffenden’s two-volume biography of the British critic William Empson that I came across in *The Independent*:

To register Empson’s weirdness of character, a touch of hysterical laughter is surely called for. There was, for a start, the grotesquerie of his beard, a star-shaped fan below his chin, or his demure request to a young colleague that he be allowed to kiss his member, or a typical menu for guests in ‘The Burrow,’ his filthy basement: hard-boiled egg in bottled curry sauce followed by a doughnut soused in condensed milk, plus a tumbler of Japanese whiskey.

Thank god for footnotes.

You couldn't just stuff all this crap anywhere, and if you got the order wrong, you had to type the whole page over. This was before computers; you couldn't move paragraphs around, cutting and pasting at will. Or rather, you could: but "cutting and pasting" in those days meant snipping out a paragraph and literally pasting it onto a separate page with Elmer's glue. "You cannot imagine," Boswell complained to a friend, "what labour, what perplexity, what vexation I have endured in arranging a prodigious multiplicity of materials, in supplying omissions, in searching for papers, buried in different masses, and all this besides the exertion of composing and polishing; many a time have I thought of giving it up."

Who could blame him? I'd thought about it, too.