

CRITICAL AND EDIFYING? A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that edifying dialogue is an appropriate and satisfying component of historically critical biography. It *has been* a part of biography. The edifying and critical intent is traced through pre-modern biography to demonstrate that this was the case in the Hebrew, Greek, Roman, Early Christian and Medieval eras. Key authors examined include the author(s) of the Pentateuch, the Gospel writers and the authors of the Biblical epistles, Herodotus, Polybius, Livy, Plutarch, Tacitus, Athanasius, Jerome, Sulpicius Severus, and John Capgrave. It *can be* a part of biography even given the challenges of contemporary theory posed by the extreme positions of positivism and postmodernism (or their chastened re-formulations). Important authors discussed in this section include Arthur Marwick, Keith Jenkins, David Harlan and Peter Novick. It *is* a part of some biographies meant for a particular audience (such as feminist works). And hopefully it *will be* increasingly looked upon as the preferred way of writing biography. My dissertation follows these stages. I begin with what biography has been and argue that the Greek and Roman historians believed that the intent of biography was critical and edifying. In fact, critical and edifying intent is notable also in Biblical and medieval biographies. The next section argues that edifying discourse is compatible with both traditional and postmodern theories of history-writing. The third section of the dissertation moves from theoretical considerations to the work of two notable Christian historians, George Marsden and Harry Stout. I note that these two scholars in particular are, in theory, open to my argument but that they can hesitate to engage in edifying discourse in biography. Finally, I briefly examine a few authors who write edifying and critical biography. Toril Moi, Carolyn Heilbrun, and the Bollandists are discussed in this section.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
CHAPTER I Critical and Edifying History—Something Has Been Lost	1
CHAPTER II The Critical and Edifying Impulse of Classical History and Biography	25
CHAPTER III The Critical and Edifying Impulse of the Bible	81
CHAPTER IV The Critical and Edifying Impulse of Medieval Christian Biography	133
CHAPTER V The Critical and Edifying Impulse and Modern and Postmodern History.....	187
CHAPTER VI The Critical and Edifying Impulse and Recent Christian Biography.....	242
CHAPTER VII Critical and Edifying History—What Might Be Regained	286
Bibliography	303

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DEDICATION

To Brian

And to my family

Chapter One: Critical and Edifying History—Something Has Been Lost

In the 1990s among the members of one particular sub-section of the American Historical Association, the Conference of Faith and History, there was an infamous exchange pertaining to a certain biography of George Whitefield.¹ The biography, renowned for its controversial content even among its supporters, was reviewed by some evangelicals with a degree of rancour its author, Harry Stout, had not anticipated. His detractors charged Stout with failing to portray Whitefield as a kind of emblematic hero. At best, Stout depicted Whitefield as pious and diligent. Furthermore, there was no sense of the work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, evident in Stout's account of Whitefield's life.² Iain Murray, Whitefield scholar and author of numerous biographies, including one on Whitefield's contemporary Jonathan Edwards, levelled similar charges against Stout's biography and added another. For Murray, Stout's text was paradigmatic of all that was wrong with what Murray called the new evangelical approach to history: it failed to engage history from a standpoint which included the supernatural.³

Although to many Murray's comments could seem bizarre (historians have situated their task in the realm of the mundane rather than the supernatural for quite some time now), from other perspectives Murray's views can be understood sympathetically. First, Murray knew he was reading a biography about a prominent religious figure that was written by a like-minded, confessing, practicing and prominent Christian historian. Murray expected to find

¹Harry Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 1991).

²For example see David White's review of *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*, by Harry Stout, *The Banner of Truth* (March 1994): 2.

³This exchange was summarized by D.G. Hart, "History in Search of Meaning: The Conference of Faith and History," in *History and the Christian Historian*, ed. Ronald Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 68-87. Hart suggests that the strong reactions which Stout's biography garnered point to much larger questions of historical method still unresolved by members of the Conference of Faith and History (CFH). See also Iain Murray's review of *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles and Beyond, 1700-1990*, eds. Mark Noll, David Bebbington, and George Rawlyk, *The Banner of Truth* (July 1994): 8-14. See especially page nine of this review article where Murray takes aim at Stout's chapter, "George Whitefield in Three Counties."

evidence of that shared faith perspective within the biographical composition. It troubled Murray, as previously mentioned, that the Holy Spirit was not credited as prime mover in the conversions experienced by many in Whitefield's audiences. Instead, observes Murray, Stout suggests Whitefield's theatrical and marketing skills were the animus driving the Great Awakening. Murray had hoped for a different tone from a fellow Christian. Second, throughout most of the history of Christian biography, both readers and authors entered into the biographical task as a form of discourse that went beyond historical recitation. Although Murray does not explicitly discuss the history of biography, he seems to have hoped that more of the character of pre-modern biography would be a part of Stout's text. In the past it was expected that examining the life of a godly person would reveal something of the character, will or hand of God. Furthermore, biography before modernity was concerned with questions of morals and ethics. In terms of the history of the biographical genre, Murray's expectation of some form of direct discussion of Whitefield's spiritual importance was not unreasonable.

If Murray can be understood sympathetically, so too Stout's surprise at the reception his biography received from members of his own Reformed denomination is not unexpected. While the kind of biography Murray was calling for is consistent with previous modes of discourse, Stout assumed that overtly religious biography was a past form that should be abandoned in the present, or at least confined to a church context.⁴ Stout responded to Murray's articles with a critique of what Stout labelled "providentialist" historical methodology.⁵ At first it might seem that Stout's denunciation of providentialist history side-steps the question of the supernatural within history-writing. Stout's definition of providentialist history is not much concerned with the reality of, or even the possibility of, the miraculous. However, the argument is not a dodge but an attack on the assumptions which gird

⁴This is an important qualification and will be discussed at greater length in chapters four and five.

⁵Harry Stout, "Biography as Battleground: The Competing Legacies of the Religious Historian," *Books and Culture* 2 (July/August 1996): 9-10.

Murray's own methods. Stout is more troubled by the way in which claims of knowledge of the supernatural are used as proofs of God's divine favour, or alternatively of God's condemnation, than whether miraculous anecdotes are to be included or not. More precisely, even if aberrations in natural causation could be proven, historians likely cannot and certainly should not determine the meaning of such occurrences for their readers. One cannot, for example, say that the Holy Spirit guided Whitefield's words and actions to bring about conversion experiences. Such a claim not only is inappropriate in the religious plurality of the present but also, quite simply, assumes to know what is ultimately unattainable. The most that could be claimed would be to observe that Whitefield believed in the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion. The Christian tradition maintains that humanity cannot know the fullness of God's interaction with the world and people; God's ways are comprehensible only in part. God alone possesses fullness of knowledge. Stout holds that the same epistemic strictures apply in the analysis of everyday events. In either the so-called miraculous or mundane events of the past, Stout remains sceptical that anybody can look back and discern what the will of God had been at those times; he is incredulous of those who presume such intimate knowledge. Stout can marshal both academic and Christian epistemology to support his arguments. Thus, Stout rejects two aspects which his detractors believed should be part of biography: inclusion of the miraculous and inclusion of evidences, whether mundane or miraculous, which demonstrate the hand of God in individual lives or past events. Whether supernatural or not, the events of the past cannot be given providential explanations.

The historiographical positions of Murray and Stout are representative of the two types of religious biography at the present time. Even though the arguments of both Murray and Stout can be understood sympathetically, both positions are insufficient. The terms of the debate have been set out as a discussion about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of providentialist claims. For many, following the strictures which Stout holds is the way that

historically critical biography is differentiated from biography appropriate to a confessional context. It is my observation, however, that in this debate there has been no mention of the function of biography as guide to ethics, morals and models of imitation or condemnation. Yet for most of the history of biography, the emphasis has been on these latter impulses. To be sure, past biographies contained statements that would fit Stout's providentialist label. In particular, reports of supernatural events were a part of biography, just as miraculous events were part of ancient history-writing. The Roman historian Livy, for example, began and ended many of his books with lists of the miracles that had occurred during that year. In Greco-Roman biography and early Christian biography of the late Classical era, however, providentialist claims were not prominent, even if supernatural events were part of the historical report. Greco-Roman biographers were more interested in edification than in making claims about the will and intent of a divinity. Such a comment is perhaps less characteristic of the biographies included in the Christian canon. In at least one formative, non-canonical text, *Life of Antony*, however, edification is not linked to overtly providentialistic claims. The notable point is that edification does not have to include providentialistic claims which assert that a particular event in history demonstrates God's blessing or punishment.

Definitions

For the purposes of my dissertation "edification" will indicate an author's intent to instruct the reader about how to live in response to historical knowledge. For the historians and biographers of much of the human past it was as important that a biography provided the reader with information about the subject as it was that the reader's actions should be influenced as a result of reading the text. An aspiring politician, for example, would engage the biography of a statesman as part of his contemplation of his own character, actions and career. Given the history of biography, I find Murray's and Stout's debate about the admissibility of providentialism to be slightly reductionistic. There continues to be little discussion on the

admissibility of edifying discourse in biography. Is that because it is agreed to be inappropriate? If so, it is the intention of my dissertation first to re-open discussion of the role of edification for the historical sub-genre of biography, and particularly in the kind of biography in which I deem this discussion the most contentious and most urgent: religious biography. Second, my project will argue that edifying discourse is indeed appropriate for a historical-critical biography, whether religious or not. Third, I will contend that biography, like history, cannot help but participate in the discussion of “how now shall we live.” Thus, eventually my project should move from questions of appropriateness to questions of method. The bulk of this dissertation will build a foundation for this third task by establishing the first and second of these points. Significant exploration of how to do ethically sensitive historical-critical biography will emerge briefly in this dissertation, and I intend subsequent work to follow this direction.

Doubt about the possibility of edifying dialogue has been part of modern consciousness. Interpretation takes place within a particular worldview—which is sometimes called speculative philosophy of history. All interpretation (including speculative philosophies of history and even mere chronicles) takes place within a worldview. In order to have an edifying dialogue as a result of reflection upon history there has to be significant overlap between the worldview of the author and the reader.

Many have given up on edifying discourse because the modern world is characterized by competing systems of meaning (as opposed to the supposed unity of the religiously grounded worldview of the Middle Ages or the Bible, for example). The potential difficulty of engaging in edifying discourse only increases when the text is meant for a larger audience in which many worldviews will be represented. Within the discipline of History, competing worldviews have sometimes led to fragmentation and frustration with regard to the kind of conversations that result from this fragmentation. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Elisabeth

Lasch-Quinn explain the beginning of a new historical society in America, The Historical Society, as a reaction to the “wave of postmodernist relativism and indeterminacy” that welcomes those who have not “capitulated to relativism and relevance.”⁶ The members of The Historical Society see themselves as a kind of remnant of historians who still do their historical work as it should be done.

Others have given up on edifying discourse because of the inescapability of a socially constructed worldview. In the 1960s Peter Berger published two texts that explored the relationship of an individual to his or her society as a social construction. In *The Social Construction of Reality* Berger and co-author Thomas Luckmann do not agree with radical relativism nor do they believe that sociology should abandon empirical methods.⁷ In *The Sacred Canopy* Berger examines the social construction of religion. Religion, according to Berger, is one of the forms of legitimation of social institutions and religious institutions in particular. What he says in the context of religion has come to apply to many sectors of life including the discipline of History: “All legitimation serves to maintain reality—reality, that is, as defined in a particular human collectivity.”⁸ History, therefore, is a social construct and History legitimates social institutions as well as collectively held understandings of the past. Within the discipline of History, understanding the implications of social construction has typically resulted in either the ghettoization of interpretation (everyone has their own interpretation) or severely limited any engagement in interpretation for the present. In chapter five I discuss the relationship of edifying discourse in the context of relativism and the consequences for interpretation in the writing of history.

It is important to note that interpretation, in the broadest sense of the term, does occur

⁶Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, *Reconstructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xiv.

⁷Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 189.

⁸Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 35.

in all three of the historian's tasks. In rough terms, a historian provides description, explanation, and interpretation. A historian describes *who* said and did *what* as well as *when* and *where* it was said and done. A historian explains *how* particular events came about (as a result of previous events) and how a particular event effected the events that followed it. Evaluative judgements are part of these first two tasks. A historian judges certain descriptive details as unnecessary to include in his or her report. Some factors of causation are deemed more important than others. My dissertation does not discuss the kinds of judgements (perhaps these could also be called interpretations) at these first two levels of the historian's task. When I discuss the interpretive function of a historian I will be referring to the third level of the historian's task. A historian interprets the meaning of an event. The third task, interpretation, can be done in two different ways. Interpretation can, first, discuss the meaning of an event in terms of its consequences. *Why* was this event important for subsequent events? Someone could argue that the terms of the negotiations in Paris, 1919 set in motion all the factors that would cause the Second World War.⁹ But a historian could also interpret the meaning of the event for the present. Why are the negotiations which took place in Paris in 1919 meaningful today? Certainly the consequences of the Paris Peace Conference could be traced not only to World War II but also to the present. The meaning of the Paris Conference could also be interpreted for the present in terms of what might be learned by individuals or by a society. What can I as an individual learn from something that happened almost a century ago? Perhaps that if I as a voter in a democratic country demand that my political leaders exact a kind of vengeance on our nation's enemy, I may have the power (through the voice of my vote) to set in motion negative consequences not only for that enemy but also myself. What can a society

⁹This is not the argument which Margaret Macmillan puts forward in her monograph on the Paris Conference (she does not posit that the Paris Conference guaranteed the Second World War). MacMillan's text is notable, however, as a fascinating discussion of the meaning of the events in Paris for the subsequent two decades. See Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2003).

learn from the Paris Conference? Perhaps that the actions of a country (or group of countries) can have global ramifications. Whether or not my particular interpretations are correct is not the point here. The example is meant to illustrate the different kinds of interpretation that are possible. It is the last two of these kinds of interpretation that I am interested in. What are the potential meanings of an event for the individual or a society and how an individual's or a society's actions be directed as a consequence? I will typically use the word "interpretation" to mean the third of the historian's tasks.

Before continuing, a few more terms need to be given provisional definitions: moral adjudication, ethical dialogue, and exemplary models. These three forms of dialogue were part of the edifying intent of the ancient author. My definitions may seem to be crude but they have been helpful to me as I have attempted to sort through the various ways in which authors attempt to interpret the meaning of a life or of historical events. One way that authors entered into the interpretation of a life or event was by adjudicating what is good or what is less-than-good. At its most basic level, moral adjudication commends or censures the words, deeds or intentions of a subject. It is not merely a comment to the effect that a particular speech or deed was unfortunate for the subject's career or that a specific action helped an individual to win a military victory (and was therefore a good decision). Such comments would be better understood as an author's way of explaining cause and effect. Rather, moral adjudication would suggest that a subject's words or deeds were virtuous, ignoble, or so forth, in and of themselves. Such moral discourse could be applied to an individual or group. A person could be condemned for cowardice or praised for selflessness. Or the deeds of a corporate body such as the Roman Senate, a town, or a military regiment, could be evaluated as shameful, noble, or otherwise. Historians are rightly concerned about such evaluations as I label moral adjudication. They observe that all adjudication is contextually situated and therefore relative. They conclude that, it is inappropriate to judge the dead. Past people acted within their context

which is not the same as the present context. These concerns are discussed in fuller detail in later chapters where I question whether these concerns are sufficient to warrant censure of moral adjudication.

Ethical dialogue can be discussed in at least two ways. The goal of both forms of dialogue, however, is to convince the reader to adopt a certain attitude or act in a particular way. First, general truths of life, the universe, human nature, or divine entities can form part of an author's interpretive scheme. Comments like these can become providentialist. In such instances an author could assert, for example, that certain events occurred because the Gods strike down the proud and the self-exalted. The reader understands that his or her own failure to be humble risks the same divine judgement; the reader is exhorted to forsake pride. This observation of the Gods and the proud is an important theme in Herodotus, the Greek historian of the Persian Wars. Even if the divine is left out, however, observations of human nature can still function as providentialist statements. An author could, for example, structure a historical account in order to emphasize that human greed leads to war; society is exhorted to forsake greed and seek peace. This observation is a significant theme in Thucydides, the historian of the Peloponnesian War. While ethical dialogue of this kind explicates the nature of the divinities or the world, it is not this kind of ethical dialogue which will be the focus of my discussion.

A second form of ethical dialogue reflects on the meaning of the past. Whatever the adjudication of the past may be, there is something that can be learned in the present. An author could indicate that the actions of a person or society at a particular time were shameful or praiseworthy (a moral adjudication). The author would then go on to suggest that the appropriate response is grief for what is lost or pride in what has been accomplished, or perhaps exhort the reader to fix what has been destroyed in one way or another. The author might disclose his hope that readers will act in such a way as to reverse unworthy decisions or

to continue to build on the good that was done in the past. It is this second type of discussion that is of interest—the author’s intent to persuade the reader to move from his or her current actions or attitudes to new or modified actions or attitudes.

Especially in the Greek, Roman and Christian traditions (but not limited to them), biography included exemplary models. The words and deeds of a subject were taken as models. Authors presented their subjects as models to be imitated or as examples to be condemned. In fact, a single subject could be both a model of imitation and repudiation. Or the imitation of a subject could be qualified in one way or another. Often an author understood that exact replication of a particular deed might not be possible or even desirable. Rather, the author would endorse the imitation of the subject’s inner character. If a reader imitated the good character of the subject the result would be good deeds. The reader is not meant to imitate the deed but the character trait that produced that deed. Examples of both kinds of imitation are notable in ancient biographies. When the fourth-century Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, discusses the eating and sleeping habits of his biographical subject, the eremitical Antony, he commends them as a template for monastic discipline. The details of Antony’s eating and sleeping habits were important because they were intended to be normative for other monks’ eating and sleeping habits. *Agricola*, by the Roman historian Tacitus, on the other hand, commended its subject not as someone to be imitated in a sort of one-to-one correlation. Agricola was the Governor of Roman Britain. No general reading the speeches Agricola had given to his troops, for example, would understand his task to be a repetition of Agricola’s sentiments, let alone the same speech, to his own troops. Tacitus does insist, however, that Agricola’s virtues are imitable: especially Agricola’s faithful service to the empire even though that empire was ruled by a tyrant.

The Task and Themes

The title of my dissertation is deliberately ambiguous and an intentional play on the

multiple meanings of the word “historiography” as used by historians. (It is the only place in my dissertation where I use the term ambiguously.) When some authors use the term “historiography” they mean the method and theory of writing history, which some also call the critical philosophy of history. When others use the term “historiography” they simply mean texts in which the past is discussed. Thus “historiography” has been used to indicate both method and theory as well as writing about the past. My dissertation is an examination of the history of Christian biography but with particular emphasis on a question of method. I examine the history of Christian biography in order to inquire about the critical and edifying intent of the authors. Furthermore, I examine the history of Christian biography to inquire about the methods that the authors used to convey that intent. I begin with an exploration of the Classical and Biblical foundations of Christian Biography and then discuss medieval biography and its critical and edifying impulses. I argue that historians and biographers of the Classical, Biblical and medieval eras understood that the edifying applications of biography were necessarily rooted in a real past even as they applied them to the present. Methods of communicating that critical and edifying content differed from author to author and from era to era. All understood, however, that biography must be both critical and edifying.

In this dissertation I examine biographies from various eras in order to think through what aspects of pre-modern biographies should be jettisoned or refined for the present context and what should be re-incorporated that has been abandoned. Not all the components of earlier biographies can be retained. Where methods of obtaining a greater degree of accuracy have been advanced, for example in archaeology and sociology, these methods rather than antiquated methods should be employed. In the past, various historians and biographers did claim to know the mind and judgement of God (or the Gods) on past events and lives. Although I will argue that this kind of claim was not the dominant form of edifying content of pre-modern biographies, it was present. I believe that making such claims in a confessional

setting today should be done only with great caution. Christians agree that omniscience is a quality of God and not of humans. Furthermore, Christians agree that humans can know the mind of God only in part. It may be that on many occasions making overt providentialist claims in a non-confessional setting is typically counter-productive. Providentialist history, such as that which Murray espouses, will likely continue to be unwelcome in a pluralistic, academic context. This lack of welcome does not bother me much as I believe the focus can helpfully and legitimately shift from aspirations of divine knowledge to inquiries in ethical discussions. Examining the life of another in order to answer “how now shall we live?” is both a legitimate historical and religious question. It is also a question that people of varying faiths or philosophies can engage even if different answers are given to it. Biography in this form acknowledges that something important to the historical and biographical processes has been lost in the contemporary era. Too much of the ancient forms of discourse has been abandoned if this question is to be answered. This dissertation is, in a sense, a recovery project: reclaiming elements of pre-modern assumptions of the functions of history. Furthermore, I will show that such biography endures within contemporary history-writing, albeit perhaps from examples not in the centre of the academic profession. The benefit of recovering this mode of biography will be two-fold: biography as ethical discourse constitutes a more satisfying religious engagement and a more honest and satisfying historical engagement. Convincing authors such as Murray and Stout, and other potential doubters, of a different approach to biography will constitute the principal purpose of my dissertation.

I am not primarily interested in how biography was written but rather in how biography can be written today. The primary question of my dissertation is an inquiry into the place and function of edifying discussion in historically critical biography of contemporary religious biography. I argue that a middle ground, so to speak, is possible. Between its exclusion and its abuse, a place for edification in history-writing can be opened. Indeed, certain basic elements

of edifying discourse are unavoidable. Many would agree that some degree of moral adjudication, however basic, is part of all history-writing. However much historians may strive to research and write about the past in a so-called objective way, most of these same historians would also agree that everyone inevitably interprets within the context of his or her worldview. Some brief comments about the history of the relationship of facts and values in history-writing may be helpful here.

Half a century ago, Karl Löwith traced a two thousand-year arc between modern and Greco-Roman Classical times during which discussion of meaning was slowly but increasingly extracted from the processes of history-writing. His minor classic, *Meaning in History*, is an account of the devolution of the interpretive function of history.¹⁰ While modern historians may continue to describe what happened in the past, explain why it happened, and perhaps even interpret what events might have meant to the original participants, the progression (perhaps the term regression would more accurately summarize his argument) of history from late antiquity to the modern era demonstrates the increasing reluctance of the contemporary historian to interpret the ongoing meaning of past events for the present-day reader. Thus, Löwith begins with the modern situation (as demonstrated through an examination of the writings of Burckhardt, Marx, and Hegel) and progresses, backwards through time, as he analyzes the philosophies of history of Comte, Voltaire, Vico, Bossuet, Joachim, Augustine and Orosius, ending with an analysis of the Bible and its Classical context. Early Christian writers did not separate the historical task from explication of its meaning.¹¹

¹⁰Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History, Traced Through the Works of Burckhardt, Marx, Hegel, Proudhon, Comte, Condorcet, Turgot, Voltaire, Vico, Bossuet, Joachim, Augustine, Orosius and the Bible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

¹¹See also Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949). The essays in this collection argue that modern history-writing has too easily (prematurely) cast aside the Christian and Classical methods of history-writing. Niebuhr asserts that the "goodness of Christ must be embodied in the stuff of history" (213) but at the same time he is exploring legitimate ways of doing so in a pluralistic world. The conclusions he comes to are outdated in the postmodern situation as he focuses primarily on the modern perception of history as progress – a concept which

Löwith wrote half a century ago yet his complaint continues. The issue has been discussed by a more recent author. In *The Degradation of American History* David Harlan notes that until the twentieth century historical writing had been one of the ways in which Americans engaged in moral reflection. He makes a case for the return of this function in historical writing and gives an account of the emergence of New Traditionalism in America. Harlan is attempting to “find the predecessors that we need—to think with their thoughts, to work through our own beliefs by working through their beliefs. Only thus does history become a mode of moral reflection.”¹² However, the predecessor which most dominates his own text is Hayden White, among other modern philosophers of history. This dissertation differs from Harlan’s work in two respects. First, I find that the predecessors we need, in Harlan’s terms, are historians and biographers as well as philosophers of history. Harlan is building the philosophical foundation for the possibility of constructing of a new style of history rather than designing blueprints or beginning construction itself. As such Harlan performs a necessary task but this dissertation intends to interact with historians and biographers proper in order to contemplate what history as moral reflection has and could look like. Furthermore, while Harlan looks to the late twentieth century for the predecessors who will guide I will take a much longer look back and suggest that the predecessors we need are found in many pre-modern authors.

My thesis insists that edification is integral to biography as a subset of history-writing.

has declined in recent decades. Yet, even if his conclusions need revision, he is at least raising the question of the relationship of Christian history-writing and secular history-writing. The notion that the two may be incompatible is not currently much entertained. See also George Grant, *Time as History* (Toronto: CBC Learning Systems – CBC Massey Lectures, 1969). In these four lectures Grant argues that since the publication of Nietzsche’s writings, humanity’s conception of history has changed. He argues that until and including the time of Hegel and Marx, history (and I would argue by extension, history-writing) derived its meaning from the end towards which it aimed and gave particular events meaning in terms of that perceived end. Grant believed that Nietzsche had correctly exploded the weaknesses in both Hegel and Marx’s theories but that his own solution was problematic. Nietzsche “discovered” that time was history – and nothing more. If people, not God, are the creators and sustainers of history, then there is no inevitable outcome to time and history has no meaning. Grant countered that man cannot live by this axiom. Humans are called to make moral choices and these choices are difficult to make if all that man has to guide him is Nietzsche’s will to power.

¹²David Harlan, *The Degradation of American History*, 75.

There is, however, some work to be done in the performance of such kind of dialogue. Just as I insist that people can learn from the past, so too I will look to the textual exemplars within the history of biography to learn from their understanding of critical and edifying biography.

There is an important parallel between the Stout and Murray debate with discussions in current historiographical debates. Many practicing historians are cautious about, or even dismissive of, the place of ethical discourse in scholarly historical texts.

My dissertation requires intense interdisciplinary work. The sub-title of the scholarly journal *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* also indicates that to work on biography is to cross disciplines. Something of the nature of biography refuses to be captured by any one of the modern disciplines. It will not be made the exclusive domain of history or literature or any other branch of learning. I think it is fitting that my thinking and writing about biography has been done in the Interdisciplinary Studies Program, for to study biography requires historical, literary, and I will argue, philosophical and religious sensitivity. Specific streams within each of these four disciplines are more directly linked with my project. Historiographers discuss the methods of historical investigation as well as the limits of claims to historical certainty. Within the study of literature there are those who have thought about how biography, a non-fiction form, can be good literature (similar to those who think about this same question in autobiography). Morals and ethics are an important part of philosophical discussion, and also of religious dialogue. As I shall suggest later in the dissertation, it may be that writing biography requires the input of representatives from these varied fields. That these important branches from a number of the humanities should be brought together in biography seems commendable for the discussion of a single human. One can hope that the different perspectives of the various fields of inquiry will lead to a fuller and more helpful understanding of a person's life and the application of that understanding to the present. Such interdisciplinary work, furthermore, might help foster a context similar to that which prevailed

prior to the multiplication of disciplines in the modern university. It may even be that as the number of disciplines grew so did the difficulty in assessing a life. Interdisciplinary work may actually make interpretive comments more obvious, and especially so if similar interpretive insights are shared by practitioners from several fields.

If I want to argue that something has been lost or similarly that we can learn from the history of the genre itself, an examination of the nature of ancient history-writing and biography must be completed. In the last few decades much scholarly work has been produced on the character of ancient history-writing. I will rely on this work for this section to observe that the authorial intent of Greek, Roman, Biblical and medieval biography, as a sub-set of history-writing, was both critical and edifying. How did it seek to be critical? How did it edify? What of the methods of communicating edifying content can be instructive today?

Contemporary historiography (method and theory) tends to be divided into two important factions: traditional and postmodern. So-called traditional historiography tends to be nervous about combining edifying and historical writing. Since the professionalization of history-writing in the late nineteenth century historians have cultivated a reputation for accurate historical reporting based on evidence. The disciplining power of the academic guild was thought to ensure that fabrications, which had characterized the previous work of the gentleman or clerical historian, would be eliminated. Yet even such a commendable pursuit as that had its own pitfalls. Positivists had claimed too much epistemic certainty in their accounts of the past. Historians have come to accept that the Truth of the past (certainty) can only ever be “truth” (contingent upon the perspective of the author and the reader). This change in epistemology is based on the admission (shared by a great many in the humanities) that full knowledge and absolute objectivity are unattainable. This means that ultimate Truth is unknowable and truth from a particular perspective is the best that can be achieved. Furthermore, the mystique of the disinterested scholar has been revised. Objectivity has been

re-defined as the attempt to acknowledge and overcome biases rather than believing that historians can work unencumbered by any corrupting prejudice.

Finally, until about half a century ago much historical research tended to focus on the topics of politics and war and questions germane to other sectors of society such as women, minority groups, and domestic life received less attention. There seems to be a correlation between the increasing breadth of historical foci with the need to think carefully about both the meaning of history and the meaning of individuals. Many of those interested in the history of women, minority groups, and domestic life were not merely curious about these histories but also believed that the implications of such research affected actions (both of individuals and society as a whole) in the present. Biography was also important in the historical research of women, minority groups and other areas of inquiry. Biographies of key women, for example, could validate the importance of women's history as well as inspire women in the present by first making the life of a particular woman known and second by demonstrating how her actions were important. Such women of the past became exemplars for women of the present. Traditional historiography has welcomed the greater breadth of research topics and in that regard it is neither naïve nor narrow. But it continues to remain suspicious of edifying reflection. Greater *topoi* are accepted and especially so if such research is done without an overtly edifying intent. Those who are more cautious about edifying reflection in these newer areas of research rightly challenge those who are more enthusiastic about such discourse to avoid hagiography. Conversely, the latter challenge the former that the writing of history is not mere chronicle.

The postmodern critique of traditional historiography has convinced many that power and interests are an inescapable part of writing history, and that this is true whether or not the author is aware of the way in which power influences his or her work. Postmodern theory is open to an ethical discussion of power in the writing of history but less open to an ethical

discussion of the interpretation of the past. Furthermore, radical relativism tends to discourage the corporate process of learning from the past. David Harlan has argued that the writing of history is a moral discipline and relies on the seminal work of Peter Novick to support his rejection of traditional claims of objective knowledge.¹³ At the same time that Harlan welcomes edifying dialogue in the writing of history, he also claims there are no models or methods that help an author write what Harlan describes as the history which we need—history as moral discourse.¹⁴ Harlan allows that individuals are free to make their own meaning but has little hope that a society can engage history as moral dialogue. It seems to me that relativism allows edifying dialogue only for the individual, or perhaps a group. If this is true, then an author's ethical discourse could be viewed as akin to narcissism and the justification for its inclusion in a text would be extremely weak. Thus while postmodern historiography welcomes edification, its fear of acting tyrannically inhibits authors from the performance of such discussions.

Biography as edifying dialogue is compatible with the traditional historiography that endorses a chastened Enlightenment—the rejection of the positivism of the early twentieth century but the continuing insistence that truthful knowledge of the past is attainable and some ability to minimize the distortions of bias exists.¹⁵ The goal of biography is to describe how it essentially was. Yet biography as edifying conversation also agrees with postmodern critics that ethics is inescapable. The new religious biography must be both critical (including self-critical) and edifying discourse. It insists that that edification is not only legitimate but also a

¹³David Harlan, *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997), 210-211. Peter Novick's history of the American historical profession provides a history of the idea of objectivity. The positivism of the early twentieth century has been largely rejected or at least modified so as to make claims of less epistemic certainty. See *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988).

¹⁴Harlan, *The Degradation of American History*, 205.

¹⁵I first encountered the term "chastened Enlightenment" in the conclusion to Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University, 1997), 147.

beneficial corporate endeavour.

Three renowned historians and three well received biographies will receive close attention: Martin Marty's *Martin Luther*, George Marsden's *Jonathan Edwards*, and, Harry Stout's *The Divine Dramatist*.¹⁶ In his introduction, Marty states that it is important that an author present his subject in such a fashion as to be comprehensible to a reader far removed in time, space and cultural situation. But Marty does not indicate to what end any particular subject is to be made accessible nor why Luther in particular should be of interest in the early twenty-first century. If thoughtful consideration of Martin Luther's life can aid a Lutheran pastor of today, for example, would an interested historian not want to explicate this insight clearly? Marsden, perhaps the most sympathetic to the task of learning from biography, begins and ends his biography with a discussion of the importance of learning from our predecessors. The biography proper, however, never pauses to consider what can be learned from Edwards. Both Marty and Marsden are convinced that the reader can be edified, to use my term, by their subjects but hesitate to engage in edifying discourse. Stout raised controversial suspicions regarding his subject's sexuality. As he couldn't prove that his intuition was correct, his allegations are embedded in the text with a kind of wink-and-a-nod to those able to perceive it, but never directly discussed. He has acted as a responsible historian but could he have also opened up a timely and important discussion as well? Is there not more to learning from a life than merely learning about a person? Historians of religious history could be at the forefront of such discussions and practices, not lagging behind. With their historical credentials well developed they could be the avant-garde of practitioners who broaden the historical task in this direction. I will demonstrate that engaging ethical discussions can be a more satisfying historical analysis than omitting them.

¹⁶George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2003). Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

Much exists in the texts of Marty, Marsden and Stout that is good. Indeed, these texts were chosen over others because the direction of these historians holds more potential than that of the providentialists. It is not my intention to enter into a thorough critique of providentialist history-writing. There may be appropriate venues for asserting the judgement of God on specific events of history or on specific individuals. I believe that there is greater potential for common ground if the dialogue avoids such assertions and instead discusses the moral and ethical implications of historical research. I am under the impression that people of relatively diverse belief systems can and have agreed on many points of ethics. I believe that following the lead of scholars such as Marty, Marsden and Stout will lead to a more inclusive dialogue that remains appropriate to an audience of various beliefs. Extensive engagement with providentialist historians will be for later research endeavours. However, it is the task of my project to cast a vision of what I think could be and how it can be achieved. The best examples, therefore, are chosen in order to encourage good history-writing to become better yet.

It is not an entirely new task that I advocate. Should historians of religious history look for allies they can be found not only in the past but also in the present. Feminist authors may be instructive in this matter. Take for example the biography of Simone de Beauvoir by Toril Moi. What is the meaning of Simone's life? Moi addresses this directly for her audience. Her discussion has not gone without controversy but the goal of biography is not necessarily to avoid controversy. Moi is unafraid to discuss the significance of Simone's life, for herself and for the reader. The reader now has the ability to engage the facts of Simone's life as well as her meaning. Moi has begun the conversation which needs to arise anytime the contemplation of a life is begun.¹⁷ In the history of biography, severing the facts of a life from a discussion of the implications of that life constitutes an aberration. By re-evaluating the functions of biography as both history and ethical discourse, the "unusual" format holds the potential to become the

¹⁷Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

standard practice. What has been lost can be re-incorporated. A truncated form of history-writing can regain its proper breadth.

There are, therefore, unexpected allies for Christian authors. At least one scholar has chided Christian historians for not seeking out these allies. Bruce Kuklick has urged Christian historians to explore alternative historical methods that engage the meaning of their history and that are transparent about the philosophical and theological principles which guide them. Kuklick is a non-Christian historian who has spied the latent hypocrisy, or at least potential inconsistency, in the methodological assumptions held by Christian historians. In a review of recent works on American religious history by Mark Noll and George Marsden, Kuklick concludes with sustained scepticism regarding the integration of secular history and the Christian historian:

The principles of Christian, and more specifically, Protestant scholarship, especially in the field of history, fit uncomfortably with the premises of the academy today . . . [yet] it is by no means clear that the axioms of secular “critical” history are coherent. With the rise of committed history over the last generation, the response of Protestant thinkers has been awkwardly and nervously to adopt many of the secular conventions on offer. Yet the kind of history they have written – they must know in their heart of hearts – avoids confronting the deepest issues of their faith, indeed denies that these issues are relevant to history.¹⁸

Kuklick faults Christian historians on several counts. First, they accept current historical methods as unproblematic when they are not. Second, they fail to see the contradictions between Christianity and modern historical theory (perhaps Kuklick might point to differing opinions on the plausibility of the so-called miraculous and note that a Christian would have difficulty denying miracles without denying his or her faith but have difficulty including accounts of miracles as having really happened and be considered

¹⁸Bruce Kuklick, “Evasive Manoeuvres: Can Protestant Historians Play by the Rules of the Secular Academy without Giving the Game Away?” *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* (March/April 2004): 21. Note that it is Marsden’s recent biography of Jonathan Edwards which functions as one of Kuklick’s primary examples.

credible). It is the goal of this dissertation to present an alternative position that does engage “the deepest issues of their faith” while arguing that such discussion can fit plausibly in the academy today (even if still uncomfortably).

The debate between Murray and Stout is notable not only for the emotional fireworks it ignited but also because it represents an unresolved tension amongst Christian historians in particular and within the epistemology of history-writing more generally. Historians have long conceded that objectivity, as an ultimate goal, is impossible. Yet, to their credit, historians generally refuse to veer into the opposite ditch of radical scepticism. The past can be known, even if imperfectly, and it can be discussed and written about. Thus, historians exist in precarious epistemological middle ground in history-writing. They reject providentialist history on the one hand and on the other hand they know that pure objectivity and truth are unattainable. Although difficult to maintain, it is a compromise that tends to work, in a practical sense, for most historians as they go about their everyday tasks of writing history. When these same historians turn their hand to the historical sub-genre of biography, however, the difficulties and tensions tend to increase.

The same epistemological assumptions by which historians garner praise when discussing historical events can sometimes incur harsh criticism when writing biography. Or, at least, those assumptions can fail to be sufficient to many readers. Stout discovered this for himself. He notes that he used the same research methods and historiographical principles when he wrote his history of Puritanism in America as when he wrote his Whitefield biography, but was criticized for his methods only in his biography. Stout states, “My biography of George Whitefield embodied the same objective perspective as *The New England Soul*, but it aroused quite different and far more hostile response on the part of many Christian

readers and reviewers.”¹⁹ The same methods and tone which he used in his history, which was well received by his current detractors, failed in his biography. People expected something more when the author chose to write biography. For the historian, biography represents a challenge. A biographer often feels that he or she must choose between either an only slightly chastened hagiography or an only slightly chastened objectivity. It need not be like this. For the historian, biography represents an opportunity. If a theorist can substantiate the combined quest of the highest critical methods with the ethically didactic discourse which has been part of biography for most of its history, an epistemologically rich position may be possible.

I believe that the challenge of writing biography is particularly pertinent for religious historians. On the one hand, religious historians will want to avoid hagiography and on the other hand they will also want to avoid the charge of having written a mere chronicle. I believe that a critical and edifying biography constitutes a satisfying balance between hagiography and chronicle. Although I will not return to the writing of authors such as Stout and Marsden until the last chapters of the dissertation, I will demonstrate that religious historians are well-poised to be at the forefront of this interdisciplinary and epistemologically rich historical engagement: biography.

Summary of Thesis

In sum, edifying dialogue is an appropriate and satisfying component of historically critical biography. It *has been* a part of biography. The edifying and critical intent is traced through pre-modern biography to demonstrate that this was the case over a considerable span of time and in a variety of cultural contexts (from the Hebrew, Greek, Roman and Medieval eras). It *can be* a part of biography even given the challenges of contemporary theory posed by the extreme positions of positivism and postmodernism (or their chastened re-formulations). It *is* a part of some biographies meant for a particular audience (such as feminist works). And I

¹⁹Stout, “Biography as Battleground,” 9.

hope that it *will be* increasingly looked upon as the preferred way of writing biography. My dissertation follows these stages. I begin with what biography has been and argue that the Greek and Roman historians believed that the intent of biography was critical and edifying. In fact that critical and edifying intent is notable in Biblical and medieval biographies. The next section argues that edifying discourse is compatible with both traditional and postmodern theories of history-writing. The third section of the dissertation moves from theoretical considerations to the work of notable Christian historians. I note that two scholars in particular are, in theory, open to my argument but that they hesitate to engage in edifying discourse in biography. Finally, I briefly examine a few authors who write edifying and critical biography.

Chapter Two: The Critical and Edifying Impulse of Classical History and Biography¹

For most of the last two hundred years of professional, academic history-writing, the historical texts produced by the ancients have been regarded as sub-standard history-writing. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars scoured the ancient texts for factual errors, methodological naïveté and rhetorical artifice; all were found and systematically documented. Through the processes of this modern “unmasking,” it was concluded that ancient authors were unreliable and uncritical. Yet, with respect to the last two centuries, there has never been a better time than now to be an admirer of some of these ancient authors, particularly, the Greco-Roman history-writers. Beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, the dismissive evaluations of the Classical authors have been adjusted.

Greek and Roman historians have been increasingly portrayed as intentionally critical authors. The point, however, is not without debate. Did the Greek and Roman historians intend to write about the past? In the first part of the chapter I will discuss Cicero’s succinct summary of the historical task. Recently, scholars have debated how seriously to take Cicero’s words and so I will summarize the debate but agree with those who argue that influential Greek and Roman historians typically intended to narrate a real past. Did the intention to write about what really did happen result in an account that reflects this historical intent? By modern standards Greek and Roman methods were crude. Yet recently archaeological discoveries have shown agreement with some of the oral reports recorded by Herodotus and Livy. Although such finds do not verify the text as a whole, the apparent agreement between written record and material remains

¹The term “ancient” will be used throughout this text as a collective reference to Greek, Roman and Early Christian authors. It is acknowledged that these three categories do not encompass the entirety of ancient writings. Egyptian or Babylonian history-writings, for example, could also be included under the rubric “ancient” even though they will not be discussed here. The Hebrews also were significant in the ancient world for their history-writing and this topic will be covered at length in the chapter on the Bible. “Classical” will refer to Greek and Roman texts only (excludes Christian texts). Also, in an attempt to make clear the multiple meanings of the word history, this dissertation will attempt, wherever grammatically possible, to use the term “history-writing” to indicate the act and products of recording events of the past. “Historiography” will be used to indicate the methods and theories of history-writing. “History” will refer either to the past or to the academic discipline as a department of the University.

is suggestive of an impulse to remember the past. The second section of this chapter will discuss a few Greek and Roman historians in depth in order to elucidate the relationship of the critical and edifying character in the writing of history. Although the points I make could be made by examining additional primary sources, my discussion will focus on Herodotus with some attention given to Polybius and Livy. The final section of this chapter will explore the critical and edifying character of Classical biographies, especially as found in selected biographies by Plutarch and *Agricola* by Tacitus.

Did the Greek and Roman historians intend to report on a real past or were they writing something else? Two contemporary authors are notable in the discussion of the rhetoric as used by the ancient history-writers and the topic of intention. T.P. Wiseman explores the rhetorical and oratorical nature of Roman history-writing in *Clio's Cosmetics*. Since a modern reader has not been trained in the same way as the ancients were, argues Wiseman, it can be difficult to discern the intent of the author. Roman education, for example, was primarily directed towards the training of rhetoricians and orators. Patricians needed to be persuasive advocates in the lawcourts and political assemblies. They were not trained to be historians. Typically, writing history was something you did if your political or military career had ended. Thus these retired or failed politicians would use the tools of rhetoric as the foundation of their history-writing. Wiseman argues that a deeper appreciation for ancient rhetorical techniques illuminates certain passages which were not intended to be taken at face value but which have been taken as such by modern readers. In the first third of his work, Wiseman argues that sensitivity to rhetoric helps clear up much of the misinformation taken, for example, from Valerius Antias' text. In the last third of his book, Wiseman situates Roman historians within their literary context. In particular, historians were indebted to the poets. Wiseman compares Cornelius Nepos with Catullus to argue that both historians and poets shared a common canon of myth, geography, ethnography and history. His central point in this section: the boundary between myth, poem

and history was fluid rather than firm and that it is hard to say whether the history-writers intended to write about the past.²

A.J. Woodman takes some of Wiseman's research even further. Wiseman had noted that the earliest Roman historical records were *annales*: specifically, lists of military victories and triumphs. He suggested that Roman historians filled in the tempting gaps between the annual entries with oratorical *narratio*. This narration was that of the orator rather than what we would recognize as historical narrative. Oratorical narrative was intended to persuade and to that end the author of a speech was allowed to invent what he needed.³ Using Wiseman's work as a platform for his own research, Woodman's analysis of rhetoric in history-writing leads him to conclude that those ancient texts typically described as history-writing should rather be classified as literature.⁴ His argument rests on the assumption that ancients and moderns perceive historical truth differently. Oratorical permission to invent rather than report was employed to create dramatic effect in history-writing. Woodman believes that there are good reasons for believing that Tacitus, for example, simply made up much of his history. Although this dissertation disagrees with Woodman's conclusion (that ancient history-writers often knowingly fabricated the past), the analysis of rhetoric by both Wiseman and Woodman has advanced our ability to discern the character of ancient history-writing. In particular, ancient history-writing was a literary endeavour as well as historical. As such, it embraced one of the functions of literature: the contemplation of meaning. Nevertheless, if they are correct that the Greek and Roman historians intended to entertain and persuade then that discussion of meaning remains rooted in fiction.

To further examine the question of intention I will discuss Cicero's comments on the

²T.P. Wiseman, *Clio's Cosmetics: Three Studies in Greco-Roman Literature* (Rowman and Littlefield: Leicester University), 1979.

³Ibid., 34-37.

⁴A.J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies* (London and Sydney: Croom and Helm, 1988), 197.

writing of history and secondary scholarship on Cicero's description of the historical task. There is little historiographical discussion by the Greeks or Romans and so Cicero's comments on the principles which should guide this genre are important. Cicero's work has been interpreted in a number of ways. In the middle of the twentieth century T.A. Dorey accepted Cicero's discussion as indicative of the Greek and Roman attempts to be accurate historians. Later T.P. Wiseman and A.J. Woodman suggested that careful analysis of Cicero indicated that Cicero would not have been troubled by historians who made up parts of their historical narratives. In this debate I think that the recent work of John Marincola is most convincing. Marincola demonstrates that fictional invention was not the norm. Cicero's brief historiographical discussion is interesting both as study of what it meant to be truthful in antiquity and the relationship of truth with edification.

Cicero outlined three fundamental rules for history-writing. First, an author must never say what is false. Second, a historian must never suppress the truth. Third, the documents must demonstrate no hint of partiality nor is the venting of hatred permitted.⁵ In the mid-twentieth century T.A. Dorey understood Cicero in a fairly straightforward manner. Furthermore, Dorey noted that the application of these rules calls for the use of moral skills.⁶ Dorey's observation emphasizes the point that ancient history-writers took their task to be both a critical and a moral one.

T.P. Wiseman's *Clio's Cosmetics* first raised scepticism regarding Cicero's ruminations on history-writing.⁷ The difficulty in reading Cicero in straightforward manner, Wiseman argues, is that it does not take into consideration the evolution of language. Over time a particular word might remain the same but its meaning may not. The word "truth" may not have

⁵Cicero, *De Oratore*, II, 15, 62, as translated and explained by T. A. Dorey, "Caesar: The 'Gallic War'" in *Latin Historians* ed. T. A. Dorey (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 15, 62.

⁶T.A. Dorey, "Caesar: The Gallic War," in *Latin Historians*, ed. T.A. Dorey (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 67.

⁷Wiseman, *Clio's Cosmetics*, 37-38.

meant the same thing to Cicero as it does to a person shaped by the scientific, critical mindset of the Enlightenment. When twentieth-century scholars have read Cicero they have assumed that when Cicero says historians must tell the truth, Cicero means basically what moderns mean by truth. Without appreciation for the evolution of a word, Cicero's advocated methodology can seem to bear a great likeness to modern sensibilities. Wiseman compares the early historians with the poetry of that era and suggests that early historians invented their narratives and these inventions became the sources which later historians used.

A.J. Woodman aligns his analysis of Roman history-writing with Wiseman's.⁸ In *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* Woodman argues that when the Roman historians are claiming that they are telling the truth they are saying 'I'm not biased,' rather than 'I'm not making this up.' Impartiality, or the impression of impartiality, was an important part of both oral rhetorical performance in the law courts and in history-writing. Thus, Wiseman and Woodman believe that Cicero is not setting out a historiographical method. Rather, Cicero is simply recommending that history-writing be as good a literary form as rhetoric. In order to do so, a historian can and should use all the techniques of a rhetorician. Invention was one of the techniques of rhetoric.

Wiseman and Woodman seem to have a point. Various Greek and Roman authors did indeed set truth and bias as opposites rather than the modern instinct to understand 'false' as the opposite of 'truth'. Consider the following passage from Polybius and note that he does not discuss the important historiographical principle of 'not making something up' when discussing truth and bias:

Now in other spheres of human life we should perhaps not rule out such partiality. A good man ought to love his friends and his country, and should share both their hatreds and their loyalties. But once a man takes up the role of the historian he must discard all considerations of this kind. He will often have to speak well of his enemies and even

⁸See C.S. Kraus and A.J. Woodman, *Latin Historians* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 5. See also Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*.

award them the highest praise should their actions demand this, and on the other hand criticize and find fault with his friends, however close they may be, if their errors of conduct show that this is his duty. For just as a living creature, if it is deprived of its eyesight, is rendered completely helpless, so if history is deprived of the truth, we are left with nothing but an idle, unprofitable tale. We must therefore not shrink from accusing our friends or praising our enemies, nor need we be afraid of praising or blaming the same people at different times, since it is impossible that men who are engaged in public affairs should always be in the right, and unlikely that they should always be in the wrong. We must therefore detach ourselves from the actors in our story, and apply to them only such statements and judgements as their conduct deserves.⁹

There is no direct command to avoid fabrication of the past but rather the emphasis is on impartiality. Polybius had many reasons to defend his history with regard to its impartiality. Polybius was, after all, in an amicable relationship with a key figure of much of his history; Scipio Aemilianus. As his readers would know of this relationship, Polybius needed to convince his audience that he knew his task required him to set aside his partiality and bias. Polybius had to demonstrate that truth and partiality are opposites in order that his history-writing be taken seriously. Otherwise he risked being received as Scipio's propagandist. Truth and impartiality are critical for the ancient historian because he must assign praise and blame irrespective of his personal friends and enemies. Further, note the importance given to the ethically interpretive task of the historian in this passage. Nevertheless, Woodman seems to be correct. Truth and bias, truth and partiality are set as opposites rather than truth and fiction or truth and lying.

Another scholar disagrees with Woodman. John Marincola examines the various authors who make claims of impartiality in their history-writing in order to discuss their understanding of truth and falsity. Did the Greek or Roman historian feel free to invent the past? Marincola observes that of all the claims made by ancient history-writers (such as claims of effort, upstanding personal character, political and military experience and so forth) "the promise to be impartial is far and away the most common."¹⁰ Furthermore, unlike other claims, the ancient

⁹Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, 55. From I.14.

¹⁰John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997), 158.

historians conducted genuine discussions about impartiality. Impartiality was necessary because it was the historian's task to evaluate. Failure to pass judgement on deeds and actions would have been unthinkable

because that would be alien to history's nature and purpose as imagined by many of the ancients: since history's utility lay partly in displaying proper and improper models of conduct, it was the historian's task to evaluate men and deeds. Although the valuation did not need to be overt, it became common for the historian to speak in his own person, words of praise or blame about the characters and events of his history.¹¹

Marincola agrees with Woodman: truth and bias are opposites rather than the modern dichotomy of true and false. However, Marincola asks further questions that clarify aspects which Woodman leaves unexplored. *Why* is it that bias and partiality so dominate the historians' claims to the reader? What about bias makes it the opposite of truth? According to Marincola, partiality is the opposite of truth because the person who is biased will think nothing of inventing deeds. That is, if you want to make someone a hero who was not a hero, you must make up some deeds that prove he merits such an evaluation. Proper adjudication can only be done when the facts are judged rather than invention. The ancients did not perceive the decision to assign praise or blame as a problematic historiographical practice. Such actions were troubling only when done by a biased person who falsified deeds in order to validate his adjudication.¹² If Marincola is right, then the dichotomy of truth and bias approximates the modern truth-falsity dichotomy. More importantly, Greek and Roman historians understood that if narrative was to be edifying it needed to be rooted in an actual past.

Cicero also promoted four secondary rules for history-writing. First, the author should express his own opinion on the topics discussed in his text. Also, the author should describe not only what was said or done but how it was said or done. Third, when describing the outcome of an event the author should explain whether the cause was praiseworthy, blameworthy or neutral.

¹¹Ibid., 158-59.

¹²Ibid., 160, 162

Finally, an author must not tell only what men did but also the careers and character of the men who gained a notable reputation.¹³ What does one make of these further rules? Cicero's first rule suggests that ancient history-writing was very much intended to be an interpretive task. The ancient reader learned not only what happened but also the author's estimation of deeds and events. For Cicero, it is not enough to describe or explain; the author must adjudicate.

Description and explanation are only part of the job. You can't simply list the events of a war, season by season, without indicating whether the decision to participate was justly or unjustly made. Further, Cicero's fourth point expresses interest in the biographical aspect of history-writing. Men don't simply appear or disappear in the events of history. The Roman fascination with individuals and great men in particular is betrayed here. Character was of great importance to the ancients. Assigning praise and blame to the causes of events was intimately linked to knowing the character and deeds of the people of those events. In another document, *Pro Archia* 14, Cicero states, "All literature, all philosophy, all history, abounds with incentives to noble action, incentives which would be buried in black darkness were the light of the written word not flashed upon them. How many pictures of high endeavor the great authors of Greece and Rome have drawn for our use, and bequeathed to us, not only for our contemplation, but for our emulation."¹⁴ Here Cicero also acknowledges and commends the exemplary function of history-writing. Although Cicero did not write history, he believed that historians should be both accurate and edifying.

A final point on the intention of the Greek and Romans historians can be made by discussion of what the ancient historian said when he wrote autobiographically. Marincola examines what the ancient history-writer said about himself. The ancient author had to convince

¹³Cicero, *De Oratore*, II, 15, 62, as translated and explained by T. A. Dorey, "Caesar: The 'Gallic War,'" 66-68.

¹⁴As translated by Ronald Mellor, *The Roman Historians* (London: Routledge, 1999), 3. Note that here are listed the three forms of discourse (literature, philosophy and history) which the ancients considered proper for the discussion of right action.

the reader that he had an upstanding character before he could hope to convince the reader that he had reported the content of history accurately. The historian, therefore, wrote autobiographically, if briefly so, in order to let the reader know that he possessed sufficient moral goodness to be worthy of writing the historical account. An author had to prove he merited a reader's trust in the performance of this task.¹⁵ Ancients saw a much stronger connection between the value of the history-writing produced and the character of the author than we do today. If a person lacked a virtuous character, ancients wondered how a person's interpretation of history could be trustworthy. In their concern for the moral character of the author, the ancients demonstrated a high respect for and awareness of the interpretive nature of history-writing.

The intent of Greek and Roman history-writing seems to have been both critical and edifying. Let us return briefly to Livy for a concrete example:

What chiefly makes the study of history wholesome and profitable is this, that you behold the lessons of every kind of experience set forth as on a conspicuous monument; from these you may choose for yourself and for your own state what to imitate, from these mark for avoidance what is shameful in the conception and shameful in the result.¹⁶

Why the ancients wrote history or what they considered the function and use of history to be, differs from the modern perspective. Many would consider exorcising such practices from modern discourse as a critical advancement. Those who think that the critical and edifying tasks need to be kept apart will need also to read the following chapters, for this chapter is not primarily intended to convince the reader that the joint agenda *should* be done. Rather, the attention of this section will be on the ancient performance of history-writing; that it *can* be

¹⁵ John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition*, 260; 128-133.

¹⁶ Livy, *Livy in Fourteen Volumes*, trans. B.O. Foster, vol.1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University), 7. See also Aubrey de Séincourt's translation of Livy in *The Early History of Rome* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1960), 34. This same section reads: "The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings; fine things to take as models, base things, rotten through and through, to avoid."

done or, better, that it has been done and was largely successful.

There has also been a growing appreciation for the critical methods of the Classical history-writers. I will briefly mention recent scholarship of Herodotus and Livy in that regard. A careful reading of Herodotus reveals that he seldom fails to evaluate the reliability of the source. Indeed, multiple explanations for various events are not uncommon and the veracity of each one is judged by Herodotus.¹⁷ Virginia Hunter describes Herodotus as an early source critic:

To leave aside the significance the word critical has acquired since the nineteenth century, when the discipline of history was born, we have seen that Herodotus was as critical as any thinker could be about the past and in particular about his Greek sources for the past, given the absence of a whole series of ancillary disciplines and a critical method, which are the contributions of the nineteenth century to that discipline.¹⁸

Herodotus' method was as critical as anyone's until the nineteenth century. He worked with a rudimentary yet, according to Hunter, not unworthy source criticism methodology. Hunter explains that Herodotus attempts to distinguish between true *logos* and false *mythos*. He seeks resolution for chronological contradictions in the various sources he consults. He will often critique all the sources he consulted in order to construct a new version which is a

¹⁷See for example *Histories* III.9 where Herodotus provides the reader with two stories of how water was brought to troops in the desert. He states that the first account is more likely because the second is hard to believe. Herodotus names his source in IX.16 and lets the reader know how reliable the source is. Here Herodotus begins and concludes a story about a mixed Theban and Persian banquet by explaining to the reader that a certain Thersander, who had been at that dinner, had told him about the event—a reliable eyewitness source. There is an interesting exception in another story where Herodotus cannot decide which account is more likely to be true. He uses this point of indecision to dole out words of wisdom. In VII.148-152 Herodotus gives both the Argive and Greek accounts of the Argive decision-making processes: would the Argives become allies with Sparta or would they avoid war with Persia altogether? The two accounts differ and Herodotus ends the section by saying that he cannot positively say which account is correct. He does, however, say that he is sure of one thing. Interestingly, the “one thing” that he is sure of is a philosophical maxim. “For my own part I cannot positively state that Xerxes either did, or did not, send the messenger to Argos; nor can I guarantee the story of the Argives going to Susa and asking Artaxerxes about their relationship with Persia. I express no opinion on this matter other than that of the Argives themselves. One thing, however, I am very sure of: and that is, that if all mankind agreed to meet, and everyone brought his own sufferings along with him for the purpose of exchanging them for somebody else's, there is not a man who, after taking a good look at his neighbour's sufferings, would not be only too happy to return home with his own. So the Argives were not the worst offenders. My business is to record what people say, but I am by no means bound to believe it—and that may be taken to apply to this book as a whole.” Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (New York: Penguin, 1996), 421.

¹⁸Virginia Hunter, *Past and Process in Herodotus and Thucydides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1982), 91. See also page 86.

demythologized combination of the credible parts of the sources.¹⁹ Hunter's work on Herodotus exemplifies the increased appreciation for the critical acumen of ancient historians.

In terms of reliability, the Classical historians are again considered to be repositories of trustworthy information. Sometimes the accuracy would have surprised the author himself. Livy is but one example. As we shall see, new archaeological discoveries have confirmed Livian anecdotes which had before been considered primarily fictive. The first ten books of Livy were considered unreliable history except as a record of late Republican myths. Livy informs the reader that he is only repeating what his scanty and weak sources had described.²⁰ Even the author doubted the possibility that his account was accurate. Recent excavations of the Roman Forum, however, have unearthed the earliest burial places of the people of Rome and found convincing evidence for the existence of an early population of mixed Latin and Sabine ethnicity. This discovery allowed historians to put the myth of the Rape of the Sabine women in an historical context. Even if the evidence was not enough to confirm the details of the story, the intermingling of the Latin and Sabine peoples who would found Roman culture was now verifiable. Further, it was discovered that the Roman Forum had been paved over about the time which Livy places the urbanizing program of King Tarquin, attesting to the accuracy of the date and event. Third, inscriptions have been discovered which include names of Etruscan kings that parallel the names of the kings as given by Livy.²¹

One could continue along the same lines when discussing Herodotus. J.A.S. Evans became aware of archaeological work in Russia and realized that the archaeologists there were

¹⁹Ibid., 97.

²⁰See Livy, trans. B.O. Foster, vol. 1, 5. Here Livy states: "Such traditions as belong to the time before the city was founded, or rather was presently to be founded, and are rather adorned with poetic legends than based upon trustworthy historical proofs, I purpose neither to affirm nor to refute . . . But to such legends as these, however they shall be regarded and judged, I shall, for my own part, attach no great importance."

²¹Ronald Mellor, *The Roman Historians*, 74. Mellor quickly lists these three archaeological proofs of Livy's mythical description of early Rome. Mellor is not suggesting that Livy's first books be taken as straightforward and accurate description of the past. He is reporting a certain degree of modern surprise with regard to apparent correlations between archaeological evidence and Livy's mythology.

unearthing evidence of a civilization remarkably like the Scythian culture Herodotus describes.²² Evans examines the topographical research and archaeological evidence of the second half of the twentieth century which validates some of Herodotus' reports. Evans relates twentieth-century archaeological discoveries which seem to verify some of the more fantastical aspects of Herodotus. The Scythians described in Book Four seemed as mythical to Herodotus' first audience as they did to the generations of readers afterwards. These people of the north were so quintessentially barbarian that they *had* to have been fictional. Yet archaeology seems to corroborate Herodotus' stories. The ostentatious and, frankly, gruesome practices of royal Scythian burials, for example, fascinated Herodotus. Excavations of these sites confirm the main points of Herodotus' description.²³ Also, the burial rites of ordinary Scythians are mentioned, including a practice which we today might call a wake. This wake was fuelled not by alcohol but rather by throwing hemp onto a communal fire, allowing the participants to breathe in the vapours. Herodotus reports that the Scythians enjoyed the vapours so much that they howled with pleasure. In the 1950s, excavations in Siberia unearthed hemp and hemp-burning tools.²⁴

Archaeology has also unearthed supporting evidence for another Herodotean anecdote. Amidst the ambitious military endeavours of Cambyses, described in Book Three, Herodotus includes a small but curious story about a lost detachment of soldiers, swallowed by sand in Egypt. A Persian detachment was sent against Siwa, explains Herodotus; the men stopped briefly at the El Khargeh oasis, left the oasis and were never seen again. The soldiers didn't return to the oasis and did not reach their destination. Herodotus then reports the story that the locals told about that detachment. They claimed that as the soldiers sat down to eat their mid-day meal a wind arose, heaping waves of sand upon their heads until they were completely

²²J.A.S. Evans, *Herodotus* (Boston, MA: Twayne, 1984). Evans's examples will be described in more detail in the section on Herodotus.

²³On the archaeological finds of Scythian burial practices see E.D. Phillips, *Royal Hordes: Nomad People of the Steppes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965).

²⁴J.A.S. Evans, *Herodotus*, 65.

covered. The story of these soldiers was merely a story until 1977 when an Egyptian archaeological team unearthed thousands of bones together with Persian spears and swords near Siwa. Interestingly enough, the area is called “The Sea of Sand.” The soldiers who had ‘drowned’ there were finally found.²⁵

If there is a caveat it is that in some ways Herodotus was not so much a great historian as he was lucky. By that I mean that much of what Herodotus reports was what he was told by the locals rather than things he investigated and saw for himself. This, possibly, speaks of a certain mindset of truth-telling by a variety of oral cultures of the time. The oral reports which Herodotus repeats have been shown to be true because many people told generally reliable stories.²⁶ Herodotus would have been a better historian if he had checked on these stories, although such actions may not have been possible for Herodotus, given limitations in travel and so forth. If oral report often does reflect actual events then, in retrospect, it might be that we are better served by Herodotus’ over-supply of information than if he had edited out anything he could not personally verify. Herodotus himself tells us that his sources are oral. His honesty about sources at least puts readers on guard as to how much to trust them. Furthermore, Herodotus is generally circumspect with regard to the credibility of his sources. If he thinks the

²⁵ J.A.S. Evans, *Herodotus*, 50. The story of the soldiers buried by sand can be found in Herodotus III.26.

²⁶ Since its first publication readers have not known how to appropriate the wealth of oral tradition recorded in *Histories*. See François Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Berkeley, CA: University of California), xv-xx. Hartog observes that Herodotus’ work has been on trial for the last twenty-five centuries but no final judgment has been reached because successive generations of interpreters swing one way then the other in their judgement of Herodotus, and his oral reports in particular. So how does one distinguish between what can be trusted in these oral stories and what cannot? Various critics of Herodotus, including Thucydides and Voltaire, decided that everything Herodotus saw himself was trustworthy but that the oral traditions which Herodotus includes may or may not be true. One simply had no way of knowing. It seems that unless archaeological finds confirm a story, the practice of Thucydides and Voltaire will continue. Also, on the basis of trusting what Herodotus saw or what was a part of his times, the early book of Herodotus have been regarded as untrustworthy but for most of the past his description of the Greek-Persian war has been taken as reliable. For more on the problem of evaluating oral tradition in Greek history-writing see John Davies, “The Tradition about the First Sacred War,” in *Greek Historiography*, ed. Simon Hornblower (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 193-212. Davies examines the contention that the First Sacred War was fictional—oral tradition ‘reports’ events that never happened. His point is less to prove that the war did happen (Davies believes that there is no conclusive proof, only a plausible hypothesis) than to examine modern evaluation of ancient oral tradition. Two books by Rosalind Thomas are also of note. *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989) and *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992).

story is untrue, he says so. If he has more than one version of a story he gives both. He sometimes lets the reader decide which version is more likely to be true and at other times lets the reader know which one he thinks is more likely to be correct.

Herodotus

Herodotus is often cast as the transitional figure in the development of history writing; not quite historian, not quite fiction writer. This is epitomized in the most famous question asked about Herodotus—“father of lies or father of history?” The answer has never enjoyed long periods of general consensus, regardless of which label has been favoured. Some epochs, including the Greeks of the generation after Herodotus, dismissed him as liar.²⁷ In the last half of the twentieth century, the barometer has again moved in the direction of historical patriarch.²⁸ Given this growing appreciation of Herodotus and his *Histories*, this formative work is now a good text in which to examine the ancient Greek understanding of the relationship of critical historical method and intentional didacticism. The Greek concept of critical and edifying will be adopted by the Roman writers.

First, what can be said about Herodotus’ reliability and methods? The question of Herodotus’ veracity is not an insignificant matter. If Herodotus was a deliberate deceiver then his work needs to be appreciated in much the same way as the Homeric epics—in a primarily literary manner. Second, the degree to which Herodotus can be taken as historically accurate is not the only reason why he is important for the purposes of this dissertation. Herodotus stands as a pivotal figure in the development of Western history-writing because he was generally a

²⁷Herodotus fared better in the estimation of Roman writers than Greek. Cicero was the first to call Herodotus the “Father of History.” See T.J. Luce, *The Greek Historians* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 36-37.

²⁸For a summary of the history of the interpretation of Herodotus consult Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus*. Also see the Norton critical edition of Herodotus, *The Histories*, edited by William Blanco and Jennifer Tolbert Roberts (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1992). Although the first part of this book is merely selections from Herodotus, the volume includes nearly two hundred pages of both ancient and contemporary commentary on Herodotus and his text. The assembled collection of excerpts provides the reader with the broad range of reactions and interpretations of Herodotus that have been put forward over the centuries.

reliable reporter *and* he took seriously his task as ethical instructor, critic of current political situations and preceptor of the general laws which govern the universe, especially the law of Fate.

Various contemporary authors have credited Herodotus with the more generous paternity of history rather than lies. Arnaldo Momigliano holds that “Herodotus is better than any mediaeval historian I know of with the possible exception of Ibn Khaldun.”²⁹ Granted, this comment was intended as a barb against those who argue that the Christian tradition should get the credit for influencing history-writing in a direction of factuality and regard the Greco-Roman authors as less reliable than Christian. Momigliano is convinced the “truth trajectory” can be traced much further back than Christianity and is not afraid to name Herodotus as father of history rather than of lies. More importantly, Herodotus was one of the earliest Greek writers to develop a critical attitude in the recording of events. Momigliano grants that critical theory has developed in necessary ways since then but affirms that Herodotus should be applauded for making significant advances—from the mere historical consciousness of the Homeric poems before him to genuine history-writing.³⁰ Indeed, Momigliano suggests that the reason Herodotus was considered untrustworthy by his ancient critics was because he was not patriotic enough.³¹

²⁹Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1990), 30.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 35. Momigliano believes the “old” theory of Herodotus’ evolution. That is; *The Histories* demonstrate evidence of the author’s progress from geographer and ethnographer (Books 1-6) into a historian (the second half (Books 7-9). While I appreciate that Momigliano vouches for Herodotus’ eventual transformation into a historian, I disagree that Herodotus only becomes a historian at the end of the text. If you adhere to a more narrow definition of a historian’s philosophy and methods then perhaps Herodotus is not a historian in the beginning of the text. The point, however, is that Herodotus had a rather broader vision of what history-writing was. For another theory amenable to my argument see Hartog’s *The Mirror of Herodotus*. One of Hartog’s goals is to demonstrate that such a division, between geographer and historian, is arbitrary. Herodotus discusses a broad range of topics in the first half of his text and then narrows his focus to the narration of the Persian War in the second half. However, this is not evidence of an evolving historical method or consciousness. Rather, the earlier Books are the grounds by which Herodotus establishes his moral and political critiques of the persons involved in the Persian War.

³¹Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography*, 40. Although Momigliano does not supply any examples from Herodotus’ text, they are not in short supply once you begin reading Herodotus. One of Herodotus’ habits was to give examples of Greek customs which had really originated in foreign lands. His comments were in contrast to the popular belief, within Greece, that these practices were indigenous. In IV.187-190 Herodotus claims that Greek clothing, harnesses for horses, and the practice of women crying at religious ceremonies all originated in Libya. In V.58 he observes that the Greek alphabet is taken from the Phoenicians.

Herodotus' obvious interest in and appreciation for barbarians and barbarian culture would have been distasteful to many Athenians. Overall, Momigliano portrays Herodotus as a methodological pioneer, who made mistakes and whose methods were crude, certainly, but who launched history-writing as a form of writing that attempted to find out about the past and report what happened.

K.H. Waters suggests yet another reason why Herodotus might have been dismissed as a trustworthy historian. Waters describes Herodotus as having one foot in the epic tradition, owing to his obvious imitation of Homeric forms.³² Because of this similarity to Homer, Herodotus' accounts have been discredited for much of the past twenty-five centuries.³³ The question of the fictive quality that the use of narrative brings to a historical account is part of lively historiographical debate today. While some have suggested that the use of narrative, in itself, fictionalizes the account to greater or less extent, others are less convinced. As this particular topic intersects with Herodotus I note that Simon Hornblower has said that although the narrative structure of Herodotus is similar to the Homeric epics, does not in itself indicate that Herodotus is inventing what he is writing. Indeed, Hornblower suggests that Thucydides follows the narrative structure of Homer more closely than Herodotus and yet Thucydides,

Perhaps most unsettling to a Greek, in II.50-51 Herodotus claims that the names of nearly all the gods were borrowed by the Greeks from the Egyptians. Remember also that Herodotus was from Halicarnassus, a Greek colony in Asia Minor and that Herodotus' father was likely Carian rather than Greek. Because his father was non-Greek, Herodotus was unable to ever attain Athenian citizenship. Halicarnassus was unwelcome in both the Dorian Pentapolis and the Ionian League. See J.A.S. Evans, *Herodotus*, 3. Such factors could explain why Herodotus failed to possess the xenophobia that characterized many other Greeks.

³²K.H. Waters, *Herodotus the Historian: His Problems, Methods and Originality* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985), 136. Waters notes that Herodotus has been regarded as incapable of historical analysis because of the influence of epic poetry in his work. As evidence Waters directs the reader to Herodotus' introductory statements. Here Herodotus informs the reader that he aspires to keep alive the deeds of the Greeks and non-Greeks. This is very much like the goal of epic poetry; to keep alive the deeds of Greek and Trojan heroes.

³³For an ancient example in which Herodotus was described as a 'liar' see the Plutarch, *On the Marginality of Herodotus*, enumerating the lapses in Herodotus' history. Interestingly, this pamphlet was written by Plutarch whose own historical details have been received with a degree of scepticism. Evans mentions this pamphlet and suggests that Plutarch's claims of inaccuracy were generally ill-founded or based on Plutarch's dislike for Herodotus' pro-barbarian tenor. See Evans, *Herodotus*, 164-65.

everyone agrees, is not writing fiction.³⁴

Besides verifying a number of oral stories in Herodotus J.A.S. Evans helped restore the reputation of Herodotus' reliability in his comments about historical method. Evans allows that Herodotus was not entirely free from bias or naïveté, but affirms that he did possess a true historian's mind. Herodotus was not a mere chronicler or geographer. He demonstrates curiosity and an inquiring disposition. He didn't just describe; he wanted to know why things happened as they did. Cause and effect were aspects of his research. How was it that the Persians came to make war on the Greeks? How were the numerically inferior numbers of Greeks able to defeat the great host of Persians?³⁵ To these authors' comments I add that Herodotus was interested in the meaning of all of history. Herodotus is famous for digressions, and digressions within digressions. But these digressions were not simply for entertainment nor do they owe their existence exclusively to Herodotus' famous inability to edit out gossip or a good yarn. Herodotus knew that to answer one 'how' or 'why' was not dissimilar to a three-year-old's infinitely regressing questions of 'why.' The digressions answer a chain of repeated "whys" and shape the discussion of the big questions of history.

It would be misguided to think of Herodotus as a modern historian. He was sloppy with chronology, numbers and other such points that a historian takes pains to make sure are correct. For example, at the end of the account of the rivalry for the Spartan throne between the brothers Cleomenes and Dorieus, Herodotus describes Cleomenes' reign with the adjective "short." In actuality, however, Cleomenes ruled for thirty years. Herodotus' choice of the adjective would seem to be inappropriate. Marincola notes, however, that the question remains open as to whether Herodotus knew the time span was longer than he indicated and he purposefully misrepresented the information to make a point, whether he simply didn't bother to do the

³⁴Simon Hornblower, "Narratology and Narrative Technique in Thucydides," in *Greek Historiography*, ed. Simon Hornblower (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 140.

³⁵J.A.S. Evans, *Herodotus* ; i-ii.

necessary research and calculations, or whether he really did understand Cleomenes' reign to have been a short, or relatively short, one. The answer is unknown. Numbers are likewise problematic as when, for example, Herodotus reports the number of deaths in the battles with the Persians. John Marincola notes that Herodotus' claims about the number of Persians killed should be approached with caution as the numbers seem inflated. For example, if Herodotus is taken seriously, the number of Greek dead in comparison to Persian dead would be at the unlikely ratio of 3:100.³⁶

In terms of intent, Herodotus was a critical historian. In terms of performance Herodotus was not a modern, critical historian. Thus far we have discussed the critical character of Herodotus. What was the edifying intent of his history-writing? Herodotus intended his *Histories* as a political critique of his current times. His history functioned as a preceptor of right behaviour and attitudes. He was interested in the manner in which human character functions in the causation of world affairs. And it explored the character of the universe, in particular, the role of Fate in the events of human history.

Some of his digressions are intended to challenge the sense of superiority which Greeks held, especially in relation to non-Greeks. The Athenian political ideal was the democracy of the city-states. Democracy was considered superior to both monarchy and oligarchy. Herodotus includes an interesting section on a debate about the ideal form of government which the Persians conducted. In the aftermath of a bloody internal power-grab within the upper echelons of Persian power-brokers, the Persian noblemen gather to discuss the direction that government should take in light of recent events. A certain Otanes delivers a speech to the congregated Persians in which he outlines the evil inherent in monarchy, as demonstrated by the reign of Cambyses. Otanes urges his listeners to create a government of the people in which the people and the government will be equals. Immediately following Otanes, a certain Megabyzus

³⁶ Herodotus, *Histories*, 587.

recommends the principle of oligarchy. Monarchy is evil, agrees Megabyzus, but the people tend to be irresponsible and violent. Thus, a small number of representatives from the highest class are to be given power to rule. When Megabyzus concludes, Darius speaks in favour of monarchy. (At this point in the narrative Darius has yet to win the throne of Persia.) Darius offers his opinions on the weaknesses of oligarchy and democracy, but in the end wins the debate with his observation that monarchy has been the tradition of the Persians and that changing the tradition would not profit their society.³⁷ Herodotus suggests, through narrative, the rather controversial notion that different forms of government might be best for different kinds of societies. Democracy is best for the Greeks because it is the Greek tradition, not necessarily because it is the best form of government. Furthermore, his audience would have been reluctant to consider the possibility that enlightened conversation took place in the Persian court, or that monarchy might be as valid as democracy.

Herodotus challenges notions of superiority not only in politics but in matters of religion as well. After describing the various religions of the world, Herodotus concludes that each people group develops for itself the religion which suits their needs the best. Every person, should he or she survey all the world's religious options, would in the end choose his or her own native religious system.³⁸ Herodotus also believes that all the religions are essentially derivatives of a common religion. What varies is not ultimate reality but rather the idiosyncratic ways in which the rituals are performed and the stories told. He is very keen, for example, to demonstrate that the gods of Egypt, Greece, Persia, and the major civilizations, are the same

³⁷Ibid., 187-189.

³⁸Ibid., 169. In II.3 Herodotus states that no nation knows more about religion than any other nation. See John Gould, "Herodotus and Religion," in *Greek Historiography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 91-93. According to Gould, Herodotus generally looks for human explanations in human affairs—he doesn't look for divine causation. But there is an important distinction to be made between Herodotus' treatment of the gods as causal and his perception of the role of Fate. He does not look to the gods for explanation of events. In fact, Gould argues, he demonstrates real hesitation in doing so which is expressed in various ways. First, Herodotus does not attribute causation to the gods unless he has been given extra evidence—which he does not require in discussing human causation. Second, he does not name which god is responsible. Finally, Herodotus doesn't use his own voice to attribute an event to divine intervention but rather uses the indirect speech of one of the characters to talk about Fate.

gods but called by different names in the different tongues. Contrary to conventional Greek thought, Herodotus asserts that it was the Greeks who borrowed their knowledge of the gods from the Egyptians, rather than arising *sui generis* amongst Greek peoples.³⁹ John Gould believes that Herodotus thought that all people had equal access, if equally limited access, to knowledge of the divine. Gould does not suggest that Herodotus did not believe in the gods or supernatural causation: “Herodotus took the possibility of supernatural causation in human experience quite as seriously as he took the involvement of human causation.”⁴⁰ But Herodotus was highly hesitant to claim knowledge of divine causation. He will only suggest *possible* motives for divine intervention or action; he does not pronounce on such matters. Herodotus believes in the gods but refrains from making providentialist claims.

Herodotus can also be critical of particular actions and policies. The story of Dorieus and Cleomenes is again instructive. Here Herodotus digresses in order to comment on the inappropriate behaviour of an individual and on the unreasonable social and political practices which caused the individual to act as he did. Herodotus recalls an episode of Spartan history in which two sons of the Spartan king desired to inherit the throne. The younger, Dorieus, is one of the finest and ablest men of his generation while the elder, Cleomenes, was mad and tyrannical. Unable to tolerate being ruled by Cleomenes, Dorieus embarked on a number of ill-advised journeys and conquests in foreign lands, in one of which he was killed. Herodotus concludes the story of Dorieus and Cleomenes by informing the reader that had Dorieus only been patient and endured a while in Sparta, he would be king, since Cleomenes’ reign was short and he left no son as heir. Herodotus’ comments could almost be taken as a statement of fact rather than an admonition to be patient. A closer reading of the entire account reveals that impatience was but one of the character flaws that propelled Dorieus to his end. When Cleomenes took the throne,

³⁹Herodotus, *Histories*, 104-105.

⁴⁰Gould, “Herodotus and Religion,” 93.

Dorieus left Sparta “in a fit of temper” without consulting the Delphic oracle for advice on a suitable site on which to settle or observing the usual formalities.⁴¹ His initial attempt to settle elsewhere ended in failure and he was driven from the area. Upon his return to the Peloponnese he was advised to found a new city in Sicily. This time he went first to the Delphic Oracle and was promised that the land would be his. While traveling along the Italian coastline he was asked by the Crotoniates to join in a campaign against the Sybarites, which he did. The end result of these skirmishes was the death of Dorieus. Later, there arose some doubt as to whether Dorieus had really helped the Crotoniates in their war. The Sybarites claimed that the proof of Dorieus’ involvement in battle against them lies in his death. For if Dorieus had not “transgressed the instructions of the oracle” but rather “done only what he was sent to do, and not allowed himself to be led into incidental adventure, he would have taken and held the country of Erys, and neither he nor his army would have perished.”⁴² Dorieus was impatient, impulsive and foolish. Although one feels pity for Dorieus at the beginning of the episode, by the end Herodotus has condemned him for his lack of virtue.

The story of Dorieus is one of Herodotus’ many digressions. It is a brief life: the manner of his birth is recorded in great detail, albeit perhaps because there was a gossipy story to be told. (There was some doubt amongst the male Spartan aristocracy that Dorieus’ mother was indeed pregnant. In order to assure themselves that she wasn’t lying, these aristocrats sat on the bed with the woman while she delivered Dorieus.) The account of Dorieus ends with his ignoble death. Yet the story of Dorieus is a small digression within a larger digression: one that sets the story of Dorieus and Cleonmenes within the larger question of the Spartan practice of making king not the ablest son of the king but the eldest. If the Spartans would have rejected their inflexible adherence to the tradition of eldest son, they would have had a better king than

⁴¹Herodotus, *Histories*, 294.

⁴²Ibid.

Cleonmenes. Instead, they wasted the life and potential of Dorieus. The foolishness of favouring tradition over good practice harmed the Spartans and, most particularly, Dorieus.

His first audience would have understood Herodotus as a political critic of past and present government.⁴³ Consider an anecdote that at first glance may seem to be a mere recitation of a truism. In book seven, Herodotus reports the maxims which Artabanaus, advisor to King Xerxes, offered as Xerxes was planning his invasion of Greece. The advisor tells his King:

You know, my lord, that amongst living creatures it is the great ones that God smites with his thunder, out of envy of their pride. The little ones do not vex him. It is always the great buildings and the tall trees which are struck by lightning. It is God's way to bring the lofty low. Often a great army is destroyed by a little one, when God in his envy puts fear into the men's hearts, or sends a thunder-storm, and they are cut to pieces in a way they do not deserve. For God tolerates pride in none but Himself.⁴⁴

Here Herodotus is setting up his themes for the last three books of *Histories*. The great Xerxes will be conquered by the comparatively insignificant Greeks. More importantly, it is a repetition of truth about the nature of the universe which Herodotus is keen to communicate at various points throughout the text: defeat is not the unexpected consequence of pride.⁴⁵ The humbling of the great, the foolishness of those who desire more but in their pursuit of gain lose it all—these lessons are the climax of the life of Croesus in the early books and set the pattern for the greed and fall of Xerxes.

The story of Croesus, a great king whose desire for conquest led to defeat at the hands of those he invaded and his execution on a pyre, is perhaps the most vivid of all of Herodotus'

⁴³Ernst Badian, "Herodotus on Alexander I of Macedon: A Study in Some Subtle Silences," in *Greek Historiography* ed. Simon Hornblower (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994), 107-130.

⁴⁴Herodotus, *Histories*, 378. Compare this statement with Hebrew wisdom and prophetic literature. For example Job 40: 11-12: "Pour out the overflowings of your anger, and look on all who are proud, and abase them. Look on all who are proud, and bring them low; tread down the wicked where they stand" and Isaiah 2:12: "For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high."

⁴⁵Perhaps this is a narrative, rather than proverbial, illustration of Proverbs 16:18: "Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall." Herodotus' central lesson may have been cliché even in his day. Or he may have borrowed it from Hebrew Wisdom literature. Yet cliché or borrowed, Herodotus is quite serious about the truth of this maxim. The gods *will* strike down the proud, the ambitious, the self-exalting. Thus, when considering the shape of his work, the fall of Croesus and then the fall of Xerxes at the end of *The Histories*, the text could be viewed as a narrative, historical form of Wisdom Literature. If this were true, Herodotus, the Father of History, is exemplary for perceiving the task of the historian as being intertwined with the task of discerning wisdom.

accounts.⁴⁶ Croesus is the archetypical foreshadowing of Xerxes. Croesus' ambition is Xerxes' ambition. What Croesus came to understand about Fate is what Xerxes should have also learned. Think for example of the climax of the first four books of the *Histories*. The last stronghold in which King Croesus had evaded defeat by the forces of Cyrus has just fallen. Croesus realizes with horror that the prophecy which he had interpreted as a guarantee of his own victory, had actually promised no such thing. Croesus had been told that if he attacked Persia he would destroy a great nation. He failed to appreciate the ambiguity of such a pronouncement. Croesus attacked Persia and did indeed destroy a great nation—his own. The greedy, unconscious impulse to interpret an ambiguous prophecy as a harbinger of success was symptomatic of Croesus' blindness and folly. His greed and ambition caused him to misinterpret the prophecy. As the flames licked his feet on the executioner's pyre, he realized his greed and ambition had brought him there.

Herodotus wrote his text during the Peloponnesian War. As Herodotus sat down to compose his *researches*, the literal translation of the word history in Herodotus' text, he seems to have come to the conclusion that those at the height of their glory are unwise to revel in their accomplishments and foolish to reach for more. The gods will strike down such persons. Throughout the *Histories* the men who in the height of their success grasp after still more are brought low. Xerxes is warned just as Croesus had been warned. Xerxes was brought low just as Croesus had been brought low. Herodotus warns the Athenians that if they continue in their current ambitions Fate will bring them low. Evans sums up Herodotus as follows:

His charm is undeniable, and it tends to obscure the serious purpose behind the *History*. Herodotus was searching for the *aitia* of the war, and the *aitia* was the moral cause: who or what was to blame? He sought his answer in the attack and counterattack of Greek and barbarian, and he centered on the rise of Persian imperialism and made it his leitmotiv. The *History* ends at the turning point of Persian imperialism, when the Persian

⁴⁶As the story goes, although Croesus was put on the pyre and the fire lit and his lower body burned by the flames, Croesus' execution was stayed at the last possible moment. The king, upon hearing Croesus' prophetic utterances, ordered that the fire be put out and made Croesus an advisor.

custom of expanding reached its watershed and could not continue longer. There Herodotus stops. But his *History* was published just as Athenian imperialism reached its crisis point.⁴⁷

The lesson, the gods will humble the proud and foil the ambitions of the mighty, is communicated through reporting past events. The message was directed at the ambitions of the Athenians who, in their growing desire for Empire, were not dissimilar to the Persians. Both the story of Croesus and Xerxes teach this lesson. The Athenians would do well to learn from the past. The shape of Herodotus' *Histories* when viewed as a whole (beginning with Croesus and ending with Xerxes) takes the form of a political and ethical warning. The warning is not directed at a future audience but the present political situation. Great men before have grasped after world domination and been defeated. With his history, Herodotus warns the Athenians to desist from their desire for empire.

Robert Kaplan recently described Herodotus as a historian for our time.⁴⁸ The first section of his article explains why Herodotus is chosen over against Thucydides, even though Thucydides "may have been more trustworthy."⁴⁹ According to Kaplan Thucydides was a brilliant editor and for that moderns tend to prefer him. But Herodotus understood that facts as moderns understand them are often unable to explain causation. Herodotus appreciated that the religious dimension of his world as well as the goodness, evil, or irrationality in human nature were not only real but often the most important part of accurate description and insightful explanation. Knowledge of perceptions, emotions and beliefs are integral to understanding the past. Kaplan recalls Herodotus' story of the founding of the temple dedicated to Pan in Athens. A professional runner named Phidippides had seen Pan when on a run and Pan had asked him why the Athenians ignored him. When Phidippides told this story to the Athenians, it was decided that a temple to Pan would be constructed. Kaplan suggests that if Western people today

⁴⁷J.A.S. Evans, *Herodotus*, 166.

⁴⁸Robert Kaplan, "A Historian For Our Time," *The Atlantic* 299 January/February 2007, 78-84.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 80.

cannot comprehend that Phidippides really did see and talk with Pan they will have little ability to understand much of the non-Western world. Kaplan is not professing any belief in the ancient gods. Whether Phidippides saw Pan because the Olympic gods do exist or because Phidippides was dehydrated does not matter. The temple to Pan was built because Pan appeared one day and demanded that the Athenians build him a temple. Kaplan believes those who dismiss the story as fiction demonstrate a kind of narrowness typical of Enlightenment. Our judgement is surely clouded, states Kaplan, if we do not understand that our world is just as “fantastic” as the one described by Herodotus.⁵⁰

Although Kaplan’s article began by granting preference to Herodotus, the final sentence places the two ancient historians on an equal platform. In the present, Kaplan states, “Herodotus will be as valuable as Thucydides.”⁵¹ Why? In a previous paragraph Kaplan wrote: “If rationalism and secularism have taken us so far that we can no longer imagine what Phidippides saw, then we are incapable of understanding—and consequently defending ourselves against—many of the religious movements that reverse the Enlightenment and affect today’s geopolitics.” Dismissing Herodotus in favour of Thucydides has led Western people to forget that Herodotus is describing a reality too—the true world of perceptions upon which many people base their decisions and actions. And the West cannot forget this if they want to combat those undeniably real religious perceptions. In the end, Kaplan has not really preferred Herodotus over Thucydides—except for the forgotten insight he brings to the understanding of, *and defence against*, non-Enlightened cultures. Herodotus is a partner to Thucydides for he includes what Thucydides omitted. I agree with Kaplan on several important points. Herodotus “allows us to see the world whole.”⁵² Admiring the editing tendency of Thucydides has narrowed the discussion of the past. Furthermore, Herodotus *is* a historian for our time—but not as a kind of

⁵⁰Ibid., 84.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid., 81.

defensive strategy against other cultures but as a text in which we reconsider the relationship of critical and edifying in the writing of history and particularly the relationship of critical and edifying in a text which assumes a different world view than Western, atheistic Enlightenment.

Polybius

Polybius bridges the worlds of Greek and Roman history-writing. Born in circa 200 B.C. in Megalopolis, a city with membership in the Achaean League, Polybius likely expected to spend his life as an influential politician, officer and gentleman. His father was a politician who also had large landholdings. Polybius was groomed to follow his father's pattern and was trained in practical matters such as hunting and the management of the family's extensive property. Although no direct evidence exists for the kind of education he had, it was probably a typical Hellenistic schooling. F.W. Walbank notes that Polybius' writing itself indicates that his training in literature and philosophy were superficial as compared to the Golden era of the fourth and fifth centuries but nevertheless Polybius was conversant with recent Hellenistic authors.⁵³ As a young man, Polybius became a politician and military commander. However, following Roman victories in Greece in 168 B.C., a thousand leading Greeks, from cities whose loyalty to Rome was doubted by the Senate, were sent to Italy as detainees. Polybius spent sixteen years in Italy during which time neither he nor the other Greek captives were granted a trial. While in Italy, Polybius became friends with Scipio Aemilianus. Scipio was the son of the commander of the Roman forces who had been victorious in Greece in 168 B.C. and was well set to become a significant member of the Roman military himself. After Polybius was released from Roman detention, he returned to Greece briefly. In 150 B.C. Scipio Aemilianus invited Polybius to join him in Carthage, about the time of the beginning of the third Punic War, where Scipio was in command of the Roman legions. Polybius would watch as Scipio's forces lay siege to and utterly destroyed the city of Rome's greatest enemy. Like Thucydides before him,

⁵³F.W. Walbank, *Polybius* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1972), 32-33.

one of the great strengths of his history is the fact that he was an eye-witness to much of what he describes. Alternatively, he had access to individuals who had themselves been eye-witnesses. Like Thucydides, Polybius is regarded as an accurate and reliable reporter.

Like Herodotus, Polybius frequently digresses. But whereas Herodotus uses the digression to include ethnographical, geographical or mythical material, Polybius' digressions also explore methodological aspects of history-writing or moral commentary. Polybius also includes geographical digressions, yet even these sections serve didactic purposes.⁵⁴ More frequently, narrative is interrupted in order to assign praise or blame. At other times, as much as an entire book is devoted to historiographical questions. Book twelve, for example, is perhaps the longest and best known of these digressions. In this section, sometimes titled "Criticisms of Timaeus and His Approach to History," Polybius outlines the failures of Timaeus and other Hellenistic historians and the manner in which he is different from them. Herodotean and Polybian digressions have fallen out of vogue in contemporary history-writing. Extended interruption of narrative, for the most part, is viewed as inappropriate. Yet, for the ancients, the digression was expected. Polybius supplies the following reason for inclusion of the digression. True to his style, the reason runs along highly utilitarian logic.

The human senses...are incapable of lengthy concentration on a single object. This is true of taste and sight, and it is true of the prolonged effort involved in reading a history; hence there arose the practice of the most learned authors of the past who were in the habit of providing myths and stories to serve as digressions...and so give their readers a rest.⁵⁵

Digressions in the text of Thucydides are extremely rare and in this aspect his history does not act as a model for Polybius. Thucydides rarely addresses his audience directly or

⁵⁴These didactic purposes vary. In 3.59 Polybius' geographical digression is a call to be sympathetic to former historians who either omitted inclusion of geography or gave inaccurate accounts. Reliable geographical information is difficult to acquire and describe, pleads Polybius, and we should be grateful that previous authors at least added something to our knowledge of the world. He, on the other hand, had travelled widely and his geographical inclusions, he claims, will provide accurate knowledge of areas which were previously unknown. It is also a subtle argument for his own authority as a historian.

⁵⁵Walbank, 46. This is Walbank's summary of Polybius 38.5-6 where Polybius justifies the use of digression by appealing to history and utility.

deviates from his narrative. Elsewhere, however, Polybius is not unlike Thucydides in his sharp and precise analysis. Polybius always strives to report what actually happened in as clear a manner as possible.⁵⁶ Accuracy is of great importance to Polybius. For him it follows that if history is to be of use to the reader, it must be accurate. Occasionally, Polybius makes claims which stress a higher standard of reliability than found in Thucydides. When reporting speeches, for example, Thucydides tells the reader that he will re-create the general gist of what was said even if the exact words are his invention. Polybius states that such a policy is insufficient. “Now the special function of history, particularly in relation to speeches, is first of all to discover the words actually used, whatever they were, and next to establish the reason why a particular action or argument failed or succeeded.”⁵⁷ In another passage, Polybius notes that it is the politician who chooses what should be said on any particular occasion. It is not the duty of the historian to invent the content of the speech retroactively. The historian reports the speech as it was said so that current politicians can learn what is appropriate speech-making for different occasions.⁵⁸ The need for accuracy is supported by utilitarian and didactic reasoning. It is Polybius’ recurrent emphasis on the usefulness of history for the present reader which differentiates him from Thucydides’ famous claim that history be useful for the future. Polybius has embraced his present-day readership; both the digressions and the need for accuracy are necessary in order that the history be useful and profitable for the reader.

Polybius discusses the relationship of truth-telling and falsity within the context of history-writing. In this section Polybius agrees with others who say that even if a history text is lacking in style, if it retains a sense of the truth, it can still be called a history. For history is like

⁵⁶John Derow is one scholar who argues that in historical acumen Polybius outstrips Thucydides. While Thucydides successfully masters the ‘who, what, where and when’ of history-writing, it is Polybius who first really gets at ‘how and why.’ Herodotus, according to Derow, relied too heavily on Fate to really answer questions of ‘how.’ Thucydides focused too heavily on detailed descriptions of events and on the human motivation of fear and therefore he did not get at serious analysis. See “Historical Explanation: Polybius and his Predecessors” in *Greek Historiography*, ed. Simon Hornblower (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 75-76; 80-81; 86-89.

⁵⁷Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (New York: Penguin, 1979), 400.

⁵⁸This is Walbank’s interpretation of Polybius’ comments in XII.25.i. See Walbank, 45.

an animal. If it loses its eyesight it is helpless. So, too, “if history is deprived of its truth, we are left with nothing but an idle, unprofitable tale.”⁵⁹ There are different kinds of falsehoods, continues Polybius: unintentional and intentional. The former are the result of ignorance and those who include unintentional falsehoods should be kindly corrected. Intentional falsehood, however, should be condemned.⁶⁰ Note that although the emotional response to unintentional and intentional falsity differs, the action taken is not. Whatever the intention, falsity is to be identified and corrected. Thus far we have noted the critical impulse in Polybius. How did he combine critical with edifying?

Polybius’ most important theme was the rise of Rome. Polybius wanted to help Greek readers understand how the city of Rome was able to elevate itself from a relatively unimportant power to be the master of the world in such a short time. To explain this topic Polybius examines a fifty-three-year period during which, in Polybius’ estimation, the formative events which effectively propelled Rome to power were concentrated. For the most part, Polybius is writing for a Greek audience. His principal goal is to explain to the Greeks the history and nature of their new masters. Yet, Polybius wasn’t just teaching the Greeks about the Romans. His interest in larger issues, such as Fate or personal conduct, is more general in application than simply acquiring political savvy.

Polybius treats the topic of Fate in a manner similar to Herodotus. Compare Polybius’ account of a certain Regulus with that of Croesus in Herodotus. Whereas Herodotus relies on the characters to discuss the lesson or on analogy to communicate his warning to the audience, Polybius addresses the reader directly. Regulus was a Roman consul during the First Punic War. He was in joint command of Roman forces which achieved key victories both in naval combat and in land battle. He was confident that he would be able to lay siege to and conquer the city of

⁵⁹Polybius, *Rise of the Roman Empire*, 432.

⁶⁰Ibid.

Carthage itself. However, he knew that this would take more time than was left in his year as consul. Therefore, in order to obtain the victory for himself and rather than allowing the new consul to claim it for his own glory, Regulus initiated negotiations with the Carthaginians. His terms, however, were no different than if he had indeed already overrun the city. The Carthaginians, when they heard Regulus' terms, were insulted by them and determined that they would be no worse off in the eventuality of loss. Thus, they opted to make the Romans earn their victory rather than give it to them without a fight. Shortly after the Carthaginians rejected Regulus' terms, a large number of Spartan mercenary soldiers arrived in Carthage under the leadership of Xanthippus of Lacedaemon. Xanthippus possessed a brilliant tactical mind and the Carthaginians gave him considerable empowerment to organize and lead the combined Greek and Carthaginian forces. The end result was a spectacular victory for the Carthaginians. The losses for Carthage were minimal while the numbers of Roman survivors were few. Regulus was amongst the prisoners who were marched into Carthage. Polybius concludes the section on Regulus thus:

These events carry in them many lessons for those who can read them aright and wish to be guided in the conduct of their lives. The disaster which befell Regulus offers us the clearest possible illustration of the principle that we should not rely upon the favours of Fortune, above all when we are enjoying success. Here we see the very man, who only a little while before had refused any pity or mercy to the vanquished, himself led captive and pleading before his victims for his own life. And that saying of Euripides, which has long been acknowledged as just, *One wise head can outmatch a score of hands* is once more confirmed by the facts in this instance. One man and one brain overcame that host which until then had seemed invincible and capable of accomplishing anything, restored the fortunes of a state which had seemed irretrievably ruined, and raised up the spirits of its soldiers which had sunk to the depths of despair. I have recorded these events in the hope that the readers of this history may profit from them, for there are two ways by which all men may reform themselves, either by learning from their own errors or from those of others; the former makes a more striking demonstration, the latter a less painful one. For this reason we should never, if we can avoid it, choose the first, since it involves great dangers as well as great pain, but always the second, since it reveals the best course without causing us harm. From this I conclude that the best education for the situations of actual life consists of the experience we acquire from the study of serious history. For it is history alone which without causing us harm enables us to judge what is the best

course in any situation or circumstance. Enough, then, on this subject.⁶¹

Throughout his text Polybius returns to the topic of the utility of history and the study of history as guide to present conduct numerous times. His promise of “enough” typically means “enough for now.” Nevertheless, the account of Regulus is one example by which Polybius substantiates his claim for the purpose of history. In the preface, Polybius writes:

But in truth all historians without exception, one may say, have made this claim the be-all and end-all of their work: namely that the study of history is at once an education in the truest sense and a training for a political career, and that the most infallible, indeed the only method of learning how to bear with dignity the vicissitudes of Fortune is to be reminded of the disasters suffered by others.⁶²

His history, like other histories, educates the reader regarding the events of the past. What happened in the Punic wars? Read Polybius and you will find out. Furthermore, the text in general and stories about men such as Regulus in particular function as advice for those thinking of a political career.⁶³ Regulus’ unwillingness to share his anticipated glory with anyone was his undoing. The reader is also reminded of the fickle nature of Fate. Like Croesus, Regulus had been confident of victory. And like Croesus, Regulus was led as a prisoner into the courts of those he thought he would conquer. Finally, the study of the lives of people, not just events, is integral to the task of history. Learning about the fortune and misfortune of others is the means by which the reader himself learns how to conduct himself. The wise person does not gloat or become greedy when Fortune smiles on him or despair when Fate turns against him. A biographical sketch is the prism through which the elements of event, Fate, character and moral action are refracted and can be analyzed for the present reader to apply to his own life.

F.W. Walbank, perhaps *the* Polybian scholar, emphasizes the pragmatic and utilitarian

⁶¹Ibid., 79-80. The story of Regulus is told in 1.25-34

⁶²Ibid., 21.

⁶³Polybius’ text comes close to rivalling Livy’s in length and yet, unlike Livy, is often considered to be a rather dry text to read. Its length and aridity were factors which contributed to its failure to influence history-writing past the Classical era. Polybius’ work was virtually unknown in the medieval period and re-discovered during the Renaissance. Interestingly, one of the first popularizations of Polybius’ text came about when Machiavelli and other sixteenth-century theorists began to appreciate Polybius’ pragmatic and utilitarian approach to politics.

nature of Polybius' historiography. It is difficult to deny that Polybius can give this impression. The utility of Polybius, however, is not only to learn what happened. Shortly after beginning his discussion of the Second Punic War, Polybius inserts another historiographical digression. On this occasion he is defending his inclusion of the fine print, so to speak, of the three treaties between Rome and Carthage.

Now some uncritical readers might think that it is unnecessary for me to discuss considerations of this kind [that is; including the entire content of the treaties] in such minute detail. My answer is that if there were any man who believed himself so self sufficient as to be able to deal with any eventuality, I should accept that knowledge of the past might benefit him but would not be indispensable. However, if there is no one to be found who could claim such omniscience in conducting either his private life or his country's affairs—since no man of sense, even if all is well with him now, will ever reckon with certainty on the future—I shall insist that a knowledge of past events such as I have described is not merely an asset but is absolutely essential.⁶⁴

Polybius' utility is not intended to gain knowledge for knowledge's sake. The person of sense equips himself for the present and the future with the knowledge of the past. The chill hand of ill Fate lingers round the comment that even the person of current happiness ought to learn since the future holds no guarantees. Polybius transcribed the treaties as they were preserved on bronze tablets in the treasury of the Aediles beside the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus.⁶⁵

(Remember that Polybius was kept in Rome for over a decade and had the opportunity to record these documents.) He does so because he believes that knowing the details of the various clauses included in the treaty will increase the reader's capacity to better understand the nature of the universe and make better decisions regarding the conduct of his own life. Whether right or wrong, for Polybius, even the minutiae of history have pragmatic, utilitarian value for private and public life.⁶⁶ Like Herodotus, Polybius exemplifies the Greek logic of edifying discourse as

⁶⁴Ibid., 206-7.

⁶⁵Ibid., 203.

⁶⁶See also Arthur Eckstein, *Moral Visions in The Histories of Polybius* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1995). Eckstein argues that despite the semi-regular digression on utility, the primary vision of Polybius' *Histories* embodies a code of conduct. Arthur Eckstein compares Polybius to a warrior. A soldier conducts his life according to a code. Polybius was an aristocrat. The nobleman, as well as the soldier, manages his life in particular ways. The honourable deed of an individual who chooses the good, knowing both that Fortune is

necessarily rooted in actual events.

Livy

Livy is notable in the development of historical writing for two important reasons. First, he was interested in what can be learned by understanding the *longue durée* of history. His history begins with the very earliest Romans and continues until his present day.⁶⁷ Livy believed it was necessary to write about the whole of history if you really wanted to understand a part of it. If you wanted to know the meaning of present events, you needed to know the relationship of the present to what preceded the current state. He saw patterns in history, a kind of cyclical recurrence. Thus, learning about the distant past helped a reader to understand the present because of recurring patterns or themes. The myths of the founding of Rome were worth telling not because Livy necessarily believed them to be true but because the character of the early Roman was conveyed through them. These Roman characteristics continued through the centuries until the present. The similar patterns of behaviour in the earliest days, the Punic Wars, and his present day are part of the resulting cycle set in motion by Roman characteristics.

Second, Livy was concerned about human actions. As Walsh notes, Livy's goal was not scientific history but rather an analysis of the moral choices which allowed the Carthaginians to succeed.⁶⁸ Indeed, depicting the psychology of the military leaders and the combatants was a higher priority for Livy than precise military description. It must be noted in Livy's defence that he was no worse at military description than Sallust or Tacitus. Livy is interested in probing motives and elucidating character, especially national character. Thus, Livy uses speeches to demonstrate the character of individuals. For example, Hanno's speech about Hannibal creates a

not only fickle but capricious and that the world of goodness is dissolving, becomes the model of the code which the reader also aspires to enact.

⁶⁷Livy, *The War With Hannibal*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (New York: Penguin, 1965). This text would take Livy's entire life to complete. The sheer size of his work was its own undoing. Because the 142 books of *ab Urbe condita* took up so much space, not to mention the time and expense involved in creating even a single copy, very few copies of the entire work were made. Most libraries would not have had the space to house that many scrolls. Of the 142 books, only 35 are extant in their entirety.

⁶⁸Ibid., 136.

portrait of Hannibal as selfishly ambitious to the point where Hannibal will put his own interests before the interests of Carthage.⁶⁹ In another example the actions undertaken by the Roman Assembly, representing the Roman spirit, depict the Roman national character.⁷⁰

Jane Chaplin explores the function of *exempla* in *Livy's Exemplary History*. She argues that the tool which stitches together the disparate parts of Livy's history is the *exemplum*. She makes the following observations in support of the importance of exemplars in Livy's text. Roman youth were trained to learn and point out the actions of others as worthy of avoidance or imitation. Speech-makers were expected to use *exempla* effectively. The Roman funeral practices or the display of ancestral busts in the atriums of personal homes kept the examples of predecessors fresh in Roman memory. *Exempla* pervade Livy's text as they did Roman culture. There are two aspects to Livy's *exempla*. First, Livy perceives history as a storehouse of beneficial lessons. Second, Livy believes that people can tailor their own actions according to what they have learned from the past. These actions can be practical (military or political decisions) or they can be moral. So how does Livy indicate to the reader who or what is an *exemplum*? Sometimes he uses the first person voice to explain the lesson. More commonly he uses narrative. For example, historical characters recollect what happened in the past and then decide to imitate or avoid similar actions. Another common tool is the use of direct or indirect speech. The speaker states what the meaning of some aspect of history is and then attempts to persuade his audience of his interpretation. Of course, Livy uses these speeches in various ways. Sometimes, Livy agrees with the interpretation of the speech-maker and intends that the external audience agree with the speaker. At other times Livy intends that the external audience reject the speaker's argument.⁷¹

⁶⁹Livy, *Livy in Fourteen Volumes*, trans. B. O. Foster, vol 5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1929), 9.

⁷⁰Livy, *The War With Hannibal*, 127, 132.

⁷¹Jane Chaplin, *Livy's Exemplary History* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), 2-4, 13-14.

Livy's history is peopled, literally, with biographical history since it is a primary way in which one learns from history. Sallust influenced the later Christian authors with his moralistic tones and use of *exempla*.⁷² Livy is notable because he combines the intent to provide moral instruction with the annalistic format of the early Roman historians and Roman interest in exemplars. Livy provides paragons to be imitated and specimens of reproach to be avoided. Livy, like later Christian authors, participates in his culture's ethical discourse through the use of exemplars in the writing of history.

Summary of Ancient History-writing

Robert Sullivan's opening paragraph in the Erasmus Institute News about Donald Kagan's 2005 Thomas Jefferson Lecture to the National Endowment for the Humanities intrigued me.⁷³ Sullivan quotes Kagan's claim that even though religious traditions are no longer relevant, "the need for a sound base for moral judgments" persists. According to Kagan, history-writing can replace religion as "a necessary supplement" and the "most useful key we have to open the mysteries of the human predicament."⁷⁴ In retrospect I should not have been surprised at his comments, for Kagan is a historian, yes, but more specifically, a historian of Greco-Roman history-writing. Kagan argues for the primacy of history-writing in moral discourse. I took encouragement from Kagan's point that the ancients wrote history for moral instruction and it is this same function which should make contemporary history-writing the greatest of the Humanity's disciplines.

⁷²Ibid., 26-27.

⁷³Donald Kagan, "In Defense of History," <http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/kagan/lecture.html> (accessed July 29, 2008).

⁷⁴Happily, the relevance or irrelevance of religion is not my particular fight. Sullivan took issue with the assumption that religion is fading which was certainly appropriate. Yet, as the director of a religious program whose headquarters are on a Catholic campus, I wonder if his interaction with Kagan's lecture could have been more expansive. Christian authors of the first few centuries shared with their Greek and Roman countrymen the assumption that history-writing was more than an account of the past. Classical people wrote and read history to remain alert to the public and personal moral implications of narrated events. Christian members who wrote history were similarly mindful of the purposes of history-writing. In addition to questioning whether or not religion is fading, a contemporary Christian might consider what could be gained by re-examining the historiography of early Christianity in a manner similar to the way Kagan explores what could be gained by re-examining Greek and Roman history-writing.

In important ways, Kagan remains a traditional historian. He is contemptuous of those who would say that humans can never know the truth about the past or who abandon the quest to discern what really happened. Further, he rejects the notion that history is an infinitely malleable body of literature which can be shaped to suit whatever personal or political goal is currently desired. He is troubled by the “many teachers of the humanities today, who deny the possibility of knowing anything with confidence, of the reality of such concepts as truth and virtue, who seek only gain and pleasure in the modern guise of political power and self-gratification as the ends of education.”⁷⁵ In these remarks, Kagan seems to be an unrepentant positivist. The second half of the lecture, however, dispels such notions. Kagan thinks like an ancient. He is not advocating a chastened Enlightenment view whereby one admits that ultimate truth and pure objectivity are unattainable—and then continues on more or less precisely as before. Like the ancients and, as it happens, traditional historians, too, Kagan believes that the past is both knowable and describable. Unlike moderns he believes that the study, writing and reading of history can and should function as moral preceptor. His final paragraph is worth quoting at length:

Two millennia ago the Roman historian Livy’s introduction to his great narrative account of his nation’s history included this observation: *What chiefly makes the study of history wholesome and profitable is this, that you behold the lessons of every kind of experience set forth as on a conspicuous monument; from these you may choose for yourself and for your own state what to imitate, from these mark for avoidance what is shameful in the conception and shameful in the result.* (1.10) That is a view of the purpose of historical study that went out of favor with professionals in the nineteenth century and is not thought respectable in our time. As a result it has been increasingly harder to persuade people that they have anything to learn from history... This has not, however deterred millions of people hungry for historical writing from reading those historians who will interpret the past by narrating a story and are alert to the moral implications, personal and political, of the story they tell. And why should it be otherwise? The fact is that we all need to take our moral bearings all the time, as individuals and as citizens. Religion and the traditions based on it were once the chief sources for moral confidence and strength. Their influence has faded in the modern world, but the need for a sound base for moral judgements has not. If we can not look simply to moral guidance firmly founded on religious precepts it is natural and

⁷⁵As found in the second paragraph of the speech.

reasonable to turn to history, the record of human experience, as a necessary supplement if not a substitute. History, it seems to me, is the most useful key we have to open the mysteries of the human predicament. Is it too much to hope that one day we may see Clio ascend her throne again and resume her noble business at the same old stand?⁷⁶

Kagan calls for a return to the thinking of the ancients. The tenor of his introduction suggests to me that it is a call to adhere to a chastened Classicalism. While the response to the postmodern critique of positivism has been, typically, a call for a chastened Enlightenment, Kagan seems to be on a better track. He is calling for a chastened Classicism.

Greek and Roman Biography

If the reliability of historical texts of the classical era has been regarded as dubious, the sentiment is only stronger when applied to biography. Patricia Cox suggests that whatever else late antique biography was, it was not history: not in the modern sense, not even in the sense of classical history-writing. “The fact is, however, that in antiquity biography was not simply a subgenre of history. It had its own unique characteristics, and sustained historical veracity was not one of them.” Her comments about biography in antiquity apply with only slight modification to late antiquity. Biographies of this period she describes as “imaginal histories or as historicized mythic ideals.”⁷⁷ An important question of my dissertation is the relationship of critical and edifying in biography. A number of Plutarch’s biographies will be examined in order to see how he combined these two elements. In some instances Plutarch seems to have been concerned about both reliable presentation of his subject and edification. A biography by Tacitus, *Agricola*, will also be discussed. The intent of influential biographies from this era was both critical and edifying.

In ancient and modern times there is a kind of singularity about the use of the word biography. In modern English, it is hard to think of another noun used to designate a sub-genre

⁷⁶ Ibid., the final paragraph.

⁷⁷ Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1983), 5, xvi.

of history-writing.⁷⁸ For specialized forms of history-writing—whether in terms of approach or of subject matter—the more common grammatical structure is adjectival. Thus, there is Marxist history, feminist history, political history and so forth. There is no stand-alone noun by which such history-writing is designated. There is not, for example, Marxistory, femistory, or politistory. Rather, biography is distinct from other sub-genres of history-writing by its designation as a noun. What then is the significance of such an observation? What is the difference between history and biography?

Although the ancients may not have cast the discussion of the difference between history and biography in grammatical terms, Greek and Roman authors noted that differences between the two genres existed. The difficulty with the ancient claims about the differences between the two genres is that the very same authors who delineate the differences between history and biography break their own “rules.” Plutarch claims the difference between biography and history is the emphasis on words and jests in the former rather than on deeds of war or politics in the latter. Yet his *Julius Caesar* omits anecdotes of words and jests in order to concentrate on war and political consolidation. Cornelius Nepos summarized the difference between history and biography thus: biography includes meditation on virtue while history does not.⁷⁹ Yet, such an observation cannot be sustained in any systematic way when analyzing ancient history-writers. Polybius moves frequently from narrative to directly addressing the reader for various reasons and often for the purpose of explicating a lesson in character. Sallust interrupts his narrative to comment on the virtues and moral failings of society and individuals.

Greco-Roman authors claimed that the difference between history and biography was the

⁷⁸Except perhaps autobiography. But autobiography has become so linked with biography that many use the terms interchangeably.

⁷⁹Cornelius Nepos says this: “the recitation of deeds is history; the recitation of deeds with analysis of virtue is biography” (as translated by Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison of Greco-Roman Biography* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992], 121, 144). For a critical yet positive evaluation of the style of Nepos see Edna Jenkinson, “Nepos—An Introduction to Latin Biography,” in *Latin Biography*, ed. T.A. Dorey (London: Routledge, 1967), 1-15.

discussion of virtue in the biography and the lack of this discussion in history. Despite this claim it seems that the difference was actually the difference between a focus on a person rather than an event, such as a war. Biography focused on a person while history-writing took larger contexts for its subject matter. The difference was not, in fact, discussion of virtue versus lack of discussion of virtue. To be sure, the change in focus from event to a single person was not without important consequences. For ancient authors the writing of a life would naturally lend itself to the probing of individual character while a history would tend towards observations about human character *in general* or the nature of the world. The change in focus, however, was not accompanied by a change in method. Authors of biography needed to establish the same claims of veracity as the history-writers. They had to convince their readers that they were telling the truth. The close relationship of biography and history-writing is especially noticeable in the age of the Roman Empire. This chapter examines biographies from Greco-Roman authors of the Principate in order to make some observations about the relationship of biography to history-writing. Did biographies attempt to be as accurate as their general history counterparts? Was biography, like history-writing, presented as a preceptor? Through various examples, it will be shown that biography attempted to be critical, it gives moral evaluation (it praises virtue and abhors vice), it commends or condemns specific actions, and it constructs exemplary models. These are patterns of writing that were found also in other history texts. It will be argued that it is best to consider ancient biography as simply a form of ancient-history writing.

Plutarch

Plutarch could combine critical and edifying. His portraits are reasonable historical representations. By deliberate arrangement of material Plutarch engages moral adjudication and ethical dialogue. Alternately, Plutarch can also enter into edifying discussion by inserting a digression. These elements were part of the historical task. How did the ancient authors understand the relationship of biography and history-writing? Plutarch's preface to *Alexander*

may make the best-known distinction between history-writing and biography in ancient texts.⁸⁰

It was Plutarch's habit to pair one biography with another in his writing. In this instance Plutarch pairs the young, conquering Macedonian king with Julius Caesar. These men, explains Plutarch, had careers that included celebrated events of such number and magnitude that to recount them would overwhelm his task. Plutarch will merely summarize their achievements. The justification for such brevity can be found in the difference in the task of the historian and the biographer. A history that focuses on an individual's exploits usually tells us nothing of the virtues or vices of the subject, claims Plutarch. In biography "on the other hand a chance remark or a joke may reveal far more of a man's character than the mere feat of winning battles in which thousands fall, or of marshalling great armies, or laying siege to cities."⁸¹ Plutarch follows this assessment with an analogy. Just as a painter must take greater pains to depict the subject's eyes than any other part of the body, so too Plutarch claims his task is to dwell with greater length on these remarks and jests in order to illuminate the inner workings of the subject. By these means, rather than by recounting the struggles and achievements of his career, is the portrait of a man created.

If read in isolation, Plutarch's introductory chapter on Alexander could suggest that a well-defined boundary between history-writing and biography was already in place by the second century. There was the "discipline," if you will, of history-writing, its subject matter confined to the matters of military and political success or failure. Whereas the "discipline" of biography existed separately, with its subject matter confined to anecdotal words and jests

⁸⁰Plutarch was certainly not the first ancient biographer nor even the first Greek biographer. For a history of Greek biography from Homer until the end of the first century B.C., consult Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography: Four Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1971). See pages 37-41 where he notes that at the time Herodotus and Thucydides wrote their histories, the Greek cultural milieu was ill-disposed towards the biographical task. In the fifth century there was faith in the collective organization and democracy and distrust of tyranny. As biography focused too much on the individual rather than the collective, biography really only develops after general history-writing. The distinction between history and biography occurs later, at the time of Polybius and onwards.

⁸¹Plutarch, "Alexander" in *The Age of Alexander*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (New York: Penguin, 1973), 252.

intending to reveal the inner man. The modern mind is predisposed towards such generic distinctions and if unfamiliar with Plutarch's work might assume that he could be counted on to follow his own classifications. In fact, at times Plutarch does write a biography that emphasizes not the word or jest but the military accomplishments. Such is the case in *Caesar*, the biography he chooses to pair with *Alexander*. A sharp distinction between history and biography would seem to be more of a guideline than a rule or, better, perhaps a way of justifying the shift in focus to a readership that valued massive historical tomes and world history. In practice, Plutarch writes biographies in a variety of ways, whatever best suits either the subject or his approach to the subject. If focusing on words and jests satisfies his purposes best, he does so. But if focusing on so-called important historic events works better, he switches to this kind of discourse.

So why did Plutarch even bother to include a brief discussion on the difference between history and biography only to fail to follow his own words in the very next text? It is unlikely he simply forgot what he wrote. Perhaps ancient biography was far more subversive than we think. Perhaps biography was a challenge to the hegemony of military and political events as the stuff of history. The change in focus in biography was an opportunity to include the other things which a history-writer would leave out. Such an observation seems to make more sense of the claims made by various authors regarding the differences between history and biography. The ancients agreed that history-writing was part of the moral discourse of their society. To justify biography on the grounds that in this format you will include discussion of virtue, as Nepos did, seems repetitive. It seems more likely that when Plutarch stakes his claim for the words and jests of life, he is actually validating the everyday matter of life as worthy historical subject matter. Should the author wish it, biography allowed for the inclusion of non-political and non-military aspects of history-writing. Not only are the so-called lofty events of the past part of historical and ethical discourse, the mundane ones are as well.

The first point which demands demonstration is whether ancient biography can be considered a form of history-writing, particularly in regard to its primary goal—to say what essentially happened. Christopher Pelling examines eight of Plutarch’s biographies in order to make some generalizations about his historical methods: *Lucullus*, *Pompey*, *Crassus*, *Cicero*, *Caesar*, *Cato Minor*, *Brutus* and *Antony*. Pelling chooses these particular lives because these subjects would not have been as much a part of Plutarch’s education and cultural background as the Greek lives but were yet well enough known that Plutarch would have to get these men “right” if these eight biographies were to be respected.⁸² So what kind of critical methodology did Plutarch employ when he had to do serious historical research? Plutarch consulted a number of sources, both history-writing and biographical texts. Livy and Polybius were among his historical sources, as were lesser-known authors Appian and Pollio. Pelling notes that Plutarch tended to follow one source, Pollio, somewhat slavishly for various sections of his text. Such practices, however, were common to both history-writing and biography. Pelling further notes that, unfortunately, at times Plutarch could be less interested in primary research than we would like him to be. *Caesar*, for example, does not demonstrate knowledge of the *Commentarii*; that is, Plutarch was aware the document existed but does not seem to have read it. Plutarch does not make use of letters by Caesar and Antony even though he knew about them and they would have been available to him had he wanted to consult them. On the other hand, in *Cicero* Plutarch seems to have been familiar with many of Cicero’s letters, speeches and treatises; in this case he did read the primary sources. In *Antony* Plutarch makes extensive use of the *Second Philippic*, a primary source. Plutarch’s lives of Pericles and Thucydides indicate that he had extensive

⁸²Christopher Pelling, *Plutarch and History: Eighteen Studies* (London: Gerald Duckworth and The Classical Press of Wales, 2002), 1; 12-13. See also Ronald Mellor, *The Roman Historians* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 136-37. Mellor observes that the Roman practice of funeral speeches was a formative influence upon the development of Roman biography. Mellor suggests that the Roman funeral speeches tended to be more accurate about the facts of a person’s life than Greek encomia. It is likely that Mellor would agree that certain facts might be glossed or creatively explained but that you simply couldn’t make something up when everyone would know the general outlines of the subject’s life. Plutarch would have to be at least as accurate as the funeral speeches when he writes about these Roman subjects.

knowledge of Thucydides' history.⁸³ Plutarch's consultation of sources was at times less than vigorous but commendable at other times.

How faithful was Plutarch to his historical sources? To what extent did Plutarch commit sins of omission to construct his portraits? Pelling states that the principle which guided Plutarch's selection of sources and selection of details was illumination of the subject's character. This generalization needs to be further qualified by noting that Plutarch generally chose the historical items that were most favourable to the subject. In *Cimon* (a Greek life) Plutarch tells the reader that a biographer shouldn't stress the subject's faults and weaknesses. An author shouldn't omit them either, but not emphasize the flaws.⁸⁴ Plutarch can be true to the spirit of his own advice. Thus, in *Caesar* Plutarch does not mention Caesar's adulterous affair with Servilla, the sister of Cato. He does include it, however, in *Cato* and again in *Brutus*. Caesar's affair actually illuminates an aspect of Caesar's character yet Plutarch represses it in *Caesar* so as to not dwell on the subject's failings. Caesar's deed is dealt with in another person's biography which, from a modern perspective, seems backwards.⁸⁵ Although unconventional, Plutarch's method allows the reader to glimpse the person of Caesar from a variety of perspectives: a commendable practice in the analysis of the events of the past and the character of an individual.

If illumination of character is Plutarch's objective, how does he arrange historical details to accomplish this goal? Is it done responsibly? Pelling lists the ways in which Plutarch abridges material. Plutarch occasionally conflates similar items. In *Caesar*, for example, Plutarch avoids

⁸³Pelling, *Plutarch*, 16-17; 20; 117.

⁸⁴Plutarch includes a digression on method at the end of chapter two of *Cimon*. Plutarch compares an author's responsibility to the subject to the task of a portrait painter. The artist must include both the handsome and less than handsome features of a face but does not dwell on the defects for to do so would be to create a caricature. Interestingly, even though the author is not to dwell upon defects, Plutarch insists upon including them. To not include them would be to misrepresent the subject and reality. For to avoid inclusion of faults would create the false impression that human nature was capable of producing a character that was absolutely good and unswervingly dedicated to virtue. Plutarch seems to indicate that the creation of a plaster saint is of little value in the contemplation of human nature and virtue. A plaster saint is a kind of caricature. A painter and a biographer represent what is really there, even if done generously.

⁸⁵*Ibid.* 53-54.

the tedium of reporting all three of the senatorial debates (dealing with the Catiline conspirators) and writes up the proceedings as if there was only one debate. In *Cato Minor* Plutarch compresses chronology so as to make it seem like events that were actually quite far apart in time, happened close together. Plutarch's arrangement conceals a five-year time lag between Cato's proposal to surrender Caesar to the Germanic people and the start of the civil war. Other times, Plutarch is guilty of chronological displacements. He likes to organize his material thematically and to do so can put the events in the wrong chronological order. Finally, Plutarch can transfer a deed from one person to another. Plutarch has Antony and Crassus give a speech to the troops before crossing the Rubicon in *Antony* but in *Caesar*, Julius delivers the speech. In truth Julius Caesar really did give the speech to the troops but in *Antony* Plutarch transfers the speech to others.⁸⁶

Pelling notes that Plutarch sometimes fabricates circumstantial detail in other of his biographies but Pelling also observes that in these eight Roman lives Plutarch allows himself very little of this. Further, what fabricated details can be found are peripheral. In *Antony*, for example, Plutarch has a conversation take place between Antony and Trebonius while the two of them are travelling together. He has the two characters discussing important topics in their tent. Yet the details of travel and tent appear only in Plutarch. The conversation itself took place as attested in the *Second Philippic* but the details of the travelling situation seem to be entirely from Plutarch's imagination. In another example, Plutarch fabricates a context in order to fit in material from different or contradictory sources. In *Caesar* Plutarch portrays Caesar in dire straits, getting the worst of it at the beginning of a battle with Vercingetorix. But such a detail is not found in Caesar's *Commentarii*. Rather, according to Pelling, Plutarch must fabricate this context in order to include an anecdote from oral history. This anecdote makes sense only if Caesar was indeed in danger of losing near the beginning of the battle. On the whole, however,

⁸⁶Ibid., 91-94.

Pelling generalizes, Plutarch renders a circumspect portrait of each of the eight Romans. In other lives, such as in *Coriolanus*, Plutarch is guilty of greater and more important fabrications.⁸⁷ The point of the eight Roman lives is that Plutarch can be a reasonably reliable historian if he wants to be one.⁸⁸ From a modern perspective Plutarch's transgressions are unacceptable but, as noted in the section on historians, ancient history-writing texts generally fail by modern standards. Many ancient biographies warrant no censure stronger than that which is applied to ancient history-writing.

Furthermore, in these eight Roman lives Plutarch can also discuss the meaning of the life of the subject. The exception to this observation occurs in *Caesar*. In this life Plutarch is not interested in character, in ethical discourse, or in insightful comments into the general truths of the human condition. Plutarch stays focused on the historical context. How is it that Caesar was able to become the tyrant he always wanted to become? The life makes no comment on whether the desire to become a tyrant was good or imitable. Rather, Plutarch examines the historical factors which came together or were manipulated by Caesar and facilitated his ascendancy as sole ruler. On the other hand, Pelling describes *Pompey* as a moralistic life. Pompey's virtues are praised and his failings censured. Also, the text demonstrates insight about the truths of human existence. At the moment when the troops of Pompey and Caesar begin battle, effectively civil war, several Roman noblemen reflect on the causes of the strife: greed and personal rivalry. Brothers and kinsmen using identical standards were locked in combat: "a clear enough lesson of how blind and how mad a thing human nature is when under the sway of passion. Had they only been content quietly to govern and enjoy their conquests, the greatest

⁸⁷ Ibid., 94-96.

⁸⁸ Granted, reliability and insightful analysis are not necessarily synonymous. Robin Seager complains about Plutarch's lack of political insight in Seager's introductory comments about *Cicero*. Plutarch either ignores or misrepresents the political implications of Cicero's actions late in life. See Plutarch, *Fall of the Roman Republic* (New York: Penguin, 1972), 311. Perhaps this was deliberately done or perhaps Plutarch did not understand late republican Rome well enough to provide political analysis. As noted below, Plutarch could be a subtle political analyst when discussing Greek politicians who, although more distant in time, were more culturally familiar to Plutarch.

and best part of earth and sea was theirs to control.”⁸⁹

Plutarch’s *Cato Minor* showcases an imitable character. He was an upright man who conducted himself virtuously. He did have flaws, and these are noted. Pelling observes that Plutarch censures Cato’s treatment of women and does not hide Cato’s unseemly fondness for wine. The circumstances surrounding his divorce and remarriage do not suggest the highest aspirations of virtue.⁹⁰ On the whole, however, Cato as portrayed in the text exemplifies a life conducted with integrity and virtue. Also notable in *Cato* is Plutarch’s decision to censure Caesar. In 22.5 Plutarch describes Caesar’s policies as disgraceful and selfish.⁹¹ It is an interesting decision—to publish a compendium of lives in which you assess unsavoury aspects of one life but in the text of another life. If Plutarch’s evaluation of Caesar really was disgracefulness and selfishness, perhaps the strictly historical analysis of Caesar makes sense. If there is not goodness or beauty to dwell upon, you need to choose between learning from a negative example or simply recount the subject’s deeds and explain contexts without recourse to contemplative analysis. But as the former option would involve dwelling on an individual’s faults, Plutarch would be, at least theoretically, disinclined to do this. Pelling concludes that for Plutarch the biographical genre is malleable; he writes biography in a variety of ways. Some texts are historically focused and others exemplary or moralistic. He assigns praise and blame but in unexpected places. Perhaps the best way to understand the texture of this text is by appreciating it as a whole. Plutarch’s biographies are a mixture of historical narrative and moral and ethical precepts.

Plutarch relied on reputable Greek historians in various Greek lives. Plutarch was intimately familiar with Thucydides, as his readers would also have been. Plutarch counted on

⁸⁹Plutarch, “Pompey” in *Fall of the Roman Republic*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin, 1972), 232. From *Pompey* 70.

⁹⁰Pelling, 103.

⁹¹Ibid., 58; 102-105

his audience's familiarity with Thucydides in order to guide their reading and indicate to them where his interpretation of Nicias, Alcibiades and Pericles differs from Thucydides'. This is Christopher Pelling's argument in "Plutarch and Thucydides" which can be summarized as follows. Plutarch makes a claim in the first chapter of *Nicias* which might surprise the modern reader. Plutarch admires Thucydides' artistic merits—his ability to create drama and emotional responses. Plutarch states that he won't try to compete with Thucydides on this plane. Rather, Plutarch will compose serious historical texts which will get at the truth of what happened. Yet for much of his account he follows Thucydides quite closely. At notable junctures, however, Plutarch revises Thucydides in subtle ways in order to make, in Pelling's estimation, better political insights than are found in parts of Thucydides. For example, Thucydides and Plutarch both emphasize the clash of individualism and public duty in the events of Athens and in the character of the leaders, but in different measure. For Thucydides, Athens is doomed when individuals forget their public duty and chase personal ambition. In both Thucydides and Plutarch the Athenian populace, the *demos*, is fickle. In Thucydides the leaders are responsible for directing and leading the *demos*. When the leaders abandon this task for reasons of personal benefit, Athens is doomed. Plutarch is not so sure; he suggests that the *demos* acted in fickle and violent ways in order to further the ambitions of the individuals who made up the *demos*. Thucydides believed that leaders who failed to act for the good of the people, regardless of whether the *demos* knew what was good or not, precipitated Athens' disaster. Plutarch is less sure that it is as simple as that. In Plutarch the *demos* is as responsible for the actions of the leaders as the leaders themselves. Pelling ends by saying that Plutarch's re-interpretation of Thucydides

is an interesting one, and well worth serious consideration even in modern terms. That is not necessarily because his views rest on contemporary authority, or at least not in a straight-forward way. It is because they rest on his human insight, a profound and impressive insight that, at least on some occasions, is likely to have got it pretty well

right.⁹²

Plutarch began *Nicias* by claiming to best Thucydides with a straightforward historical account rather than dramatic portrayal. Analysis of the purported no-nonsense history-writing reveals a concerted interest in adjudicating the behaviour of the Athenian populace, who were found wanting.

Philip Stadter explores Plutarch's choice of parallel lives. What guided his decision to put the "couples" together as he did? Stadter's test case examines what he calls Plutarch's most bizarre pair of them all: Lysander and Sulla. Both the men and their historical situations were notably dissimilar. Stadter argues that both Plutarch's choice of these subjects and where he places them within the Parallel Lives demonstrates that the reason they are paired together is to make a moral comment as well as create a negative exemplary model. For example, negative characteristics exhibited by Lysander (harshness, vengeance and military prowess) are also part of Sulla's character. In fact these negative traits dominate Sulla's portrait to such an extent that would make Sulla "seem a caricature, if the historical record did not confirm its accuracy."⁹³ Plutarch's negative exemplar was a historical person. Recall that elsewhere Plutarch claims to present his subjects in the best light possible and de-emphasize their flaws. Thus, Plutarch is careful to include the many successes of Sulla's life. Yet at the same time that Plutarch praises Sulla's extraordinary military skill, far from omitting anecdotes which blacken his character, as was the case in *Caesar*, Plutarch includes multiple criticisms of Sulla's character and behaviour. Lysander is paired with Sulla, not because he became the tyrant which Sulla did, but because he

⁹²Christopher Pelling, "Plutarch and Thucydides" in *Plutarch and the Historical Tradition*, ed. Philip Stadter (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 31. Pelling also states: "[Plutarch] is thus using Thucydides to 'correct', or at least refine, Thucydides' own portrait; and the reinterpretation is surely not unintelligent. As with his judgements of people, so even in political analysis, he is capable of applying his human insight thoughtfully, and on such occasions he is confident enough to pit his own judgements even against Thucydides'; and those interpretations are sometimes not at all bad. . . . And, great though the respect is that we rightly have for Thucydides, it is hard to be confident that Plutarch was wrong. In *Alcibiades*, then, 'literary' and 'historical' aspects go hand in hand. Plutarch traces the popular reaction to Alcibiades with more subtlety than Thucydides, and this renders his analysis both more historically interesting and more artistically arresting." Ibid., 24.

⁹³Philip Stadter, "Paradoxical Paradigms: Lysander and Sulla," in *Plutarch and the Historical Tradition*, ed. Philip Stadter (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 8.

shared a similar background and, in milder form, similar vices. Both men came from impoverished beginnings, became successful generals and introduced political reform. More importantly, both were ambitious, harsh and merciless to those whom they considered their enemies. The two subjects shared similar character flaws: the difference was the degree to which they gave expression to them. Lysander was freely elected to positions of power while Sulla had to take such positions by force. Lysander attempted to bring about constitutional reform through conventional procedures whereas Sulla imposed reform. Lysander harmed his enemies and massacred his friends' opponents but Sulla even murdered his best friends if they crossed him. Both were successful military generals, but Lysander warred against foreigners while Sulla made war on his own countrymen. Through this pairing, argues Stadter, Plutarch expresses a moral truth. The weaknesses of Sulla are common to many; Sulla was not a monster. All humans have the potential to degenerate and consequently digress from the common weaknesses of Lysander to become a Sulla if they do not control themselves.⁹⁴

Stadter is persuasive in demonstrating the way in which these lives are meant to be exemplary. The Lysander-Sulla pair is part of three pairs, all of which explore the vice of ambition. Themistocles and Camillus are prey to their ambition and do not master this weakness. However, their ambition led them to re-build cities and save their countrymen when invaded by foreigners. Both were able to set aside political strife in order to accomplish such tasks. Although they never really mastered their ambition, at least their ambition led them to feats of greatness, not meanness. The third pair, Pericles and Fabius, were also ambitious men. But Pericles and Fabius were men of self-control who would not let themselves be ruled by their ambition. Examples of such mastery are suggested by the accounts in which Pericles recalled an enemy, Cimon, back to Athens and Fabius refused to use violence against Scipio, a rival. By arranging these pairs in this order Plutarch creates examples of both imitation and

⁹⁴Ibid., 48, 7-8.

condemnation. Compare the statement attributed to Pericles as he died: “No Athenian has put on mourning because of me” with the epitaph assigned to Sulla: “No friend ever surpassed him in kindness, no enemy in viciousness.”⁹⁵ Pericles and Fabius mastered themselves to become excellent statesmen. Their exemplary role is made sharper when set alongside the violence of Lysander and Sulla. To fail to master your ambition is to be but at the beginning of a process that could lead to Sullan deeds. To control yourself is to aspire to Periclean heights.

If Stadter’s analysis is correct, it comes as no surprise to note that the first two chapters of *Pericles* are a digression on the emulation of exemplary models. We ought to blame those who chose to emulate unworthy models, Plutarch suggests, for a person is able to choose what to contemplate. Since we are responsible for our conscious intellect, we ought to choose to apply our intellect to models that inspire the reader to attain proper virtue. Plutarch states that we find these models in the examples of good men. Towards the end of chapter two Plutarch further refines the role of exemplary models. While it is good that the observation of moral good in another rouses the reader to imitation, it is not, in the final analysis, the point. It is the author’s responsibility to promote understanding of virtuous deeds. Plutarch seems to be indicating that there is no simple one-to-one correlation. Just because a subject did a particular deed does not mean the reader should undertake the exact same deed. A reader properly emulates virtues, not specific deeds. Thus, Pericles and Fabius Maximus are models of moderation and uprightness. Plutarch’s exemplars illuminate the nature of virtue and it is the understanding of virtue, in addition to proper deeds, that makes them imitable. The reception of these exemplars requires sophisticated contemplation.

Previously it was observed that Herodotus and Polybius used digressions to engage edifying dialogue. Plutarch sometimes used digressions in order to discuss virtue. Alan Wardman makes this comment about the patterns of history-writing found in Plutarch’s

⁹⁵Ibid., 50-51.

biographies: “Plutarch’s use of digressions tends to conform to the historian’s pattern, even when he is writing on subjects that are concerned with character and have moral implications.”⁹⁶ Wardman wonders why Plutarch would need to use digressions if a primary purpose of the lives is character study and why Plutarch sometimes apologizes for the use of digressions. Wardman notes, for example, that the description of Theseus in *Dionysis* is a digression which Plutarch justifies on the basis that it is relevant to the study of character. Wardman observes that Plutarch presents his story in the same manner in which a historian unfolds his account and as such he feels bound by the rules of history-writing. Plutarch’s digressions and his explanations for them lead Wardman to conclude that Plutarch’s biographies

have not entirely freed themselves from the modes of historical writing. Thus the form of Plutarchan biography is closer to historiography than his utterance in *Alexander* would, at first, have us believe. It is easy to forget his closeness to historical writing because he naturally speaks of his method with a view to making us aware of the differences between history and biography. Yet we soon become aware that the *effect* of ‘minor events, sayings and jests,’ so far as they are used is to achieve a shortened form of history.⁹⁷

Digression is one way of including edifying dialogue as part of history-writing and biography. Like Polybius, however, direct discussion of the meaning of events or a person’s life was a part of biography. For an example of this kind of edifying technique, I will look to Tacitus.

Tacitus

In terms of generic classification, Tacitus’ *Agricola* is, by turns, part eulogy, history, geography and ethnography. The focus, however, seldom wavers from discussion of Agricola, Tacitus’ father-in-law, and as such it is best described as a biography. The text begins with Agricola’s birth and ends with his death. The geographical and ethnographical digressions are related to the military movements of his career. Other characters enter the narrative only as Agricola himself encounters them. Tacitus composed *Agricola* prior to writing either of his

⁹⁶Alan Wardman, *Plutarch’s Lives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1974), 9.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 9-10.

extended historical treatises, *Annals* and *Histories*. *Agricola* (and *Germanica*) were his trial run for history-writing.

Agricola is a notable example of indirect characterization. Direct analysis of Agricola's character comes only in the concluding chapters; until then his character is developed by describing events, motives and thoughts. Thus, anecdote after anecdote demonstrates Agricola's virtue so that by the time the reader comes to the end of the biography, she thinks, "Agricola was a virtuous man!" As generalizations, such observations are certainly correct. Some further comments, however, may help refine the ways in which Tacitus intended the reader to contemplate virtue.

At various points Tacitus will include some pointed social critique; but not always in relation to Agricola's actions. Such comments have the feel of maxims. For example, in the midst of describing the seasons of warfare, Tacitus inserts this truth of life: "This is the unfairest aspect of warfare: all claim for themselves the credit for success, failure is blamed on a single man."⁹⁸ This comment is not meant as a slight against Agricola's men. Rather, once the reader comes to the concluding chapters and learns of Domitian's envy of Agricola's successes, he realizes that the comment is directed at the former Emperor. Tacitus believed that Domitian sought to claim the victories in Britain for his own and thereby strip Agricola of the honour that was due him. Critique of Domitian affords another opportunity to observe truths of humankind. Agricola, well aware of Domitian's jealousy, wisely refuses a proconsular position. Even though he refused the position, Tacitus believes that Agricola was still entitled to a proconsular salary, which Domitian refused to give to Agricola, thus demonstrating that Domitian was either a cheapskate or greedy (or both). Further, in his comments pertaining to Domitian's decision to withhold the salary, Tacitus suggests that Domitian exemplifies the human tendency to hate

⁹⁸Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany*, trans A.R. Birley (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999), 20.

someone you have hurt.⁹⁹

At other times Tacitus' observations about human nature feel surprisingly critical of Roman culture. Perhaps the most notable instance of such criticism occurs in the speeches delivered before the biggest battle of Agricola's seven years in Britain. These speeches communicate not only the character of the speakers but also a highly selective history of Rome and Britain. Calgacus, leader of the Briton forces, tells his troops that, given the history of Roman behaviour, it would be no good to submit to the Romans, for they

have pillaged the world: when the land has nothing left for men who ravage everything they scour the sea. If an enemy is rich they are greedy, if he is poor, they crave glory. Neither East nor West can sate their appetite. They are the only people on earth to covet wealth and poverty with equal craving. They plunder, they butcher, they ravish, and call it by the lying name of "empire." They make a desert and call it "peace."¹⁰⁰

Even though spoken by Calgacus, the comment on imperial behaviour seems pointed and certainly surprising in the context of a biography that purports to praise Calgacus' opponent, the subject of the biography and the person responsible for imposing empire upon the Britons.

Unexpected observations appear at other places as well. In one digression Tacitus outlines the behaviour of the Britons in response to the Roman presence in their land. Agricola, unlike his predecessors, attempted to acculturate the Britons through peaceful means; he ended economic abuses and bureaucratic ineptitude. By these means Agricola moved the Britons from open hostility towards the Romans to a point where they desired to take on Roman ways. Not only did they learn Latin and don togas but they acquired a taste for colonnades, warm baths and extravagant banquets. Tacitus describes these changes as a kind of fall for the Britons. Earlier, they had been noble savages who were unpolluted by the laziness induced by Roman luxury. The Britons, explains Tacitus, who before had no experience with baths or banquets, took on Roman ways and called them civilization, "although they were in fact part of their

⁹⁹Ibid. 30.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 22.

enslavement.”¹⁰¹ Tacitus’ observation is somewhat ambiguous (although temptingly suggestive in the contemporary context of post-colonial theory). Enslavement to what or whom? To baths or to Romans? Is it a commendation of Agricola’s pacification techniques—not only was he an able general but he could also subdue the area through non-violent acculturation? These examples demonstrate an interesting critique of imperial conquest, in a biography of a subject who was the face of the Emperor in Britain.

In addition to moral comments on various topics, the text also portrays Agricola as an exemplary model. Tacitus tells his readers that as a young man, Agricola chose models to follow; he wanted to learn from experienced men.¹⁰² Just as the reader is to learn from the experience of Agricola, Agricola had also learned from men who had lived before him. Indirect characterization continues in anecdotal modes until the time of Agricola’s recall and largely involuntary retirement. These last chapters are dominated by the antagonistic relationship between the successful general and envious emperor. It is here that we get to the lesson of Agricola’s life—how to be a great man even in an era of a tyrant. Agricola was ruled by self-restraint and good sense. He did not desire the kind of renown that comes to a man when he uselessly protests against tyranny and demands freedom. All that is gained by such actions is a ruined career or even a violent death. Furthermore, and here Tacitus obliquely addresses his reader, “those whose habit is to admire what is forbidden [demanding freedom under a tyrant] ought to know that there can be great men even under bad emperors, and that duty and discretion, if coupled with energy and a career of action, will bring a man to no less glorious summits than are attained by perilous paths and ostentatious deaths that do not benefit the Commonwealth.”¹⁰³ It is part apology, yes. Tacitus is defending Agricola’s choice to submit to Domitian rather than publicly denounce his increasing infringements upon the traditional rights

¹⁰¹Ibid., 17.

¹⁰²Ibid., 5.

¹⁰³Ibid., 31.

and roles of Senators. But Agricola is also an example of someone who put service to his empire ahead of futile protests against tyranny. He chose dutiful service to the commonwealth and by his actions attained greatness, even though ruled by a tyrant. Using rhetorical flourish in the epilogue Tacitus calls upon the spirit of Agricola himself to remind his family to contemplate his character and to continually ponder his words and deeds. This command is given ostensibly to Agricola's wife and daughter. For the family and indeed for the audience, Agricola was an exemplar.¹⁰⁴ While Tacitus' critique of empire was communicated through indirect means, critique of Domitian's actions and the Agricola's exemplary aspects are presented directly.

This discussion of *Agricola* has focused on the modes of moral discourse found in this biography rather than whether it is history-writing or accurate. A comparison of this text with Tacitus' history-writings or a comparison of the content of *Agricola* with what can be known from other sources would be informative. However, it is here assumed that since many of the first readers would know whether or not Agricola was faithfully rendered, Tacitus would have had to get most of the details of Agricola's life correct. Furthermore, Tacitus follows the Thucydidean pattern of recounting speeches: get at the general gist of the speech, if not the exact words. The speeches in Thucydides are presented as polished rhetoric that are more like what would have been found in literature than would have actually been said at the time—even though it is presented as direct speech in the biography. Thus, Calgacus' speech (in perfect, rhetorically sophisticated Latin) is no less history-writing than Thucydides.

The foregoing examination of Herodotus, Polybius, Plutarch and Tacitus is offered to demonstrate the significant continuity between ancient history-writing and biography. People both past and present sometimes instinctively understand history and biography to be separate forms rather than intimately related. The use of distinct words helps create such an impression. If in both modes of writing, however, an author attempts to provide a reasonably accurate

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 33.

account and guide the reader in ethical dialogue what is the important difference? Although ancient authors claimed there was a difference between history and biography, it was a difference of focus rather than method. The biographer Plutarch, for example, both fails and succeeds as a historian (by modern evaluation) in ways similar to history-writing proper. I will sustain this theme in the section on Christian biography. It is reasonable to consider early Christian biography also as a category of ancient history-writing. Like their Greco-Roman predecessors, Christian biographers reflected on the events of the past and found instruction for the present. And they did so using the forms of history-writing of their Greco-Roman contexts and the Biblical logic of critical and edifying. The discussion of the Greek and Roman contribution to the understanding of the relationship of critical and edifying is thus concluded. I turn now to the Biblical logic of critical and edifying as the second formative foundation in the history of Christian biography.

Chapter Three: The Critical and Edifying Impulse of Biblical History and Biography

Although Ernst Breisach's survey of the development of historiography in the West is impressive indeed, the discussion of the influence of Hebrew tradition in the history of history-writing was brief.¹ This brevity of treatment is not in keeping with the importance that the Hebrew tradition has had in the development of history-writing. What follows will demonstrate that the fundamental logic of the Hebrew Scriptures holds that the historical writings (of which biography is one) must be critical and edifying.² Even though this section will not be a survey of Hebrew historical writings of the Breisach-type, it will be, in part, an argument for the inclusion of Hebrew Scriptures in such a survey. Like its Greek counterparts the Hebrew Scriptures were formative in the understanding of the nature of history-writing. The Hebrew Scriptures in turn were influential in Christian understandings of the nature of history. Thus both the Old and New Testament portions of the Bible are important texts in the history of historiography and biography.

This chapter is divided into two basic sections—the Old and New Testament—and each of the two sections explores two fundamental questions. The first section on the Old Testament asks whether the OT is historical. A great deal of scholarship has been produced in answer to this question and I will simply sketch a basic outline of it. I agree with those who understand that the intent of the OT authors was to write about what actually happened. The second question the OT section asks is whether the OT is biographical. On this matter little secondary scholarship from the last fifty years or so has been written. In fact it is difficult to find the word biography listed in the index of texts that deal with the history of the OT. Here I discuss my observations of the character of the biographical sketches of the OT. The second section, on the New Testament, asks the same two questions. Is the NT historical? Is the NT biographical?

¹Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994).

²From this point on I will refer to the Hebrew Scriptures as the Old Testament and use the abbreviation OT to indicate the Old Testament. I will abbreviate the New Testament as NT.

What is the importance of it being so? These observations are important in my argument particularly in comparison with texts of the ancient, medieval and modern world. The primary importance of this section is to establish the critical and edifying intent of the Biblical authors—which later Christian biographers will also have. The secondary importance of this section is to establish that the Biblical authors understood that edification had to be rooted in an actual past in order to be edifying.

Is the Old Testament historical? To enter into a discussion about the historicity of the Old Testament is to enter into a scholarly field with more than the usual polarization and lack of consensus. There are a number of positions on the question of historicity. At one end of the spectrum there are scholars who argue that the Old Testament presents very little historically reliable information. In what follows I will discuss the work of Niels Peter Lemche, Philip Davies and Thomas Thompson. These scholars contend that the Old Testament texts contain a *minimum* of historical information. Moving towards the other end of the spectrum are scholars who, to varying degrees, contend that the OT is a reasonable portrait of what happened. I will discuss the work of Iain Provan, V. Philips Long and Tremper Longman III.

Although the debate about the historical value of the OT may be contentious, I note that the debate itself is similar to that in the analysis of Classical texts. I have discussed some scholars of Greek and Roman historical texts who are highly sceptical of the historical reliability of these texts. Others are more confident that when the Greek and Roman authors set out to write history their attempt, at least, was to the best of their ability. The historicity question is not just a confessional issue and you do not have to be a religious believer to think that the ancient texts are in some way reliable histories. I comment, secondly, that the question of the reliability of ancient texts, be they Hebrew or Greek, is not the same as questions about the validity or non-validity of a religious tradition. While this comment seems patently obvious regarding ancient Greek and Roman texts, it can become blurred in the discussion of Biblical

texts—by both those who hold that the Bible has a low degree of reliability and those who hold that the Bible has a high degree of reliability. Indeed, the importance that the OT places on knowledge of the events of the past, and the relationship of these past events to faith, contributes to the difficulty.

With these words of caution I return to further discussion of the nature of OT history. Within the question of the historicity of the OT are two related questions which can be conflated but if teased apart can illuminate the discussion. The first question is whether the authors of the OT intended to write history. The second question pertains to the performance of a historian. Is the author able to follow through on the intention to write history? Biblical books like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, for example, are not intended to be historical narratives. In other texts the intention is less clear. Many scholars have come to regard the book of Jonah as a parable that was always intended to be read as a parable. Similarly, many scholars (although not all) understand that the first three chapters of Genesis (or possibly the first eleven chapters) are myth and were intended as myth. It is not my intention to engage that particular question but rather to simply note that there is an important shift between Genesis 11 and 12 and thus there is justification for beginning my discussion with Abraham.³ For my purposes, I am taking Genesis 12 – II Chronicles as the historical section of the OT.⁴ In that section, however, I omit the book

³Early in the nineteenth century Hermann Gunkel identified a shift between the P source in Genesis 2:4 – 11:32 and the J and E sources in Genesis 11:30 and following. *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1997), 1. Later in the century Gerhard von Rad divided Genesis into what he called primeval history and patriarchal history and made Genesis 12:10 the dividing point. Although he agreed with Gunkel's assessment of the switch between P and J as being located at Genesis 11:30. *Genesis* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1972), 5. Tremper Longman III calls Genesis 1-11 the preamble to chapters 12-36. *How to Read Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 126. Three other scholars also divide their analysis of Genesis at this point. See John Rogerson, R.W.L. Moberly and William Johnstone, *Genesis and Exodus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001).

⁴There are different opinions as to which OT books constitute the historical narrative. F.F. Bruce categorized the books from Joshua to Esther as the Historical Books. *The Books and the Parchments: Some Chapters on the Transmission of the Bible*, revised edition (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1963), 89. A. Abela assumes that the historical narrative extends from Exodus to 2 Kings. She wonders whether the author of Genesis intended Genesis to be an introduction to the primary history of the subsequent section. "Is Genesis the Introduction of the Primary History?" in *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction and History*, ed. A. Wénin (Leuven: Leuven University, 2001), 400. Victor Hamilton states that it is common to refer to "the corpus of biblical books from Joshua through Esther as the Historical Books." *Handbook to the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 13.

of Ruth as it is currently the subject of debate as to its historical intent. Ruth may be a parable or didactic *novella* not intended as a historical text.⁵

A number of scholars are sceptical of both the intent and performance of history-writing in the OT historical books. Here we will briefly consider the work of Niels Lemche, Philip R. Davies and Tom Thompson. Niels Lemche comments on the discovery of the Merneptah stele and the inclusion of the name of the state of Israel on that archaeological find by saying that there is no proof of political or ethnic continuity between the state of Israel as it existed in the distant past and the state of Israel as it is represented in the Old Testament. “The only thing the two entities [the real political Israel of the past and the literary Israel of the OT] may have had in common is the *name*.”⁶ Later in the same article Lemche refines this position by stating that it is possible that the OT writers may have included something that eventually turns out to be historically accurate. The writers themselves, however, had no “concrete idea” of what might have happened or when.⁷ Rather, all that the writers of the OT did was put popular, oral tradition into a literary format. In short, Lemche believes that the authors of the OT lacked the methodological tools necessary to write a historical document even if they did intend to write history. The historical accounts in the OT might have some accurate information but this will be the exception rather than the rule.

As has already been discussed with Herodotus, however, it is sometimes uncanny how much oral report can turn out to be correct. Herodotus claimed to have travelled about the world (as he knew it) collecting and repeating the stories of the various areas he went to. If the OT authors and editors collected the oral reports of the Hebrew people, then historical sections of the OT would seem to be at least history of the same level as Herodotus. The status of

⁵André LaCocque, *Ruth: A Continental Commentary*, trans. K.C. Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004), 2. Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 262-262. Victor Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004).

⁶Niels Peter Lemche, “Is It Still Possible to Write a History of Ancient Israel?” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 8 (1994): 170.

⁷*Ibid.*, 183.

Herodotus as historian has greatly increased in the last two decades. Perhaps the same might happen for the authors of the OT.

A second scholar is sceptical about the historical nature of the OT. Like Lemche, Philip Davies believes that the Old Testament is at best a sketchy picture of what really happened in ancient Palestine. Davies explains that the word “Israel” represents three different and not necessarily overlapping ideas. The first Israel is a literary, more precisely Biblical, representation. The second Israel is a historical entity, or, to put it another way, the second Israel is what actually happened to those people who lived in Palestine during the Iron Age irrespective of what was written or not written about them. The third Israel is what scholars have reconstructed about the past based on information from the first and second Israel.⁸ Davies believes that the first Israel, the Biblical record, has prevented the second Israel from being represented. Davies sees his task as giving a voice to the real characters and real societies of this era that have been “obliterated by a literary construct.”⁹ He understands that his task is in conflict with the first Israel, in fact that “biblical scholarship is guilty of a retrojective imperialism, which displaces an otherwise unknown and uncared-for population in the interests of an ideological construct.”¹⁰ While Lemche sees the authors of the OT as lacking the critical tools necessary to write a reasonably accurate account of the past Davies views that matter with greater scepticism, believing that the authors of the texts and the later canonization of the text have prevented the second Israel from emerging in a responsible form of third Israel. From the perspective of the second Israel the effect of the Biblical history has been malevolent, whether it was intended that way or not.

Thomas Thompson, a third scholar who doubts the historical nature of the OT, takes the sceptical discussion in another direction that is nevertheless complementary to the ideas of

⁸Philip R. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament), 11.

⁹*Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

Lemche and Davies. For Thompson the stories of the patriarchs, for example,

are not historical, nor do they intend to be historical: they are rather historically determined expressions about Israel and Israel's relationship to its God, given in forms legitimate to their time, and their truth lies not in their facticity, nor in their historicity, but in their ability to express the reality that Israel experienced.¹¹

The reality that the Israelites experienced which Thompson is referring to is the Babylonian exile of the Hebrews. Thus for Thompson the OT is the text that the Jewish people needed in order to come to terms with their exile. While Lemche allowed that it might be possible for the OT texts to accidentally reveal something historically accurate, Thompson is less willing to make such a concession. Thompson views the OT texts as intentional fictions that communicate a mostly imagined past to alleviate the difficulties of a present reality. Thompson's position, if re-framed in the context of my thesis question, would hold that edification does not have to be rooted in what really happened in the past. The OT provides a history that justifies the attitudes and actions of the Hebrews not with an account of what did happen but with what the authors wanted to have happened. If there is historical value, it is that it reveals the concerns of the authors or editors of the post-exilic period. This kind of argument is similar to what is currently the *modus operandi* of scholars of medieval biography. These scholars state that while medieval biographies reveal very little of the subject, their historical value is in the unintentional historical illumination of the author and the author's original audience. This point shall be taken up at length in the chapter on medieval biography.

Again, Davies's and Thompson's discussion of the OT has its counterpart in the Classical field. T.P. Wiseman believes that despite claims to the contrary ancient Roman historians let present needs outweigh critical historical enquiry. Tacitus is Wiseman's primary example. Tacitus made up large sections of his histories in part because he was attempting to ingratiate himself to the Emperor Trajan. Tacitus's bias—the desire to show how good Trajan

¹¹Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), 330.

was as an Emperor in comparison to previous Emperors—was motive for a highly skewed literary construct. But Tacitus is not the only ancient who can be characterized thus but rather bias so coloured the history-writing of the Roman authors, at least, that today's reader shouldn't put too much trust in the texts they produced. Wiseman was countered by John Marincola as previously discussed. Marincola is not convinced that the Greek and Roman historians let present day concerns cloud their histories to the point where they should be regarded as fictive literary constructs.

The work of Lemche, Davies, Thompson and others has provided many important and insightful critiques. First, all three of these scholars rightly critique those who look to the OT only to support their theology and especially those Christians who look to the history of the OT to support their theology of the New Testament.¹² The history of the OT is an important topic in itself. Second, all three scholars encourage a greater appreciation for the literary character of the OT. Whether it is Lemche's position that the Biblical authors just could not write good history despite what might have been their best efforts or Davies's assertion that the OT texts have a repressive and silencing effect, or whether Thompson's understanding that the authors did not intend to write history, their scholarship encourages today's reader to pay greater attention to the literary quality of the text. It does not, however, bode well for discussion of the OT as a model of critical history. These authors are willing to concede that the intent of the OT was edifying in one way or another but do not think that the authors or editors were able or possibly did not even desire to write accurately about the past.

Lemche, Davies and Thompson are representative of one side of the debate. Other scholars disagree. The work of these other scholars seems most persuasive to me. As I am inclined to see a reasonable attempt to get things right in the Greek authors, I see no reason not to grant the Hebrew authors equal treatment. Thomas Jefferson once, reportedly, told his

¹²Ibid., 329.

nephew to read the Bible as he would Livy or Herodotus.¹³ And so I shall do—with my critical faculties functioning but with some wonderment as to why I should be expected to maintain a high degree of doubt when plausible explanations exist.

I will return to the same question posited above. Did the authors or editors of the OT texts intend to write history? The question of intentionality was discussed by Baruch Halpern in *The First Historians*. Halpern's thesis is that some of the OT authors, "those who wrote works recognizably historical—had authentic antiquarian intentions. They meant to furnish fair and accurate representations of Israelite antiquity."¹⁴ Halpern is arguing against those who say that the Israelites were either incapable of distinguishing between history and myth or chose not to distinguish between the two. The Israelites both could and did.¹⁵ Halpern focuses on the brief story of Ehud and his murder of the Moabite king, Eglon, (as reported in Judges 3:12-30) to demonstrate that the intent of the author was historical rather than imaginative. Halpern states that analysis of the text itself cannot, of course, prove that the event happened. Rather Halpern is countering Robert Alter who suggests that because the story of Ehud is written with exceptional skill, narrative economy and "whodunit" suspense, it must be historical fiction rather than historical.¹⁶ Halpern compares the Ehud text to another text of obvious historical intent and suggests how the author of the Ehud narrative worked with oral sources. Far from inventing the story, the author is instead attempting to find the true historical account of the events which had likely become exaggerated in the oral reports. The end result, argues Halpern, is that the "Ehud account is not 'fictionalized history,' in the sense of historical romance. It is history defictionalized."¹⁷

The next question would be how successful were they? In *The Art of Biblical History* V.

¹³ Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 16.

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵ Ibid., 268-269.

¹⁶ Ibid., 61.

¹⁷ Ibid., 66.

Philips Long has set out a number of criteria by which any history could be evaluated but is in particular meant for the evaluation of the OT.¹⁸ A reliable historical document must have internal consistency and external consistency. An evaluation of internal consistency is completed primarily through literary analysis. Robert Alter has done much work on the literary analysis of the OT and in particular in narrative analysis of the historical sections of the OT.¹⁹ The title of Long's text is a deliberate play on Alter's title. Long agrees with Alter's assertion that if a reader wants to understand the historical claims of the OT writers it is imperative that readers undertake careful narrative analysis to check for internal consistency as well as to understand what claims the authors are actually making about the past. External consistency can be checked by comparing a historical section of the OT with other Biblical texts, with other non-Biblical texts of the same period, and by comparing the historical section with material remains such as those discovered by archaeologists.²⁰ Long's text sets out the criteria for evaluation.

A later work by Iain Provan, V. Philips Long and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, is an extended interaction with the historical passages of the OT in which these three authors examine the text for internal and external consistency. Provan, Long and Longman conclude instead that you cannot just know that the OT does not provide a reasonably accurate account of the past.²¹ Provan, Long and Longman argue that careful narrative analysis does not allow for the conclusion that the historical sections of the OT cannot have happened. In fact, careful textual work may reveal that the historical sections of the OT actually present what may be at least a logical and coherent presentation which does not obviously conflict with archaeological discoveries. Perhaps the Old Testament does not describe what actually happened but at the very least it cannot be stated with certainty that it did not happen as the OT

¹⁸V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).

¹⁹Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

²⁰Long, 186-195.

²¹Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2003).

describes it.

Other scholars agree with Provan, Long and Longman at some level. One archaeologist, William Dever, has similarly rejected the minimalist position. He sees a symbiotic relationship between the interpretation of the material remains and the reading of the Biblical account.²² Dever does not think that every historical claim made by the authors of the OT is accurate. Dever is particularly sceptical about the books of Exodus and Numbers because he says that the archaeological record does not bear out the claims of massive conquest.²³ Nevertheless, Dever does not think that the Biblical record fails as a historical record. He believes that various Biblical authors had some reliable sources which they used well. Certainly the authors felt free to manipulate their sources but this does not make the authors outright liars. Rather it simply demonstrates a naïve view of history not unlike other ancient histories. What Dever argues for is the search for what he calls convergences. Convergences are those places where archaeology and literary text enhance each other. The book of Judges, according to Dever, is one of those places where the Biblical record and archaeological record indicate a great deal of convergence. In such cases the Bible and the archaeological record help to interpret one another.²⁴

As I find the arguments of Provan, Long and Longman persuasive, I will simply defer to their work on the matter of historical accuracy. I do, however, want to comment on some comparisons between the OT and the ancient Greek authors that seem pertinent to my discussion. The first is on the role of the author or editor in the texts of the OT as compared to the Greek authors, especially Herodotus and Polybius. The Biblical author is about as hidden as

²²William Dever, *Who Were the Ancient Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003). John Bright would be another example of an archaeologist who would understand the biblical text and archaeological record as congruent for the most part. *A History of Israel* 4th ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

²³Provan, Long and Longman have countered Dever's arguments in *A Biblical History of Israel* by saying that a close textual analysis of Exodus and Numbers does not really make a claim for a rapid and massive conquest. Rather, sections that do so should be viewed as rhetorical posturing which evidence from within the same book counters. See *A Biblical History of Israel*, 148-156.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 226-228.

can be in a narrative. As has been discussed previously, Herodotus was constantly telling his audience about his sources and providing his reader with two or three versions of the same story. Herodotus will sometimes indicate which version of the story he finds persuasive and at other times he says that he will let the reader decide which version is the most likely to be true. Polybius sees no reason why his text shouldn't be interrupted for sometimes lengthy stretches if he feels there is a need to discuss either methods or morals.

This kind of overt, authorial or editorial interaction with sources and material simply does not occur in the Bible. The Biblical authors would approve of modern historians who claim that they will not interrupt their narratives with such kinds of discussions. Close literary analysis of the Bible is necessary because both the historical intent and the edifying content is implicit in the uninterrupted narrative. The Bible allows the reader to appropriate the lessons of the text without authorial moralizing and it expects the reader to understand that what is given is a historical account. In fact, historians who would otherwise distrust the historical accuracy of the Bible might consider the implications of the way in which modern history follows the form of the Bible. Thomas Cahill has argued that the Hebrew Scriptures radically altered the way in which the Western world understood time, history and the writing of history.²⁵ By extension, I observe that this influence has gone even further than Cahill suggested. The Hebrews not only influenced conceptions of time but how history was written. What is especially noticeable in the Hebrew Scriptures is the rejection of the obvious authorial presence in a text. Christian historians today, at least those who do not claim to be writing authoritative scripture in their accounts, might wonder if the Bible is the norm they want to follow or if the Greek models might be more useful for a narrative that attempts to be both critical and edifying. Although for a purely critical text perhaps the Biblical model of absent author or editor might be the best

²⁵Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 1998).

choice.

A further question about the historicity of the OT is why history was important to the Hebrew people? Like the early Greek historians the writers or editors of the OT insist that the past is knowable, explainable and can be recorded in a written text. The Old Testament, however, raises the stakes much higher than the Greek historians would have ever considered. Should a Greek historian write up an historical account that would prove to be false the worst consequence of this would be an embarrassed author. It would be unlikely that Greek identity would be regarded as suspect and certainly Greek religion would not need to be re-evaluated.

The historical claims of the Old Testament are much weightier than the Greek historians. Should the historical accounts of the Old Testament prove to be historically untrue, the identity of the Israelite people would be in question. Worse, if the historical claims of the Old Testament are indeed wrong, then the faith of those who believe in that text would be similarly fictitious. A number of passages in the OT demonstrate this point. The book of Deuteronomy begins with Moses speaking—but this time not as a law-giver, not as a judge, and not as a miracle-worker. The Israelites have come to the end of their journey in the wilderness and are about to enter the Promised Land. Moses speaks to the people of Israel primarily as a historian. The text states that “Moses undertook to expound this law as follows.”²⁶ What follows this verse is not a repetition of the Decalogue or of the instructions for the various rituals and festivals, as you might expect after being told that you were about to hear a speech about the law, but rather Moses recalls the history of the Israelite people.

The history that Moses gives begins autobiographically. More specifically, Moses begins the story of the history of Israel by recalling that at one point Moses had found the task of leading the Israelites to be unbearable and so Moses had delegated his leadership task by appointing leaders for each of the tribes. The personal appropriation of the meaning of the past,

²⁶Deuteronomy 1:5

that all who are listening are supposed to implement, is first undertaken by Moses. Moses then recalls the wandering in the wilderness after leaving Mount Horeb and the Israelites' refusal to enter into the Promised Land when they first came there because of the many and fearsome people who already lived there. The hardships of the desert years are recounted as well as the defeat of King Sihon of Heshbon and King Og of Bashan. Moses's history has many lessons that the people are to appreciate. One such lesson is the reminder that the people of Israel had been here at this place before but that their lack of faith at that point in time had had serious consequences: forty years of nomadic life in the desert. Recalling the past functions as an exhortation to choose differently this time. The repetition of history also reassures the people that God was and continues to be with them. Remember the defeat of Sihon and Og? It was God who gave you the victory over these kings who were much stronger than you. God will surely give you the same support once you go into the Promised Land.

Finally and most importantly, the historical record is the reason for obeying God. Israel obeys God because they have seen God's hand in history. With their own eyes they have seen the works of God and with their own ears they have heard God speak. Because the Israelites have seen and known what God did in the past, they know what they are to do in the present.²⁷ Perhaps the most important passage of this section is found in chapter six.

When your children ask you in time to come, "What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?" then you shall say to your children, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case."²⁸

The same logic is evident in many other passages of which I will mention only two. The first passage is Leviticus 22:33: "I who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I

²⁷Deuteronomy 4:1-20.

²⁸Deuteronomy 6:20-24.

am the Lord.”²⁹ The historical logic of this passage seems to be fairly straightforward and yet audacious. God brought the people of Israel out of Egypt—a real event in history. Should this event prove not to be true, something just made up, then any possibility that the Israelites are serving the right God evaporates. But the author is so confident that it did happen and that this event was known to be true that the author does not blanch in the face of such a bold claim.

The second passage is found in Psalms 135-136. Psalm 135 begins with a command to praise and an acknowledgement of his power in creation. In verse eight the Psalm makes a significant shift from creation to an account of the works of history.

He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants. He struck down many nations and killed mighty kings—Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan, and all the kingdoms of Canaan—and gave their land as a heritage, a heritage to his people Israel.³⁰

Psalm 136 is an extended version with the same theme. The first nine verses are a command to praise God for his creation. The remaining sixteen verses are a command to praise God for his works in history. This history begins with the story of the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt.

Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. . . .who struck Egypt through their firstborn, . . . and brought Israel out from among them, . . . who divided the Red Sea in two, . . . and made Israel pass through the midst of it, . . . but overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, . . . who led his people through the wilderness, . . . who struck down great kings, . . . and killed famous kings, . . . Sihon, King of the Amorites, . . . and Og, king of Bashan, . . . and gave their land as a heritage, . . . a heritage to his servant Israel.³¹

To those familiar with the tenets of Hebrew and Christian faith, that familiarity has likely softened the shock of these claims. The past is knowable and the past is where God has revealed himself. Each of the events that are recalled in that Psalm is followed by the phrase, “His steadfast love endures forever.” To know the past is to know who God is. Therefore, if the past

²⁹This refrain is repeated frequently in the OT. See Numbers 15:41, Judges 6:8-10, I Samuel 2:27-28, and I Samuel 12:6-15 as a few examples.

³⁰Psalm 125:8-12.

³¹Psalm 136: 10-22.

is unknowable, God is unknowable. If the exodus from Egypt is unknowable, God's goodness and love are unknowable. Few other peoples of that time, or perhaps since, have made such claims about the past. People of this faith tradition, be they Jews, Christians or Muslims, have a powerful reason to ask, "did it really happen?"

The second of the large questions of this section is whether the OT is biographical. Unlike the question of historicity, the topic of biography in the Old Testament has received little scholarly attention. One of the few texts on the subject is Ilana Pardes's *The Biography of Ancient Israel*. This text, however, seeks to understand the first five books of the OT as a biographical unit but not as biographies of individuals. Pardes discusses how to read Genesis to Deuteronomy as the biography of the nation of Israel. As such, in Genesis we see the infancy of the nation of Israel and we are able to progress through the adolescence and finally on to the adulthood of the nation of Israel as the reader moves through the five books.³² Biographical dictionaries of the OT exist.³³ The sole entry under the subject heading "Old Testament—Biography—History and Criticism in the University of British Columbia library data base is *Moses in America: The Cultural Uses of Biblical Narrative*.³⁴ To the best of my knowledge, there is little monograph length work available on the biography of the OT. Given how much biographical information there is in the OT, I would expect texts with titles like, *How to Read Genesis*, to provide some discussion on how to read biographically. While such texts provide excellent discussions on how to read the OT as literature, as theology and as history, there is little on how to read the Bible as biography.³⁵

Thus, we turn to the text of the Old Testament to examine its biographical character. At

³²Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2000).

³³Joan Comay, *Who's Who in the Old Testament, Together with the Apocrypha* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971).

³⁴Melanie Wright, *Moses in America: The Cultural Uses of Biblical Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003).

³⁵Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005). Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

first glance it may seem the height of obvious to state that much of the OT is a succession of biographies. In fact some might say that a succession of biographies is what makes up the writing of history. However, when you compare the OT with Herodotus, it is notable that contemporaneous historical documents could be written differently. The OT is different from Herodotus in two important ways. The first way is the degree to which biography dominates the text and the second way is the different message each text gives about how to live in relationship to the Gods, or God, as the case may be.

In the first comparison I note that there are certainly many places where Herodotus focuses on a particular individual but he also has large sections devoted to discussions of a society. The customs, religious rites, and social institutions of the Egyptians and Scythians, for example, fascinated Herodotus, and he devoted entire books to this kind of information. The authors and editors of the OT shared this interest too, albeit expressed in a different form and with a focus on one people rather than many peoples. In the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, for example, there is much information about the religious practices of the Israelites. Information about what the priests wore, the kinds of utensils that were used, the dimensions of the tabernacle (the place of worship), what was said and done at a religious ritual, and when the rituals were to be performed, is given in a degree of detail that would have made Herodotus envious. However, the OT remains focused on biography in a way that Herodotus does not. Eventually the event of the Persian wars takes over the narrative. In the OT historical writings, events do not overshadow people. The exodus from Egypt or the creation of the monarchy are events that are told through biographical portraits. The reason for this becomes clearer when considering the second way that biographies differ between Herodotus and the OT.

This second difference is a result of the different conceptions about ultimate reality that each text takes to be true. Herodotus is fascinated by Fate and the way in which a person's life demonstrates the favour and disfavour of Fate. But Fate is a highly impersonal God. The hand of

Fate is as observable in the events of the time as in the events of a person's life. As a result, Herodotus is free to follow or abandon biographical narrative as he pleases. Later the Romans will allow event to include the non-human world and lightning strikes and the flights of birds will be understood as events that reveal what Fate has determined. These kinds of reports are included at the beginning and end of Livy's books of history. The biographies of the OT want to demonstrate how to live as a person of God. This OT God, however, is a highly personal God who speaks directly to individuals. There is very little of the kind of divination of animal entrails that was common elsewhere in the ancient world.³⁶ That this God is a personal God who speaks is revealed in the biographical character of the history-writing of the OT. It is not surprising that a text that believes in a personal God who speaks to individuals directly and a text that is at the same time attempting to teach its readers to live as a person of God (of *this* God) would chose to write its history as a kind of portrait gallery of people who chose (or did not choose) to live as a person of God. What is surprising is the lack of discussion in the scholarship of the last several decades on the biographical character of the OT.

The gallery of biographical portraits begins with Abram, who is later called Abraham, in chapter twelve of Genesis. Before that are the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Able, and Noah and his sons but these people are vague, shadowy figures. With Abraham we feel like we move get to meet our first knowable person of history. There are four important observations to be made about the biographical character of the history-writing of the OT. These four points are: (1) the realistically human nature of the subjects; (2) the distinctiveness of each subject; (3) the balanced portrayal of a subject's character; (4) the inclusion of female subjects in the text. I will demonstrate the first point about the character of Biblical biography by referring to the life of

³⁶This is not to say that there was no divination-style practices discussed in the OT. I am suggesting, however, that God's preferred way of communicating with people was to talk to them directly. God would, however, "speak" to people using these kinds of devices if necessary. Consider the story of Gideon as told in Judges 6:11-40. God sent an angel to Gideon to tell him God's message directly. But Gideon did not believe the angel and demanded a sign. Only after the sign was performed did he believe.

Abraham.

When Hesiod looked back to the time before his own, he saw heroes and demigods. But even in the earliest persons the OT rejects the idea of gods and heroes and instead demonstrates a respect for the humanness of the subjects. Throughout the Biblical text the subjects are ordinary people rather than superheroes and certainly not gods. And so with the story of Abraham, the first of the patriarchs, a real human character emerges. Chapter eleven of Genesis recounts the genealogy of Abraham beginning with Shem, the son of Noah, and ending with Terah the father of Abraham. Abraham feels like someone that can be known, at least in part, because he is so ordinary. He had an ordinary family, life events, and location. He had a father, Terah, and brothers, Nahor and Haran. One of his brothers, Haran, died leaving his son Lot, Abraham's nephew, to be raised by Terah. Abraham had a wife, Sarai (later called Sarah), and a sister-in-law, Milcah, who was married to Nahor. The family of Terah came from Ur but Terah and all that remained of his family moved to the city of Haran in Canaan where Terah died. Nevertheless a succession of extraordinary events occurred in the life of this very human person. Even so, Abraham remains a rather plain human being as these events occur to him and are not of his own genesis—this is the genesis of God's people but a genesis not directed by sometimes painfully human individuals. Extraordinary events do not originate with the subject, as in the stories of Hercules, for example, but are initiated and enacted by God.

Someone or something that Abraham recognizes as the LORD told him to leave Haran for a place which the LORD says he will show him. And so Abraham began a process of wandering which continued for the rest of his life. First to the wilderness of Canaan, then to Egypt and then into the Negeb region, Abraham increased in wealth and social status. If it were not for the fact that his journey had been commanded by the LORD it would have been an altogether ordinary affair, albeit with interesting aspects, as for example the Egyptian Pharaoh's marital interest in Sarah and Lot's capture by the kings of Canaan. Then, however, Abraham had

a vision in which the LORD promised to make Abraham into a great nation. His descendants, promised the LORD, would be like the stars in the sky. If Abraham had been like some of the pioneering families of the American new world, with children numbering in the teens, this might not have been a particularly impressive promise but Abraham and Sarah were old and past the years when children were a possibility. To such an extraordinary promise Abraham and Sarah reacted in ordinary human ways that are almost predictable. They doubted the promise. Sarah even laughed out loud at the absurdity. Sarah and Abraham attempted to rationalize the promise by interpreting the promise to mean that the young and still fertile maid of Sarah, Hagar, should act as a surrogate mother for the child which Abraham would then take for his own. And again everyone acted in all too predictably human ways. Hagar gets pregnant by Abraham and lashed it over Sarah. Sarah retaliated by treating Hagar badly. Abraham failed to act like the head of the household to institute peace and good relationships and allowed Sarah to do whatever she wanted to Hagar. Hagar, like many other abused young women, decided to run away.

It is to these highly ordinary human people that extraordinary events continue to occur. Hagar too encountered the extraordinary. When Hagar ran away she was met and comforted by an angel who told her to return to Sarah for the son that will be born to her, Ishmael, would also be the father of a great nation. Finally, Sarah had the most extraordinary event of them all. She became pregnant at a very old age and had a son named Isaac. Yet, despite all these extraordinary experiences, these people continue to act in all too human ways. As Isaac grew Sarah became jealous for Isaac's rightful inheritance and wanted to be rid of the now superfluous heir, Ishmael. A jealous Sarah told Abraham to send Hagar away. Rather than attempting the difficult task of mediating the relationship between the two women that have borne his sons, Abraham again took the easy way out and choose to end the problem by sending Hagar and Ishmael into the desert, essentially to die. This time Hagar did not run away but rather she and her son were cast out of the family. The extraordinary again occurs. An angel

appeared to Hagar to comfort her. A well was revealed to Hagar and it was enough to sustain her and Ishmael. Against all odds mother and son survived, the son grew, and Hagar found a wife for her son. Ishmael became a great nation. Abraham's actions against Hagar and Ishmael came close to destroying the possibility that Ishmael would be the father of a nation. The LORD had to intervene with the extraordinary in order to prevent the expected from occurring.

Abraham's actions, however, pale in comparison to the threat of the LORD himself. All of Abraham's hopes to be made into a great nation now rested on Isaac. As Isaac grew Abraham again heard a command from the LORD—to kill his son, his only son, the son whom Abraham loved, his son Isaac. This Abraham did, or at least intends to do until the very last moment when the LORD intervened to stop Abraham. Isaac was to be spared, the LORD said, because it was now clear that Abraham would not withhold anything from the LORD. Instead of Isaac a ram was placed on the sacrificial alter. After this final extraordinary event in Abraham's life, the predictable again becomes the norm. Sarah died in old age and Abraham engaged in lengthy negotiations with his neighbours in order to purchase land for Sarah's burial place. Isaac grew and Abraham found a wife for his son. Abraham put his servant a charge of finding an appropriate wife from amongst Abraham's kin and bringing her back for Isaac. A woman named Rebekah returned with the servant and married Isaac. Abraham, the elderly widower, remarried. He died and was buried next to Sarah.

The second point about the biographical character of the OT pertains to the respect shown for the distinctive individuality of each of the people discussed. Subjects are uniquely themselves. This is not to say that the various individuals do not experience similar life events or emotions. Many of the people whose life stories are recorded in the OT are described as having been favoured by God, protected by God and even talked with God. God made similar promises to different people. God promised both Abraham and Hagar that each of their respective sons would be a father of a great nation. Later, God made the same promise and

proposal to Moses which, shockingly, Moses declined.³⁷ Yet these people were all distinctly different from one another. The OT has respect for the individual characteristics of people.

Abraham is not like the other patriarchs, not even his own son. Isaac, the one for whom there was much expectation and anticipation, has a bit of an anti-climatic persona as the next character in the OT narrative. Whereas Abraham was constantly on the move and initiating events as he saw fit, Isaac is portrayed as sedentary and passive at every turn. It was Abraham who arranged for one of his servants to fetch a bride for Isaac while Isaac waited at home for Rebekah to arrive. All the intrigue of winning a wife that should have been Isaac's, (and which you would expect in the protagonist of a story), was acted out instead by the servant.³⁸ That Isaac is the only patriarch to have only one wife is more likely due to the fact that Abraham died before he could arrange for any more wives and that Rebekah did not suggest taking one of her maids for a wife rather than due to any deliberate decision on Isaac's part.³⁹ When Isaac built a well and others claimed that the well was theirs, Isaac did not fight with them but rather built another well elsewhere. And when those who lived around that well claimed that it was their well, Isaac moved on and built another well in a place where no one would want to claim it was, actually, their well.⁴⁰

Isaac and Rebekah had twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Of Esau we know only a little. He was hairy, liked hunting, married a Canaanite woman who "made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah" and was the favourite son of Isaac.⁴¹ Jacob, by contrast, we know much of and furthermore the portrait that is painted of Jacob is quite different than that of his father. Jacob was Rebekah's favourite son and when Isaac was old and it was time for the blessing to be given from the father to the eldest son, Rebekah conspired with Jacob to steal the blessing from Esau.

³⁷Exodus 32:10.

³⁸Genesis 24: 1-66

³⁹It is possible that Joseph also had only one wife.

⁴⁰Genesis 26: 17-25.

⁴¹Genesis 26:35.

Although Jacob will become a deceitful character in the episodes that follow, it must be noted that in the stealing of the blessing Rebekah was the real “brains of the operation.” Isaac instructed Esau to hunt for some game and prepare a stew for Isaac after which Isaac would bless Esau. Overhearing Isaac’s instructions Rebekah instructed Jacob to kill a goat and give her the meat to make into Isaac’s favourite dish. Furthermore, Jacob should put the skin of the goat on his arms in order to imitate the hairy arms of his elder brother. Jacob took the stew his mother made and went to his nearly blind father to receive the blessing. Although Isaac was initially suspicious (he said that the voice sounded like Jacob’s but the hair was Esau’s), Isaac remained a passive figure to the very end and blessed Jacob rather than investigate the matter further.⁴² Rebekah and Jacob were deceitful in a way that Isaac, seemingly, can only vaguely comprehend any person as being capable of.

How different Jacob is from Isaac is made clear in the difference between the story of how Jacob found a wife as compared to Isaac’s story. Isaac, unlike Abraham, did not arrange for Jacob’s marriage (as he had not for Esau’s either). Rather it was Rebekah who initiated Jacob’s journey to find a wife. Rebekah told Isaac that her life was weary because of the Canaanite women that Esau had married and if Jacob were to do the same her life would not be worth living. Therefore Rebekah sent Jacob to her brother’s house to find a wife there.⁴³ There will be no servant stand-in for this courtship.

Jacob is unlike either his father or his grandfather in other ways as well. Jacob was an opportunist who had the ability to act cleverly and deceitfully, and chose to exercise that ability on several occasions. But at the same time Jacob desired to be godly. Long before Isaac sensed that death was near and sought to bestow his blessing, Jacob took advantage of people to get what he wanted. In one example Esau returned home after a long hunting trip and was extremely

⁴²Genesis 27:1-29.

⁴³Genesis 27: 41-46.

hungry. Jacob saw his brother's condition and used that moment of physical weakness to convince Esau to trade his birthright for the food that Jacob had made (Jacob, like his mother, seems to have been an excellent cook). After deceiving Isaac and stealing his brother's blessing, Jacob had to flee from his brother who was so angry that he vowed to kill Jacob. Jacob was on the run but even he had to sleep at night. Out in the open Jacob fell asleep and received a divine vision of a great ladder between heaven and earth and angels ascending and descending the ladder. Then the voice of God promised Jacob that he would make Jacob into a great nation. When Jacob woke up he marvelled at the vision he had received saying: "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" and "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."⁴⁴ But Jacob quickly got over his awe and returned to his opportunistic character and told God: "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you."⁴⁵ It is practically a legal contract in which it is unclear who benefits more, God or Jacob. Nevertheless, it boded well for Jacob that his first reaction was one of praise to God and only after giving due glory to God did his less noble character emerge.

If it is true that those who live by the sword die by the sword it might also be true that those who deal out deceit will be dealt deceit. At least this was the case for Jacob. Jacob met his match in his uncle Laban, Rebekah's brother. When Jacob saw Laban's daughter, Rachel, he asked Laban for permission to marry her. Laban said that Jacob had to work as Laban's hired hand for seven years before Rachel could be his. So Jacob worked for seven years. On the wedding night, however, Laban gave his elder daughter, Leah, instead of Rachel to be Jacob's

⁴⁴Genesis 28:16-17.

⁴⁵Genesis 28:20-22.

wife. For some reason (possibly there was a lot of wine at the wedding feast) Jacob did not notice he had been given the wrong girl and slept with Leah. In the morning a startled Jacob quickly headed over to Laban to find out why Laban had done this to him. Laban explained that it is not the custom to marry the younger daughter before the elder and if Jacob wanted Rachel too, he would have to take them both, and furthermore, that he would have to work as a hired hand for another seven years to pay for Rachel. It is difficult, at this point, to feel overly sorry for Jacob given how he has treated his family members and even his God.

A sub-point in the respect shown for the individual distinctness of the subjects in the OT is that the respect is accorded not only to the differing personalities that each person has but also to the distinctive nature of the individual's relationship with God. All three men had a distinctly different relationship with The Lord. Time and again when Abraham heard the LORD's voice commanding him to do something he obeyed. In response to God's instructions he left his country and moved to a new land, circumcised himself and all the men in his household, and, the most difficult command of all, agreed to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham is such a pro-active obey-er that he actually strays into disobedience. When God tarried, in Abraham's opinion too long, in providing him with a son, Abraham took the initiative for God and impregnated Hagar. This kind of relationship with God is in stark contrast to Isaac's relationship. Unlike his father who heard God speak frequently, Isaac did not hear God's voice. Even in what must have been the defining moment of his life, when he was bound and placed as a sacrificial victim on top of an altar, the text does not indicate that Isaac heard the voice of God. Abraham heard God speaking at that great and terrible moment, but did Isaac? There is no indication that he did. Unlike Abraham, Isaac never heard God promise him that he will be the father of a great nation. But neither does Isaac commit the great errors of either his father or his son. Isaac simply did what he knew to be right and peaceable all his life.

Jacob's relationship with God was different again from either his father or grandfather.

Jacob's relationship was not characterized by aggressive obedience or steady pacifism. Jacob literally wrestled with God. After long years of service to Laban Jacob decided to return to his homeland. Such a decision meant that he had to attempt to reconcile with Esau, who had vowed to kill Jacob. Jacob was, understandably, afraid. On the eve of that fateful reunion Jacob spent the night alone and met a strange man. The two wrestled through the night. The stranger struck Jacob in the hip and put the joint out of its socket. Still Jacob would not concede the fight but realizing that he was wrestling with God Jacob begged for a blessing. The blessing that he received was very different from what Jacob had asked for after his vision of the ladder. He was not given a promise of protection or wealth. The blessing that Jacob received was only this: a new name. He was no longer Jacob but Israel, the one who had striven with God and with humans and had prevailed.⁴⁶ The OT portrays Jacob's relationship with God as almost shockingly personal, intense, and quite different from his father's.

At the same time that the kind of relationship that these three men have with God is distinctly their own, all three were loved by God. Centuries later when God revealed himself to Moses God called himself the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. No distinctions were made between the three men. All three men were favoured by God and the patriarchs of God's people. Surely the mark of a good biography is concern to portray the distinctive character of the subject. The OT does this in both the personality of the subjects and the character of their relationship with God. The interest in biography is perhaps not surprising given what is said in the earliest chapters of Genesis. There the reader is told that God created Adam and Eve in his image. Human beings, who are descended from Adam and Eve, share this quality of being in God's image. It follows then that, first, human beings are interesting and significant and, second, human beings can learn from the behaviour of others. There is a kind of *humanism* in the Bible that is expressed in the interest in individuals.

⁴⁶Genesis 32: 22-32.

The previous retelling of Genesis 12-36 will be familiar to all that grew up attending synagogue or church. And perhaps the ability of a ten-year-old to recount all that has been presented on the flannel-graph board is better testimony of the biographical character of the OT than the opinion of scholarly secondary sources. For in those Sunday School lessons the individual characteristics of each of the subjects is typically plainly presented as part of a faithful retelling of the Biblical text. The respect for the individual character could be demonstrated by giving more examples as the stories of the patriarchs continues. Joseph, the son of Jacob, for example, is different again from his father. Jacob was a deceiver but Joseph was such a holier-than-thou do-gooder that Joseph's ten older brothers could not stand him (the elder ten brothers were far from saintly—apparently having inherited a bit more of Jacob's characteristics). Moses was a distinct person as well, as were Joshua, Gideon, Samson, and so forth. The portrait of the first three patriarchs, however, will have to suffice to make the point that the OT respects the individual characteristics of each person.

The third observation about biography in the OT has already been hinted at but further examination will demonstrate the point more fully. The OT respects the subject enough to present both the commendable and the reprehensible deeds of the subject. The OT does not gloss over or justify the ugly and evil deeds of the subject. Rather all that is unflattering is laid bare. Similarly, the deeds of faith and obedience are presented in a straight-forward manner. Interestingly, the OT is reticent to either overtly condemn particular actions or overly praise the good in a person. Often the text lets the telling of the actions themselves suffice for condemnation or praise. Those twenty-first century biographers, secular or Christian, who do the same share this methodological choice with the Biblical authors. The result of presenting both the triumph and failure of the Biblical subjects means that most of the subjects discussed are fairly balanced individuals. This helps create the impression that they are real people (and therefore helps to solidify the first observation I made about the characteristics of OT

biographical portraits). A balanced depiction of character is generally true for all subjects who receive more than merely cursory treatment. Joseph is perhaps an exception as in his adult life he is presented as nearly entirely praiseworthy. For the most part, the subjects of the OT are not plaster saints. Some examples will illustrate the point.

As already discussed, Abraham was capable of noble and praiseworthy actions but he could act with cunning and worse with a callousness that would bring about criminal charges in today's world. Abraham obeyed the call of God when he left Ur and moved to Canaan. However, the text has barely finished telling us of his move to Canaan, where God seems to be telling Abraham to go, when the text then informs us that Abraham has moved to Egypt. It is not entirely clear whether or not God wanted Abraham to go to Egypt. Whether this action was in obedience to God or demonstrated a lack of trust in God is not made explicit. Whatever the case, Abraham acted less than honestly while in Egypt. Sarah was a woman of apparent beauty. Abraham told Sarah that she should tell everyone that she was his sister lest anyone, in desiring Sarah, should kill Abraham thus freeing Sarah of the nuisance of a husband. Sarah caught the eye of none other than the Pharaoh of Egypt. Whether or not Pharaoh got around to sexual congress with Sarah is unclear but it is definitely clear that if it did not happen it was not Abraham who stopped the act. Rather God himself had to intervene by inflicting a plague on Pharaoh and his household. The plague ended when Pharaoh sent Sarah back to Abraham and gave Abraham great riches to boot. If Abraham was sorry for treating Sarah thus, it is not recorded. Furthermore, Abraham did the same thing again when he met King Abimelech of Gerar in the Negeb region. Again, it is a close thing that Sarah did not have sex with this man for Abraham was not going to intervene when Abimelech made it clear that this was his intention. God had to intervene again by sending a dream to Abimelech telling him of the truth

of the matter.⁴⁷ Again Abraham did not seem sorry for his actions—deceiving other men and treating Sarah like trade goods. He just welcomed the money he made in these near-affairs. The text implicitly criticizes Abraham. Both Pharaoh and Abimilech knew how wrong it would be to sleep with Abraham's wife and said so once they learned the truth. By everyone's standards but Abraham, Abraham has committed a terrible deed. And everyone but Abraham repented of the deed. In fact, these unwitting cuckold's did the repenting for Abraham.

Both the good and bad of Abraham are evident when comparing two further stories about him. In the first story Abraham demonstrated his piety by his actions towards three people he thought were strangers. Abraham treated them with the hospitality that his culture commended. He welcomed them to his tent, he washed their feet, he served them cakes that Sarah had made, and prepared a feast of choice meats and cheese.⁴⁸ Contrast this account with Abraham's treatment of Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar was dependant on Abraham for her very life. To be cast out of his household was to be given a sentence of slow death by yourself in the wilderness. Far worse, Hagar was a slave who had been his sexual partner and was the mother of his child, whom Abraham also sent away. Abraham intended to be complicit in the death of his own son. That this horrible act was not realized is due to the intervention of God, not Abraham. Abraham exhibited what was best and worst in a head of a household. Abraham might be an example of how to be a person of God but that does not mean that everything he did was commendable.

Other characters are similarly presented as having both redeeming and unholy characteristics as manifested in their words and actions. Moses, for example, obeyed and disobeyed God. When God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush Moses obeyed God's command to worship him. When God commanded Moses to return to Egypt and command

⁴⁷Genesis 20: 1-18.

⁴⁸Genesis 18: 1-15.

Pharaoh to free the Israelite slaves, Moses was less eager to comply. Moses gave a string of excuses to explain to God why he was unable to do this task. God became frustrated with Moses, not for the last time either, and it was an angry and exasperated God who responded that he would allow Aaron, the brother of Moses, to speak for Moses.⁴⁹ Much later in the text Moses asked to see God. It was a mark of how much Moses had faithfully served God that God agreed. Moses hid in a cave and God passed by the cave so that Moses saw God—not God’s face but God’s hinder parts.⁵⁰ Another time, the Israelites came to a place called Meribah where there was no water. Moses used the staff God had given him to strike the rock to make water flow for the Israelites to drink. He did not, however, give God the glory or invoke his name in this action. Moses acted as an independent miracle worker and God responded with judgement. As a consequence of his actions God told Moses that he would not be able to enter into the Promised Land.⁵¹ Moses was a great leader and a man of great faith but he too made serious mistakes.

Gideon is a figure in the book of Judges who similarly obeys God but also commits great sins. Although Gideon demanded God prove himself with a series of tests before Gideon would agree to obey God, Gideon did eventually agree to do as God commanded. As a result, Gideon defeated the Midianites of the area with only a small army of men. Furthermore, Gideon destroyed the altar of Baal. Although Gideon was faithful in these events, he ended his life in idolatry. Gideon made a gold idol and put it up in his hometown.⁵²

The fourth observation about the biography of the OT is with regard to the information given about women’s lives. Women are not represented to the degree that men are, as could be demonstrated by simply adding up the number of lines about men and comparing this number to those given to women. The balance would fall decidedly on the side of men. Furthermore, the

⁴⁹Exodus 3:1-4:17.

⁵⁰Exodus 33:12-23.

⁵¹Numbers 20:1-13.

⁵²Judges 8:22-35.

stories given about women are often troubling. Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror* is a literary analysis of four women discussed in the history-writings of the OT: Hagar, Tamar, an unnamed concubine of a Levite, and an unnamed daughter of Jephthah.⁵³ The stories of the two unnamed women, both of which are found in the book of Judges, are particularly troubling as both die violent deaths as the result of horrific decisions made by the men in their lives who should have protected them. In the case of Jephthah there is no direct condemnation of his actions. Even given these two significant points, the OT is notable for its inclusion of women's lives.

Sarah and Rebekah are not as prominent as their husbands Abraham and Isaac but they are nonetheless depicted as women who have particular personalities and who have at least some ability to control their own lives. In fact, Rebekah is nearly as fully developed a character as her husband Isaac which is remarkable considering that Isaac was the beloved son of Abraham and the person on whom rested all the promise for the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Sarah is not as prominent in the story as Abraham but we are told about her laughter when she overheard the promise of a son being given to Abraham. Furthermore, it was Sarah's wish that Abraham take Hagar as his concubine and later it was Sarah's wish that Hagar be sent out to the desert.

Jacob's wives, Leah and Rachel, receive much less attention than Jacob. Small details, however, are suggestive of their personalities. Rachel was both lovely and loved by Jacob. Leah, despite her beautiful eyes, was not loved by Jacob. It was Leah, however, who gave Jacob sons while Rachel was barren. The agony of both women is palpable. After the birth of each son Leah professed a hope that now Jacob will love her. That she made this statement after the birth of every son is an indication of how fully Jacob failed to do so. Rachel may have been Jacob's favourite in part because she seems to have shared similar characteristics with Jacob. When

⁵³Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984). See also Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

Jacob decided to leave Laban's household Rachel stole the statues of Laban's household Gods and then hid them when Laban came to look for them. She even lied to her father in order to prevent Laban from finding them. Rachel also experienced acute agony about her barrenness. She approached Jacob demanding a child through her servant and then another child by the same means. Finally Rachel had a son, Joseph, but died in childbirth when a second son, Benjamin, was born. Despite being loved by Jacob, Rachel's life is filled with pain and bitterness.

In the early chapters of I Samuel the reader learns of a woman named Hannah, a barren women. Although Hannah experienced great anguish because of her barren state she took control of her spiritual state and presented herself at the house of the Lord to pray for a son. Hannah's petition was answered and her son Samuel was born. The Biblical author ascribes a great hymn of praise to Hannah which she sang after bringing Samuel to Eli, the priest.⁵⁴ Although the portrait of Hannah is brief it is a compelling one. She experienced great anguish but also the answer of God to her prayers. She is depicted as a woman of great spiritual strength.⁵⁵

Later in the chapter I will make some comments about the differences between the biographies of the OT and NT. Here I will make a few comments about the differences between OT biographies and those examined in the previous chapter. Most importantly, the OT functions differently than Herodotus or Polybius, for example, because it is intended to be read as a sacred text rather than merely an account of the causes and events in the Persian War or Punic Wars. The authors of the OT are claiming that they are revealing holy history. The intended goal of the OT is to bring people to a right understanding of who they are as a people of God and what actions are required of them as a result. Moses gives the Israelites a moral code, as given in the

⁵⁴I Samuel 2:1-10. Deborah is also credited with the composition of great hymn. See Judges 5.

⁵⁵I have by no means exhausted the list of women's life stories found in the OT. Tamar, Miriam, Rehab, and Deborah, to name a few, are all memorable women.

Pentateuch. Those who are descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and who follow the moral code are the people of God. The OT, therefore, sets out the collective identity of the people of God. Greco-Roman authors did not claim to be writing sacred text and the creation, at least, of a collective identity is not a prominent theme. Herodotus, in fact, disturbed the notion, collectively held by Greeks, that Greek ways were better than non-Greek ways. Polybius was explaining the Roman people to a Greek audience.

The claim of divine revelation and the function of the OT as sacred text have important implications for the present as well. I do not think that the OT can function as a methodological model for history-writing today in one important respect—the implicit nature of interpretation. The OT is, of course, a text that provides its reader with normative ethical teaching. It is in the laws and prophets that this normative teaching is given—the reader is told what right and wrong action is. As already noted, Moses told the people of Israel how to understand their history. The prophets explain, repeatedly, that the evil that the Israelites have done will bring about their political destruction. The biographical and historical accounts have little of this kind of direct discussion. As the history and biography are part of the larger text, however, these other portions of text (direct discussion of normative ethical actions) are vital for interpreting the history and biography. Neither the Greco-Roman texts nor the history-writing of today is embedded in such a larger context. In order to engage in ethical dialogue the Greco-Roman authors often had to directly address their reader in order to make their point clear.

This then concludes the discussion on the Old Testament as history and biography. I have not discussed all of the biographical portraits in the OT. Many similar observations could be made about the biographical portraits of Moses, David or Joseph. I note further that there are two books named after women—Ruth and Esther. The book of Ruth is the story of two women, Ruth and Naomi, who are both equally important in the story. In fact, there is no male, not even Boaz who eventually marries Ruth, who receives as much attention as these two women in this

text.

The same questions as were put to the Old Testament will be put to the New Testament. Is the New Testament History? Like the question of history in the OT, the issue of the historicity of the NT is a matter of considerable debate and scholarly production.⁵⁶ I will give only a small sketch. Also like the scholarly debates about the OT, the question of the historicity of the NT is focused on the performance of history in these texts. There is less concern to analyze the intention of the authors than on the matter of ascertaining what Jesus and Paul really said and did. My impression of the debate is rather that scholars today usually assume that the intention of the NT was to write history or at least to use the form of history-writing to convince the reader that what was being reported was actually true to past events.

Early in the twentieth century Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* was the beginning of the so-called Quest for the Historical Jesus.⁵⁷ In the middle of the century Rudolf Bultmann argued that there was a distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.⁵⁸ In other words, there was very little of the historical Jesus to be found in the New Testament.

In the 1980s the Jesus Seminar began under the influence of Robert Funk.⁵⁹ This seminar focused on the sayings of Jesus and evaluated the probable historical authenticity of the words ascribed to Jesus.⁶⁰ Like Bultmann the Jesus Seminar has concluded that very little of the Gospels records something Jesus said or did. John Dominic Crossan, for example, has argued

⁵⁶For an annotated bibliography of NT literature see Scott McKnight and Matthew Williams, *The Synoptic Gospels: An Annotated Bibliography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000).

⁵⁷Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: A. and C. Black, 1926).

⁵⁸Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Ermine Huntress Lantero (New York: Scribner's, 1958).

⁵⁹Robert Funk, Bernard Brandon Scott, and J.R. Butts, eds., *The Parables of Jesus* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1988).

⁶⁰For a brief evaluative discussion of Jesus Seminar in general and a book review of a text published by the seminar, *The Five Gospels*, see Richard Hays, "The Corrected Jesus," *First Things* 43 (May 1994): 43-48. For a longer evaluation see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

that Jesus is misrepresented in the Gospels. Although Jesus was a Jewish man of his time, he was a subversive and revolutionary figure in a way that the Gospels do not present him.⁶¹ Crossan, like others in the Jesus Seminar, perceive an older source of Jesus' words and deeds than the Gospels. This source is often referred to as *Q* and is the shorthand way of referring to a now lost *quelle* (German for "source") that existed before the canonical Gospels were written. Crossan and other Jesus Seminar authors also give attention to extra Biblical material such as *The Gospel of Thomas* in their work. Thus using these other sources has led Crossan to conclude that Jesus a figure who teaches about radical equality of people and the ability of all to have direct access to God without the need for religious institutions or mediators. Crossan understands Jesus to have actually been something like a Cynic philosopher rather than the portrait that the Gospels paint.⁶²

The historicity of the Apostle Paul has also been the subject of debate.⁶³ Much of the New Testament is typically regarded as having been written by Paul. The letters from Romans to Ephesians have all been thought to be of Pauline authorship at one point in Christian history. The Pauline authorship of some of these letters is now typically thought to be dubious. It is doubted, for example that Paul wrote the epistle to the Ephesians. But letters such as Romans and Corinthians are generally thought to be of Pauline origin. The question of the historicity of Paul must further take into account the book of Acts. This book is a history of the early church beginning with the missionary work of Peter, the disciple of Jesus, quite shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus. While Peter is a central figure in the first twelve chapters or so, the

⁶¹John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper Sanfrancisco, 1995).

⁶²Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, IL: InverVarsity, 1997), 72. Marcus Borg puts it this way: "What picture of Jesus emerges in Crossan's book? I will put it in a sentence and then unpack it: Jesus was a Jewish Cynic peasant with an alternative social vision." *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1994), 34.

⁶³Some have suggested that Paul is in fact the founder of the Christian faith rather than Jesus. For discussion on this matter see A.N.Wilson *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997) and N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Chirstianity?* (Oxford: Lion Books, 1997).

story of the early Church quickly becomes dominated by the deeds of Paul.⁶⁴

The scholars listed above have taken seriously the question of what can be known about what Jesus and Paul actually said and did. They have applied modern methods of historical inquiry to the internal and external evidence of veracity. This kind of activity is something which Christians applaud (or at least should applaud) even if they do not agree with the conclusions of these scholars. As with the scholars of the OT, I note two points. First, important work is being done by those who have concluded that the Biblical canon has very little historical accuracy. Second, while I appreciate this work I find the work of other scholars to be more persuasive. I will briefly mention a few scholars who have also brought modern historical methods to bear on the canonical texts but have found reason for less scepticism. In particular I will briefly focus on scholarship of Luke and Acts as these texts are often categorized as biography and history.

N.T. Wright is an example of someone who has argued that the NT has greater veracity than other authors have claimed.⁶⁵ He is noted for having engaged the work of Marcus Borg, who is sceptical about the historical accuracy of the Gospels, both in print and in public debate.⁶⁶ Wright is, therefore, conversant with both NT scholarship and with the arguments of those who think the real Jesus was much different than the portrait in the NT. Even though Wright has refuted a more radical scepticism about what can be known about Jesus he has also said that it will not do

to suggest that because we have the Gospels in our New Testaments, we know all we need to about Jesus. . . . Christian traditions have often radically misunderstood the picture of Jesus in those Gospels, and only by hard, historical work can we move toward

⁶⁴For a survey of the scholarship on the historicity of Paul see Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

⁶⁵Other scholars who hold a similar position would include Richard B. Hayes, Gordon Fee, and Luke Timothy Johnson. These scholars do not hold identical positions on the historical veracity of the NT but share a sense that the history is more trustworthy than not.

⁶⁶Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

a fuller comprehension of what the Gospels themselves were trying to say.⁶⁷

Wright is not arguing for a simplistic reading of the portrait of Jesus but rather that even if a less sceptical attitude towards the historicity of the NT is adopted, much hard work needs to be done in order to appreciate what the authors intended to communicate.

David Aune classifies Luke-Acts as history and in fact it is a two-volume example of a general history.⁶⁸ Aune defines a general history as something that narrates “the important historical experiences of a single national group from their origin to recent past.”⁶⁹ He classifies Polybius as the earliest general historian whose work survives, at least in part. Aune may be correct but an observation is required here. Aune understands that the intent of the author of Luke-Acts was to present what happened. Even if it is true that Luke-Acts cannot be forced into the biographical mode it seems that there is much in Acts that is biographical.⁷⁰ The text focuses on individuals in a sequential way. Peter, Stephen, and Philip take up the lion’s share of the first chapters of Acts. The journeys of Paul dominate the latter sections.⁷¹

The author of Luke-Acts writes that it is his intent to tell you the truth of what really happened. One of the most interesting features of Luke-Acts is the prefatory material at the beginning of Luke. As far as Greek and Roman prefaces go, this section is comparatively short. By comparison with the rest of the Bible, this preface is far more of an authorial presence than is

⁶⁷ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 10-11.

⁶⁸ Although the following observation may make a mountain out of a molehill, the decision to compose Luke and Acts as two volumes is of interest. In a previous chapter it was noted that the Greek literary tradition looked back to Iliad and Odyssey (history and biography) as its formative texts. In the two-volume Luke-Acts, we again note a similar pairing at the beginning of a religious tradition. Of all the Gospel authors Luke-Acts was the most interested in addressing a literate Greco-Roman audience.

⁶⁹ David Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1987), 88.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 77.

⁷¹ Charles Talbert has argued, interestingly, that Acts should be regarded as biography rather than historical monograph. He says that the difference in classifying it as one genre rather than another makes a difference in the interpretation of the focus of the two books. “The issue is whether or not the theological dimensions of the divine plan being worked out in Luke and Acts are the background or the foreground of the narrative. If Luke-Acts or Luke and Acts are biographical, then the divine plan is the backdrop for the Christological ecclesiological focus of the two volumes.” Charles Talbert, “The Acts of the Apostles: Monograph or ‘bios’” in Ben Witherington III, ed. *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 71.

in much of the history-writing in the OT and in the other Gospels. Here we see an author setting out his intention.

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.⁷²

As has been discussed in the material by John Marincola on Greek and Roman historiography, historians held the primacy of eyewitness as the most authoritative sources. Luke claims that he has eyewitness sources. Historians made claims of effort and competence. Luke states that he is writing an orderly account. This preface and its parallel to Greek and Roman historical styles is an indicator of authorial intent to write about the past.⁷³

Like Aune, I.H. Marshall describes Luke as a historian. The historical and theological tasks are blended in Luke to form a text that expresses both historical and theological forms. Marshall is less concerned with questions of genre than he is with Luke's reliability. Luke purports to give the historical account of Jesus yet he is also attempting to convey a highly subjective message—human salvation as he understands it. In such circumstances can Luke be trusted as a history-writer? Marshall quotes M. Hengel as his answer: "Luke is no less trustworthy than other historians of antiquity."⁷⁴

C.J. Hemer compares Acts to other texts of the time and argues for a high degree of historical accuracy that is at least comparable to its Greek and Roman counterparts.⁷⁵ Hemer's work is like that of Provan, Long and Longman on the OT in the sense that Hemer is attempting

⁷²Luke 1:1-4.

⁷³See Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*, 120-121.

⁷⁴I.H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), 225. As has been noted by Charles Talbert it would have been nice if Hengel would have said *which* ancient historians were comparable to the author of Acts. Talbert, "The Acts of the Apostles," 71. Is the author like the good ancient historians or the bad ones?

⁷⁵C.J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

to assess the internal and external evidence of Luke-Acts in order to evaluate its historicity.⁷⁶

There exists solid research on both sides of the debate about the historical reliability of the NT. Since I am persuaded by one side rather than another I will simply note its existence and the arguments that seem the most likely to me and move on to the text of the NT in order to discuss the historical logic that the authors assumed and the character of biographical portraits there.

The historical logic of the NT is similar to the OT. The Book of Matthew has been placed as the first of the texts in the NT. This book begins with a genealogy of Jesus. For those who have studied the OT this genealogy is far from boring. Saying the names of these people brings to mind their stories. “Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar.”⁷⁷ Instantly the reader recalls how Tamar was denied her rights by Judah and how she decided to trick Judah in response. In fact, if a student were to be forced to write an exam on the history of the OT, this page from Matthew would be a rather handy cheat-sheet to be smuggled into the examination room. The genealogy begins with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the sons of Jacob and continues to David. After David are listed Solomon and the kings of Judah. These names are familiar to those who have read the books of Kings or Chronicles. There are names that are new to Matthew such as the names after the last king of Judah until the name of Jesus.⁷⁸ The author does not say where he obtained these names.

This genealogy is important for a number of reasons. The person of Jesus is linked with the faith of the people in this list. As the author of Matthew will later reveal, Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises made to many of the people in this list. The faith of the people in the OT will be shared by Jesus and those who come after him. Part of that faith is a particular understanding of history. The Christians who will follow Jesus adopt the OT understanding of

⁷⁶See also a collection of essays on Acts by Ben Witherington III, ed., *History, Literature and Society in the Book of Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996).

⁷⁷Matthew 1:3.

⁷⁸As has been observed by careful Bible readers for many centuries, there is another genealogical list given in Luke 3: 23-38. This list is significantly different from the one in Matthew. For example the list in Luke traces the genealogy of Jesus from Nathan, the son of David rather than from Solomon, son of David.

the importance of knowing about the past as part of knowing about God.

This assertion is borne out in other passages from the NT. Recall that when Moses spoke to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land he reminded them of events in which they had participated. With their own eyes and ears, hands and feet they had watched or even been part of the battles against the King Sihon and King Og. This logic is very similar to what is stated in the epistle of I John.

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you⁷⁹

Like the Israelites, the person who composed this letter had seen and heard with his or her own eyes and ears. The author shared with the Greek and Roman historians the primacy of eyes and ears. Like the OT as well, the edifying import is inherent in the author's view of God's presence in history. Since we know what has really happened we have joyful fellowship with God.

So what, more precisely, have these people seen and heard? The answer to this question is recorded in the Gospels. The first four books of the NT report the words and deeds of Jesus. The logic of the Gospels is that what is reported there will have significant implications for the reader. Towards the end of the Gospel of John the author makes a rare authorial appearance to tell the reader the following:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.⁸⁰

The disciples had seen and heard what Jesus did and are now testifying to those events. And now that you, the reader, know what happened, you have the possibility of true life. In these two

⁷⁹I John 1:1-5a.

⁸⁰John 20:30-31.

texts the authors agree with the OT writers that God reveals himself in history. If you cannot know what happened in the past, you have little hope of knowing God. But through these texts you can know what happened and therefore you can know God.

Paul was a significant contributor to the New Testament canon. He too agreed with the OT understanding of the nature of history and the importance of knowing what really happened as a way of knowing God. The Acts of the Apostles records an event that occurred in the life of Paul the Apostle while he was in Athens. Paul addressed a number of Athenians whom he was attempting to convert. Paul observed that the great number of temples in that city had given him the impression that the people there really believed that the Gods lived in the temples. Paul stated that this was untrue. There was a God who the Athenians did not know. This unknown God, however, need not remain unknowable. There are two ways, stated Paul, to know the true God. One is creation, of which the world and human beings are evidence. The other is history. God is knowable because from one ancestor he made all the nations of the world.⁸¹ Paul could have added that if the Athenians wanted to find out more about this history they should certainly consult the collected works of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Paul derived his personal spiritual authority on his ability to say, “I really know what happened!” In a letter which he wrote to the Christians in Galatia, Paul tells the recipients that he has the authority to rebuke and chastise them because he really did meet God one day on the road to Damascus. Paul had been zealous to defend the faith of Judaism against Christians but then God revealed himself to Paul and furthermore revealed the truth of the Christian claims about Jesus. After this event Paul converted to Christianity and later became a Christian missionary. Paul conferred with James the brother of Jesus—presumably learning much about Jesus through this excellent source.⁸² It is because God revealed himself to Paul in a particular

⁸¹Acts 17:22-31.

⁸²Galatians 1:11-24.

time and place and because at that time he was given a particular task that he can say what he does about God. It is almost expected, therefore, that Paul used the example of Abraham later on in the text to make his point even stronger.⁸³ Abraham too was a man in a particular time and place and God revealed his will to Abraham as well. The implicit logic of this section seems to be that if the audience believes that God met Abraham in a particular time and space and that this real experience gave Abraham authority, the same is true of Paul.

The link between the historical narrative of the OT and the continuation of the historical logic of the OT into the early Church is made more explicit in a passage from Hebrews. “What is faith?” asks the author of Hebrews. What follows, interestingly, is not a discussion of systematic theology or a philosophical dialogue. The chapter that follows this question is primarily a list of names from the OT. If you want to know what faith is, take a good look at the people of God in the past. It is distinctly similar to the genealogical list in Matthew (and would also constitute a good cheat-sheet for that OT history exam). The author of Hebrews says:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”⁸⁴

Abraham is not the last person in that list. Moses and many others are listed as well. The culmination of that list, however, comes with the example of Jesus. If you want to know what faith is, the author is telling the reader, look to the example of all of these people of the past. Above all, however, look to the example of Jesus.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race

⁸³Galatians 3: 15-18.

⁸⁴Hebrews 11:8-12.

that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.⁸⁵

Jesus really did endure crucifixion. He is the ultimate example of one who ran with perseverance and the culmination to the list of others who ran with endurance. Jesus is the author and perfecter of the faith of the people on the list before him. The passage in Hebrews still has one remarkable aspect left to discuss. Although Jesus was the greatest fulfillment of God's self-revelation in history, Jesus' life, death and resurrection did not bring about the end of history. Others, after Jesus, will run the race with perseverance. Indeed the reader is meant to participate in that very race. The Christian, however, moves forward empowered by the cloud of witnesses and the knowledge of the life and death of Jesus. Note also that this passage in Hebrews imitates the biographical character of the OT. It is history as a biographical list. The intent of the biographical list is edification. The faith of the reader is to be built up as he or she is reminded of the many people of the past to whom God was revealed in the events of their lives.

The examples from the New Testament are internal evidence that the early Christians took history seriously. They, like the authors of the OT, agree that it is important to know what really happened if you are to know God. There is external evidence, also, of this same logic. The primary example of this is in the canon debates. As the early Church began to see the need to designate particular texts as more authoritative than others, they had to set criteria for inclusion or exclusion from the canon. One of the criteria was apostolic authority. In short, the criterion of apostolicity was evidence that a particular text had been written by an apostle—in other words, an eye-witness to the events that a particular text described. Apostolicity was not the only criterion—the other two were the rule of faith and the consensus of the church. Nonetheless,

⁸⁵Hebrews 12:1-3..

apostolicity was perhaps the most important of the criteria. “As primary sources the apostles and their followers were seen as the trustworthy exponents of the original revelation given in Jesus’ Church.”⁸⁶ Bruce Metzger makes the point even more clear. He states that it was important to early Christians that claims of apostolic authority were validated by meeting standards of historical veracity.⁸⁷ It was important that Christians be able to make claims of historical accuracy because of challenges to the tradition as exemplified by that of Marcion. Marcion claimed that Christians had badly misrepresented Jesus in the Gospels and he suggested that Jesus had in fact said and done something quite different.⁸⁸ The historical logic of the NT is a direct heir to the historical logic of the OT and in various passages deliberately links itself to the OT. Furthermore, the NT, as the OT, understands that edifying content and religious instruction cannot be removed from knowledge of a true past.

The final question of this chapter examines the biographical character of the New Testament. Are the Gospels, for example, biographies? David Aune argues that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John are a type of ancient biography. Aune states that although the “Gospels have no *exact* literary analogues in antiquity” the same could be true of many Classical texts. *Agricola*, for instance, is without an exact parallel. Nevertheless, these Gospels do fit within the parameters of Greco-Roman biographical forms.⁸⁹ The best treatment of the genre of the Gospels is by Richard Burridge. His text, *What are the Gospels?* is persuasive. Early in the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann had described the Gospels as an original and a unique phenomenon; they were *sui generis*.⁹⁰ Although not the first to question Bultmann’s

⁸⁶Andrie B. Du Toit, “Canon” *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce Metzger and Michael Coogan New York: Oxford University, 1993), 104.

⁸⁷Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 253.

⁸⁸R. M. Grant, “The New Testament Canon” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: From the Beginnings to Jerome*, vol. 1, eds., P.R. Ackroyd and C.R. Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1970), 294.

⁸⁹David Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, 46.

⁹⁰Denys Hay, *Annalists and Historians: Western Historiography from the Eighth to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1977). Hay observes that the unique contribution of the Gospels not genre but subject

conclusion, Burridge has more recently suggested a different perspective. He argues that the Classical genre which the Gospels most closely resembles is biography.⁹¹ Burridge compares the Gospels with ten biographies from the Greco-Roman world.⁹² Categories of comparison include the way in which biographies begin and end, the subject of the text, characterizing external features (such as metre, size, structure, scale, literary units, sources, and methods of characterization) and characterizing internal features (such as style, tone, mood, attitude, values, and social setting). Burridge even conducts statistical analysis on the kinds of verbs used in the biographies of the Greeks and Romans as compared to the kinds of verbs used in the Gospels. The NT, then, has four important biographical portraits.

What can be said about the character of these biographies? First, that there are a number of important differences between the character of biography in the NT as compared to the OT. There are a number of reasons for this. The first difference is that the four Gospels are all about the same person. No character in the OT received that kind of repetitive attention. The story of King David, to be sure, is repeated in Chronicles in shortened form after its extended version in Samuel but even a figure as important as David does not receive the amount of repeated treatment as Jesus does. I hasten to add that even though much of the four Gospels is the same, the four Gospels are four distinct portraits of Jesus. The early Church, however, placed so much authority on the life of Christ that they decided to include four accounts of the life of Jesus in their authoritative canon.⁹³

matter. For the first time in history-writing, the focus is on ordinary people rather than gods, heroes, political and military elites or the upper classes. Perhaps Hay's observation can be taken even further. If it is true that biography allowed for the inclusion of the ordinary (non-political, non-military) aspects of life, it may be that the Gospel authors gravitated towards the genre of biography in order to discuss their non-political, non-military yet historical events.

⁹¹Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison With Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992), 9-11.

⁹²These ten biographies are: Isocrates's *Evagoras*, Xenophon's *Agesilaus*, Satyrus's *Euripides*, Nepos's *Atticus*, Philo's *Moses*, Tacitus's *Agricola*, Plutarch's *Cato Minor*, Suetonius's *Julius Caesar* and *Augustus*, and Philostratus's *Apollonius of Tyana*.

⁹³For a discussion of the four distinct portraits of the Gospels see Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994).

The second difference is that the authors claim that the person who is the focus of the Gospels, Jesus, is not only human but also divine. It is difficult to argue, for example, that Jesus is an ordinary man to whom extraordinary events occur. The authors did not believe that Jesus was an ordinary person but rather quite the opposite. The Gospel authors claimed that Jesus was the Son of God. Furthermore, Jesus performed many extraordinary deeds. He cast out demons, healed the sick, turned water into wine, and had an uncanny talent for knowing where to fish at a particular moment. That Jesus initiated and performed these extraordinary deeds was meant to communicate to the reader that he was not an ordinary person.

A second point about the character of NT biography is the idea of *imitatio*, or imitation. For Christians it is helpful to have four biographies of Christ included in the New Testament since there is the expectation that the apostles, and all followers of Christ, will imitate Christ. The descriptions of the life of Christ and the apostles are, therefore, necessary for Christian faith and practice. A direct discussion of imitation is found in Paul but is linked to the importance of the biographies of Jesus. Paul himself urged his reader both to have the mind of Christ and to imitate his own example. Paul instructed us to imitate Christ's attitude in all things.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. . . . Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.⁹⁴

The most important imitation is of Christ but Paul's readers were also supposed to imitate himself. In another letter Paul says:

Therefore I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.⁹⁵

There is, therefore a two-fold *imitatio* within the NT: *imitatio Christi* and *imitatio Pauli*. First a believer imitates Jesus but also Paul. If we are to be imitators of Paul, it seems logical that there

⁹⁴Philippians 2:1-5.

⁹⁵I Corinthians 4:16-17.

would be other leaders that are worthy of imitation. This kind of theology, was carried out by the early Christians and was part of the beginning of the medieval interest in the saints. For Paul was an example of how to live as a person of God, as were other leaders. This passage could also be indicative of an *imitatio Timothi*. Paul wants Christians to imitate Christ just as they had been taught by Paul (therefore imitating Paul's example of faith). But since Paul could not be there Timothy would represent Paul's teaching for him and Christians could therefore trust the teaching of Timothy and imitate his example of faith. As time passes this sense of imitation will pass on to the martyrs of the Christian faith. I do want to qualify this statement somewhat, however. It is not that the OT lacks any sense of *imitatio*. As the passage from Hebrews reveals, the people of the OT were models of faith. The impetus and even the imperative of imitation are heightened, however, in the NT in part because of Paul's direct discussion of it. With regard to Jesus, furthermore, the imitation is largely unqualified.⁹⁶ Whereas the patriarchs and kings of Jewish history were both models of faith and examples of those who disobeyed and sometimes even committed evil deeds, Jesus was the perfecter of faith.

These are two important ways in which the character of biography in the NT is different from the OT. There are, however, similarities as well. While Jesus might not be an ordinary person, the rest of the people in these accounts are. Before continuing with that point I must first make a rather large caveat. Some of these ordinary people, however, do initiate and perform miraculous deeds. The Book of Acts, for example, reports that Peter healed a crippled beggar.⁹⁷ An Old Testament parallel might be the miracles reported in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. Here two prophets named Elijah and Elisha were empowered by God to perform such deeds as miraculously keeping a food supply from diminishing during a drought, curing a woman's son

⁹⁶ This largely unqualified imperative to imitate Christ has been an important discussion in the history of Christianity. Even though Christians are called to imitate Jesus they have to think about how they will imitate Christ given that they are not first-century Jewish men living in Palestine, let alone that Jesus is thought to be God. Then again, the imitation of Paul is also complicated even though there is no claim of his divinity. The imitation of the saints, it seems, is a task which requires thoughtful engagement.

⁹⁷ Acts 3:1-10.

of sickness, raising a boy from the dead and healing a man named Naaman of leprosy.⁹⁸ These were, then, ordinary people empowered to perform miracles. These miracles, however, have a very important point. When Elijah healed the sick son of a widow, she responded, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD is in your mouth.”⁹⁹ When Peter healed the crippled beggar Peter said: “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”¹⁰⁰ The beggar’s response was to praise God—not Peter. The miracles of the Old Testament prophets and Peter were the opposite of the miracle of Moses performed when he brought water from a stone. Here Moses did not announce that the power behind this miracle belonged to God before causing water to appear and God was angry about this crucial omission.

Again, the people of the New Testament were ordinary people. The disciples were fishermen, tax collectors, and zealots. The women who follow him included wives and one woman who was formerly possessed by demons. Ordinary men, women and even children are the people of these accounts. These ordinary people were distinct from one another. Peter and Paul, for example, perhaps the two most important apostles, were quite different from one another and in fact had distinctly different experiences of Jesus and had distinctly different careers as leaders of the early Church. Peter was a disciple of Christ who spent a number of years with Jesus. When Jesus called Peter to be a fisher of men, Peter left his fishing career and followed Jesus. He witnessed the miracles of Jesus. When he saw Jesus walking on the water, Peter went out of the boat to walk on the water towards Jesus (and when he began to sink, it was Jesus who had to save him from drowning). Paul, on the other hand, persecuted Christians after the death of Jesus. As he was travelling on the road to Damascus, he was blinded by a bright light and heard the voice of God. There are, of course, similarities between Peter and Paul. When Paul finally encountered Jesus he too left his former career and became a Christian. The

⁹⁸ 1 Kings 17: 8-24 and 2 Kings 4-5.

⁹⁹ 1 Kings 17:24.

¹⁰⁰ Acts 3:6.

two were distinct in their approach to mission work. Paul seemed to have embraced the mission to Gentile and Jewish people whereas Peter struggled to accept the work of missions among the Gentiles. Whereas Paul had needed a vision in order to come to faith, Peter needed a vision to understand the mission to the Gentiles. Peter, who had no problem preaching to fellow Jews in the temple, or to the Jewish crowds who gathered for the Jewish festival of Pentecost, received a divine dream. In this dream he saw something like a sheet being lowered from heaven and on it were all kinds of animals which Jewish law had declared as unclean for eating. A voice commanded Peter to eat those animals. This command was repeated three times. Peter came to realize that he must not hesitate to associate with Gentiles. He then went to the house of Gentile named Cornelius and there Peter explained what he has learned:

I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. . . . We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.¹⁰¹

This passage demonstrates that Peter had to come to an awareness of the mission to the Gentiles and in this sense differed from Paul who seemed to have no difficulty with this concept even though Paul's Jewish credentials were in no way inferior to Peter's. I could have shortened the quotation from Peter to make this point. I simply observe that in this passage again we see that Peter, like Paul and the Gospel authors, understood that he was an eyewitness to the historical event of Jesus and that knowledge of this truth was the impetus for his present actions.

Some of the people of the New Testament are not plaster saints. The portrait of Peter, one of the most important of the twelve disciples, is of an ordinary fisherman who at times is an

¹⁰¹ Acts 10 34-43.

example of faith and at other times, the opposite. When Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, it was Peter who answered: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

To this Jesus replied:

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.¹⁰²

These are powerful words indeed! For his proclamation of faith Peter received a new name and the keys of heaven and earth. Later Peter would be one of only three disciples who witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus and the presence of Moses and Elijah with Jesus.¹⁰³

This same Peter, the rock on whom the Church will be built, denied Jesus. Jesus warned Peter that he would deny him when Jesus was about to face death. Since the disciples failed to understand or believe Jesus when he told them that he must die, Peter did not believe that he would ever deny Jesus. Yet after Jesus is arrested Peter follows Jesus to Caiaphas’ house (the place where the scribes and elders had gathered to try Jesus). When Peter was recognized while waiting outside he denied that he ever knew Jesus.¹⁰⁴ Peter exemplified what was best and worst in the disciples.

The final point to observe about the character of NT biography is that like the OT there are a lot of women. Like the OT, there are fewer women than men presented and there are fewer lines of text given to women than to men. Nevertheless, when reading the Gospel of Luke, for example, you will learn about a number of women. In fact, the first people discussed are a married couple named Zachariah and Elizabeth. Both these characters are equally developed. Elizabeth was the mother of John the Baptist and she was the first person in the text to recognize

¹⁰² Matthew 16:16-20.

¹⁰³ Matthew 17:1-13.

¹⁰⁴ Matthew 26:57-75.

that Jesus was the Son of God—no small part to play. Elizabeth was pregnant when the also pregnant Mary visited her. The baby leaped in Elizabeth’s womb when Mary greeted her and Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit, declared that in Mary’s womb was the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Lord.¹⁰⁵

Of course the second woman in the narrative of Luke is Mary, the mother of Jesus. We learn that an angel visited Mary to tell her of the coming birth of Jesus. After Mary heard Elizabeth’s words, Mary sang a song of praise.¹⁰⁶ Mary continues to be important in the narrative and especially in the stories of Jesus birth and early childhood. When Jesus was a youth and was left behind in the Temple Jesus’ parents came looking for him. It was Mary whose words to Jesus were recorded, not Joseph’s. “Child why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.”¹⁰⁷

Women are also prominent in the stories of Jesus’ miracles. Jesus visited the town of Nain and saw a funeral procession of the only son of a widow. Jesus saw this and understood the great sorrow that was hers and had compassion on her. He raised her son from the dead.¹⁰⁸ In other examples it is women themselves who are healed or raised from the dead. Luke tells how a man named Jairus had an only daughter who was so sick that she was on the point of death. Jairus came to Jesus to beg him to heal her but while he was speaking with Jesus he was told that his daughter had died while he was gone. Jesus went to Jairus’s house and raised the girl from the dead.¹⁰⁹ The story of Jairus’s daughter is interwoven with another story of a woman. This woman had been haemorrhaging for twelve years and comes to Jesus believing that if she could just touch him she would be healed. When she touched Jesus she was healed. Jesus wanted to know who touched him and would not go to Jairus’ house until he could speak to the

¹⁰⁵ Luke 1:39-45.

¹⁰⁶ Luke 1: 46-56.

¹⁰⁷ Luke 1:48

¹⁰⁸ Luke 7:11-17.

¹⁰⁹ Luke 8:40-42, 49-56.

woman face to face. When he spoke to her he gave her words of reassurance.¹¹⁰ Another time Jesus healed a crippled woman.¹¹¹

Women were important friends to Jesus even if no women were listed among his disciples. Luke gave the names of the women who followed Jesus around during his ministry:

The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.¹¹²

As the end of this passage reveals, these women were not only friends but also financial backers. The latter is not attributed to the male disciples. Other friends of Jesus were Mary, Martha and their brother, Lazarus. Jesus visited these siblings at their home. Jesus' verbal interaction with Lazarus is not recorded. What is recorded is Jesus' discussions with Mary and Martha.¹¹³ Some of Jesus' highest words of praise were given to a woman who he observed in the temple. She was a destitute widow and yet she put her last copper coins into the treasury. Jesus commended her offering as better than anyone else's because she had given all of her wealth.¹¹⁴ Women are important in the death and resurrection accounts of Jesus. It was the women followers of Jesus who took care of Jesus' body after he died.¹¹⁵ These same women were the first to go to the tomb of Jesus and it is the women who were met by an angel at the tomb. The angel's message of the resurrection of Jesus was given to the women. These women were the ones who told the male disciples of Jesus' resurrection.¹¹⁶

The historical intent and logic of the Bible are consistent between the Old and New Testament. There are also many similarities in the biographical character of the Old and New Testament. But like the passage in Hebrews indicates, history and biography did not come to an

¹¹⁰ Luke 8:43-48.

¹¹¹ Luke 13: 10-17.

¹¹² Luke 8:1-3.

¹¹³ Luke 10:38-42.

¹¹⁴ Luke 21:1-4.

¹¹⁵ Luke 23:55-56.

¹¹⁶ Luke 24:1-10.

end when the last page of the canon had been written. It should be expected, therefore, that anyone shaped by the Biblical tradition would write critical and edifying biography.

Chapter Four: The Critical and Edifying Impulse of Medieval Christian Biography

The Bible has been a formative influence on later Christian texts. The *Life of Antony* by Athanasius was indebted to the norms of Greco-Roman history-writing and biography as well as Christian canonical forms of history-writing and biography. Athanasius was the fourth-century Bishop of Alexandria who championed Nicene theology. Antony lived from the middle of the third century to the middle of the fourth century. This chapter will elucidate the continuing logic of history and edification as found in the Classical and the Biblical texts in this important text of Christian biography. The first part of this chapter will focus exclusively on the *Life of Antony* and the second part of the chapter will demonstrate how the character of Christian biography develops and subtly changes in the Middle Ages.

This chapter is about biography of the Middle Ages and yet it begins with a text from Late Antiquity. The biography of Antony, the desert hermit, was deliberately chosen, however, owing to its continuing influence in the Middle Ages. If you were to trace back from medieval biography to its antecedents, all lines of investigation would likely converge at one particular text: *The Life of Antony*. This text is commonly described as the most influential progenitor of the hagiographical tradition.¹ According to Averil Cameron, the reception of the *Life of Antony* by intelligent Christians such as Augustine and Jerome and its success among the general, literate populace during late antiquity established a new literary genre, hagiography.² In the preface to a translation of *Life of Antony*, William Clebsch states that this text “inaugurated the genre and therefore established the frame of Christian hagiography” and that it “quickly became

¹One notable exception is T.D. Barnes’ claim that Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine* is the pioneer of the hagiographical tradition. Eusebius’ text predates the *Life of Antony* by about twenty years. See “Panegyric, History and Hagiography in Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine*” in Rowan Williams, ed. *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989), 94-123.

²Averil Cameron, “Eusebius’ *Vita Constantini* and the Construction of Constantine” in *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire* M.J. Edwards and Simon Swain, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 174.

the paradigm for the genre of Christian hagiography.”³ And, like its descendants, the *Life of Antony* is today regarded as an unhistorical text. In the conclusion of another article, Cameron describes the *Life of Antony* in these terms: “As for Antony, the *Life of Antony* combines harangue, ideology, and narrative to such an extent that it is difficult to say where, if anywhere, the ‘real’ Antony lies.”⁴ She advocates an approach to the *Life of Antony* that does not treat it as a historical source but as a literary text.⁵

In this regard the *Life of Antony* is not a special case. Biographical texts of late antiquity, as a category, are described in a manner similar to the *Life of Antony*. Patricia Cox insists that the genre of biography in late antiquity cannot be classified as history-writing or even a sub-category of history-writing. Cox asserts that biography in late antiquity reveals the author’s concerns, and particularly the socio-political and cultural concerns, not the subject’s. Cox calls this “The Creative Use of History” (the title of her concluding chapter).⁶

Susanna Elm has explored two texts by Gregory of Nazianzus which could support Cox’s conclusion: *Oration 42* and *Oration 43* (together with two autobiographical poems). Gregory had been forced to resign from his position as bishop in Constantinople. These documents were created in order to aid his supporters who remained in Constantinople—to orchestrate his return. *Oration 42* constitutes his farewell to the citizens of Constantinople. In it he defends himself and his actions in Constantinople and outlines the qualities which his successor should have. *Oration 43* is a biography of Basil. Gregory chose Basil as his subject to describe what a bishop should be and, by implicit contrast with the current bishop, what the

³Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert Gregg (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1980), xiii; xiv.

⁴Averil Cameron, “Form and Meaning: The *Vita Constantini* and the *Vita Antonii*” in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity* ed. Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2000), 86.

⁵Other authors also assume that a literary approach to *Antony* is the status quo. See Philip Rousseau, “Antony as Teacher in the Greek *Life*,” in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed. Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2000), 102. Rousseau makes the bold suggestion that the Antony of the *Life of Antony* might not be entirely the product of Athanasius’ creative imagination but rather part of an attempt to place a famous Egyptian ascetic within a Christian philosophical tradition.

⁶Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity*, 135.

current bishop lacked. Now, perhaps biography is too concrete a designation. It is a character study of Basil and the reasons why the person who becomes the bishop of this, the most important diocese, should be someone like Basil. It is, to use Elm's term, a programmatic life. As it happened, the person who was made the bishop after Gregory was the opposite of everything that Gregory and Basil represented.⁷ Although Cox does not mention Gregory's *Orations*, here are two texts which seem to demonstrate her point. Gregory's political and ecclesiastical battles are described in one text and bolstered by the life of Basil in the companion text. We don't learn about Basil, one might argue: we learn about Gregory and the socio-political situation in the capital city.

Cox further observes that biography in late antiquity, as compared to the classical biography that preceded it, had at least one significant difference: biography became a form of advocacy. Biographies were written on behalf of religious or philosophical communities (or as Cox perceives it, philosophy was religion in Late Antiquity) in order to display or argue for the superiority of the belief system of a particular community.⁸ Thus, Porphyry's *Plotinus* and Eusebius's sketch of Origen in *Historiae Ecclesiae*, two of the texts Cox examines at length, are acts of *apologia*. The intent was not simply to persuade the reader that the person as subject was worthy of attention or admiration. Rather, the ultimate goal was to persuade the reader that a particular belief system, which the subject espoused and represented, merited the reader's interest and, ultimately, allegiance.⁹ These then are the charges against Christian biography in late antiquity and, by association, the *Life of Antony*. First, such writing reveals the concerns of the author and his context rather than the subject's. Second, it was written to persuade; it was a form of advocacy or apologetic.

⁷Susanna Elm, "A Programmatic Life: Gregory of Nazianzus' *Orations* 42 and 43 and the Constantinopolitan Elites," *Arethusa* 33 (2000): 411-427.

⁸Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity*, 18

⁹*Ibid.*, 99-101; 131-133.

Given the current estimation of early Christian biography, what reason would a historian have to consider what could be learned about historical method from a text like *Antony*? Why should the *Life of Antony* not be summarily dismissed? There are good reasons to reconsider the charges against the *Life of Antony*. If we compare it with the texts that preceded it rather than with those that came after it, the common complaints against the biography are mitigated as *Antony* relied on methods substantially the same as classical history-writing. The degree of historical scepticism levelled against the *Life of Antony*, as compared to other texts of Classical history-writing, is unwarranted. Even if from a retrospective analysis Athanasius' *Antony* represents the genesis of a new kind of biography, hagiography, it is not *sui generis*—if such a thing is even possible. Rather than see this text as something new, I will compare this text with writings already discussed. The elements of history and biography from the earlier Greeks and Roman era are very much a part of Athanasius' text. Furthermore, the critical and edifying logic of both the Greek and Roman texts and especially the Bible are continued in this text. Indeed the difficulty with summarizing biography in late antiquity is the abundance and variety present at this time.¹⁰ Rather than look to other texts of the late fourth century, comparison of the *Life of Antony* to the history-writing of the Greco-Roman tradition reveals interesting methodological similarities.

John Marincola analyzes the methods whereby Classical authors established their

¹⁰Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity*, 69-102. Cox does not examine *Life of Antony* in her text—a book that intends to sketch the distinguishing characteristics of late antique biography. She chooses Eusebius' portrait of Origen as her pre-eminent example of Christian biography in late antiquity (principally Book 6 of Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesia*) rather than a stand-alone biography. A survey of various early Christian biographies reveals a surprising degree of variety. Possidius' life of Augustine portrays a saintly, prolific and vigorous life in which supernatural events are given very little attention. From a modern perspective, it is a very believable depiction: it includes a lot of factual, even mundane, details. The *Life of Cyprian* by Pontius relied on rhetorical extravagance in order to fill in parts of the narrative where Pontius was unsure of the details of Cyprian's life. By contrast, Paulinus knew his subject, Ambrose, quite well and could rely on personal knowledge rather than literary conventions. Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* is an allegorical and mystical exercise. Elizabeth Clark compares *The Life of Melania the Younger* with romance novels of late antiquity, although Clark concludes that it is inadequate to view it as simply romance; it is anti-heretical literature. See *The Life of Melania the Younger*, trans. Elizabeth Clark (New York: Edwin Mellor, 1984), 170. All of these are different from Athanasius' *Antony*, where anecdotes of supernatural healing, battles with demonic spirits and feats of ascetic denial most closely mimic the anecdotes of the canonical Gospels.

authority as reliable historians. His study observes that Greco-Roman historians asserted authority by four general principles. First, the author impressed upon the reader the greatness of the subject matter. The text is worth reading because it records the events of cataclysmic wars or other deeds with profound consequences. It was necessary for historians to write about important events because it was for the good of society to have access to clear and detailed accounts of what happened. Thus, a historian claimed to write for public utility; he styles himself a servant for the good of the populace.

Second, a history-writer would inform the reader regarding the degree of effort put into the research and writing of a history. To support his claims of effort he would study earlier histories, if any existed; report what he had himself seen; and question eye-witnesses if such individuals were available. The author would treat these primary sources, both history texts and eye-witnesses, as reliable but without undue deference to them. That is, the author demonstrated that he had a proper degree of scepticism of primary sources, thus equipping him for the task of piercing through the façade of the source to get at the truth.

Third, the author would let the reader know that he had the proper character to undertake the task in the first place. The character of the person who composed the history was a determinant in establishing the veracity of the events described. Thus, the author tells the reader about his experience in either the military or political spheres, particularly if he is describing military or political events. The author is assuring the audience that he is qualified to speak about political matters; he was once a politician and knows that realm. He may be briefly autobiographical regarding his career or the effort he made as he researched the events. The author will also include indirect assertions of care to reassure the reader that the text is literarily and factually sound. Further, claims of impartiality were also included to establish his trustworthy evaluation of men and deeds.

Fourth, the author would establish his own authority by praising his own deeds. This last

task was done with strategic care. Obvious self-promotion was not persuasive. Various techniques would be employed in order to shadow self-praise. In *Anabasis*, for example, Xenophon uses a pseudonym to decrease the potential perception of self-aggrandizing. Marincola notes that an author's discussion of these four aspects of his authority need not be overly long and not every author includes all four aspects.

Marincola further explains that the most important way in which an author established his authority was by carefully placing himself within the history-writing tradition. It was a delicate balancing act in which the author would follow the stylistic norms and assertions of fact within former histories while at the same time incorporating slight modifications of his own design. The author had to do both. Omission of either task spelled disaster. Disregard for previous authorities would cause the reader to dismiss the author as an untrustworthy maverick. Thus, authors would link their work with prior respected texts either in stylistic matters or in agreement with the conclusions. On the other hand, the author had to establish that his work was unique in some way. The author was not simply transcribing the work of another. He had to create some distance between his work and that of the tradition. The author could not be excessively polemical in creating this distance; he had to maintain proper respect. One conservative tactic might be to grant full respect to an author but demonstrate that the tradition that evolved afterwards had strayed from the original vision. Thus the author's work differs from contemporaries (originality) by returning to the original vision of the authority. The ultimate goal of any history was to pay respect to previous authorities while establishing that it too was a new authority.¹¹

I suggest, then, that the text of *Antony* follows conventions similar to those outlined by Marincola for Greco-Roman history-writing in general. For example, Athanasius observes that

¹¹John Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1997), 258-62.

the worth of his text is related to the importance of its subject.¹² The epistolary introduction congratulates the monks who have written to Athanasius requesting information about Antony for they have entered the best kind of contest, a contest of virtue. To win this contest the emulation of Antony is enough, for “Antony’s way of life provides monks with a sufficient picture for ascetic life.”¹³ In fact, Athanasius is concerned that, should he write about all that Antony did, the monks would become incredulous. Instead, the few deeds which Athanasius records should lead them to pious emulation of Antony.¹⁴ The greatness of Antony is implicit in the notion that Antony’s example is of immense aid to those who wish to live a successful, virtuous life. Although superlatives are not used to describe Antony, as are often used to describe wars (Herodotus describes Xerxes’ expedition as the greatest of all that were known, and Thucydides claims that the Peloponnesian War was the war of longest duration, greatest sufferings and the most sackings, exiles and civil strife), Athanasius does set the importance of Antony within the context of a noble and important contest.¹⁵ In arguing for the greatness of his subject, Athanasius is closer to the Latin historical monograph. Marincola notes that Latin history-writing is “less likely to play up its greatness in superlatives or to suggest that the events contained therein are beyond all others in importance.”¹⁶ Marincola notes Sallust’s hesitation to use superlatives in introducing his subject. Rather than assertions of being “the greatest,” Athanasius indicates importance by noting the context of public good. The combined aura of the monasteries and the names of the monks, Athanasius states, “carries public weight.”¹⁷ Perhaps

¹²I am aware that T.D. Barnes has argued against Athanasian authorship. On this see “Angel of Light or Mystic Initiate?: The Problem of the *Life of Antony*,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (October 1986), 353-68. For the most part, however, scholars attribute this text to Athanasius. See Anatolios Khaled, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) and David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995). For a concise summary of the history of the authorial debate of this text see Rousseau, “Antony as Teacher,” 100-104.

¹³Athanasius, *Antony*, 29.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹⁵Marincola, *Authority and Tradition*, 34-35.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁷Athanasius, *Antony*, 29. Directly following these words Gregg includes a footnote which refers the reader to Peter Brown’s “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity” *The Journal of Roman Studies*

Athanasius saw the theological debates of the fourth century as every bit as important a battle as the military contests of the past. As an orthodox bishop in Alexandria who had lost his position to Arian bishops, Athanasius wanted to establish the importance of an orthodox monastic community as led by its orthodox leader, Antony. Athanasius is providing the monks, whose reputation carries public weight, with valuable information which will increase their ability to maintain their public function.

Further, we can note the claims made regarding efforts of inquiry. As Antony has only recently died, Athanasius likely has no previous history-writing or biographies to consult and indeed Athanasius does not claim to have read previous records or histories of Antony.¹⁸

However, Athanasius makes other claims of effort typical to ancient history-writing. Marincola notes that the twin methods of validation for *contemporary* historians were autopsy (to have been an eye-witness yourself) and to have interviewed participants in the events described.¹⁹

Athanasius claims to have been an eyewitness to the deeds of Antony. He says that he will recall what he knows of Antony: “What I myself know (for I have seen him often) and what I was able to learn from him when I followed him more than few times and poured water over his hands, I hastened to write to your piety.”²⁰ Athanasius indicates that he is aware that a history-writer

61 ((1971): 80-101. In this article Brown argues that the holy man took on public roles. Holy men existed on the periphery of society and thus were perceived as neutral arbiters of civil disputes. For a recent re-examination and evaluation of Brown’s formative article see the issue of *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (Fall 1998), especially Susanna Elm, “Introduction,” 343-351, and Mark Vessey, “The Demise of the Christian Writer and the Remaking of ‘Late Antiquity’: From H.-I. Marrou’s Saint Augustine (1938) to Peter Brown’s Holy Man (1983),” 377-411.

¹⁸There were the collections of sayings arising from monastic communities but, as Benedicta Ward has noted, the dating of these sayings defies precision. See *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* trans. Benedicta Ward, SLG (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), xxvii. Whether Athanasius had access to a collection of sayings about Antony is difficult to determine. See Michael Williams, “The *Life of Antony* and the Domestication of Charismatic Wisdom,” in *Charisma and Sacred Biography* ed. Michael Williams (Scholars Press for the Journal of the American Academy of Religion Thematic Studies Series XL VIII/3 and 4, 1982), 23-45. Williams argues that Athanasius composed the *Life of Antony* in order to take authority away from any collection of sayings about Antony that might have been circulating and redirect general attention to the authority of his biography of Antony. The brilliance of the *Life of Antony*, argues Williams, is that sayings and anecdotes are woven into a narrative—a powerful and compelling format which can rival the sayings collections.

¹⁹Marincola, *Authority and Tradition*, 63.

²⁰Athanasius, *Antony*, 30. It has been noted that there is only one example in which Athanasius uses the first-person perspective when describing events. See Athanasius, *Antony*, 83 (chapter 71), where the first-person plural is used to describe the accompaniment of the Alexandrian bishops as Antony left the city and Antony’s

must make claims regarding the interviewing of eye-witnesses. Athanasius must apologize that such a task had not been completed. He had hoped to “send for some of the monks who were accustomed to being near [Antony] so that after learning something more, I might send you a fuller narrative.”²¹ Athanasius begs for forgiveness, however, as time and travel restraints have prevented this kind of inquiry. Although it might seem that Athanasius’ failure to secure an audience with the monks who lived with Antony constitutes an unpardonable methodological error, Athanasius is actually relying on the understood epistemological hierarchy of knowledge for his exemption. Marincola argues that in the ancient mind “autopsy is the best and most reliable source of knowledge, and the report of an eyewitness is next.”²² Athanasius admits he has failed to provide secondary evidence, but the recipients are not to scorn his efforts because he is providing first-level evidence. Athanasius seems to be aware that claims of autopsy and interrogation of eyewitnesses need to be made and makes sure to address the conventions of history-writing, if not fulfill them entirely.

Finally, Athanasius acknowledges scepticism but assures his reader that he is able to get at the truth. He notes that the recipients had wondered “if the things said concerning [Antony] are true” and had sent a directive to Athanasius to send them a true account of Antony.²³ Athanasius says he received the directive with ready good will; the scepticism implicit in the request is warranted. But Athanasius instructs the reader to stay their incredulity; “Do not be

healing of a girl possessed by a demon. In a footnote Gregg suggests that the “fact that only in this instance do we find a ‘we-passage’ points to the possibility that Athanasius’ contact with the monk was less frequent than the introduction of the *Life* might lead a reader to suppose; Athanasius would have made himself an eyewitness to the feats he describes, had he been able to do so credibly.” See page 142, footnote 132. That is, Athanasius didn’t really have much first-hand experience of Antony or otherwise he would have been keen to exploit his eye-witness status. However, Marincola’s study of claims made by historians regarding their own personal eyewitness (autopsy) observes that most historians did not perpetually include ‘I saw’ statements. Marincola notes that it “was impractical and intrusive for the author to interrupt his narrative constantly with ‘I saw’ or ‘I learned’ or ‘I conjecture’; it would be an impediment to the enjoyment of the narrative’s pleasure,” (80). The standard practice was to make a claim of autopsy at the beginning of the text and only rarely make such claims throughout the text.

²¹Athanasius, *Antony*, 30.

²²Marincola, *Authority and Tradition*, 64, 67, 72. “For [ancient historians] the steadfast claim of reliance on their eyes and ears remained from start to finish the chosen ‘methodology’ for historical inquiry.” Ibid., 66.

²³Athanasius, *Antony*, 29.

incredulous about what you hear of him from those who make reports.”²⁴ Athanasius assures the reader that while scepticism is natural, the account of Antony is true. If the recipients remain doubtful, they are invited to question others on matters of veracity for such checks will confirm the greatness of Antony: “Do not fail to put questions to those who sail from here. For perhaps after each tells what he know, the account concerning him would still scarcely do him justice.”²⁵

Athanasius assures his audience that he has the proper character to write this biography. He speaks about his effort and enthusiasm to compose the requested biography; he “hastened to write” the life of Antony. And he makes indirect assertions of care when he indicates that he has included neither too much information, thus causing the reader to disbelieve, nor too little information, causing the reader to be contemptuous of Antony. In all his research Athanasius claims that he has been a fair adjudicator; he has always kept his “mind fixed on the truth.”²⁶ In sum, he has the proper disposition for composing a biography. As the biography is not much interested in military or political affairs such claims are not part of assuring his audience that he has the proper character to write this text.²⁷ It is, however, a little surprising that he does not mention his experience as a bishop. Mentioning his career would follow the pattern of claiming to have the necessary acumen to write about the subject.²⁸ Rather, the only experience Athanasius mentions is the shared experience of benefit that comes from meditating on the life

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., 30.

²⁶Ibid., 29-30.

²⁷At least not interested in political affairs in the secular sense of the term. The political implications of the text involve the church rather than secular government bodies.

²⁸It is possible that Athanasius relies on a particular anecdote at the end of the text to convey this sense of proper character rather than claim it directly in the introduction. In chapters 91-92 Athanasius tells the reader that Antony had willed his sheepskin and cloak to him and that he had kept and treasured these articles. The passing of the cloak invokes the Biblical story of Elijah in 2 Kings 2:6-14. Here Elijah’s prophetic task is transferred to Elisha, as symbolized by the transfer of Elijah’s cloak to Elisha. (A reference to the Elijah and Elisha relationship is made in the first chapter when Athanasius explains that he “followed [Antony] more than a few times and poured water over his hands.” It is a reference to 2 Kings 3:11 where Elisha is described as the one who poured water over the hands of Elijah.) Athanasius could be asserting authority indirectly—to an audience that would have understood that Antony’s expressed wish to will his cloak to Athanasius signified the passing of authority from Antony to Athanasius. As Marinola has observed, ancient authors had to be careful about how much self-promotion to incorporate. Athanasius is indicating that he has the proper character to write his text because he has the proper authority—from Antony.

of Antony: “For simply to remember Antony is a great profit and assistance for me also.”²⁹

Perhaps Athanasius is aware that experience of this kind could recommend his character to the recipient monks more than any kind of professional resumé.

Athanasius performs a balancing act similar to the Greco-Roman historians in placing his *Life of Antony* within tradition while also promoting his text as a new authority. Where Athanasius differs from the Greco-Roman histories is where he locates his authoritative texts. As far as Athanasius is concerned, the Christian canon is the tradition into which his text must insert itself. References to canonical texts are made in the second chapter. Here the memorable story of Antony’s conversion to ascetic life is recounted. While considering the example of the apostles as described in Acts, Antony went into church and heard the words of the Gospel (of Matthew) spoken.³⁰ In response to hearing the account of Jesus’ command to the rich ruler to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, Antony gave away his wealth and his life as an ascetic began. Again, the history of the deeds of the apostles and the life of Christ are the texts by which the account of Antony begins.³¹ Scriptural references are not restricted to the Gospels. Indeed, the allusions and references to the whole of the Christian canon (Old Testament and New Testament) permeate the text.³²

In addition to quotation of New Testament texts, the anecdotes of Antony’s life-story mimic the *pericopes* of the Gospels in *topoi*, if not in exact detail. The primary depictions of Jesus in the synoptic gospels are of a healer, exorcist and teacher. These are the motifs which

²⁹Ibid., 29

³⁰ “Six months had not passed since the death of his parents when, going to the Lord’s house as usual and gathering his thoughts, he considered while he walked how the apostles, forsaking everything, followed the Savior, and how in Acts some sold what they possessed and took the proceeds and placed them at the feet of the apostles for distribution among those in need, and what great hope is stored up for such people in heaven. He went into the church pondering these things, and just then it happened that the Gospel was being read, and he heard the Lord saying to the rich man, *If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.*” Ibid., 31.

³¹The connection of history and biography is prominent in this section where Antony was contemplating the history of the Church as recorded in Acts when he hears the words of a biography about Jesus.

³² There are approximately fourteen allusions to or direct quotations of Matthew; two of Mark; eleven of Luke; and three of John. There are forty allusions to or quotations of the Pauline epistles and four from non-Pauline epistles. The Psalms are referenced thirteen times and other Old Testament passages at least thirty times.

are used of Antony. In the Gospels, the crowds flocked to Jesus for healing and exorcism and a similar description is given of Antony's career. The reader learns that the people sought out Antony in great numbers and through Antony "the Lord healed many of those present who suffered from bodily ailments; others he purged of demons, and to Antony he gave grace in speech."³³ This summary of Antony is substantiated in the anecdotes when Antony, through Christ's power, purifies an officer's daughter from a demon; prayed for water, which then sprang miraculously from the desert sand and saved man and beast from dying of thirst; instructed a man named Fronto, who couldn't speak and was going blind, how to receive healing; and prayed for the healing of Polycratia, a woman who had great stomach pains.³⁴

Antony is also a teacher and the instructions he gives to the monks are described. A long section of teaching begins in chapter sixteen and ends in chapter forty-three. Antony teaches the monks about the kingdom of heaven; the demons; and how to repel demons.³⁵ Philip Rousseau has argued that the *Life of Antony* presented a figure that was more than simply "an exemplar worthy of imitation" but rather one who was also a teacher who taught "in ways familiar to 'philosophical' or neo-Pythagorean pedagogues of the age."³⁶ Like Jesus, Antony was miracle-worker and teacher.

Even though Athanasius is unmistakably placing his text within the tradition of the Christian canon, he is also creating something new. The authority of the *Life of Antony* comes from both its similarity to but also its difference from the Christian canon. Antony, as

³³Ibid., 42. Note that all three aspects of healer, exorcist and teacher (graceful speech) appear in this sentence.

³⁴These episodes are found in chapters 48, 54, 57 and 61 (respectively) in Athanasius' text. For parallel Gospel events see Matt. 15:22-8 where Jesus exorcizes a Canaanite woman's daughter and Matt. 17:14-18 where Jesus exorcizes a boy with a demon. See also the healing of blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52; the instruction to 'go' in order to receive healing is given to both Fronto and Bartimaeus. In Matt. 9:20-22 Jesus heals a woman with a haemorrhage. Compare also the story of the prayer for water and the miraculous occurrence of a spring with II Kings 3:16 where Elisha prays for water in the desert to fill a wadi with water to sustain people and animals. The exorcisms, healing and miracles of Antony are reminiscent of the Gospels in particular.

³⁵These episodes are found in chapters 20, 2, and 23-43.

³⁶Philip Rousseau, "Antony as Teacher in the Greek *Life*," in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2000), 89.

Athanasius describes him, is Christlike, a very special human. But Antony is not Christ; he is not God. Athanasius wants to make this point very clear. Antony teaches the monks not to boast about deeds of exorcism for “the performance of signs does not belong to us—this is the Savior’s work.”³⁷ Later the reader is told: “The ones who were cured were taught not to give thanks to Antony, but to God alone.”³⁸ When Antony performs a miracle, he tells the recipient that he did nothing to conjure the results. He was merely the conduit through whom God, who has all the power to perform acts of healing and exorcism, chose to work.³⁹ Thus even though Antony is not a substitute for Christ, he is still to be recognized as an authority in his own right. I do not think that Athanasius is attempting to supplant the authoritative model of Christ nor claim equal authority for Antony as is given to Christ. He is continuing both the classical and Christian practice of commending particular individuals as examples worthy of imitation.

Imitation of God *and* man is not something which can be credited to an Athanasian genesis, of course. The dual task was already implicit within the texts that had emerged as the canon. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, the Gospels advocated imitation of Christ and Paul urged his readers to imitate himself in his letters. The reader of the letter to the Philippians was exhorted to imitate Christ above all but many other examples are also given. Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus function as positive examples.

Athanasius’ text remains faithful to the theological tradition of Paul’s epistles in three points. First, Athanasius agrees that the ultimate model is Christ. Second, he agrees that individuals can be models of a secondary sort. Third, he agrees that some individuals or groups

³⁷Ibid., 60

³⁸Ibid., 73.

³⁹Ibid., 74. After praying for a healing Antony states: “this good deed is not mine, [this] healing is from the Savior who works his mercy everywhere for those who call on him.” In another example a military officer named Martinianus camped outside of Antony’s door in order to request healing for his daughter but Antony refused to see the man. Finally, after Martinianus had made quite a nuisance of himself, knocking on the door and refusing to leave, Antony called to the officer from behind his door: “Why do you cry out to me, man? I too am a man like you, but if you believe in Christ, whom I serve, go, and in the same way believe, pray to God and it will come to pass” See page 67.

of people are negative models. Examples of the first point have already been cited. With regard to the second point, Athanasius agrees with Paul's command to imitate other Christians. But Athanasius enters virgin terrain by establishing a new model. Antony is a model of something slightly different—an exemplar not only of sacrifice but of an ascetic expression of Christianity. Antony was the model of what it was to be a desert monk. The pattern of Antony's discipline, his asceticism, was to be the pattern for other monks. While Benedict would later present the norms of monastic life in a form more akin to a contract or list, the 'rules' of the desert monks were given here in a biographical format. The portrait of Antony's life is not merely a repository of interesting details. The manner in which Antony conducted his life was the model for how others would pattern their lives.

Throughout his translation of the Greek *Life*, Robert Gregg has transcribed *askēsis* as “discipline” rather than “ascetic” or “asceticism” because it was only after the publication of *Antony* that *askēsis* came to be primarily associated with the renouncing practices of the desert monks.⁴⁰ Antony was the example of someone who both initiated and mastered a life of this sort of discipline. As such, he was a standard to which others who aspired to be ascetics were to affix their attention. The *Life of Antony* is ostensibly addressed to a group of monks who have asked for information regarding the career of Antony in order that they might imitate Antony.⁴¹ The monks who received this letter were told, “I know that even in hearing, along with marvelling at the man, you will want also to emulate his purpose, for Antony's way of life provides monks with a sufficient picture for ascetic practice.”⁴²

The text gives the readers details of very practical aspects of everyday life in order to make good on its intent to guide future monks in the ascetic life. Thus, the monks learned that at

⁴⁰Gregg's introduction in Athanasius, *Antony*, 20

⁴¹“Since you have asked me about the career of the blessed Antony, hoping to learn how he began the discipline, who he was before this, and what sort of death he experienced, and if the things said concerning him are true—so that you also might lead yourselves in imitation of him” Athanasius, *Antony*, 29.

⁴²*Ibid.*

the beginning of his life of discipline Antony ate only once a day, after sunset. After time, Antony began to eat only every second day and later on still, only every fourth day. His food was bread, salt and water and never anything as extravagant as meat or wine. Antony slept on a rush mat at first and later on the ground, if he chose to sleep at all. His watchfulness was such, the reader is told, that he would often pass the entire night without sleep. Such details were included because the monk was to bring his body under subjection—for by weakening the body the soul's intensity was increased.⁴³ The reader is to understand quite clearly that the monastic life is one of great rigour. Even so, it is not to be one in which one completely destroys the body. Further on, Antony urged the monks to “concede a little time to the body, out of necessity.”⁴⁴ Antony functions as a guide for moderation even in the extremes of the discipline. Christian monasticism was in its infancy. The *Life of Antony* provided a conceptual orientation to an emerging religious community.

It seems likely that the intended audience was broader than those who wanted to become or who already were desert ascetics. Again, Antony was to be more than just a story to be marvelled at. Antony was imitable in aspects applicable to ordinary people. Among his innumerable visitors were those who were cruel, advancing a lawsuit, or overly wealthy. Antony's influence was such that Athanasius likens him to a physician given to Egypt to heal the evils of the people. Those who came to Antony forgot their lawsuits or laid aside their money. He empathized with the pain of the victims of injustice so completely so as to give the impression that he himself had been injured. Such was the influence of Antony that the behaviour of those who visited him was changed after their encounter with him. Those who were grieving left rejoicing, those who were angry left affectionate, those exhausted by their poverty left consoled, those who were discouraged left stronger, those who were young left

⁴³Athanasius, *Antony*, 36.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 65.

renouncing the pleasure and excess of youth, and those who were distressed in thought left with a calm mind.⁴⁵ Since Antony had already died when this text was written, the reader could no longer make pilgrimage to Antony.⁴⁶ Yet, like those who were transformed by their encounters with Antony, the reader can receive consolation in the literary embodiment of Antony. Like the pilgrims, the reader should renounce pleasures, embrace moderation, drop lawsuits and so forth.

The lay reader is to imitate the general piety of Antony, but these endorsements are made for the most part in generalized statements of virtue—with the exception of the command to end lawsuits. Exhortations of moderation, renunciation of wealth or alleviation of injustice are not accompanied with specifics such as are meant for the monks—such as amounts of food, amount of sleep and so forth. It would have been up to the ordinary individual's discretion to quantify moderation, how much money to give away, or even more basic, what acts constituted injustice let alone what should be undertaken as remedy. There is, however, one specific way in which all people, aspiring monks or laypeople, are to be like Antony. Antony demonstrated submission to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Thus, the reader is informed that Antony “wanted every cleric to be held in higher regard than himself. He felt no shame at bowing the head to the bishops and priests; if even a deacon came to him for assistance, he discussed the things that are beneficial, and gave place to him in prayer, not being embarrassed to put himself in a position to learn.”⁴⁷ Antony's treatment of every level of ecclesiastical office is in contrast to his usual behaviour. In most of the anecdotes in which people come to see Antony, they are denied access to him. Antony refuses to see suppliants seeking healing for themselves or others. At times the monks themselves must approach Antony to plead the case of the suppliant as Antony makes himself

⁴⁵Ibid., 94.

⁴⁶Peter Brown describes the power of the late antique hermit to adjudicate in important matters of religious, social, legal and economic matters of the region in which the hermit dwelt. This power was mostly wielded in the capacity as adjudicator. Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101.

⁴⁷Athanasius, *Antony*, 81.

unavailable.⁴⁸ He journeys to increasingly more inhospitable locales in order to make it more difficult for even the monks to visit him. Clerics, by contrast, are granted immediate and respectful access to Antony. For both monks and ordinary folk, Antony was an exemplar. It is interesting to note that while respect for the appointed shepherds of the church is part of the New Testament, the preference for clergy over laypeople is not. In fact in the New Testament stories, Christ seems to prefer the ordinary people over the clerics. In his concern to demonstrate respect for the clergy, Athanasius does not seem to realize he is advocating an attitude slightly different than the New Testament. I should have liked Athanasius to comment on this difference and the application for the reader.

With regard to the third point of Athanasius' agreement with Pauline theology, there are negative examples in *Antony*. As noted in the section on Plutarch and Tacitus, the offering of both positive and negative exemplars was common in classical biography. At various points throughout the text, Antony denounces the Meletian schismatics and the Arians. Given its Athanasian authorship, the denunciations are not surprising. Nearly a third of Athanasius' career as a bishop was spent as an exile away from his Alexandrian diocese, as a result of the influence of Arian leaders. Antony gives straightforward instruction on these groups: "Do not approach the Meletian schismatics, for you know their evil and profane reputation. Nor are you to have any fellowship with the Arians, for their impiety is evident to everyone."⁴⁹ These words were spoken by Antony in his final visit to the monks before his death. By this point in the text, Antony's instructions are expected since prior to this point anecdotes from his life are included which demonstrate his abhorrence of the Arian heresy. At one point in his career a group of Arians had gone to Antony. After listening to these men and discovering their impiety, Antony "chased them from the mountain, saying that their doctrines were worse than serpents' poison."

⁴⁸See the story of the parents of the woman from Busiris who came to plead for their daughter's healing but whom Antony refused to see until his disciples pleaded with Antony to admit them.

⁴⁹Athanasius, *Antony*, 95.

Another time when Antony was in Alexandria, he publicly denounced the Arians saying that the Arians were “the forerunner of the Antichrist. . . . Therefore you are to have no fellowship with the most ungodly Arians, for there is no fellowship of light with darkness.”⁵⁰ As Paul included negative examples, the evil workers who mutilate the flesh and the enemies of the cross of Christ, Arians and Meletians are the negative exemplars in *Life of Antony*. Similar to the divine and human exemplars of the positive models in Philippians (Christ and Paul) the rejection of negative examples has both sacred and human examples: Christ and Antony. Antony exhorts the monks to “draw inspiration from Christ always” and “remembering what you heard from my preaching” the brothers are reminded to shun heterodox teaching. The divine is always of superior status—whether that be Christ or Scripture. Yet neither Paul nor the *Life of Antony* endorses imitation of Christ to the exclusion of the imitation of humans. Christians of the past are secondary exemplars after the primary example of Christ.

Marincola noted that ancient history-writers carefully placed themselves within the established tradition of ‘great’ texts while simultaneously asserting some degree of independent importance. Athanasius combines the claims of ancient history-writers, claims intended to establish the veracity of their content, with the theology of Paul and the format of the Gospels. Then Athanasius offers something new. It is something new because Paul had established human exemplars but he had not written biography whereas the Gospels are biographical in form but espouse a divine model. What constitutes texts of authority and importance has been modified from the Greco-Roman tradition. The primacy of Herodotus and Thucydides, or Livy and Tacitus, has been replaced by the Gospels and New Testament Epistles. Further, no longer are the major world events, and especially the wars and political manoeuvring of leaders, the focus of discussion. The people who change the course of world history are now perceived to be those who remove themselves from society and the world. Monks and bishops become the new

⁵⁰Ibid., 82.

great men.

This section on the *Life of Antony* began by noting the two strikes against considering this text as history-writing: that it reveals the author rather than the subject and that it is a form of advocacy. The response thus far is to note that in respect to the forms of ancient history-writing, the *Life of Antony* conforms to the general requirements. Athanasius is using every technique of his predecessors to convince the reader that he is conveying what essentially happened. The critical and edifying logic of the Classical and Biblical texts is evident in the *Life of Antony*. So, the question remains: does an obvious advocacy of belief prevent an author from writing history? Is it possible for a biographer to reveal something of his subject or is he incapable of leaving his self-enclosed subjectivity? These questions will be answered in the chapter on modern and postmodern historiography. Before moving on to modernity, however, we will turn to the continuing influence of *Antony* in the Middle Ages and the continuing logic of critical and edifying from the fourth century to the seventeenth century.

The reputation of medieval biography has not fared well in the modern world. Often labelled with the pejorative term “hagiography,” many agree that medieval biography is bad history-writing. A typical evaluation of medieval biographers is like this modern evaluation of the Carolingian-era biographer, Ermenrich of Ellwanfen: “[he] makes liberal use of dubious oral sources, and entire sections are derived from pre-existing saints’ lives or from biblical stories”⁵¹ Nevertheless the reputation of medieval biography has received two important historical “rehabilitations” in the twentieth century. Hippolyte Delehaye and Thomas Heffernan will be discussed as representative of these two scholarly developments. By building on the important work of these scholars I will suggest a third way of rehabilitating medieval biography.

At the beginning of the twentieth century various scholars sifted through the massive

⁵¹Lynda Coon, “Historical Fact and Exegetical Fiction in the Carolingian Vita S. Sualonis,” *Church History* 72 (March 2003), 2. For a good introduction to hagiography see the introductory matter in Thomas Head, ed., *Hagiography An Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

corpus of medieval biography searching for those elements which were true to the events as they likely happened. Hippolyte Delehaye is one scholar representative of that kind of work.⁵² Others also worked in this same manner.⁵³ Delehaye's research focused on method and particularly on the historiographical problems of medieval hagiography as they impinged on the veracity of the accounts. Thus, Delehaye explained why obviously fallacious material appears in these texts. Some copyists, for example, did not understand Latin very well and if they misread a particular word they would allow themselves to add material that would make sense of the misunderstood word. Delehaye included an interesting instance in which a copyist mistook *odorare* with *adorare* in a story about a lion and St. Marciana when she was in the arena facing her martyrdom.⁵⁴ Thus instead of the lion jumping on the victim and sniffing her, as reported in a previous text, the story now becomes one of a lion recognizing her saintliness.

Other copyists failed to understand the way words changed in meaning over time, misinterpreted place names, or other such errors. These instances then also became an opportunity for the copyist to insert material that the modern reader quickly understands does not describe what actually happened. In one example of this sort Delehaye observed that it was also common to attribute the deeds of *all* the persons who happened to have the same name to *one* individual by that name. Medieval authors assumed that great men are so rare there could not be two people by the name of Cyprian. Thus Cyprian of Carthage and Cyprian of Antioch were combined into one person who did all the deeds formerly done by two people.⁵⁵ Delehaye's work was important in two ways. First, he explained how in some instances well-meaning monks came to include erroneous or fallacious material. Second, he identified parts of

⁵²Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints*, trans. Donald Attwater (London: Charles Birchall and Sons, 1962).

⁵³This approach taken by Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982).

⁵⁴Delehaye, *Legends of the Saints*, 61-62.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 17. See also the on-line Medieval Source Book <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/delehaye-legends.html>, 20, where the information about Cyprian is included that has been deleted from the 3rd edition of the print version of Delehaye's book.

the biography which were true and could be used by modern historians as they wrote their own histories.

Towards the end of the twentieth century the focus of scholarship began to shift from a search for what was true about the subjects of medieval biography to the discovery of what was true about the medieval author and the medieval audience. Thomas Heffernan is representative of this second kind of rehabilitation.⁵⁶ He argued that while it is unfortunate that these biographies tell us so little about the subject this fact ought not mean that there is no redeemable information in these biographies. Quite the contrary, medieval biographies are a treasure of information about the author and his original intended audience. What was important to the people of a particular era is revealed in the interests, fears, concerns, peculiarities and piety of these texts.

Heffernan moved Delehaye's work forward by focusing on an assumed but unexplored point in Delehaye's research. Although there were many ways in which medieval authors and copyists failed to write accurate history, all these mistakes were made in the context of a popular love of the stories of the saints. If biographies of the saints were cherished by the average person in the Middle Ages, what do the biographies tell us about the average person of the Middle Ages? Unlike Delehaye, Heffernan is not particularly interested in ferreting out the facts about a saint. Rather, for Heffernan, the value of medieval sacred biography lies in what we can learn about a field of study that is otherwise difficult to learn about—the ordinary medieval person who left no written documents. Medieval biography is a historical treasure trove if questions about author and audience are applied to it. Through these texts we can understand the mentality of the Middle Ages.

⁵⁶Thomas Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

The kind of re-orienting that Heffernan applied to medieval biography has set the tone for other scholars. Sherry Reames, for example, states that since medieval hagiography provides little reliable biographical information, scholars can

[A]lternatively and even more fruitfully, . . . study the conventions and polemical elements [of medieval biography] themselves, seeking to understand what the traditional patterns can tell us about the assumptions and concerns of the people who used them or changed them in various ways.⁵⁷

Thus the focus of contemporary scholarship is on the afterlives of the saints rather than on the lives of the saints.⁵⁸ This focus has influenced research in other areas of scholarship outside of medieval biography. In *Constructing American Lives*, for example, Scott Casper tells his reader that he will examine nineteenth-century American biography in order to learn about the cultural values of the people of that century. He will not judge whether the biographies of the era were good (Casper's word) or not. The biographies reveal the author and his audience but the subject of the biography is opaque.⁵⁹

The work of Delehaye and Heffernan is fine scholarship. It is not my intention to quarrel with their work but rather to suggest that the discussion can be taken in a further direction still. Delehaye held medieval biography to the standard of modern history in order to explain how the medieval methods were different from the standard of modern history-writing. The end goal was to remove fictive accretions from the stories of the subjects. In contrast to Delehaye, Heffernan spends much of his book explaining how the medieval biographer understood his task and the worldview that supported this understanding. I will rely on Heffernan for his explanations of the medieval biographer's methods. Heffernan calls the medieval biographical production *instructio*

⁵⁷Sherry L. Reams, ed., *Middle English Legends of Women Saints* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003), 2.

⁵⁸The importance of the "after lives" of the saints began to shape my thinking in a lecture series on this topic as organized by Mark Vessey at the University of British Columbia, 2002.

⁵⁹Scott Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1999), 3.

history: history that instructs.⁶⁰ The instruction of medieval biography was primarily the imitation of the saints. These authors were interested in the critical and edifying intent of medieval biography. In contrast to both of these authors I will argue that medieval biography was critical *and* edifying.

If someone were to read a number of Biblical and Classical biographies and then turn to a number of biographies from the Middle Ages, that person would instinctively feel like something different or new is occurring in the medieval texts. I will argue that that on the one hand there is actually a fundamental continuity between medieval biography and Biblical and Classical texts. That continuity is in intent. In general authors of all three eras intended to be both critical and edifying to the highest standards of their worldview and methodological acumen. On the other hand, in the Middle Ages the character of biography does change with respect to its Biblical and Classical predecessors. This change is primarily one of method. Both the continuity and changes will be discussed by reference to a number of influential texts including biographies by Jerome, and Sulpicius Severus, an anonymous life of Cuthbert as well as Bede's text on Cuthbert, and a biography by John Capgrave. Along the way, other texts that are highly biographical in content but in some ways different from the typical medieval style of biography will also be discussed as notable alternatives.

The final primary texts to be discussed include John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, the Anabaptist *Martyr's Mirror*, and the work of the Bollandists, a Jesuit order that devotes their lives to the study of the saints, entitled *Acta Sanctorum*. These three texts are representative of the end of medieval biography. In these texts we can observe how the methods of biography begin to become more recognizably modern and therefore feel like they are becoming more critical again. The changing methods, however, are not really indicative of a beginning of a return to critical history—because the Middle Ages as a general rule do not deviate from the

⁶⁰Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 71.

intent to write critical history. Rather the difference between biography before and after the Middle Ages is a result of a method that reflects a theological emphasis that medieval authors held. In what follows I will discuss the medieval worldview that supported this methodological change. A discussion of how this worldview was manifested in the writing of biography, particularly the way in which this theology was expressed in method, will then be sketched by discussing some notable medieval biographies.

Medieval clerics held a number of theological positions in common with Christians before and after the medieval era. There was, however, sensitivity to the oneness of faith that was expressed differently as compared to other eras. How was medieval theology different and how did this difference affect the writing of biography? Heffernan's explanation of the medieval concept of *communio sanctorum* is helpful here.⁶¹ Medieval people sensed that all Christians, past and present, were part of the one body of Christ (a point not unique to that era but perhaps more strongly held than in later eras). But medieval authors extended this belief in the one body of Christ to a point where the distinctives or peculiarities of a person were less important than the paradigm of the one faith. In fact, because all saints were part of the one faith, it was expected that one saint would be very similar to another saint. Because the essential core of a saint was the same regardless of whatever era he or she might have lived in, it was natural that the saints would have similar characteristics, similar life experiences, similar abilities and similar encounters with God.⁶²

Heffernan further explains how this sense of community was also manifested in the writing of biography. The unity of the Church and the unchanging nature of Christian faith were demonstrated in the similarity of the lives of the saints. As a result, passages from one saint's biography can show up in other saints' biographies in either unmodified or only slightly

⁶¹Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 124.

⁶²Ibid., 11.

modified form. The result is history that instructs and Heffernan illuminates the subtle ways that medieval biographers reused passages from previous texts as part of their intent to lead readers further along the path of the imitation of the saints.

Two points about the critical judgements of the medieval biographer need to be made, briefly, before discussing the medieval sense of the communion of the saints and biography. First, it is not that the medieval person did not know the difference between *what really happened* in the past and something made up about the past, but, second, that the medieval author had a different expectation of *what could have really happened*. In examining Einhard's work we can see both points demonstrated. Einhard is often regarded as the exception in medieval biography. His biography of Charlemagne, for example, is unlike the biography by his contemporary, Ermenrich of Ellwanfen, who was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. Einhard does not use dubious oral sources or copy wholesale from other biographies and the Bible. How exceptional, really, was this Einhard?

R.W. Southern called Einhard's biography of Charlemagne the most historically critical biography of the Middle Ages.⁶³ Einhard demonstrates that he can sort through the various reports about Charlemagne and discern which are most likely to be true and which are most likely to be untrue. Einhard will not discuss Charlemagne's childhood because there are no reliable written sources.⁶⁴ Much of the information about Charlemagne's everyday life comes from Einhard's personal observation from the time he was a court bureaucrat. Einhard grants greatest credence to eye-witness reporting as do his Classical models. Even so, Einhard was still a man of his time. In addition to his biography of Charlemagne, Einhard also wrote about the miracles of Saint Marcellinus and Saint Peter and brought the relics of these saints to the city of Seligenstadt. There Einhard built a church to these two saints and collected miracle stories about

⁶³R.W. Southern, "Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing: The Classical Tradition From Einhard to Geoffrey of Monmouth," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 20 (1970): 183.

⁶⁴Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (New York: Penguin, 1969), 59.

them.⁶⁵ In Einhard then, we can observe a medieval man who can evaluate the probability of what happened and recount it and at the same time believes in miracles. Why then are there no miracles in the biography of Charlemagne? I believe that the answer may be the fact that Charlemagne was a secular ruler and that as such Einhard expected the parameters for what was possible to have really happened to be different from what can really happen to a saint. Einhard has what Carolly Erickson called the fuller sense of reality in his understanding of a religious person as opposed to a secular ruler.⁶⁶

What can be said about the edifying nature of Einhard's biography of Charlemagne? It is frequently noted that Einhard based his writing on the style of Suetonius.⁶⁷ Even so, R.W. Southern has noted that Einhard, unlike Suetonius, was unwilling to follow the Classical precedent in pointing out a subject's character flaws. Einhard felt he had to do everything he could to build up the character of Charlemagne.⁶⁸ In this sense Einhard demonstrates the typical medieval tendency to portray a subject as a kind of plaster saint rather than a balanced portrait. Whatever the evaluation of the edifying content of this biography, Einhard is writing a biography that is both critical and edifying. Einhard can prove that Charlemagne was a generous monarch in both little things, as demonstrated by welcoming Einhard to his court, and big things, as demonstrated in his will.⁶⁹ Einhard ends his biography with a replication of that will. It is both an attestation to his sense of accuracy (he is replicating a document) and a demonstration of the generosity of an ideal ruler. Einhard understands that the edifying content of his biography is rooted in its historical accuracy.⁷⁰

⁶⁵Einhard, "The Relics of Sts. Marcellinus and Peter," trans. Barrett Wendell in *Medieval Biography: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Head (New York: Routledge, 2001), 199-226.

⁶⁶Carolly Erickson, *The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception* (New York: Oxford University, 1976).

⁶⁷R.W. Southern, "Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing," 183.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 184-85.

⁶⁹Carolly Erickson, *The Medieval Vision*, 52, 87-90.

⁷⁰On the opposite end of the critical and edifying spectrum is another biography about Charlemagne, *De Carlo Magno*, by a monk of St. Gall named Notker. This text is highly suspect as history. The stories are like

The heightened sense of the community of faith and the continuing sense of the critical and edifying intent of biography have been briefly sketched. These points will become even clearer in examining other texts. What follows is both a brief history of medieval biography from Athanasius to John Bolland and also a critical description of how the methods of biography change as a result of the emphasis on the oneness of faith.

The story of Antony, the orthodox hermit, was well known throughout the Middle Ages. Augustine, bishop of Hippo, was greatly inspired by the story of Antony. Once when Augustine was in agony about his spiritual state, a friend told him the story about the life of Antony. After hearing the story of Antony, Augustine fled to the garden where he heard children chanting to “take and read.” Upon this prompting Augustine opened the Bible and, after reading a passage from the Pauline epistle to the Romans, Augustine reported that he was truly converted.⁷¹ The story of Antony is second only to the Bible in Augustine’s understanding of his process of conversion. What text may have been the source of the story of Antony is not revealed in Augustine’s account. The source was not likely to have been Athanasius, in fact, or at least not directly, since Augustine did not know Greek, but it may have been Evagrius’s Latin translation of Athanasius.

Other people after Augustine were also greatly moved by the story of Antony and the

generic jokes that you hear at a wedding reception: they are meant for a laugh and in no way tell anything that actually happened to the bride or groom. For much of the first half of the text Charlemagne seems to spend all his time going around to church services. One time, reports Notker, Charlemagne observes a silly monk fail to convincingly “lip-synch” the liturgy to try and hide the fact that he did not know the words. Another time Charlemagne teaches one of his greedy bishops a lesson by tricking him into paying a fortune for what was supposed to be some exotic artefact but was in fact a stuffed mouse. In fact, for the first half of his biography Charlemagne is a mere device to connect amusing stories. If the first anecdote is meant for pure entertainment, however, the second is a morality tale about humility which has nothing at all to do with Charlemagne. Thus Notker’s text exemplifies the other extreme of medieval biography. The result of this kind of emphasis on fictional edifying material is textually embodied in the way in which Charlemagne is merely an observer of events in the telling of his own life. The succession of moral lessons for lazy monks and greedy bishops makes the person of Charlemagne irrelevant. When taken to this degree of absurdity the problem of medieval emphasis on edifying to the detriment of critical engagement stands in clear and obvious relief. Of course modern historians are going to reject this kind of history-writing. And many medieval authors did too. Einhard and Notker, *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, 101, 108-109.

⁷¹This story occurs in Book 8.6-8.8 of Augustine’s *Confessions*.

text of *Antony*. Both the Athanasian text and the Evagrian translation were widely copied and circulated throughout the Middle Ages.⁷² I will now sketch the reception and use of the story of Antony, and in particular the Athanasian text of Antony's life and the Evagrian translation of Athanasius, in order to demonstrate an important change in biographical portraiture. The powerful and even iconic status that this text acquired is part of this medieval development.

About two decades after Athanasius produced his text on Antony, Jerome wrote a number of biographies that he likely intended to eventually incorporate into a history of the Church.⁷³ The subject of one of these biographies was Paul the Hermit, also called Paul of Thebes.⁷⁴ The story of Antony figures large in this text. Indeed, the popularity of the texts about Antony, which Jerome notes were currently circulating in both Latin and Greek, are the impetus for Jerome's account of Paul. In the established rhetorical pattern of history-writing of the era, Jerome justifies his topic by making claims of importance. Jerome tells the reader that the popularity of the story of Antony had caused most people to think that Antony was the first desert hermit. As Jerome will demonstrate, this is in fact not the case. Paul was the first of the desert hermits and Antony was for a brief time a disciple of Paul's.

There is at least as much about Antony in this text, however, as about Paul. In chapters one to three Jerome mentions martyrs who lived during the time of Paul and who suffered terrible deaths under Decius and Valerian. In section six we are introduced to Paul and in

⁷²Bertram Colgrave states that Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, Sulpicius's *Life of St. Martin*, and Jerome's *Life of Paul* become the "models for later lives of saints for several centuries, all over Western Europe." *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: Text, Translation and Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1940), 310.

⁷³Jerome did not get to writing that history of the church although he said this was his intention. In *Life of Malchus* Jerome wrote that he planned to write a history "from the advent of our Saviour down to our day, treating of how and through whom the Church of Christ came to birth and maturity, how it grew under persecution was crowned by martyrdoms, and, after it came into the hands of Christian emperors, how it became greater in power and riches indeed, but meaner in virtue. But this is for another time; for the present, let us explain what lies before us." Jerome, "The Life of Malchus, the Captive Monk," trans. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald, *The Fathers of the Church*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, vol. 15, *Early Christian Biographies* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1952), 287-288.

⁷⁴Jerome, "The Life of St. Paul the First Hermit," trans. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald, *The Fathers of the Church*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, vol. 15, *Early Christian Biographies* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1952), 225-238.

section seven the focus shifts to Antony and his journey to find Paul. From this point on Antony remains central to the biography as his interaction with Paul, as Antony told it to his own disciples, is the source of Jerome's knowledge of Paul.

The account of Paul is generally like other Christian biographies of the time with one notable exception: the information about Antony's journey to Paul. Antony had thought that he was the only desert hermit at that time until it was revealed to him in a dream that another who was even greater than he had preceded him. As a result of this dream Antony understood that he had been divinely instructed to find this person. The dream did not reveal, however, the location of this other hermit. Antony began his journey trusting that he would receive directions as he went. Divine guidance was not new to Christian literature but the source of that divine direction, as reported in Jerome's story, was. A centaur appeared to Antony after he prayed to God. Antony asked the creature where to find the man of God he was seeking and the centaur, who was inexplicably unable to talk, motioned with his outstretched hands in the direction Antony should go. To today's reader there may be other events in the account that seem incredible, but for the Christian reader the appearance of a centaur is particularly troublesome.⁷⁵ Jerome has taken a character from Greek and Roman mythology and inserted it into his biography.

Those who read Jerome's text immediately after he wrote it seem to have had problems believing Jerome.⁷⁶ In the introductory matter to his later biography on Hilarion, another desert monk, Jerome mentions slanderers and disparagers who accused Jerome of making up the person of Paul—which Jerome denies. While it is thought today that Paul of Thebes was a real

⁷⁵ Other examples of miraculous events are found in chapters ten and eleven where a raven brought a loaf of bread to Paul and Antony (who then spend the rest of the day politely insisting that the other should break the bread and so it takes a whole day before the two of them get around to actually eating the bread). In chapter sixteen a pair of lions dig a pit in the sand after Paul died which Antony then used as a grave for Paul. These stories have biblical precedent as for example the birds who fed Elijah and the lions who did not feed on Daniel.

⁷⁶ Jerome sensed that his readers did not believe that Paul has really existed. Jerome says this at the beginning of his next biography on Hilarion. Jerome says he scorns those who, "formerly depreciating my Paul, will probably disparage Hilarion also. They misrepresented Paul's solitude; . . . He who always lived unknown for that very reason did not exist at all." "The Life of Saint Hilarion," trans. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald, *The Fathers of the Church*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, vol. 15, *Early Christian Biographies* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1952), 246.

person the inclusion of a centaur in the account probably did not help Jerome's credibility. So why did he include it? Did Jerome believe in centaurs? Possibly. It may also be that Jerome wanted to make an allusion to a Classical text in his biography. By doing so he would show his erudition and link this text to the Classical texts of previous generations. The centaur is the most surprising of the details in the biography but it is not the only point at which he alludes to Classical writings. The two martyrs he mentions in the preamble to Paul are also Classical allusions. According to Jerome one of these martyrs was smeared with honey and exposed to biting insects and the other martyr bit out his own tongue rather than risk sinning with it. Delehay has noted that "torture by insects [was reminiscent of a scene] from Apuleius."⁷⁷ Biting out the tongue was also attributed to various ancient philosophers including the Pythagorean Timycha and to Zeno of Elea.⁷⁸

Jerome's *Life of St. Paul the Hermit* is important for two reasons. First, it shows the importance of the story of Antony. The reader actually learns very little about Paul. Jerome's text is almost entirely an account of the meeting of Paul and Antony a few days before Paul's death. Antony's actions dominate the story. Paul asks Antony to go back to Antony's cave (a journey of several days each way) in order to fetch the cloak that Athanasius had given Antony and so we learn of Antony's journey to fetch the cloak, his return to Paul's cave at which time he finds Paul's corpse, and Antony's burial of Paul. It is possible that Jerome is indicating that this is the cloak which Antony will later give to Athanasius. If so, the pre-eminence of Paul would be further strengthened. Without the story of Antony the story of Paul would be a few paragraphs but this fact is less important than the way in which the character of Antony functions in this text. The story of Athanasius's cloak is one that readers would have known from the Athanasian text. When the reference to this cloak is incorporated into Jerome's text,

⁷⁷Delehay, *Legends of the Saints*, 25.

⁷⁸Ibid.

this reference not only links the two texts but links Athanasius, Antony and Paul. Although Jerome justifies his text on the primacy of his subject, in the account itself it is Antony who validates Paul's career. The practice of incorporating stories from previous texts into a later text as a way of validating the later text will become increasingly prevalent in medieval biography.

The second reason Jerome's biography is important relates to the inclusion of the mythical centaur and the martyrs' experience in the arena which links the subjects to known Classical motifs. Perhaps it was only a small literary allusion that should be smiled at but otherwise ignored. But as the power and popularity of the story of Antony grows so too will the degree to which previous texts are invoked. Like Jerome's reference to the cloak these allusions will not be confined to the Bible but to other recognized saints. Like Jerome's reference to a centaur, these texts will occasionally even depart from Christian motifs.

The ascetic hermit movement may have begun in Egypt but soon Gaul could boast its own holy men. Sulpicius Severus's account of Martin of Tours is more like Athanasius's biography of Antony than any of Jerome's brief accounts. Unlike either of these two predecessors, however, Sulpicius's biography was written before Martin died and thus lacks the Classical and Biblical emphasis on the death of the subject found in the biographies of both Greco-Roman and Christian subjects.

Like *Antony*, Sulpicius's *Life of Martin* was an influential text in the Middle Ages. Sulpicius explains that the life of Martin demonstrates that the holy life of the Egyptian monks is also found in Gaul.⁷⁹ Like Antony, Martin is accosted by the devil and preaches against the Arian heresy.⁸⁰ Martin even betters Antony by giving his cloak to a beggar, rather than keeping a cloak, and also betters Antony by not only healing the sick but also by raising people from the

⁷⁹Sulpicius said that the place of Martin's cell was so secluded that it was equal to the solitude of the desert. Sulpicius Severus et al, *The Western Fathers: Being the Lives of Martin of Tours, Ambrose, Augustine of Hippo, Honoratus of Arles and Germanus of Auxerre*, trans. F.R. Hoare (New York: Harper and Row), 24.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 18-19.

dead.⁸¹ The *Life of Martin* resembles the *Life of Antony* the way Athanasius's text imitates the Gospels. There are, however, two important developments to note. First, there is a growing emphasis on the miraculous powers of a saint. After describing many of the miraculous deeds of Martin Sulpicius says:

The immense renown of this man of blessings dates from this time. He was already regarded by everybody as a saint; now he was looked upon as a man of power and in very truth an apostle.⁸²

The term apostle should have been enough and indeed the highest form of commendation to give to a Christian saint. Saints will increasingly have to demonstrate that they are men of miraculous powers. Second, in the Sulpician text we can observe how the texts of the biographies themselves become a kind of literary relic. Just as the relics of the saints had the power to heal those who sought the shrines of the saints, so too the text itself, if reused in later accounts of different saints' lives, has the power to prove sainthood. This observation will become clearer as the growing interest in the lives of the saints is discussed.

There is within the Sulpician text an interesting tension between the emerging cults of the saints as practiced by the people of late antique Gaul and the Biblical understanding of the way to write history. Early in the Sulpician account we are told that Martin came across a shrine that had been set up for the veneration of an unknown martyr. That the name of the martyr was unknown greatly bothered Martin for he wanted to know both whether the person had really been martyred and, if so, what the story of that martyrdom was. After extensive inquiries among the locals yielded no information, Martin summoned the ghost of the person in the grave to find out who this martyr might be. The ghost dutifully appeared to the man of God and explained that he had not been martyred but rather that he had been a common criminal justly killed for his misdeeds.

⁸¹Ibid., 14; 19-21.

⁸²Ibid., 21.

When the interview was over, Martin tore down the shrine.⁸³ It mattered to Martin that the real historical truth about the person being venerated be known. It did not matter to Martin that the local people thought he was a martyr and found strength or inspiration from a made-up account. Martin himself demonstrates the Christian insistence that spiritual benefit must be rooted in historical fact. This story is in accord with Sulpicius's own claims of historical accuracy. Sulpicius mentions that he had gone to interview Martin himself and Martin had told him the stories which Sulpicius records.⁸⁴ Unlike Martin, Sulpicius did not have to raise his subject from the dead to find out about him. Like Martin he is learning the truth of his subject's life by asking the subject directly.⁸⁵ These accounts reflect the Biblical concern that edification be rooted in a real past.

There is another story in the account of Martin which indicates movement in a different direction. At the end of section eighteen Sulpicius reports that "thread[s] pulled from Martin's clothing or hairshirt worked on the sick. When tied round a finger or hung round the neck of the patient, they often banished his malady."⁸⁶ Compare this statement with what Athanasius said in the *Life of Antony*. Athanasius reported many healings in which Antony prayed to God and the sick were healed. In these stories, however, Antony was always consciously participating and made sure that the person who was healed understood that it was Christ who healed and not himself. There is no sense that Antony's belongings could be used to accomplish a healing.

This story about Martin's miraculous clothing is important for two reasons. First, it is literary evidence for what Peter Brown has called the cult of the saints.⁸⁷ In the New Testament the Apostle Paul called all Christians saints. Within a short time, however, the term saint came

⁸³Ibid., 25.

⁸⁴Ibid., 41-42.

⁸⁵Sulpicius also reassures his reader at other points that he has carefully researched the story of Martin's life and can be trusted to provide a trustworthy account, including rejecting stories which could not be verified, and including only that which is most important of that which can be truly known. Ibid., 11-12.

⁸⁶Ibid., 32.

⁸⁷Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981).

to be applied with greater discrimination. In particular, those who were martyred were given a special place of commemoration. In the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, who came to be regarded as a saint, the author reports that the followers of Polycarp gathered up his bones and laid them to rest at a suitable spot where they met on special occasions to “celebrate the birthday of [Polycarp’s] martyrdom.”⁸⁸ Augustine reported that his mother, Monica, had worshipped at the shrines of saints on their memorial days.⁸⁹

The second important observation about this passage is the way such passages about healing become literary relics on their own. Writers after the *Life of Antony* and the *Life of Martin* will recycle parts of these texts (and others) into the new biographies in order to demonstrate the holiness of their subject. After the Edict of Milan the Christian community looked to the ascetic monks as the “new martyrs” and while Christians continued to collect the bones and other material goods of these martyrs, they also collected the stories of the holy saints. These collections of miracle stories functioned as the literary equivalent of the collections of the martyrs’ physical remains. A saint in the Middle Ages thus might boast literary relics in addition to material relics. Gregory of Tours, for example, collected the miracle stories about those who visited Martin’s shrine (which housed his material relics) and who were healed as a result. Gregory himself had experienced the healing power of Martin’s relics including relief from headache and dislodging a fishbone that had become stuck in his throat.⁹⁰

In the Middle Ages authors will look for all the ways in which their subject resembles a previous saint. We will look more closely at several authors who demonstrate this literary

⁸⁸“The Martyrdom of Polycarp” in *Early Christian Writings*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (New York: Penguin, 1987), 131.

⁸⁹This story is found in Augustine’s *Confessions* VI.2.

⁹⁰Raymond Van Dam has written on the continuing importance of Martin in the early Middle Ages. He includes a translation of a text written by Gregory of Tours in which Gregory has compiled the miracle stories that people reported occurred after visiting the shrine of St. Martin. The veneration of relics became a standard part of medieval religious practice and seems to have been part of religious life of both the common people and the clergy. Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1993), 258-60.

practice in order to discuss how they understood themselves to be writing critical biography within their understanding of the truth of the world.

The anonymous life of Cuthbert produced at the monastery of Lindisfarne demonstrates how the texts of previous biographies were incorporated into the biography of the present subject. Bertram Colgrave's commentary on the anonymous text points out a number of places where the author has simply copied wholesale from previous texts. The description of Cuthbert's asceticism, for example, is "borrowed verbally from the Evagrian *Life of Antony*."⁹¹ Colgrave notes that although Cuthbert was an ascetic his discipline was not in the extreme fashion of the Egyptian monks. Indeed the stories that follow demonstrate that Cuthbert seems to have been fed by God rather than going without food. The emphasis of the stories is on Cuthbert's reliance on God for the provision of food.

Some examples will demonstrate how the author portrayed God's care of Cuthbert. While traveling on pilgrimage Cuthbert and his companions found three portions of dolphin meat miraculously washed to shore which were enough to sustain them for their trip. The author does not consider this just a happy coincidence but rather the fact that the meat was precisely what was needed and in the precise amount needed demonstrated God's hand in the event. On another journey an eagle gave Cuthbert and his companions a large fish. Another time Cuthbert entered into an abandoned hut at the end of a combined journey and fast, and his also hungry horse miraculously pulled down bread and meat from the roof of that hut as the horse attempted to eat the thatched roof.⁹² These stories demonstrate that Cuthbert's diet had more variety (and, likely, quantity) than Antony's.

The author of Cuthbert's biography was of course not limited to the Evagrian translation of *Antony* but could similarly incorporate material from other biographies into *Cuthbert*.

⁹¹Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 315.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 71.

Colgrave also notes that the list of Cuthbert's virtues is "borrowed almost wholesale" from a life of Saint Sylvester.⁹³ The anonymous author of Cuthbert's biography does, however, change one of the virtues listed in the *Sylvester* text and substitutes one given in the Evagrian text. While Sylvester was described as never bursting into laughter from an excess of hilarity, the anonymous author switches this to a description from *Antony* which describes him as being at all times happy and joyful.⁹⁴ One surmises that Cuthbert must have been of such a cheerful disposition that the author simply could not include something so at variance with the actual person. Even in the desire to evoke the lives of previous saints the author will make an alteration to better represent what was true.

To the modern reader copying other texts seem like a clear indicator that such a biography is not a critical engagement. For his part, however, the author was writing precisely what happened. If the author of the anonymous life could be questioned today he might say that of course he knew that Cuthbert's asceticism was of a different sort than Antony's and that of course Cuthbert's virtues were not in precisely the same measure as Sylvester's. The author might further say that he had assumed that everyone who would read his biography of Cuthbert had also read the Evagrian *Life of Antony* and *Sylvester*. And since he had given the stories about Cuthbert whereby the differences between the two subjects can be discerned, he had rather hoped that the reader would get the point that Cuthbert's asceticism and character were just as holy and imitable as Antony's and Sylvester's. But there's the rub. Particularities and differences, in other words *what actually happened*, matter to the traditional Christian understanding of history. The medieval authors were attempting to demonstrate that the various biographical subjects were all part of the same holy and unified faith that could be traced back

⁹³Furthermore, the same list of Sylvester's virtues also appears in Adamnan's *Life of St. Columba*. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 4, 316.

⁹⁴Note that the anonymous life of Cuthbert also takes passages from Sulpicius's *Life of Martin*. From Sulpicius the Lindisfarne monk takes the claim that he would rather remain silent than to report those things he knows to be false. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 140-141.

to Christ. That theological point may be valid within the Christian understanding of faith, but the method of making it is not. As we move to our next text we will observe that this tendency to minimize the historical peculiarities increases. Authors include so many anecdotes that are closely based on previous lives that a modern regards the likelihood of someone's life really looking so much like another's as evidence that critical history has long been left behind.

When the Venerable Bede composed another biography of Cuthbert some fifteen to twenty years after the anonymous life, he depended on that text and also looked back to other biographies, particularly the Evagrian *Antony*, Sulpicius's *Martin*, Possidius's *Augustine*, and the biography of Benedict in book two of *Dialogues* by Gregory the Great. Although Bede followed the anonymous life closely, Bede's biography is also notably expanded. Bede tells the reader that the additional material of his text comes from stories told to him by those who knew Cuthbert, and especially by one monk, Herefrith, who had lived for a time with Cuthbert.⁹⁵ These anecdotes bear a strong resemblance to anecdotes found in other saints' lives. In one example the story is very much like what is written in *Antony*. Athanasius reported that Antony had planted a few vegetables so that those who visited him would have some relief from Antony's rigorous diet. This garden, necessarily located near a good water source, attracted wild beasts which would trample the vegetables in their search for water. Antony captured the beasts, asked them why they were hurting his garden and commanded them to not return.⁹⁶ In Bede's biography Cuthbert similarly plants a crop which birds begin to destroy. Cuthbert asks the birds why they touch the crop that they did not sow and then commands the birds to go if they haven't received God's permission to eat his crop. Bede does not hide the similarity to Athanasius's text. Indeed, Bede says that this story shows that Cuthbert imitated the example of Antony.⁹⁷

⁹⁵Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 145.

⁹⁶Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert Gregg (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1980), 69.

⁹⁷Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 221-223, 350.

Bede seems to think that it is natural that the same kind of event would happen to two equally saintly men.

Other anecdotes about Cuthbert show similarities to the lives of other saints. Both the anonymous biography and Bede's text have a story about Cuthbert's prayer that put out a fire. Colgrave notes that this story is similar to what is found in the account of Benedict in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great.⁹⁸ Both Benedict and Cuthbert pray to God to put out a kitchen fire. Bede links another story about Cuthbert to Benedict. Both Benedict and Cuthbert are able to command ravens to do as they tell them. Benedict has a raven carry away a poisoned loaf of bread and Cuthbert commands certain ravens to stop carrying off parts of a roof.⁹⁹ Bede includes a story about Cuthbert which Bede explicitly links with a similar story about Augustine.¹⁰⁰ This story comes from Possidius's account.¹⁰¹ Both Augustine and Cuthbert are experiencing their final illness before death when a sick person (in Augustine's case a relative and in Cuthbert's case an attendant) are healed when the saint lays his hands on the sick person. Bede wants you to recognize that Cuthbert is like the saints that came before him. Like Martin, Cuthbert does not want to be made a bishop and must be compelled to do so somehow. Like Antony Cuthbert will not wash his body. Like Martin and Antony Cuthbert wrestles with demons.

In another example information about Cuthbert's last days and death, as found in Bede's biography, depict a notably different portrait of Cuthbert's death than is found in the anonymous text. Bede does not follow the anonymous biography's account of Cuthbert's death and instead closely follows the account of *Antony's* last days and death. Bede might have been aware that his readers would notice this difference and so Bede assures the reader that this information comes from an eye-witness report. The passage in Bede's text is written in the first person in

⁹⁸ Ibid, 91, 322.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 223-25; 250. St. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, trans Odo John Zimmerman, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 39 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1959), 70-71.

¹⁰⁰ Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 281, 356.

¹⁰¹ Possidius, "Life of St. Augustine," trans. Mary Magdeleine Muller, *Early Christian Biographies*, vol. 15, *Fathers of the Church*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1952), 111.

order to communicate that it is a recording of what Herefrith had told Bede. It is like Bede is saying, “Look, I am simply reproducing the words of Herefrith.” Unlike the previous story about the crop-destroying animals, however, the link between Cuthbert and Antony is not made explicit. The similarity between Bede’s story of Cuthbert’s death and Athanasius’s story of Antony’s death are as follows. Like Antony’s instructions to his disciples to avoid Arian and Meletian heresies, Cuthbert instructs his listeners to avoid Irish heresies. Echoing Antony’s desire to have an unmarked grave so that his body will not be venerated, Cuthbert also expresses a wish that his burial be known to no one but his followers.¹⁰² Colgrave notes that the words that Cuthbert uses to give his deathbed advice are at variance with the simple monk that has been presented so far and particularly at variance with the portrait of Cuthbert in the anonymous life.¹⁰³ The farewell speech is modeled on the text of *Antony*.¹⁰⁴

A modern reader is tempted to dismiss the story as pure invention. A modern reader tends to think that the number of stories with strong similarity to other texts makes it difficult to discern which of the stories most likely really happened to Cuthbert and which have been borrowed to show theological and ethical continuity with previous saints. But Bede has been at pains to explain that his source is an eye-witness. What does Bede mean when he makes these claims of veracity? Bede could be straight-forwardly lying. Even though he writes that Herefrith said this, he either is making up Herefrith or making up what Herefrith said. Or he might have never intended for the reader to take him seriously but rather praise him for his knowledge of other texts and his ability to weave those texts seamlessly into this text. Or the medieval milieu so shaped the minds of the medieval person that Herefrith really saw these similarities and reported them to Bede. If the text of *Antony* was part of the woof and weave of Bede’s and Herefrith’s mental landscape, and they believed that saints should display similarities even in

¹⁰² Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 355.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 355-57.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 356.

the most trivial of details, they might make connections that modern people would simply not make because the modern woof and weave is so different. Outright lying would be so dissonant with the whole fabric of a medieval monk that I find it an unlikely option. Furthermore, if Bede had wanted you to simply to note erudition and literary allusion why would he bother to give you the source of his information, which would be another outright lie? It seems most likely that Bede believed he was writing a critical biography that would edify at the same time. The theology of the one faith was determining the methods in the biography of the one saint. Cuthbert was of the one faith just as the saints before him were. Bede looked for and found evidence to support that theological emphasis.

This kind of thinking does not end with the biographies of Cuthbert. As Cuthbert becomes thought of as a true saint, the stories of Cuthbert are in turn recycled. Eddius Stephanus (usually referred to as Eddius) copies straight out of Evagrius's *Life of Antony* and Sulpicius's *Life of Martin* in his *Life of Wilfrid*.¹⁰⁵ These sections, however, are claims of effort, claims of holiness and importance of the subject. He is not copying anecdotes wholesale (even if he, like Bede, will look for very similar anecdotes between his subject and other saints). In his prefatory material Eddius could have just written his own words but he copies wholesale as a way of signalling the continuity, unity and oneness of his subject with saints of the past. Given this indication of his theological worldview it is not surprising that he, like Bede, would see similarities in the details of his subject's life with other subjects. Eddius links his subject with the saintliness of Cuthbert. As proof of Cuthbert's holiness the Lindisfarne monk had reported the story of a father who had brought his son, who suffered from a demonic affliction, to the monks who carried on after Cuthbert died. When no cure could be found, one of the clerics filled a basin of water and in that basin of water he put some dirt that had been in the very spot that the monks had poured out the water that had been used to bathe Cuthbert's corpse. This

¹⁰⁵Heffernen, *Sacred Biography*, 140-141.

water with the sacred dirt, when drunk by the boy, cured him of his afflictions.¹⁰⁶ In Eddius's account of Wilfrid a woman's lifeless hand is cured when it is washed in the water in which Wilfrid's burial cloak had been laundered.¹⁰⁷

Description is one thing but what kind of evaluation can be made of this medieval mindset and their biographical practices? I am inclined to be less than enthusiastic about the kind of biography that medievals wrote but not because it is not critical history. The medievals were generally writing critical history as best they could given their worldview. Rather, I think that medieval biographies are at variance with the biographical character of the Bible: a text they knew quite well and which should have been their primary guide. As was discussed in the Biblical section, Biblical authors had a great deal of respect for the distinctiveness of the subject and the particularities of historical setting. These various literary borrowings are notable because they show what I am calling a "relic-izing" of the biographical text. The same stories, if brought into the account of a new subject, have the power to demonstrate the sainthood of the new subject. Recycling may be a virtue in paper and plastic, but less so in a historical text, because it creates the growing sense that there is one way to be a person of God. More worrisome still, the stories seem to be moving further away from the style and example of the Gospels. Stories in which the subject looks like Christ are not as important as stories in which the subject looks like previous saints. The imitation of both Antony and *Antony*, so to speak, has the power to bestow sainthood on Cuthbert. That Antony points to Christ is still the implicit logic in medieval biography, but Christ is in Antony's shadow. In repeating the anecdotes of Antony the later authors have venerated Antony—which Athanasius did not want to happen.

A biography about Benedict by Gregory the Great exemplifies what I think is best and worst in medieval biography. On the one hand this text develops a method in which the edifying

¹⁰⁶Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, 133-135.

¹⁰⁷Eddius Stephanus, "Life of Wilfrid," in *The Age of Bede*, trans., J.F. Webb (New York: Penguin, 1988),

import of a subject can be discussed without the homogenizing effect of similar anecdotes. On the other hand it is so fascinated with the miraculous that it makes its subject into a generic wonderworker.

The account of the life of Benedict occurs in the second book of the four books that make up a text entitled *Dialogues*, composed by Gregory the Great, circa 593. The story of Benedict's life begins in a manner very similar to that of most other biographies. Gregory begins by describing Benedict's birth and education in Nursia. Gregory reveals that the stories he will relate about Benedict come from eyewitness reports of Benedict's own disciples. The text then quickly moves to Benedict's first miraculous deed, mending a broken sieve for his beloved nurse, followed by his flight from his home as he begins the life of a solitary monk. As can be expected, Benedict is soon assailed by demons and lustful thoughts of women.

Here the typical, third-person-narrative voice of the text is interrupted by a question from someone named Peter. Peter is the ostensible disciple of Gregory but functions literarily as Gregory's intended reader. Peter thus interrupts Gregory's narrative to ask him to explain the meaning of Benedict's life more fully. Gregory obliges by explaining that Benedict's life so far demonstrates that the temptation of the flesh is strongest among the young. Thus it is important for the young to be subject to the leadership and guardianship of their elders. Gregory explains that after the age of fifty the body's heat begins to cool and the temptations of the flesh recede. It is therefore proper for the older monks to guard the younger monks. Peter responds by saying that he now understands the meaning of these stories from Benedict's life and begs Gregory to continue the narrative.¹⁰⁸ Gregory's text then returns to the familiar, third-person-narrative prose of biography until the next interruption by Peter.

Most often Peter's requests for further clarity and explanation provide Gregory with the opportunity to discuss the meaning of the text, but occasionally Peter's interjections are meant

¹⁰⁸Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, 55-61.

to provide insight themselves. At one point Peter exclaims that he sees how Benedict had the heart of Elisha. Since that is all that needs to be said, Gregory's textual response is to ask Peter to be quiet so that he can get on with the narrative.¹⁰⁹ If the reader was too dense to see the point from the narrative alone, Peter's interjection has made sure the reader knows that Benedict is indeed like Elisha. Gregory's literary device is of interest to us because it allows him to make comparisons with other people without having to replicate an anecdote from someone else's life to communicate the point. Rather the anecdote about Benedict can be distinctly about Benedict and the dialogue between Gregory and Peter draws out the edifying content. Furthermore, Gregory's device allows for an open discussion of meaning rather than something the reader should gather from literary or narrative analysis. Gregory the Great's text is a step further along than uninterrupted narratives in the attempt to create a community of interpretation.

The theology of the life of Benedict in Gregory's *Dialogues*, however, is troubling. The bulk of the text is focused on Benedict's purported miracles as proofs of his saintliness. The miracle stories establish the subject's right to be counted among the company of saints rather than to point back to the style and character of the Gospels and the figure of Jesus. Indeed, the miracles that Benedict performs are often trivial and function only as proof of the subject's powers. Mending a broken sieve, the example mentioned earlier, merely prompts the reader to nod his or her head and say "Yes, Benedict was a powerful, holy man." This kind of tendency was noted in Sulpius's *Martin* but here in Gregory's text is extended to a rather pointless deed of mending a sieve in contrast to healing the sick or casting out demons. In his introduction to medieval hagiography Thomas Head notes that as biography develops it "comes to focus ever more exclusively on the miraculous powers of the saints."¹¹⁰ As such the portrait of Benedict is in danger of demonstrating a generic kind of medieval wonder-worker rather than a distinctively

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 79.

¹¹⁰Thomas Head, *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 2001), xx.

Christian saint.

A more historically satisfying example of the dialogue form of biography is Palladius's *Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom*. Miracles that have no other function than to prove the holiness of Chrysostom are not part of the account.¹¹¹ Like Gregory's text, Palladius's account of Chrysostom follows a basic biographical narrative. The extent and variety of digressions that occur, however, are much greater than in Gregory's text. The result of these frequent and lengthy interruptions does distract from the narrative flow typical in a biography. Because of these various "interruptions" it might be considered a less satisfying biographical read in the sense that the story of the life is broken up by these digressions. Nevertheless, by using the format of dialogue Palladius can discuss the significance of Chrysostom directly. As was discussed with Herodotus, Polybius, and Gregory the Great, the use of digression can be an important way of making the meaning of a historical event clear.

Palladius lived in the era of in which Christian biography was beginning and he was likely familiar with both the biographical texts of Athanasius, Jerome, and Sulpicius as well as the Classical tradition. Palladius's *Dialogue* is just as interested in demonstrating the merit of the subject as any of the previous Christian biographies. Palladius was a disciple of John Chrysostom and intended to defend Chrysostom against the many who were currently disparaging him. Yet despite his cultural and literary context Palladius defends the greatness of John through this kind of biographical, philosophical, and theological dialogue rather than the kind of biography of the Middle Ages discussed far.¹¹²

Like Gregory's text, Palladius's digressions are typically reflections on the meaning of

¹¹¹ Actually, there are no miracle accounts at all in the text, excepting the author's belief in the resurrection of Christ. The inclusion of miracles in a text are not problematic for me in themselves. Miracles that portray the subject as a generic wonderworker or that function only to show the power of the subject, however, are.

¹¹² "Here ends the historical dialogue of Palladius, bishop of Helenopolis, with Theodore, deacon of Rome, on the life and deeds of our father and archbishop of Constantinople, John the Golden-Mouthed." Palladius, *Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom*, trans. Robert Meyer in *Ancient Christian Writers* vol. 45 (New York: Newman, 1985), 151.

Chrysostom's life in light of a particular Biblical passage. This style of writing is similar to Gregory of Nyssa whose *Life of Moses* recounts the Biblical story of Moses with extended allegorical interpretations of the various deeds of Moses.¹¹³ Palladius does not use allegorical methods of interpretation but the format of small sections on the life of the subject followed by extended interpretation of the story for the reader is like Gregory of Nyssa's text. These texts by Gregory the Great, Palladius and Gregory of Nyssa do not become the models for medieval biography. Unlike other medieval texts, however, they make the edifying message of the biography explicit rather than implicit. The successes and failures of these alternative texts may be helpful in constructing a different approach to biography today because these texts do not have to rely on the narrative to communicate the edifying content. These texts have the potential, at least, to neither put fictional aspects into their biographies nor omit the edifying content altogether.

The final text we shall consider is John Capgrave's *Life of Katherine*.¹¹⁴ According to the medieval story, Katherine was an eighteen-year-old, upper class, Christian virgin who was executed in the early fourth century by the Emperor Maximinus. Katherine turned herself in to the Emperor in the sense that she presented herself to him in order to protest Maximinus's cruel treatment of Christians. Katherine was then tortured and beheaded.¹¹⁵

With Capgrave's text we move from what moderns would call plagiarism (the incorporation of text from previous biographies into more recent texts) to what moderns would call fiction (biography about a subject who likely never existed except in literary form).¹¹⁶ In the introduction to the *Life of Katherine* Capgrave stated that he is providing the reader with an

¹¹³Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (Toronto: Paulist, 1978).

¹¹⁴Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 168-184.

¹¹⁵Christine Walsh, *The Cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria in Early Medieval Europe* (Cornwall: Ashgate, 2007), 7-21.

¹¹⁶Capgrave was born in 1393 and died in 1464. His text on Katherine is thought to date sometime between 1437 and 1462. See Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 172.

English translation of a Latin translation of a Greek text written by Athanasius, the self-same Athanasius who wrote the biography of Antony. In fact, Capgrave states, Athanasius was a disciple of Katherine's.¹¹⁷ Capgrave further notes that the Latin translation he relies on is by a man named Arrek, a rector in London who died in 1349. Capgrave is here indicating the solid historical tradition which he relies on. To a modern historian, however, the difficulties with Capgrave's introduction are several and striking. First, nothing is known of Arrek apart from what Capgrave writes. Second, no known text by Athanasius on the person of Katherine is otherwise known to have existed. Third, it seems that the person of Katherine did not exist.¹¹⁸

To say that Capgrave simply made up the story of Katherine would be incorrect. It is unlikely that Capgrave doubted that Katherine was both a real woman of history and also that she lived and died exactly as he says she did. Even in this most extreme case of what seems to be pure fiction, the biographer was convinced that what he was writing had in fact taken place. There are a number of reasons why he would have believed the story of Katherine. According to Heffernan, Capgrave would have thought that the virtue displayed by Katherine was itself proof of the historical truth of the account.¹¹⁹ A story about such virtue did not require extensive verification processes. Furthermore, the story of Katherine was so widespread that even though we can today perceive that Katherine is likely a fiction, Capgrave did not. The story of Katherine had been circulating for several centuries. Delehaye dated the beginning of the medieval popularity of the story of Katherine to the eleventh century.¹²⁰ The story of Katherine was popular throughout Europe as is attested in an anonymous Czech version composed in the fourteenth century.¹²¹ Thus Capgrave thought that he was using reliable sources. In addition to

¹¹⁷Karen Winstead, ed. *The Life of St. Katherine* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999). The introduction to this text is available on the internet. See Karen A. Winstead, "The Life of Saint Katherine: Introduction," <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/katintro.htm> (accessed May 14, 2008).

¹¹⁸Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 168-184.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 184.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 175.

¹²¹For an English translation of the Czech version see Thomas Head, ed., *Medieval Hagiography*, 763-779.

Arrek's translation, the story of Katherine of Alexandria can be found in the collection of saints lives known as *The Golden Legend* as edited by Jacobus de Voragine in the thirteenth century.¹²² Capgrave's story of Katherine is, in fact, an expanded version of what is found in *The Golden Legend*. All of these sources, the widespread belief in Katherine, and the amazing virtue of Katherine would have likely convinced Capgrave of the veracity of Katherine's story.

Capgrave's account is a fiction but even in this discredited text we see that the intent was critical and edifying. In his analysis of this text, Heffernan reports that Capgrave credits his two muses for his ability to translate this text: St. Paul the Apostle and Apollo, the Greek god of reason. In listing these two particular muses Capgrave is giving a kind of nod to the two great cultural footings on which medieval culture had its foundation. He believes that he is in line with the historical and biographical logic of both these cultural and literary traditions.

We have traced the changing paradigm of biography from late antiquity to the late Middle Ages observing both that the authors continued to write critical and edifying biography but that at the same time there was slow evolution in method which reflected the medieval sense of the *communio sanctorum*. The third and final section of this chapter discusses two texts and one movement which marks the end of the medieval biography. All three of these examples are collective biographies. We note them now not because collective biographies are new but rather because these collective biographies represent a shift away from the methods of the Middle Ages and begin to approximate what we understand historical biography to be. The two texts are Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and the Anabaptist *Martyrs Mirror*. The Bollandists, a Jesuit society, produced and continue to produce the multi-volume *Acta Sanctorum*. Thus we have three important biographical projects from the, Protestant, Anabaptist, and Catholic branches of Christian family tree. I suggest that it is no coincidence that these texts come after the start of

¹²²Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend of Jacobus Voragine*, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripper (New York: Arno, 1969).

the Reformation. Of course the influence of the Renaissance is likely an important factor as well. However, the authors of these texts live in an era in which the one faith has fractured beyond repair. Changes in belief result in a different world view which in turn results in a different way of writing biography. The intent to write critical and edifying biography, however, continues. All three of these texts are useful literature in community that show the best way to be a person of God. And that knowing how to be a person of God is rooted in knowing the past.

The earliest of these texts is what is commonly called Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, alternately entitled *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*. Foxe intended the book to be more than just a martyrology. It was an apologetic for Protestantism.¹²³ Foxe published the first edition of this text in 1563 as a response to the executions of Protestants under Mary Tudor. At the time of publication Elizabeth had assumed the throne and such a document could be produced without fear. With the benefit of hindsight we know that the ascension of Elizabeth was the beginning of the dominance of Protestantism. But Foxe had experienced the vicissitude of the Tudors rather than what was yet to come and he may very well have worried that Elizabeth could easily return to Catholicism if she chose. Foxe sought to persuade all readers and especially Elizabeth with regard to the validity of Protestant faith.¹²⁴ Foxe's text is important in the present discussion because in it we can observe the beginning of a turning away from the methods and theology of medieval biography.

Gretchen Minton delineates Foxe's reliance on the *Church History* of Eusebius. Like Eusebius's history, with Foxe's *Martyrs* we have come to an important text which is somehow new.¹²⁵ Minton explains that although much was the same in the historical situations of Eusebius and Foxe (both had lived through periods of great persecution, both experienced the

¹²³The full title of this book as given on the frontispiece of the 1563 edition reads like an optometrists' eye-chart. See Gretchen Minton, "'The same cause and like quarell': Eusebius, John Foxe, and the Evolution of Ecclesiastical History," *Church History* 71 (December 2002): 739.

¹²⁴The artwork on the frontispiece depicts Elizabeth as a regal queen. The book is dedicated to her.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 738.

reversal of fortunes when a Christian monarch came to power, and both felt a certain degree of guilt for having survived the persecution when so many others did not) there was an important difference in their historical situations which caused Foxe to differ from his primary guide.

While Eusebius needed to defend the church, Foxe lived in an era of two churches and needed to defend the good (Protestant) church against the (Catholic) church that had become corrupted.

As she describes the relationship of Foxe and Eusebius, Minton notes that Foxe, like Eusebius, was interested in factual evidence. As such, Foxe incorporated many primary documents into his text and emphasized the importance of eye-witness reports of the events he is describing.¹²⁶ Like Minton, I am intrigued by Foxe's choice of model. Foxe chose a model from the early church rather than any of the authors from the Middle Ages. There were theological reasons for this. Minton argues that Foxe believed that the problem with the Church was not limited to the recent actions of Queen Mary but rather Mary's actions indicated that the whole Catholic Church had become detestable. Thus, Foxe cannot choose models from the Middle Ages, such as Bede's *History of the Church*, because Foxe is attempting to demonstrate that the good and true Anglican movement is more like the good and true early Church than the Catholic church of his day. This theological point had important implications for the methods of Foxe. Foxe is typically not trying to make one martyr look like another. Foxe, like Eusebius, copies verbatim from other sources, yes, but this is not as problematic as the writings of the medieval authors. For when Foxe is telling the story of a martyr he is simply repeating exactly what Eusebius said about that same martyr. Reading Foxe's text immediately feels different from the medieval texts. Pick up the eight volumes and quickly leaf through the pages and you will notice how many letters and court documents he includes. Foxe is interested in this kind of documentation rather than comparison of subjects.

Admittedly, however, Foxe is not entirely free from this medieval practice. In what

¹²⁶Ibid., 721.

became perhaps the most famous story in Foxe's work, the execution of Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer, we can see that Foxe still makes use of this technique. Foxe reports that as these two men were about to be executed Latimer says to Ridley: "Be of good comfort, master Ridley, and play the man."¹²⁷ Minton noted that this quote comes from Eusebius's account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, but she did not mention that Eusebius himself copied this quote and nearly the entire story of Polycarp's martyrdom from an earlier account.¹²⁸ Both this earlier account of Polycarp and Eusebius's text include information about a voice from heaven that spoke to Polycarp as he stepped into the arena to be killed, saying: "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man."¹²⁹ Minton observes that at this point in his text Foxe is telling his readers that the English, Protestant martyrs were just as capable of "playing the man" as the early Christians.¹³⁰ I observe that Foxe is here demonstrating the continuing practice of putting very similar words and deeds from previous subjects into the stories of others. Nonetheless, although Foxe still retains some vestiges from the medieval era, he is starting to return to the methods and assumptions of the late Classical and early Christian era. He does so at least in part because he is rejecting the Catholic Middle Ages and instead linking Protestantism to the (supposedly) not-so-Catholic Early Church. In rejecting the Middle Ages and looking to Eusebius as a model, Foxe is also dispensing with medieval methods.

Similar observations could be made about another text of Reformation martyrs: the Anabaptists' *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their*

¹²⁷ John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, 4th ed, vol. 7 (London: The Religious Tract Society, date not given), 550.

¹²⁸ *Early Christian Writings*, 115-118, 125-135.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹³⁰ Minton, 723-24.

Saviour, From the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660, usually called *The Martyrs Mirror*.¹³¹

In 1660 Thieleman J. van Braght, a Dutch Mennonite, compiled the baptisms and martyrdoms of Christians from the early church until the mid-seventeenth century. Like Foxe, Thieleman was interested in demonstrating that his reforming movement, in Thieleman's case the Anabaptist faith, was more like the early church than any other form of Christianity. Thus, Thieleman provides the reader with an account of the baptism and execution of Jesus, the deaths of the first disciples, and the martyrdoms of the early church and reforming movements throughout the ages, such as the Waldensians, before discussing the Anabaptist martyrs as the authentic heirs to this sacred tradition. Thieleman, like Foxe, is rejecting the Middle Ages as a corruption of Christianity. This rejection has implications for method.

In an article on the paratext of *The Martyrs Mirror*, Sarah Covington discusses the way in which this text functions as sacred history. Covington observes that van Braght was "a careful compiler of documents, even if his undertakings did not reach the full critical levels of a modern's historical method."¹³² Furthermore the purpose of his text required fact-checking. One of the claims against the Mennonites, observes Covington, was that Anabaptism was new and never had been part of Christianity. Van Braght, therefore, needed to establish that the practices and beliefs of the Anabaptists had really been a part of the history of the true church. Historical accuracy, therefore, was paramount to van Braght. Covington's analysis of marginalia reveals that if van Braght deemed a story to be incredible then he would not include this story in his main text. Van Braght linked his account to the early Church as a way of proving the validity of Anabaptism. Demonstrating that the Anabaptists really were like the Early Church would have been important to the Anabaptist community as well. Both detractors and adherents needed to

¹³¹Thieleman J. van Braght, ed., *Martyrs Mirror*, trans. Joseph Sohm 3rd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1886). This title is grammatically incorrect, but the title appears this way in the most authoritative translation of the text.

¹³²Sarah Covington, "Paratextual Strategies in Thieleman van Braght's *Martyrs' Mirror*" *Book History* 9 (2006): 14.

know that Anabaptism was a return to the theology and practices of the early Church and therefore a true, and purer, expression of faith. The logic of Thielman was the same as the Biblical authors.

In the midst of Covington's intriguing analysis, however, she makes a comment that warrants further consideration:

Though [van Braght] took care to legitimize his credentials as one who could create a work of historical accuracy and humanist or classical learnedness, the history he was introducing was above all a sacred history indebted to past sacred histories. Indeed, it was an extension of those hallowed books, which in turn were extensions, in the stories they told, of the Bible itself. Ironically, van Braght was using emergent secular-oriented strategies—humanist references, historical methodologies—to establish the sacredness of his work.¹³³

It is her use of the word “ironically” that caught my attention. That employing critical tools should be seen as ironic indicates how much the intent of the medieval biographer has been misunderstood. Both medieval authors and the authors of the collective biographies of the Reformation were writing critical history. What has changed is the manner in which the edifying content is communicated. This change is a result of the rejection of Middle Ages in favour of the early Church. That van Braght's reading of Scripture and Classical sources led him to appropriate whatever humanist methods of critical engagement which were available at that time is *not* ironic.¹³⁴

Another important movement began at about the same time as van Braght was compiling his martyrology. A group of Catholic monks and scholars were also troubled by the lack of critical historical engagement as found in the large corpus of medieval biography. Beginning circa 1607, Héribert Rosweyde began work on the manuscripts of the many biographies of the saints. Roseweyde was a Jesuit professor of philosophy who copied manuscripts in the abbeys of Flanders. As he worked at his task he became concerned that in these accounts “the historical

¹³³Ibid., 15-16.

¹³⁴Covington notes that van Braght lists Homer, Plutarch and Virgil among his list of authorities. Ibid., 14. See also James Lowry, *The “Martyrs’ Mirror” Made Plain* (Aylmer, ON: Payway, 2000).

figure, the human personality, was lost beneath layers of legend and rhetoric or diluted to insipidity by imagination or error.”¹³⁵ Thus began his interest and work in the search for the historical accuracy of the lives of the saints. Rosweyde began collecting all the authentic documents he could find and began to critique and explain the stories of the saints with all the tools of scholarship available to him. In particular he wanted to work on what was recorded in *Roman Martyrology* and an edition of the *Vita Patrum*, the lives and sayings of the desert fathers.

After Roseweyde died his work might have been abandoned had not the Catholic Church sent John Bolland to sift through Roseweyde’s writings. Intrigued by the work Roseweyde had done, Bolland reported that Roseweyde’s work could be “executed without undue delay” and volunteered to be the one to finish this task.¹³⁶ It is from Bolland that the movement took its name. The Bollandists of Belgium have been working on the task ever since. Bolland founded the *Acta Sanctorum* as a way of completing Roseweyde’s plan of examining the lives of the saints in the order they appeared in the church calendar. These Jesuits began the work on the saints of January in the seventeenth century and are expected to come to the end of the saints of December some time in the twenty-first century.

David Knowles describes Bolland and many of those who succeeded him, for example Godefrid Henskens (1601-81) and Daniel Van Papenbroeck (1628-1714), as excellent scholars of the type produced all over Europe by the new model of Jesuit educators.”¹³⁷ At the same time, however, the “Bollandists see historic truth as a Dominican sees theological truth; as a reflection of Truth itself perceptible by the intellect, and as something to be freed from and defended against every attempt to cloud or to confuse it.”¹³⁸ It is not always an easy tension to manage.

¹³⁵David Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises: Problems in Monastic History* (New York: Thomas Melbourne and Sons, 1963), 5.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, 6.

¹³⁷*Ibid.* 7.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*, 12.

Knowles describes Papebroeck as the flower of genius of the Bollandist enterprise and during his era the Bollandists were very productive. In working with the saints of late March, April, May and June Papebroeck had to deal with the “wraiths and monsters” in the records of St. Silvester, the dragons of St. George and the portable head of Denys the Areopagite. In his work with these accounts Papebroeck “had no mercy for what he proved false by legitimate criticism, and he did not hold that a historical or critical argument could never be more than a probable one, or that a false or superstitious tradition, however venerable or harmless, should be allowed to pass as authentic.”¹³⁹ The Bollandists, however, are not secularists—they are Jesuits. They perform their task as a service to the church, believing that edifying biography is that which is historically true.

Christian biography has as its two foundations Classical and Biblical notions of critical and edifying. This foundation continues to be held by late antique and medieval authors. Given this history of Christian biography, which has lasted for some two thousand years by the time we reach the era of the Reformation (this figure includes the OT period), you might expect that the intention to write critical and edifying biography would continue indefinitely. And you would be right in that assumption for the next four hundred years or so. You would be wrong, however, to make that assumption about modernity.

¹³⁹Ibid., 15.

Chapter Five: The Critical and Edifying Impulse and Modern and Postmodern History

Early in the twentieth century C.W. Langlois and Charles Seignobos attested to the beginning of something new in the writing of history. “It is within the last fifty years that the scientific forms of historical exposition have been evolved and settled, in accordance with the general principle that the aim of history is not to please, nor to give practical maxims of conduct, not to arouse the emotions, but knowledge plain and simple.”¹ Clearly, something had changed since the seventeenth century with regard to the understanding of the goals of a historian. Historians were to acquire knowledge. It was for practitioners of other orders (novelists, clerics, politicians) to entertain, to guide ethical discourse and to incite patriotic fervour. Should this sentiment have been put to a historian who had lived in antiquity or the Middle Ages, his response might have been similar to T.S. Eliot who asked, “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?”² How did the writing of history become what Langlois and Seignobos described? How did history of any sort, and Christian biography in particular, change as a result of this altered historical sensibility.

Our story of the history of Christian biography ended with texts from the late sixteenth century and mid-seventeenth century. I want to move the discussion of the history of Christian biography forward into the twentieth century but before doing so a brief sketch of two important developments of the intervening centuries must be given. The first development was the rise of the natural sciences in the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century the Enlightenment expanded the advances of the Scientific Revolution into all areas of study. Prior to the Enlightenment the most important area of study had been theology. In the sixteenth century Erasmus wrote: “Theology is the mother of sciences.”³ Theology in the

¹CH. V. Langlois and CH. Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History*, trans. G. G. Berry (London: Duckworth, 1898), 303.

² T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 147.

³As quoted by Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the History of the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 102.

Middle Ages and Reformation guided the work of science. As is well known, the priority given to theology led to some unfortunate repressions of scientific work, as for example the Catholic Church's treatment of Galileo. The increasing respect given to the findings of scientific study was, therefore, a welcome correction to some of the applications of the medieval prioritization of theology. During the Enlightenment theology slowly lost its pre-eminent position in the University. Whereas theology had been queen and mother in the medieval universities, the universities of the Enlightenment and modernity now rejected this monarch and parent. Scientific inquiry in the Enlightenment prized the distinction between fact and value. As the model of the natural sciences came to dominate the University so too most other fields of study accepted the need to separate facts and values.

The second development occurred in the nineteenth century as the writing of history became a profession. For more than two millennia history had been written by private individuals such as retired politicians, military men, and sequestered clerics. A significant transition occurred during this century. Historians were no longer gentlemen of leisure in private libraries but professors in modern universities. As history-writing became a discipline in the modern university it came under the influence of the model of the natural sciences.

Many histories of modern history-writing begin by describing the rise of natural sciences in the university and the professionalization of writing history. Georg Iggers explicitly links the two together. "Central to the process of professionalization [of writing history] was the firm belief in the scientific status of history" and further, historians agreed with science's claim that "methodologically controlled research makes objective knowledge possible."⁴ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob similarly begin their discussion of historical method with the influence which the supposedly "neutral, value-free, objective image of science" had on the new

⁴Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University, 1997), 2.

profession of history.⁵ Peter Novick makes perhaps the most startling comment of this sort in his text on the rise of professional history in America. He states that conscientious turn-of-the-century historians took as their goal the production of a “body of reliable atomistic facts which ‘when justly arranged, interpret themselves.’”⁶

The attempt to write history as influenced by the natural sciences was best exemplified in the work of Carl Hempel. Those in the natural sciences worked to establish general laws which explained the way the natural world worked. Thus, the laws of gravity explained why an apple always falls down from a tree and never sideways or upwards. Some thought laws could be found for the study of the past. Hempel was notable for his work in the development of general laws for the study of history.⁷ Hempel believed that the historian who attempted to imaginatively enter into the past and empathize with a particular era or person would employ many inappropriate methods—the result of which would be incorrect understandings of causation.⁸ General laws, Hempel thought, would allow historians to apply objective tests to their theories of causation for a particular event in history.

For the most part, the influence of science in the writing of history has not been in the search for general laws. There has been very little work of this sort after Hempel.⁹ Although historians have abandoned this influence of the natural sciences, the influence of the natural sciences on the distinction between fact and value has yet to be resolved by historians. Indeed discussions about bias and objectivity exemplify the continuing process of understanding the

⁵Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 16.

⁶Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988), 39.

⁷Carl Hempel, “The Function of General Laws in History,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 39 (1942): 35-48.

⁸Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *Fifty Key Thinkers on History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 152.

⁹Although most historians were familiar with Hempel’s arguments, many believed that the general laws of scientific study were not suitable for the study of past human actions because historical events were considered to be unique and unrepeatable. W.H. Dray, for example, argued against the application of general laws in history-writing in *Laws and Explanation in History* (London: Oxford University, 1957). While historians abandoned the trajectory of Hempel’s work, sociologists have continued in this direction.

relationship of facts and values. Today every historian would agree that those simplistic notions of objectivity, so prized a century ago, have been discredited. No one would suggest that pure objectivity was attainable and sensitivity to personal bias and its potential influence in a historian's analysis is carefully cultivated. I sense, however, that some angst still lingers in the historical profession. There is a desire to combine fact and value in a responsible manner but uneasiness in actually doing so. At present historians, whether chastened positivists or postmodernists, are more comfortable discussing either facts or values but uncomfortable discussing fact and value in history.

How does biography, which had long understood itself as critical and edifying, continue in such a milieu? The fact-value distinction divides what had formerly been one. Facts are critical and edification is value. Does it not make sense, given this division of fact and value, that the writing of biography might go in two different directions? In the twentieth century an author should really choose whether he or she is writing a critical biography or an edifying biography. In a delicious kind of irony, critical and edifying biographies are still possible in modernity since the scientific, professional paradigm of history allowed that there could be critical biographies and there could be edifying biographies but the latter would not count as knowledge or scholarship. A critical *and* edifying biography was now an anachronism. Theoretically, the university should have prized critical biography. In fact, biography was rarely considered to be a worthy form of history-writing in many university history departments. Perhaps there was a lingering suspicion that the fact-value distinction, which was hard enough to discipline in the discussion of an event, was even more difficult to maintain in the discussion of a life. An edifying biography was barred from academic context altogether.

This chapter explores the place of edification in the current academic situation. It does not provide a history of biography nor are any contemporary biographies discussed. This chapter examines contemporary historiographical theory in order to argue that a critical and edifying

biography is possible in the present academic context. Furthermore, edifying biography may be the most desirable form of academic biography because of its potential to address the historiographical concerns of both modern and postmodern historical theory. At the end of the chapter I will return to the *Life of Antony* in order to re-evaluate it in light of my critique of modern and postmodern historiography.

Authorial Construction and Agenda

Historians are sometimes accused of methodological simplicity but this is an unfair accusation. For the most part historians demonstrate great care to write history that is methodologically responsible. Historians do hold differing opinions about method and theory. Some examples of the different views include Elizabeth Clark's *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*. Clark makes a case for the application of poststructuralist theory in the analysis of pre-modern texts. Ernst Breisach's *On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and its Aftermath* evaluates the postmodernist views of history and insists that while postmodern theoreticians have enriched the history-writing process, history-writing in a chastened but traditional form will continue as the dominant approach for practicing historians.¹⁰ John Lewis Gaddis's *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* discusses the historical task in light of recent developments in the sciences, particularly quantum physics. Gaddis suggests that since the natural sciences have abandoned a mechanistic notion of the world it is fair once again to compare history-writing to the natural sciences. In addition to his primary goal, Gaddis claims that another purpose of his text is

to encourage my fellow historians to make their methods more explicit. We normally resist doing this. We work within a wide variety of styles, but we prefer in all of them that form conceal function . . . We don't question the need for such structures, only the

¹⁰Elizabeth Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2004); Ernst Breisach, *On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and its Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003). Interestingly, both these texts are primarily surveys of theory. The comparatively small portion of the books given to presenting the author's own discussion of theory is also typical of many practising historians. Description and careful explanation of ideas, cultural developments and events are comfortable terrain whereas extended theoretical reflection is less so.

impulse to exhibit them. Our reluctance to reveal our own, however, too often confuses our students—even, at times, ourselves—as to just what it is we do.¹¹

Gaddis' scientific approach agrees with historiographical critiques of power regarding the need for unmasking or revealing the methods or framework which support the conclusions.

These texts are just a small sample of the variety of conclusions which authors offer in discussions of theory. Despite the variety of opinions, two points which most authors interested in such topics address at some point or another are those which Patricia Cox brings to bear in her discussion of biography in late antiquity: the imposition of the author upon the subject; and the apologetic, polemical or agenda-driven function of the text. Indeed these aspects of the epistemology of historical narrative are often central points of contention in discussion of method and theory.

Whereas Cox would deny late antique biography a place under the umbrella of history-writing, historiographical discussions often debate whether history-writing itself can be rightly placed under the history umbrella or whether it should find its way somewhere else. Some suggest that history-writing would be more appropriately placed under the literature umbrella. In order to assert that history-writing is not a form of fiction, proponents of traditional history-writing must argue that so-called problems of authorial perspective, bias, and agenda do not necessarily mean that it is impossible, *a priori*, to obtain a knowable past. Traditional historians would admit that knowledge of the past is indirectly obtained (the historian must almost always rely on someone else's account of events since he can't go back in time to see for himself) but that the application of the tools of historiography to these indirect sources will yield generally reliable knowledge. Detractors, conversely, must argue that such notions are ill-founded. They believe that the agenda of the historian so influences the account of events as to make a truly reliable report of the past impossible. The debates surrounding the limitations of the author have

¹¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2002), xi.

often led to a defence of the historian's descriptive and explanatory tasks.

Much attention has been given to questions pertaining to whether a researcher can know what happened, whether he can trust the evidence a source supplies, and whether limitations of perspective or language can be resolved in a way that allow a researcher to communicate knowledge of past events to a reader. Since most practicing historians are aware that such questions occupy much of the theoretical debates, many write history in a manner that does not give any reason to suspect the descriptions and explanations given. As a consequence history-writing tends to conform to certain guidelines and the end product usually complies with the spirit of what Cox, reflecting the opinion of many others, counts as history-writing. A historian will take pains to communicate that the output of his research is shaped by the events, sources, subject matter, and the concerns of the people of the past, rather than by his own agenda. Of course an author must shape the material into a readable text but this shape, many argue, arises organically from the subject matter at least as much as from the author's inevitable hand in the material. Furthermore, the historian demonstrates that the text produced is not a form of advocacy. A historian does not have a converting agenda beyond convincing the reader that there are good reasons for accepting the descriptions of specific events, the probability of certain causes as antecedents, and the consequent results of the events.

If these are the assumptions of many in the history guild, then the conclusion that violating these guidelines should disqualify a text as history-writing has support. Accusing an author of promoting his own agenda is reason enough for dismissing, or at least casting suspicion on, particular texts. Since such aspects are discernible in ancient history-writing, the ancient texts are also suspect. Thus while other aspects of ancient history-writing are being applauded, such as evident attempts of source criticism, the ancient understanding of the function of history-writing is not. There are significant differences between ancient and modern understandings of the function of history-writing. In ancient times history-writing was an act of

interpretation with moral and ethical implications. It is hardly surprising, then, that the concerns and advocacy of the author are detectable. Ancient historians and late antique biographers claimed to be reporting an accurate past and saw no disjunction in also exploring the moral and ethical significance of events for the reader's appropriation. Were they simply too naïve to perceive an inherent problem? Why does robust interpretation, manifested in authorial concern and promotion of particular acts or ideas, negate the reliability of history-writing? Can any text, ancient or recent, be dismissed as history-writing because it reveals the author's concerns or advocates a particular response? Is the contemporary rejection of the ancient understanding of history-writing's function justifiable? In the present it is not surprising that historians under pressure to convince readers about description and explanation tend to shy away from the kind of interpreted discussion that was so acceptable to the ancients. Even if the present practice is understandable in the context of ongoing scholarly dialogue, nevertheless I contend that it continues to be insufficient. There are good reasons for embracing an understanding of the function of history-writing similar to the ancient understanding. Support for revitalizing the ancient purposes of history-writing can be found, in fact, in the dialogue of the last few decades. Let's turn, therefore, to a closer look at the present-day discussion of theory.

Contemporary Historiography

For many historians theoretical clashes have been rumbling in the background for their entire careers. At times peer reviews of historiography monographs express a degree of fatigue with the whole discussion. Such sentiments are hard to miss, for example, in David Roberts's first sentence of his review of Breisach's *On the Future of History*: "By now the overall issue is familiar, even tiresome."¹² There is a certain boredom, or perhaps resignation that no resolution will be achieved in Roberts's description of the debate itself: "On one side, we have the

¹²David Roberts, "Postmodernism and History: Missing the Missed Connections," *History and Theory* 44 (May 2005): 240.

postmodern challenge, which might seem to threaten the self-understanding of practicing historians, even to render history as a mode of inquiry irrelevant; on the other, the somewhat disparate response of those same historians to that challenge.”¹³ Similarly, when Michael Roth reviews Keith Jenkins’s *Refiguring History* he observes that Jenkins has been “[beating] the postmodern drum for some time now,” indeed that Jenkins is “an old school postmodernist.”¹⁴ Roth depicts Jenkins’s citations of Hayden White, Jacques Derrida, E.H. Carr, Natalie Z. Davis, E.P. Thompson and Joyce Appleby as akin to a reminiscent sampling from a shelf of golden oldies vinyls. But however weary some may have become with such topics and their proponents, entering into the epistemological concerns of current arguments has the potential to vindicate the ancient understanding of the function of history-writing and its intentional participation in edifying discourse.

Not only has fatigue afflicted the discussions of historical theory, at times various American professional historians have become frustrated with the unresolved and seemingly unresolvable divide between traditional practicing historians and those who embrace a more radically sceptical historiography.¹⁵ Despite certain polarizations in the profession, however, there is also commonality to be found where both sides agree. Most happily it is at these junctures of overlap where a defence of the ancient function of history-writing can begin.

First, it is interesting to note that nearly all contemporary historiographers agree that history-writing is unavoidably agenda-driven. There is agreement that at the most fundamental epistemic level no author of history can totally or ultimately escape his own perspectival

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Michael Roth, “Classic Postmodernism,” *History and Theory* 43 (October 2004): 372.

¹⁵See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, eds., *Reconstructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society* (New York: Routledge, 1999). This text is a collection of essays by professional historians who became frustrated with the politicization of history-writing and the American Historical Association’s failure to right the problems. These scholars formed a new association: The Historical Society. Presumably in agreement with the rest of the charter members, one contributor, Marc Trachtenberg, expresses the belief that the profession of history is in need of major revision and believes that the former professional associations lack the will to take the necessary steps: “The Past Under Siege: A Historian Ponders the State of His Profession—And What to Do about It,” 11.

situation. Consequently, no author can totally or ultimately avoid promoting certain agendas while suppressing others. This concession is hardly new. In American scholarship, critiques of positivism began in the early twentieth century and have continued into the present. In his well-known monograph, *That Noble Dream*, Peter Novick begins the section entitled “Objectivity Besieged” with the disillusionments experienced by American scholars after the First World War. Novick describes the intellectual shift of Raymond Sontag, a college student whose education was interrupted by military service in the War, from positivism to something more sceptical. Sontag’s experience of history-writing both before and after the War was the impetus to his growing belief that historians could no longer be “confident that they understood the forces which shaped the past and that they could describe the past objectively and correctly.”¹⁶ Novick describes how shortly before the war began, American historians had read the propagandistic excesses of their former German professors (many Americans had trained in Germany and were there instructed in historical objectivity and historical criticism) and wondered how that objectivity, the goal of their craft, could be so easily set aside.¹⁷ But later the New World scholars proved as fallible as their teachers. When America entered the war, history-writing was used to promote the Allied cause. Later, American historians of the 1920s looked back on war-time history-writing, by both the Allies and the Germans, and they began to suspect that objectivity was more difficult to achieve than previously thought or was perhaps even illusive. A small number of authors suggested that history-writing was agenda-driven and limited by the author’s situation in time and space. For publishing such ideas these scholars earned the title, “historical relativists.” Notable examples from this clan are Charles Beard, Carl Becker and James Robinson. Today, historians agree that it is not possible to remove all traces of “agenda” from history-writing. This conclusion from the earlier part of the twentieth century

¹⁶Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988), 132.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 114-116.

continues into the present.

Second, historians agreed that the past was knowable. This conclusion was not contested by the earlier historians but has been controversial since the 1960s. For the most part, however, even postmodern historiographers agree the past is knowable in some sense, even while arguing that the knowable past is not really the goal of writing history. Novick stresses the point that the historical relativists of the 1920s and 1930s did not doubt that facts and explanations about the past could be known. Rather, their comments were directed at interpretation: “historical interpretations always had been, and for various technical reasons always would be, ‘relative’ to the historian’s time, place, values, and purposes.”¹⁸ By limiting their observations to interpretation, the relativists could concede one of their opponents’ basic premises: the knowable past. The positivists, as they came to be called, in turn conceded the relativists’ main contention: the inescapably perspectival nature of interpretation. Novick observes that even in the 1920s opponents to historical relativism did not argue that the relativists were wrong in their conclusions. Rather the problem with the relativists, from the traditional perspective, was that the relativists weren’t unhappy about the situation.¹⁹

Novick charts the wax and wane of the concept of objectivity as his text continues on from the early part of the twentieth century until near the end of the century. In the 1940s and 1950s objectivity was re-construed. During these decades the historical relativists of the 1920s and 1930s were thanked for illuminating the point that facts don’t simply speak for themselves, but the full critique of the relativists continued to be rejected by most historians. Instead of constructing arguments to prove that the theory of the relativists was incorrect, however, mainstream historians largely evaded the relativist critique by reformulating the notion of pure objectivity into practical objectivity. Historians of the mid-century did not deny the

¹⁸Ibid., 166.

¹⁹Ibid.

epistemological position of the relativists but instead found a way of “living with” relativism that didn’t deny its tenets even while ignoring its implications.²⁰ The epistemology of relativism was conceded but the practice of writing history was not altered. From the 1960s onwards, Novick explicates the collapse of this reformulation. He describes the end of the twentieth century as a “period of confusion, polarization, and uncertainty, in which the idea of historical objectivity has become more problematic than ever before.”²¹ Even so the main lines of debate in historiographical discussions seem, from an early twenty-first-century point of view, much the same as those of the early twentieth century, as described by Novick. Discussions of the 1960s certainly introduced an element of radical scepticism that was new. Some doubted you could ever know any fact, no matter how basic and seemingly attested to. But the fundamental, epistemic point has remained virtually uncontested for almost a century: no history-writer can fully divest himself of all subjective baggage to attain a state of pure objectivity. Neither traditionalists nor postmodernists disagree. Some present-day examples underscore the point.

Arthur Marwick is not effusively grateful for Novick’s work.²² Even so, Marwick expresses an opinion not dissimilar to that which Novick attributes to the majority of historians in the 1950s. Marwick claims that he is “challenging the arguments that history cannot achieve a reasonable degree of objectivity, while fully recognising that history, probably in common with all other scholarly activities, cannot achieve total objectivity.”²³ “All historians,” continues Marwick, “recognize that we are all culturally, or socially, *influenced* but deny that their work

²⁰Ibid., 410-411. Novick notes Oscar Handlin’s phrase that historians had “learned to live with relativism” and agrees that it characterizes most mid-century, mainstream historians. The characterization is underscored by a vivid medical analogy. Historians had learned to live with relativism as one learns to live with eczema: “it’s not fatal, simply an annoying chronic itch that’s best ignored; it only gets worse if you scratch it” Ibid., 410.

²¹Ibid., 16-17.

²²Marwick groups Novick with Carr and Collingwood several times, (41, 45, 46), which I suspect is Marwick’s way of indicating that Novick’s text should be viewed as being as “dubious” as those other texts. Ibid., 41-46. While Marwick describes Carr as “stimulating” in the “Further Reading” section, Carr is also Marxist (not a plus in Marwick’s estimation) and *What is History?* is filled, according to Marwick, with misconceptions. Ibid., 300.

²³Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Chicago: Lyceum Books, 2001), 45.

(that is, history) is culturally, or socially, *determined or constructed*.²⁴ Yes, yes, Marwick seems to be saying, pure objectivity is unattainable since we're shaped by our perspectival situations but the proper response to this situation is the development of a practical objectivity in which the historian attempts to "understand the influences operating on [the historian], and, therefore escape from them."²⁵ The historian is the superhero who overcomes the pitfalls of bias by following the methodical discipline of the profession—helpfully outlined in the second half of Marwick's book.

Thomas Haskell's conclusion on this topic is easily discernible as it can be found in the title he assigns to a collection of his essays, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality*. The central article of the text, sharing the same title, also responds to Novick's *That Noble Dream*. Haskell believes that Novick has not made important distinctions between the moderate historicism, which Novick employs to compose his history-writing, and the more radical rhetorical postures Novick assumes to support that moderate position. Haskell here seems to be implying that Novick is traditional in practice while radical in theoretical postulation; his theory is not aligned with his practice.

Haskell objects to Novick's portrayal of historians as philosophical simpletons who naively equate objectivity with neutrality. He chides Novick for his "exposé" tone of voice and mock-shock by which Novick implies that most historians don't even know that they are limited by such epistemological constraints. Haskell defends the majority of historians and portrays them as epistemologically savvy even if they don't discuss the topic directly. Haskell's defence however, relies on a definition of objectivity that seems similar to Novick's description of the practical objectivity of mid-century. "I regard objectivity, properly understood, as a worthy goal

²⁴Ibid., 46. Italics in the original.

²⁵Ibid.

for historians”²⁶ Properly understood objectivity is “that minimal respect for *self-overcoming*, for detachment, honesty, and fairness, that makes intellectual community possible.”²⁷ Haskell is not quibbling with the premise that history-writing is fundamentally intertwined with agenda and the subjective nature of research. All agree with Haskell. Pure objectivity is unattainable.

Haskell is right to chide Novick for representing historians as he does. Not discussing epistemology in a historical text may simply be a choice to focus on one kind of task rather than another—and not necessarily proof of epistemological ignorance. At the same time, however, if it is true that historians generally don’t discuss the theoretical framework of their history-writing, then it seems fair to ask what historians see the function of history to be. *Is* the assumed epistemology sufficient for the task? I agree with Haskell’s respect for the practicing historian but continue to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of some parts of the assumed epistemology.

Novick describes the switch from belief in pure objectivity to practical objectivity and Marwick and Haskell exemplify it. The three authors share another common characteristic but of quite a different sort. All neglect to comment on an important change in the nature of the discussion that occurs when historiographical discussion switches from pure to practical objectivity. The defence of pure objectivity is primarily an ontological discussion. It is a discussion of the essential essence, essential being, of history-writing. An argument that defends pure objectivity must concern itself primarily with demonstrating that the past *is* real, that historical knowledge *is* obtainable, and that humans *are* capable of knowing and communicating events of the past. By contrast, the defence of practical objectivity omits discussion of being. Rather, it is primarily concerned with defending a particular response to the inevitability of agenda. *Since pure objectivity is unattainable the best response is practical objectivity.* Both

²⁶Thomas Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1998), 146, 147.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 154. Italics mine.

Haskell and Marwick believe—in almost Nietzschean fashion—that a historian can *overcome* the perspectival reality of knowledge by his response.

So the question is not whether history-writing can free itself from the concerns of its author or whether it can be purified of conscious or unconscious advocacy. These are unavoidably entangled with the history-writing process at one level or another. And this is an important point to make as it is often a blurred point or merged with a further question—what the response to this situation should be. This can be observed, for example, in Cox's indictment of late antique biography: it is non-historical because it reveals the concerns of the author not the subject. Given the nearly uncontested epistemic historiographical agreement of the twentieth century, to reject a document as history-writing on such grounds is either a rejection of the possibility of history-writing *in toto*, or a veiled assertion regarding *the degree* to which the author smothers his subject with his own agenda. As it is doubtful that Cox is a radical sceptic, her point would likely run along the latter line. But she has conflated what a historian's response to an epistemic position should be with the epistemic position itself. A reasonable projection as to what Cox really means is that, in her opinion, history-writing should work very hard to eliminate all the unfortunate baggage which the author brings to his task, even if it is impossible to do so completely. Essentially it is the position to which Marwick and Haskell adhere. It is a denunciation based on a preferred response: those who do not act in this manner *in response* to the inherently vested nature of history-writing are not writing history. Or it might be more accurate to infer that those who do not act in this manner in response to the inherently vested nature of history-writing are not writing *good* history, and since *good* history is the only history that counts, not to write history the *good* way, is not to write history. Again, comment on what constitutes the right response to the epistemology of history-writing has become neatly enmeshed with what history-writing is. It is vital to signal that an important change occurs when the discussion switches from defence of pure objectivity to defence of practical objectivity.

Practical objectivity is a defence of a response. However, not everyone agrees what the right response should be. Other responses to the nature of historical knowledge do not discourage exploration of ethical discourse. What can be learned from these other responses?

Keith Jenkins, a self-proclaimed proponent of postmodern historiography, is not altogether unwilling to acknowledge that the facts of the past are knowable. Like the relativists of the 1920s, Jenkins has no intention to get into a fight about basic description and especially not when it comes to description of the recent past. A person can know that the First World War happened between 1914 and 1918 or that Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979. For Jenkins the ascertaining of facts is so small a part of the historical task as to not merit much of a quarrel.²⁸ On the topic of interpretation, however, Jenkins is most willing to engage and endorse controversial ideas about the agendas, polemical goals, biases and authorial impositions upon the subject matter. Even in these areas there would be some agreement between his understandings and those of Marwick and Haskell. But whereas the latter suggest that history-writers can mitigate or sufficiently overcome the ultimately subjective nature of historical knowledge through their disciplined responses, Jenkins suggests a very different path. “For although there may be methods of finding out ‘what happened’ there is no method whatsoever whereby one can definitely say what the ‘facts mean.’”²⁹ So what, Jenkins’s comments imply, if we can know that Margaret Thatcher became the Prime Minister of England in such and such a year? Such details are chronicle, not history-writing. It’s how you present those facts, what kind of interpretive grid those facts are plotted into, that matters. For Jenkins, the disciplined overcoming espoused by Marwick and Haskell is simply one of many choices of interpretive frameworks and no choice is inherently better or worse than any other. The question is not, claims Jenkins, ‘what is history?’ but rather ‘who is history for?’

²⁸Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991), 32-33.

²⁹Ibid., 33.

We can see that history is bound to be problematic because it is a contested term/discourse, meaning different things to different groups. For some groups want a sanitised history where conflict and distress are absent: some want history to lead to quietism; some want history to embody rugged individualism, some to provide strategies and tactics for revolution, some to provide grounds for counter-revolution, and so on . . . It is also easy to see how the list of uses for history is not only logically but practically endless; I mean, what would a history be like that everyone could once and for all agree on?³⁰

Jenkins answers the last question of the above paragraph by suggesting that a universally agreed-upon history would create a world like Orwell's *1984*. A single history would be a tool whereby centralized power is legitimated and imposed. Rather than responding to the subjective nature of history-writing with a method (such as practical objectivity as employed by many historians³¹), Jenkins advocates a different response: celebrating interpretive diversity. Indeed there would no longer be any centre but instead all history-writing would occur at the margins and would all be equally incorrect.

Now certain things follow from this position, not least that if historiography only takes place on the margins of knowledge, then an approach that sees all history as historiography (my view) is also marginalized (i.e. deemed incorrect). If history is interpretation, if history is historians' work(s), then historiography is what the 'proper' study of history is actually about.³²

The focus of history-writing should not be what happened but rather the interpretation of it.

Jenkins has made a point with which I agree and which, more importantly, furthers my argument. First, however, I note a point with which I disagree. His analogy of history-writing on the margins and the end of the centre seems improbable in practice and confusing in theory. In

³⁰Ibid., 18.

³¹Jenkins tends to use the term "empiricist" to describe such authors as Arthur Marwick and G. Elton. It is a term with some odour of pejorative comment about it. To Jenkins' discredit, he tends to caricature the so-called centre of professional history-writing (which, according to Jenkins, is dominated by empiricists). Jenkins writes: "Historians often seem to assume that interpretations just do derive from the 'always already there facts, and that what is actually a temporary and local interpretation really is true/accurate as such; that at 'the centre' lie the facts of the matter in some given, uninterpreted way" Ibid., 33. This comment may not be fair. Many historians are aware that interpretive schemes function in the primary sources where we go to find the facts and in the secondary sources they themselves write. Whether intentional or not, Jenkins seems to be confusing what many historians believe to be ontologically true with their response to it. The response may be to act as though that is true but this is a response, not a claim of being.

³²Ibid., 34. In this quote Jenkins uses the term "historiography" the way that this dissertation uses the term "history-writing" and the term "history" the way that this dissertation uses the phrase "past events" or "the past."

order for the academic centre to die, the current system by which texts are published and scholarly work is validated would have to cease. There could be, for example, no hierarchy of publishing houses. Indeed, on what basis would a publisher or scholarly community critique or reject a scholar's work if there were no centre to reference? On the other hand, Jenkins is right to say that a single history would be a tool to legitimate and impose a centralized power. Perhaps the collapse of the centre is not the right image but rather the image of extending the table. What would be the more effective way of averting the sinister power of a single history? Would it be the collapse of the centre? Or would it be by inviting previously marginalized voices to the table? Having noted my disagreement, I observe that Jenkins' understanding of history-writing allows for focus on interpretation—which I will take as agreement that edifying dialogue is a legitimate function of history-writing.

For postmodernists like Jenkins, the response to epistemological uncertainty is celebration. He believes that the collapse of the centre and the acknowledgement that history-writing is historiography done only at the margins will result in freedom and social toleration.

If we are freed from the desire for certainty, if we are released from the idea that history rests on the study of primary/documentary sources (and that doing history is studying these alone and that from these originals we can adjudicate later historians' disagreements), then we are free to see history as an amalgam of those epistemological, methodological, ideological and practical concerns I have outlined.³³

Later Jenkins projects this hope:

It may be that this kind of scepticism towards historical knowledge may lead towards cynicism and varieties of negativity. But it need not and does not for me. Along with and for the same sort of reasons as Hayden White, I see moral relativism and epistemological scepticism as the basis for social toleration and the positive recognition of differences.”³⁴

Although Jenkins cites White as his primary influence in the preceding citation, the work of Michel Foucault seems relevant to his point here. In *The Archeology of Knowledge* Foucault persuaded many that a human, situated in a particular time and place, has tightly circumscribed

³³Ibid., 48.

³⁴Ibid., 56.

limits on what he or she can think. Indeed it is the “archive,” a term which Foucault re-defines as a system of rules in a particular culture, which determines the boundaries of human thought and practice. Although over the course of time and space humans as a collective are capable of a broad spectrum of thoughts and practices, individuals are bound to their particular systems of thinking and doing. Concepts of meaning and truth, however, will change over time. An author will therefore, knowingly or not, endorse the meaning or truth of his time.³⁵ In response to the unavoidable promotion of an era’s agenda, Jenkins seeks to mitigate the potentially oppressive power of an era’s archive by writing history from the margins rather than the centre. The multiplication of perspectives will bring about toleration and freedom: precisely those goods which justify his approach.

Whether or not non-centred history-writing will bring about such ends will be tested by time. Foucault’s observations on the changing perception of what constitutes truth and meaning, on the other hand, can be applied as a critique of Cox’s chastisement of late antique biography. Thus, while the late, twentieth-century rules (archive) about truth cannot include authorial imposition and polemical agenda, fourth-century truth could. Further, one might ask Cox on what grounds she can know that the twentieth-century archive is more truthful than the late antique understanding. This dissertation does not discount the possibility that an adequate defence could be summoned. However, the influence of Foucault’s work has been to create agreement with Croce’s famous dictum that all history is present history. Yet the admission is usually begrudging; the charge of presentism is rarely meant as a commendation.

Just as Jenkins and Marwick agree on the epistemological state of historical knowledge (even while disagreeing on the response), they also share the hope that their chosen method will result in positive changes for society. Compare Jenkins’s hope for freedom and toleration as

³⁵Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan-Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972), 48, 49, 127.

cited above with Marwick's comments regarding the pursuit of knowledge:

We live in a dreadfully unequal world, in which basic human rights and freedoms are denied to millions. However, it is my belief (based, I think on a rational assessment of the evidence) that the living standards and freedoms which most of us enjoy in the West are fundamentally due to the expansion in human knowledge over the centuries, principally, perhaps, knowledge in the sciences and technologies, but also in the humanities and social sciences. I further believe that decent living conditions, freedom, *empowerment* for the deprived millions everywhere depend on the continuing expansion and, above all, *diffusion* of knowledge. I make no arrogant claims on behalf of historical knowledge, simply the point . . . that what happened in the past influences what happens in the present, and indeed, what will happen in the future, so that knowledge of the past—history—is essential to society.³⁶

Both Marwick and Jenkins are convinced that their chosen response to the ultimate nature of history-writing will result in a better society. In his attempt to validate the history-writing task, Marwick acknowledges that, at least indirectly, history-writing is a tool that assists the development of good societies. Certainly Marwick believes that his way is better than a Jenkins-style approach. And Jenkins, if he were to remain consistent to his paradigm, would have to concede that his way and a Marwick-approach are equally incorrect (equally incorrect in an epistemological sense). Even so, Jenkins clearly chooses his particular mode and does so because it is better than centralized history-writing. Marwick and Jenkins promote two different responses to the perspectival nature of history-writing. Both believe their response to be the best and both claim the results will be the same: a better society.

We should note, then, that to base justification for the act of history-writing on societal betterment is an edifying claim. To talk of a good society or of bettering society is to enter the domain of moral adjudication and ethical discourse. If improving society in some way is the goal of history-writing, then perhaps historians would do well to become ethically astute if for no other reason than to reassure themselves that their research furthers rather than hinders this goal. Fostering “the good world” is a lofty task but also a grand task. Of course historians would want to contribute to this goal. In fact, it is such an important task that historians would be amiss

³⁶Marwick, *The New Nature of History*, 2.

not to engage in the edifying task of history-writing, or to invite others (perhaps ethicists or religious leaders) to work with the historian to interpret the moral and ethical aspects of history-writing.

The preceding discussion emphasized three unexpected areas of commonality between traditional and postmodern historiography. First, when historians, both practitioners and theoreticians, get down to discussing the epistemology of historical knowledge, all agree (even the most positivistic) that no one can divest himself of all his own assumptions, concerns, agenda and unconscious advocacy. Thus, it would be unfair to dismiss biography as a historical form of discourse simply because it reveals the author's concerns. Such a discussion must be held at a different level: by arguing for the best response to this agreed position. Simply demonstrating that an author's assumptions or agenda are present and incorporated into a text is insufficient grounds for dismissal as history-writing. Second, various authors have conflated the ontology of historical knowledge with what they consider the best response. Cox is not notable because she is especially guilty of this charge but rather a representative example of the typical blurring of this important distinction. Jenkins is also guilty of this kind of fuzziness. His emphasis on the interpreted nature of history-writing also becomes enmeshed with the response—there is only historiography. Jenkins' claim that history-writing is the study of interpretation is really an assertion of the best response but it is presented as an ontological claim. Third, there is further common ground which most historians and historiographers share. Historians wish to link the justification of their method to the hope that the writing of history will lead to a better society.

The preceding discussion was also necessary to establish that this dissertation is not about the ontology of historical knowledge. Rather, the thrust of the discussion is to suggest that current responses to the nature of history-writing are in various ways troubling and to offer another response for consideration. It is a response that incorporates aspects of both traditional

history-writing (from the centre, to use Jenkins's designation) and postmodern critiques of the centre. It is a response that has some affinity with the purpose which the ancients attributed to the process of history-writing: thoughtful reflection on the past as part of on-going dialogue considering how we ought to live.

Historians such as Arthur Marwick, Ernst Breisach and Georg Iggers are persuaded that a good response to epistemological problems is the attempt to eliminate intentional agenda, political aims and all other forms of authorial impositions, even if ultimate success is unattainable. Postmoderns such as Jenkins embrace relativism and the end of the so called traditional historical texts of the university. The effect of both of these positions is to discourage ethical discourse. As noted earlier, both traditional and postmodern historians justify their methods on moral grounds. Yet both groups do ethics poorly in their history-writing. For traditional authors, open discussion of moral aspects or advocating particular ethical responses, such as imitating or rejecting particular actions or events, smells too strongly of all that Marwick's methods are attempting to avoid. Marwick endorses disciplined overcoming of authorial concerns and agenda, not an open forum on the same. Ethical discussion comes dangerously close to allowing subjectivity to rule rather than be subject to the rules. And while a Jenkins-style response would not actively seek to rid itself of ethical discourse, the belief that all positions are equally incorrect reduces such discussion to mere self-indulgence: if my ethics are as equally incorrect as anyone else's, what right do I have to promote them? Furthermore, concerns about the abuse of power emerge. There is the distinct possibility that by promoting my incorrect ethics I might oppress someone else's incorrect ethics: from this point of view, an undesirable situation.

Most historians see themselves as being somewhere in the middle: between the near positivism of Marwick and the sheer relativism of Jenkins. It is possible, however, that a middle position may be no more amenable to ethical discourse than the more extreme points of the

spectrum. Thomas Haskell, for example, might praise Novick for his research, but chastise Novick for his discussion about advocacy. Haskell considers himself in the middle because he supports both Novick's goal of making the "academic world safe for politically committed scholarship," agreeing that "activists have undeniably and valuably widened the scope and variety of the profession's interests," and at the same time Haskell supports a qualified objectivity.³⁷ Yet, Haskell inserts a subtle qualification. "[It] appears to me that there is widespread recognition within the profession that political commitment need not detract from the writing of history—not even from its objectivity—as long as honesty, detachment, and intelligence are also at work."³⁸ This short but weighty qualification raises questions that Haskell does not address. Honesty, detachment and intelligence as defined by whom? "The academic guild" seems like the obvious answer. In the same section as Haskell calls for honesty and detachment he also evaluates Novick's discussion of the "dual-citizenship of the historian:" the phrase is defined as someone with equal loyalty to political ideologies and the "traditional intellectual imperatives of the scholarly community."³⁹ Recall that Haskell has claimed earlier that he is not opposed to people having political commitments. What is unacceptable, is that a political commitment be considered equal to one's academic commitment. Haskell repudiates Novick's notion of dual citizenship:

Dual citizenship would mean . . . that sometimes we would understand ourselves to be acting in our capacity as scholars, sometimes as political partisans; the laws of neither domain would be allowed to overrule those of the other. Or, at any rate, no one would ever be under any very weighty obligation to adhere to scholarly standards if doing so encroached on political loyalties. Whether Novick is really prepared to go this far I am not sure, but it is certainly too far . . . In the end Novick allows his solicitude for advocacy to subvert his scepticism: he hands to any scholar who can claim membership in a political movement a blank check, a license to believe whatever the movement requires and to assert it with all the authority of scholarship.⁴⁰

³⁷Haskell, 167.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., 167-168.

Immediately following this passage, Haskell switches from talk of political commitments to epistemic and *moral* obligations. This switch indicates two possible connections which Haskell implies but does not explicate. First, that political citizenship necessarily implicates you in moral judgments, even advocacy. Such a comment seems in line with the argument that complete neutrality is unattainable and the sentiment would align with the conclusions of the article as indicated in the title of the piece. Second, even while conceding that neutrality is illusory, he insists that commitments be put in their place. Giving equal authority to both parts of your dual citizenship is problematic because the morals and ethics of your politics might dominate your research. And this is unacceptable.

Within the scholarly community, the characterological values that we associate with the intellectual vocation—respect for logical coherence, fidelity to evidence, detachment, candor, honesty, and the like—must not only compete on equal terms with other values, they must prevail. When members of the scholarly community become unwilling to put intellectual values ahead of political ones, they erase the only possible boundary between politically committed scholarship and propaganda and thereby rob the community of its principal justification of existence.⁴¹

Unfortunately, Haskell does not say what the principal justification for the existence of the scholarly community is. Is he assuming that the principal justification is simply respect for logical coherence, fidelity to evidence, detachment, candor and honesty? Perhaps. It is, however, equally possible that he is arguing for the pursuit of truth without using the term.

Whatever the case, it does not seem too much to conclude that in Haskell's opinion, the ethics of your politics, and certainly advocating for the ethical implications of your politics, are unwelcome in your research. Why? Because there is nothing to guarantee that your work is not propaganda. Haskell is attempting to defend a precarious middle ground. On the one hand it is acceptable that historians have political commitments. He even admits in this section that most people cannot help but be morally and ethically oriented: "most of us cannot avoid construing the world in terms of right and wrong, no matter what our formal views on objectivity and

⁴¹Ibid., 168.

relativism.”⁴² But the response to this human trait is to prioritize the norms of the guild over your *personally chosen* political interests. Of course the postmodern critique of traditional history holds that disciplinary method cannot be without ethical implications, even if they are not discussed, and that employing the guild’s rules is choosing one political commitment over another. In the end, Haskell’s claim that politically committed scholarship is welcome seems a bit hollow: by all means choose to be politically committed, just don’t act like it when you write for the professional community. Your other commitments must always be secondary. Indeed, advocating for the ethical implications of your commitments is considered propaganda for the simple reason that you have broken the first rule of the scholarly community: to put the methods and standards of the guild ahead of all else. It seems fair to say that such an atmosphere is not welcoming of edifying discourse, even if also admitting that humans just can’t seem to avoid moral judgments.

Haskell’s middle position is somewhat confusing terrain. He admits to ethical dimensions and wants to welcome politically committed scholarship but it must first conform to ‘the rules’ of the discipline. The rules of the discipline are there in the service of truth and the service of truth is, I agree, the proper concern of every scholar. But the historian with political or even religious commitments is in a difficult spot. Discussing precisely those commitments which Haskell says he welcomes or reflecting on the edifying component of past events in light of those commitments will cause others to suspect that you have in fact disregarded the rules of the discipline. Such a scholar opens himself or herself to the charge of propaganda by which his or her work will be dismissed. If a scholar has in fact done serious research that does conform to the norms of the discipline, would he or she risk this kind of censure? I do not mean to treat Haskell harshly as I am in agreement with much of his article. I do wonder, however, whether it is possible to truly welcome committed historical scholarship without changing some part of the

⁴²Ibid.

disciplinary rules.

What then is a committed scholar to do in response? The researcher could decide to put the norms of the guild ahead of his politics. Or the scholar may be genuinely convinced that the best or even the only way in which peaceful, profitable scholarship can occur is if everyone abides by the guidelines when writing for the academy. Such is the dilemma that committed scholars have. One such scholar, Sonya Rose, wondered, “Is Feminist Scholarship Losing its Critical Edge?” For those familiar with Marwickian outlines of historical methods, the title could be a bit misleading. Rose is not particularly concerned that feminist scholars are failing to comply with a historical-critical conceptualization of critical-ness. Rather, by “critical” she means the function of feminist scholarship to both adjudicate (pass moral judgment) and advocate the ethical implications of a feminist critique—specifically critique of patriarchy. The initial and primary goal of feminist history, claims Rose, was the “unmasking [of] oppression and enhancing the potential for emancipatory politics.”⁴³ Rose cites another feminist scholar, Judith Bennet, who agrees that feminist historians have let go of their moral and political commitments, and the implication of this statement is further clarified by examining the critiques of feminist history by women of colour later in the essay.⁴⁴ That is, feminist historians have let go of any *meaningful* moral and political commentary as evidenced in their failure to dismantle patriarchal power-structures in non-white societies. Integration into the profession’s mainstream entailed a loss: the voice that identified and attempted to exorcise what was wrong and promote the corrective.

In looking back on the feminist history-writing of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Georg Iggers notes that just as feminist history-writing was integrating with the mainstream of history-writing by coming to a “general agreement with contemporary history’s epistemology, which

⁴³Sonya Rose, “Gender History/Women’s History: Is Feminist Scholarship Losing Its Critical Edge?” *Journal of Women’s History* 5 (Spring 1993), 89.

⁴⁴Ibid.

was considered to be neutral in the male/female controversies,” some feminist historians began to question the “theoretical propositions of the progress view of history . . . [of] the mainstream of historiography, particularly academic history.”⁴⁵ Feminist historians found that mainstream (traditional) history-writing was insufficient for arguing the case for women. Thus, explains Iggers, feminist historians such as Joan Wallach Scott began to argue for a radical revision of theory. Although Iggers does not suggest it, it seems possible that some feminist historians, such as those who did not want to lose their “critical edge,” found their political and ethical agenda neutered by integration into mainstream historiography and therefore turned to another arena to continue their conversation. In Scott’s case, she claimed that the real historical discussion was not about what happened—the traditional domain of history-writing—but about language and categories of words. In Scott’s turn to Gender History she asserted that biology, male or female, was not what shaped the past but rather constantly changing gender constructs. The goal of Gender History, then, was to obtain the power to define gender. It was a radical turn which prioritized theory. If the price for that turn was relativism, it seems that scholars like Scott preferred this cost over against suppressing the discussion. Traditional historians can seem baffled by a scholar’s alignment with postmodern historical theory.⁴⁶ Why would obviously intelligent historians choose a theoretical framework by which they must admit the relativity of their own cause and thereby undermine their own objectives? Perhaps it is because such authors perceive that ethical discourse is equated with propaganda and not allowed in “good” history-writing. Perhaps it is because some committed scholars want to discuss their goals, objectives, concerns, polemics and advocacy.

Another group of historians has attempted to think through their commitments to both

⁴⁵Iggers, *On the Future of History*, 184 and 185.

⁴⁶See for example Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Postmodernist History” in *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society* (New York: Knopf, 1994). Himmelfarb describes postmodernist history as intellectual and moral suicide.

their religious affiliation, Christianity, and professional history-writing. Rather than adopt postmodern theory, these scholars choose to alternate between secular and sacred scholarship. Bradley Seeman begins his discussion of the “alternation approach” by summarizing the work of Alfred Schutz and Peter Berger.⁴⁷ The alternation approach (also called the “two spheres approach” or “complementarist approach”), however, was part of academic thought much earlier than Schutz and not by sociologists. Herbert Butterfield, historian of the early twentieth century, recommended alternating between the role of history-writer and the role of Christian. Butterfield took this alternation quite seriously and hid his Christian commitments from his academic colleagues, who had no idea until much later in Butterfield’s life that this supposedly secular professor was a Methodist preacher on Sundays.⁴⁸ At the end of *The Whig Interpretation of History* Butterfield states that a historian can make moral judgments, but this has nothing to do with the writing of history. If he does make moral judgments these should be viewed as his opinions, but not as inherent to the events of the past. All that Butterfield asks is that the historian make explicit his opinion (value judgments) rather than try to hide them.⁴⁹ Of course I agree with Butterfield that an author who reveals his or her opinions respects his or her reader. In all this, however, Butterfield never doubted a person’s ability to simply alternate between modes of discourse at will. One could put on the secular hat when at the academy and take it off on the way to church to be replaced by the sacred hat. He chastised authors for deciding whether people or events of the past were good or bad. He did not think a historian should be a moral adjudicator—which I argue is part of the edifying discourse of history-writing.

Decades later, Schutz and Berger described the alternation approach. Seeman

⁴⁷Bradley Seeman, “Evangelical Historiography Beyond the ‘Outward Clash’” A Case Study of the Alternation Approach,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 33 (Fall 2003): 95-124.

⁴⁸C.T. McIntire, “Herbert Butterfield: Scientific and Christian,” *Christian History* 20, no. 4 (2001), 47. Seeman does not mention Butterfield. Although Seeman is correct to begin with Schutz and Berger, since these scholars created arguments justifying the alternation approach, the practice itself was commended at least as early as Butterfield.

⁴⁹Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: Norton Library Imprint, 1965), 104-105.

summarizes Schutz and Berger and includes their explanation of the alternation approach.

The sociologist qua sociologist always stays in the role of reporter . . . As soon as he ventures an opinion on whether the belief [of the people he is studying] is finally justified, he is jumping out of the role of sociologist. There is nothing wrong with this role change, and I intend to perform it myself in a little while. But one should be clear about what one is doing when.”⁵⁰

Following the summary of Schutz and Berger, Seeman briefly examines a few important texts by Harry Stout, Mark Noll and George Marsden (three self-professed evangelicals notable for their work in American religious history) and argues that these scholars have also adopted a Berger-style alternation approach to scholarship. Seeman is suspicious, however, that the alternation approach, which seems so buttressed by common sense, might not be possible. Can one move out of one role and into another and alternate back and forth as if they were discrete spheres? Seeman believes that the “alternation approach rests on an unrealistic picture of human beings. No one could actually perform this leap. A being that could, would look very much like what has been called the ‘unencumbered self.’”⁵¹ Historians believe that scholars of all kinds of ideological commitments, be they political or religious, can co-exist in the discipline of history because when they act as historians they discipline or restrain such commitments, what Seeman calls encumbrances, in order to engage in a commonly shared, public discourse.

Seeman advances several critiques of this public forum. First, the public discourse of the academy could be understood as having its own metaphysics rather than being truly unencumbered. The university setting is as encumbered as any political or religious sphere. Seeman does not develop this idea. I think he would agree, however, that partisan scholarship takes place in the university as well as in the political and religious arenas of society. The

⁵⁰Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 7-8: as cited by Bradley Seeman in “Evangelical Historiography Beyond the ‘Outward Clash:’ A Case Study on the Alternation Approach,” *Christian Scholars Review* 33 (Fall 2003): 100.

⁵¹Seeman, “Evangelical Historiography,” 110. The unencumbered self that Seeman refers to seems to be a way of indicating the pure objectivity which is no longer thought possible to obtain. Seeman is pointing out a problem in reasoning. The unencumbered self is no longer thought possible but in order for the alternation approach to work, the researcher does in fact have to be unencumbered.

university may not be any less of an ideologically committed sphere than any other sphere.

Second, the fact that we “*actually* believe things to be true betrays the alternation approach at its very core.”⁵² Think, for example about a religious historian who gives a history of an individual to his fellow religious adherents. Here he includes comments about the actions of God which he considers to be true. Then in an academic setting he gives a history of the same individual where comments about divine actions are omitted. What is relevant as a religious person is irrelevant as a historian. So which account is true? Or which account is *his*? Which account does the scholar believe to be true?

In his discussion of the second point Seeman doesn’t seem to go far enough. He might be trying to say that simply omitting certain details isn’t the same as an innocent editing of inconsequential details (like deciding not to give the names of a historical figure’s siblings or the like). His point would be strengthened if he said that omitting certain details, which the author believes to be fundamentally true about metaphysical reality, is to tell a different story. Switching from one metaphysical framework to another has significant implications for the meaning of the details. Thus, even though the scholar may seem to be successfully alternating between spheres, in fact he or she is a fraud in one of them, or possibly both.

Seeman’s third point is simply to note that while no one believes that anyone can simply set aside their situated subjectivity when it comes to issues of gender and race, the ability to set aside your metaphysics is still believed to be the *modus operandi* when it comes to what the author believes to be ultimately real (be that Christian, Buddhist, atheistic or other belief system). Just as it is unlikely that you can separate your research from your situated state in race and gender, Seeman doubts that you can separate your scholarship from what you believe to be ultimately real. In order to alternate between the spheres of these kinds of commitments and

⁵²Ibid., 113.

public, academic discourse, you have to be an unencumbered self.⁵³ But such a being is rare, if not mythical.

The alternation approach of Butterfield, Schutz and Berger agrees with Haskell's hierarchy of commitments. When in the "professional" sphere the historian engages in the public discourse of the academy first and admits to his commitments, if at all, in the preface or conclusion. But the two modes do not mix; they alternate. Write as a historian when discussing your research and as a political adherent when in those venues. Unlike some feminist historians, many Christian scholars have not demanded a radical re-working of theory. They have adopted the alternation approach. Publishing with academic presses in their professional historian mode and speaking to or even writing for confessional organizations in their Christian mode.

But why should a Christian have to alternate? I should have liked to read Seeman's thoughts with regard to the reasons why the alternation theory is attractive to members of the university. Even if the alternation theory is feasible, should not a Marxist history look different from a feminist history which should look different from a Christian history, a Buddhist history, or a Jewish history? Would not a historian want to forgo the alternation theory, regardless of its plausibility? Why uphold the distinction between "professional" and "confessional?" I am not saying that a Christian historian should write as a Providentialist in the academy. I do not think this a correct mode of historical discourse whether the venue is the university or the church. What is the distinction between "professional" and "confessional" and do they need to be two discrete spheres? Previously Seeman wondered whether the historian who ascribes to the alternation theory is a fraud as either a "professional" or a "confessional" author, or possibly both? While it is an interesting question to pose, to answer that question affirmatively is going too far. Authors, like speakers, are sensitive to the character of their audiences and their writing and speaking will reflect this. At the same time, the academy may be guilty of encouraging

⁵³Ibid., 112-14.

fraud if it insists that research cannot be distinctly Marxist, feminist, or Christian.

These two responses exemplify ways in which history-writers have reacted to the rejection of ethical discussion in history-writing: *either* leave the comfort of the centre and adopt an alternate theoretical framework *or* concede the norms of the academy while there and speak “committedly” when in a like-minded community. There is a third possibility but a difficult one to determine or trace. An author could hide his advocacy. Using the rules of the academic community, he could write in such a way as to guide the readers to make the connections he wants them to make. Perhaps this would be deliberately done. This is not to imply that any falsification would be required. It seems entirely possible that a “good” historian writing “good” history could take such a task as his goal. Such an act is not necessarily pernicious. It is, however, discourteous. If persuasion or, more strongly, advocacy is the goal of the author, the readers should be told of this goal and informed of potentially competing information. How rare or common such an act is would be hard to ascertain. As the ancient historians well knew, there is an element of trust necessary in the relationship between the history-writer and the reader. To hide the seams of an interpretive grid is a kind of a white lie to the reader, and possibly, an abuse of trust. Most likely a hidden advocacy, instead, would be unconsciously pressed. This is the great critique of traditional history-writing by the postmodern periphery. While believing yourself objective, you unknowingly select and explain the past in such a way as to promote certain social and political agendas with their attending moral and ethical implications.

The kind edifying discourse in modern and postmodern writing is unsatisfactory because it is either minimally done or relativized. This dissertation offers another response. It is a middle position that affirms some aspects of both traditional and postmodern history-writing and rejects some of both, too. But it is a position that is being increasingly demanded, if little performed. The final comments of a review of Robert Fogelson’s *Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930*, are unusual and perhaps indicative of the direction history-writing might go.

Julia Vitullo-Marting, the reviewer, begins her article with personal anecdotes about the American suburbs of the present day. These anecdotes are in contrast to the past situation in which prejudice of race, ethnicity and religion forbade many Americans the chance to purchase a home in the suburbs. Vitullo-Martin expresses dissatisfaction with Fogelson's treatment of the past prejudices of suburbians. The concluding paragraphs of the review ask this question of Fogelson: "What does this mean?"

Vitullo-Martin wants to know how the suburbs are doing today and is surprised that Fogelson has not mentioned that many of the same suburbs which Fogelson documents in his history are now fairly diverse, both religiously and ethnically. Rather, when discussing the state of suburbia today Fogelson focuses not on the bulk of suburbs but on one which is unlike the majority: the Palos Verdes Estates. This suburb continues to have only one per cent African-American and two percent Hispanic individuals despite large populations of both groups surrounding this suburb. Her critique of Fogelson's book is that he leaves ambiguous the moral implications of such a focus. She asks: "Have we really not made progress, even though the Italians and Jews who were closed out in the twentieth century now own many of the most beautiful suburban houses in America? Does the paucity of blacks and Hispanics in Palos Verdes reflect intractable injustice and discrimination?" A few sentences later she concludes the article as follows: "Fogelson doesn't tell us, leaving us to draw our own conclusions about the meaning of it all."⁵⁴ Vitullo-Martin is frustrated by Fogelson's silence with regard to the reason he chose to focus on the Palos Verdes Estates. Was he making a moral comment? Or was it simply a case of having researched that suburb more than other communities? Although I have not read Fogelson's book I share Vitullo-Martin's exasperation in trying to discern the author's leading in other texts.

⁵⁴Julia Vitullo-Martin, "Ambiguous Utopias," review of *Bourgeois Nightmares*, by Robert Fogelson, *Books and Culture* 12 (May/June 2006): 25.

David Harlan's *The Degradation of American History* argues that history-writing should resume a place in the moral disciplines. He begins by sketching an outline of the history of American history-writing. In America history-writing began as a moral discipline but abandoned this position in the middle of the twentieth century. As has been demonstrated earlier, history-writing as a moral discipline can be traced at least as far back as the Greek and Roman authors. His call for a return is timely none-the-less. Harlan states that when Perry Miller, Richard Hofstadter and Alfred Kazin wrote history they intended to communicate moral and ethical discourse. These men communicated: "[This] is what we value and want, and don't yet have. This is how we mean to live and do not yet live."⁵⁵ Throughout the monograph Harlan describes and applauds those historians who perceive the function of history-writing to be "a conversation with the dead about what we should value and how we should live."⁵⁶

Harlan's text clears the ground, so to speak. He spends most of the text arguing that history-writing *should* return to its place as a moral discipline rather than offering extensive suggestions as to *how* it could get there. His argument seems directed at historians who feel uncomfortable in the traditional history-writing camp. He engages numerous authors who have taken a postmodern theoretical turn. He is sympathetic to the postmodern position but also hesitant to about radical scepticism with regard to a knowable past. Thus, his chapter on feminism, for example, focuses almost exclusively on the work of Elaine Showalter and Joan Wallach Scott. These two authors are formidable examples of feminist writers, to be sure, but both have largely given up on the possibility of knowing the past. Harlan points out certain key inconsistencies in Scott's writings. For example, he notes that while at times Scott refuses to abandon history-writing's truth-telling claims (she writes as though the past really can be known

⁵⁵David Harlan, *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997), xv.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, xviii.

and appropriated) at other times she refuses to defend history-writing's truth claims.⁵⁷ It is a contradiction that Scott herself acknowledges but one which, it seems, Scott cannot see her way past.

Harlan distinguished himself from many of the postmodern scholars, however, in an important respect. Although he might not be able to see a means by which the "spectre of relativism," as he calls it, may be exorcised, at least Harlan expresses the hope that a way will be found. The title of Harlan's final chapter combines two nouns not often found together in discussion of historical method or theory: "Love and Objectivity." Whether intentional or not, he has made "objectivity" the trailer to "love" rather than the other way around. In opposition to Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish, whom Harlan characterizes as promoting the view that texts are empty vessels waiting to be filled with whatever meaning the reader chooses, Harlan suggests that love, of all things, is what prevents such relativism. Specifically, love of a text halts the slide into radical relativism. The love of a text causes us to seek out "a vision of what the text *might* be saying," it "[engenders] an active caring within us," which when realized causes us to

feel an obligation [to the text], no matter how murky and obscure, how muddled and inarticulate . . . All we know is that we have been made to care, that a sense of obligation and responsibility has been imposed on us, and that it is no more to be quarrelled with than love itself . . . We find ourselves—if we find ourselves at all—in the service of something that somehow takes us beyond ourselves, "something that all along has been and will be greater than ourselves." This is what people meant when they used to talk about "a sense of the past."⁵⁸

While Harlan is careful not to sound naïve (he tells the reader he is not suggesting that readers have direct access to the author's intentions), he is bold enough to suggest that love of a text will resist the relativism of its readership. And for all his dancing around the topic of authorial intention, Harlan's belief that a text can repel irreverent readers suggests that an author might yet still hope that at least part of his intent might be communicated and understood by the

⁵⁷Ibid., 72-73.

⁵⁸Ibid., 191.

reader. Although Harlan praises Dominick LaCapra's critique of contextualists who believe that they can ascertain authorial intention he does not fear the fulfillment of LaCapra's prediction that readers will simply read whatever they wish into a text.⁵⁹ Harlan's call to engage in moral dialogue assumes at least a minimal author-reader communication. Alas, the author's ability to communicate intent is only half of the problem, and indeed inseparable from the reader's ability to perceive that intent.

There is an even further problem of the relativism of application. If every author begins a dialogue advocating particular actions, who is to say which of her counsels is to be taken? From the reader's perspective the difficulties continue with the problem of which author, or authors, to heed. Harlan asks a number of questions about this problem: choosing which authors will be read as guides. Harlan does not believe that any method exists that will ensure that the "right" guides are chosen. "It would be reassuring to think that the historical profession had devised a reliable methodology for helping us find the forebears we need, and so constructing the histories we need. But no such methodology exists, of course."⁶⁰ In the end, he offers no suggestions about who might be a guide and how we choose guides.

While Harlan concludes his observations on history-writing with a somewhat mystical ending, the twenty-first century researcher need not be left in such an ephemeral place as Harlan's eighth chapter.⁶¹ It is questionable whether it is advisable to really "throw away the

⁵⁹Ibid., 193

⁶⁰Ibid., 205.

⁶¹This comment is not a denigration of Harlan's comments on the mystical topic of love. Indeed, his discussion of such a topic is commendable. Anything truly meaningful like conversation or friendship, however, is not something to be put in a test tube. Like love, moral adjudication and ethical dialogue can be discussed and investigated but in the end not reducible to empirical science. If history-writing is to attempt to edify, there will be aspects which will refuse to be de-mystified, even if put under a microscope. To discuss what is good, beautiful, and true, requires love and although love is often demonstrable and tangible, especially in the context of human relationships, it is also mystical. When John Lewis Gaddis begins his section on the comparison of history-writing with the sciences, he begins with a sense of this mysticism. He discusses the use of the metaphor, on which he claims science, history and art are all utterly dependent, to open up the subject of the non-concrete aspects of science, history, and art. As is the case with love, metaphor cannot be captured by empirical analysis. Like Gaddis' emphasis on the metaphor, Harlan's chapter on love and objectivity seems reminiscent of a Romantic critique of Enlightenment: a reaction to the "murderous" potential of empiricism.

crutch of context,” as Harlan advises, in favour of caring, obligation and love.⁶² Why the task of contextualization must be abandoned in order to love is unclear. Could not context and love co-inhabit a text rather than be mutually exclusive? The ancient authors engaged in a dialogue with their ancestors with the kind of respect and obligation which Harlan urges upon the contemporary reader. Yet the ancients were not particularly mystical in their approach. They attempted to write about a past that really existed and to employ critical thinking in order to discover and communicate that past as accurately as they could even while employing rhetorical tools to create texts that shared with literature pleasurable reading and the contemplation of meaning. Furthermore, ancient history-writers participated in their society’s ethical dialogue, as Harlan wishes American historians would do, through the not particularly mystical means of digression, dramatic tension and analogy. Ancient history-writers generally expected their text to be part of a *conversation* between author and reader, not merely passing packages of information. The difficulty for the present day is discerning how to apply the wisdom and the methods of the ancients to the present day, while avoiding their weaknesses. Harlan laments that the historical profession has not devised “a reliable methodology for helping us find the forebears we need, and so constructing the histories we need.”⁶³ If he is correct that there is no method for finding the “right” guides, then at least choosing the ancient historians as guides will not be a “wrong” decision. These ancient authors may turn out to be the “right” guides.

I want to return to where I began. The non-canonical Christian biographical tradition did not begin with Athanasius and his biography of Antony but this text was formative in the Christian biographical tradition. I have shown the critical and edifying impulse in that text and its foundation in the Classical and Biblical impulse of critical and edifying history. Biography after this text continued to take the critical and edifying task as central to their writing. I have

⁶²Ibid., 190; 191.

⁶³Ibid., 205.

discussed the place of edification in the history-writing of twentieth and twenty-first century.

Given this work, what about this text can be appropriated today?

The strength of the Marwick-style response (disciplined method) is that it takes seriously the possibility of knowing the events of the past and of coming to reasonably plausible, even accurate, descriptions and explanations. This disciplined method of history-writing is not a naïve response—the ability to achieve perfect knowledge is not claimed. But it does still believe that there are sufficient warrants for asserting the descriptions and explanations of past events. The strength of a Jenkins-style response is the thoughtful exploration of the interpreted nature of history-writing and the role of the author in that act. History-writing as edifying discourse, that is history-writing that describes and explains what essentially happened and interprets the meaning in terms of the reader's response to that knowledge, is a combination that is as old as Herodotus, Polybius, Livy, Plutarch and Tacitus. Although cruder and with notable mistakes, the ancients presumed the Marwick approach at the level of description and explanation. However, at the level of interpretation, they held views compatible with Harlan. Although they did not adhere to the relativism of Jenkins, ancient authors were interested in and attentive to the edifying function of history-writing.

When ancient authors spoke autobiographically about themselves and their research, they did so to convince the reader that they were telling the truth. The ancient history-writer knew that the reader had a great appreciation for the role of the author in the creation of the text; the reader was well aware that a text is an interpreted work, and that the author could have as easily made up whatever he chose. Thus, the ancient author knew his first task was to convince the reader that his interpretations are worth considering because his interpretations are based on reliable knowledge of the past. Today, the use of footnotes is intended to convey a similar goal: to assure the reader that due diligence, care and unbiased examination have been the *modus operandi*. And yet, footnotes are not the same as autobiographical discussion embedded in the

text. Footnotes remove the author from the text, in effect saying, “it’s not me saying this, it’s other sources.” Through autobiographical discussion of method, care and personal experience and by directly addressing the reader in digressions, the author was an integral part of his history-writing, a presence that was not obscured by use of footnotes or unvarying modern historical narrative.⁶⁴ But the ancient author claimed to have disciplined, if you will, himself, his research and his writing, in order to present reliable information. For the ancients, the past was knowable and describable. But the texts were presented in such a way that the reader could interact with both that knowable and describable past and with the author’s interpretation of it.

This particular combination of discipline, authorial presence and participation in ethical discourse has been an elusive challenge for the modern historian to put into practice and for the historiographer to defend in theory debates. At least one of the reasons this combination has been elusive is the aversion, shared by both disciplined and relativistic historiography, to conversion. Although the text I will examine, *Life of Antony*, is concerned with conversion to Christianity, this is not quite the same as what I mean by converting history. By converting history I mean a critical historical engagement that also seeks to persuade the reader about some point. It is not meant to limit the form to Christian authors, but to any historian who wants to convert the reader to a particular viewpoint. In this chapter and the next, Christian texts are merely my examples. It is the converting history of antiquity, precisely the kind of history-writing which some deny even the title, which converges on the middle ground advocated here. It seeks to describe and explicate the past and engage in ethical dialogue.

Athanasius’ *Life of Antony* is converting history. As the acknowledged progenitor of hagiography, this text has not been much looked to as a model for writing history in the modern

⁶⁴I would also argue that to an audience that was so accustomed, the use of analogy and dramatic tension was also a way of addressing the reader. Certainly, it was an indirect way but to a culture that understood these forms as teaching tools, rather than merely entertainment, analogy and drama (as in Herodotus and Thucydides) functioned as indirect yet still intentional moral and ethical instruction.

or postmodern age. There are good reasons, however, for re-examining this example of converting history and the possibility it has to instruct contemporary practice and theory. To some the choice of Athanasius' *Antony* would be surprising. Indeed, this text might be considered a worst-case scenario. It is everything good history-writing is not, whether considered from a traditional or postmodern perspective. Athanasius intended to persuade. Of course Athanasius wanted to persuade you that his description and explanation were correct but he also wanted to persuade you that Antony was an imitable guide for a reader's own actions. In other words, Athanasius has an agenda. He really is trying to convert the reader to orthodox Christianity. Furthermore, it is not difficult to discern the concerns of Athanasius as they are plainly expressed in this text. Athanasius was at odds with Arian and Meletian parties within the Church for most of his career. The Arian faction was able to expel Athanasius from his own diocese more than once. The passages in the biography in which Antony denounces these so-called heretical groups have often been remarked upon as being particularly transparent vehicles for promoting Athanasius' concerns. Athanasius neither hides his concerns nor suppresses his religious convictions. And yet Athanasius is no relativist. He is persuaded that specific aspects of Antony's life are worthy of imitation and he hopes that the reader will be similarly persuaded.

Since I am arguing that good history-writing has been unnecessarily narrowed by both traditional and postmodern advocates, this text is worthy of close examination because *Life of Antony* exemplifies a broader conceptualization of history-writing. In fact, this more expansive understanding of history-writing may require cooperation across disciplines (such as literature, philosophy and religious studies).

Athanasius' *Life of Antony* employed the methods of ancient history-writing. Athanasius, like the Greek and Roman historians, attempted to convince his audience regarding the accuracy, or at least the attempted accuracy, of his texts. Also similar to his predecessors, Athanasius wanted to achieve more than simply a chronicle of his subject. Athanasius wrote to

convert the reader. Athanasius claims that thoughtful engagement with the life of a specific ascetic monk yields particular conclusions about the character of the world and the conduct of one's life in response. It manifests the converting agenda which many historians find objectionable in biography. We shall return to the point later on. First, let's examine how Athanasius attempts to convert his reader through his biography before evaluating its merit as history-writing.

The term conversion has two meanings. One of its connotations refers to conversion from an ordinary, "secular" Christian life to a monastic life. In this definition of conversion an individual changes from one kind of Christian lifestyle to another and in the Middle Ages *conversio* indicated the conversion to monastic life rather than coming to faith in Christianity. A second meaning of conversion refers to the changing of one's beliefs and practices from a non-Christian state to one that embraces Christian faith. Interestingly, for a biography about an ascetic monk, it is the latter form of conversion which dominates Athanasius' biography. Non-Christians were to be convinced about the power and truth of Christianity. Monks did not need to be converted either to Christianity or to asceticism. The converting agenda directed at the monks was intended to persuade with regard to specific ways in which to best express their converted state.

Ramsay MacMullen discusses the features of early Christianity that would have been noticed by pagans and how they were reported to have persuaded pagans to convert to Christianity. MacMullen argues that there were two basic strategies of Christian mission. One strategy was aimed specifically at the educated pagan elite. The second was a style of evangelism that was effective among the general populace.⁶⁵ When early Christians engaged

⁶⁵ Ramsay MacMullen, "Two Types of Conversion to Early Christianity," *Vigiliae Christianae* 37 (1983): 174-192. MacMullen uses three categories of sources to support his case. These sources are, first, those parts of the Acts of the Apostles and some parts of apocryphal texts which describe how evangelists up until that point had been expected to behave (Acts of the Apostles is dated to sometime around A.D. 90). The second source is those apologists of the last half of the second century whose writings can reasonably be asserted to have been known to a

educated pagans in apologetics they took a two-pronged approach. First, they agreed with the generally accepted, Stoic view that there existed a Supreme God. Belief in a God above the gods was part of Plato's thinking as well as Stoic philosophy.⁶⁶ Second, Christians then announced that their God was, in fact, this Supreme God.⁶⁷ Christians believed that support for this claim could be found in demonstrations of their God's superior power over pagan gods, which the Christians re-classified as demons. If pagan gods were really demons it logically followed that proof of the superior power of the Christian God was best exemplified in the practice of exorcism. MacMullen asserts that most people in society agreed with Simon Magus's maxim: He that has a master is not a god. Thus, the canonical accounts in which Jesus casts out demons demonstrated that he was master over the demons and therefore God. And since Jesus had given his disciples the power to cast out demons as well, Christians could continue to prove the power of God to their pagan audiences.⁶⁸ MacMullen argues that this two-pronged approach was effective. "Exorcism and mastery of spirits—not unknown among pagans but much more practiced and proclaimed before them by Christians—exorcism thus was a demonstration of a theological position and thereby a missionary instrument. It made converts."⁶⁹

The non-literate, common masses, however, encountered Christians in a different manner. MacMullen applies Tertullian's famous dictum, *the blood of the Christians is the seed of the Church*, to conversion amongst the masses. The virtue and courage which Christians

pagan audience. The third source is the reports of exchanges between martyrs and their tormentors. The martyr accounts which MacMullen uses date as late as the persecutions of Diocletian and Maximian. Note that Antony is reported to have ministered to the martyrs of the Maximian persecutions as discussed later in the chapter. Thus, MacMullen's timeframe is inclusive of the beginning of the Christian Church to the time of Constantine. This timeframe brings us to within 30-40 years of the writing of the *Life of Antony*.

⁶⁶Ibid., 174, 179. MacMullen notes that Tertullian, for example, challenges his pagan audience with the words: "Do you not grant, from general acceptance, that there is some being higher and more powerful, like an emperor of the world, of infinite power and majesty?"

⁶⁷Ibid., 178-9.

⁶⁸Ibid., 180. MacMullen cites tales of victorious confrontations found in the apocryphal second-century *Acts of John and Peter*. Matthew 10:8 is cited as a canonical passage which records Jesus as conferring power of exorcism to his followers.

⁶⁹Ibid., 180-81. MacMullen cites Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* 5.7.4 and Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* 2.34.4, both of which report conversions that occurred after witnessing an exorcism.

publicly demonstrated in the midst of extreme circumstances, such as their imprisonment and public executions, was noticed by pagan audiences. In one account a jailor was so impressed with the virtue displayed by Christian prisoners that he became a convert. The unshakeable convictions and exemplary virtue of the martyrs, maintained even when tortured, so impressed some pagans that they were brought to the point of conversion. Acts of virtue which went beyond what people thought could be accomplished in the individual's power alone proved that a powerful God was working through this God's followers and enabling them to act as they did.⁷⁰

The wonder-worker was also an effective evangelist. The success of the wonder-worker was attributable to his ability to provide his audience with tangible displays of God's power as demonstrated through acts of exorcism and other miracles. The account of St. Gregory, as depicted in the *Life of St. Gregory of Thaumaturgus* by Gregory of Nyssa, is shot through with displays of miraculous works which brought people to conversion. The wonder-worker, in this case St. Gregory, put an end to a plague and the pagans thereupon turn to the God he proclaims.⁷¹ MacMullen states that both pre- and post-Constantinian conversion followed displays of divine efficacy.⁷²

MacMullen's explanations of the converting mechanisms of the early Christian era can be observed in Athanasius' *Life of Antony*. If it can be agreed that demonstrating God's supreme power through mastery over demons, the life of virtue carried out in extraordinary circumstance as made possible only by the strength of God, and the miracles wrought by holy individuals as proof of God's power, were the missionizing strategies of the early Christians, then there is

⁷⁰Ibid., 184-87.

⁷¹Ibid., 186-87.

⁷²Ibid. For a non-Christian and pre-Constantinian example of a wonder-worker evangelist who had great success in converting the crowds who saw his miracles MacMullen could have noted Apollonius of Tyana as described in Philostratus' biography. Philostratus recounts an exorcism performed by Apollonius which brought about the end of a plague in the city of Ephesus: Philostratus, *Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. Christopher Jones, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2006).

much in the *Life of Antony* to suggest that Athanasius wrote this treatise with the hope of converting pagans to Christianity. Should the reader have missed his point in the bulk of the text, Athanasius addresses the reader directly in the final chapter:

And if the need arises, read this [biography] to the pagans as well, so they may understand by this means that our Lord Jesus Christ is God and Son of God – and, additionally, that the Christians who are sincerely devoted to him and truly believe in him not only prove that the demons, whom the Greeks consider gods, are not gods, but also trample and chase them away as deceivers and corrupters of mankind, through Jesus Christ our Lord to whom belongs glory forever and ever. Amen.⁷³

The converting intent of the text, with which Athanasius concludes, should not come as a surprise to the astute reader. Much of the anecdotal content of this biography is presented in a way that is consistent with the conversion strategies of the early Christians.

Compare the first of the ways in which Christians were reported to have converted pagans with what is in *The Life of Antony*. MacMullen's article illustrates the evangelistic technique employed in engaging the educated elites of the Greco-Roman world. Christian apologists agreed with the Stoic idea of a Supreme God and insisted that the Christian God was this Supreme God, as demonstrated by God's power over the lesser supernatural beings—the demons. In chapters 70-80 Athanasius records the visits of various Greek philosophers who from time to time would come to Antony.⁷⁴ In chapter 78 Antony gives the following as proof of the truth of Christianity to these educated Greeks:

We Christians, then, do not possess the mystery in a wisdom of Greek reasonings, but in the power supplied to us by God through Jesus Christ. For evidence that the account is true, see now that although we have not learned letters we believe in God knowing through his works his providence over all things. And for evidence that our faith is effective, see now that we rely on the trust that is in Christ, but you rely upon sophistic word battles. Among you the apparitions of the idols are being abolished, but our faith is spreading everywhere. And you by your syllogisms and sophisms do not convert people from Christianity to Hellenism, but we, by teaching faith in Christ, strip you of superstition, since all recognize that Christ is God, and Son of God. By your beautiful

⁷³MacMullen, "Two Types of Conversion to Early Christianity," 186-87.

⁷⁴Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and The Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1980). Apparently Antony was not able to speak Greek. Athanasius notes several times that Antony spoke through an interpreter when interacting with Greeks. *Ibid.*, 83-87

language you do not impede the teachings of Christ, but we, calling on the name of Christ crucified, chase away all the demons you fear as gods. And where the sign of the cross occurs, magic is weakened and sorcery has no effect.⁷⁵

Antony is arguing for the superiority of Christ and the proof of that is the dispelling of demons. He is not trying to convert these philosophers to monasticism but to Christianity.

The accounts of the demons in the *Life of Antony*, which seem so bizarre to today's Western readers, are not meant to shock or titillate. They are part of his converting agenda. Antony proves that the Christian God is superior because his God empowers him to defeat the demons. There are numerous examples. In chapter five Athanasius records that the devil tempted Antony with thoughts of family, food, money, and, in the most famous instance, with sex, when the devil takes the form of a woman, in an attempt to lead Antony away from the monastic life. However, just as Jesus passed his own testing by the devil so too Antony "passed through these testings unharmed."⁷⁶ Just as the Christians who behaved admirably even while tortured in public were considered to be "super-human" by the pagan observers, so too Antony is depicted as possessing "super-human" virtue because he did not pursue the common desires of man. Chapter eight includes an anecdote in which Antony is physically assaulted by the demons to such an extent that he is thought to be dead. At other times the demons take on hideous beast-like forms.⁷⁷ Antony is able to defeat them with the sign of the cross. As prominent and vivid as the accounts of Antony's wrestling with demons are, none of these stories are recorded without Athanasius telling the audience that it was the power of God in Antony who enabled him to defeat the demons. Antony did not have this power of his own. Athanasius states: "Working in Antony was the Lord, who bore flesh for us, and gave to the body the victory over the devil, so that each of those who truly struggle can say, It is *not I, but*

⁷⁵Ibid., 87-88.

⁷⁶Ibid., 34.

⁷⁷Ibid., 48.

*the grace of God which is in me.*⁷⁸ Antony encourages the monks by pointing to the superior power of Christ and exhorts the monks not to fear the demons. He tells his followers: “Now if even the devil himself confesses that he is able to do nothing, then we ought to treat him and his demons with utter contempt,” and later “let us consider in our soul that the Lord is with us, he who routed [the demons] and reduced them to idleness.”⁷⁹ Antony wanted those who were cured of their demons to know that it was not his doing but the Lord’s: “the ones who were cured were taught not to give thanks to Antony, but to God alone.”⁸⁰

Compare MacMullen’s second type of conversion with Athanasius’ text. In MacMullen’s second type of conversion, that of the masses, people were converted after witnessing public displays of virtue in extreme circumstances, especially martyrdom. There was little that could persuade Antony to leave the desert. However, during the persecutions of Maximian, Antony went to Alexandria saying, “Let us go also, that we may enter the combat, or at least look upon those who do.”⁸¹ Athanasius reports that Antony “yearned to suffer martyrdom, but because he did not wish to hand himself over, he rendered service to the confessors both in the mines and in the prisons.”⁸² Furthermore, Antony went to the lawcourts to support those who were accused. Unhappy with the presence of the monks in his courtroom the judge gave orders that the monks should not appear at court any more. Rather than go into hiding, Antony appeared the next day in court, in clear sight of the judge. Antony was grieved that he was not chosen for martyrdom and continued to serve the confessors in whatever way he

⁷⁸Ibid., 34.

⁷⁹Ibid., 62-3.

⁸⁰Ibid., 73.

⁸¹Ibid., 65-66.

⁸²Ibid., 66, 139-140. Robert Gregg, the translator, notes that there was considerable suspicion of those who would hand themselves over to the authorities in order to obtain martyrdom. He notes that literary precedent for this kind of attitude began with *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* in which Polycarp flees to a hiding spot where authorities finally hunt him down and arrest him. Thus, in desiring martyrdom but not turning himself in, Antony is demonstrating admirable zeal and correct action. Furthermore, he directs this zeal to a new end, service of others and asceticism, thus becoming a model of the new martyrdom.

could.⁸³

Antony's life spanned the time before and after the reign of Constantine. As such he lived both during the time of the martyrs and after the persecutions ended. Although Antony was not a martyr, Athanasius is careful to align Antony with these witnesses. Note also that after martyrdom is no longer possible, Athanasius claims that Antony lived a new kind of martyrdom. It was not one based on death in an arena but a life of virtue in extraordinary circumstances nonetheless. Martyrdom was possible in a life of asceticism. Virtue could be displayed in death to the self and death to the world as well as in literal death. Athanasius writes that when the persecution was over, "Antony departed [from Alexandria] and withdrew once again to the cell, and was there daily being martyred by his conscience, and doing battle in the contests of the faith. He subjected himself to an even greater and more strenuous asceticism."⁸⁴

Athanasius describes Antony's ascetic life of virtue in detail. As a young man Antony gave away all his possessions, which were considerable, and sought out old men who had practiced the solitary life in order to learn from them. The beginning stages of his discipline were the forsaking of family, wealth, abundant food and society in order to practice prayer and meditation on Scripture.⁸⁵ The intensity of his discipline increased and "more and more...he mortified the body and kept it under subjection."⁸⁶ Athanasius reports that Antony ate once daily, although at times it was only every second or even fourth day. His food was bread and salt and he drank only water. Meat and wine were not a part of his diet. Sometimes he slept on a rush mat but often the ground was good enough for him.⁸⁷ Near the beginning of his time in the desert Antony barricaded himself into a deserted fortress and for many years lived on nothing

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid., 32.

⁸⁶Ibid., 36.

⁸⁷Ibid.

but bread (which was brought to him twice a year) and water.⁸⁸ In a later stage of life when a group of followers had gathered around Antony, he and those living in the desert chanted, studied, fasted, prayed, distributed alms, and performed other deeds of virtue.⁸⁹ But again observe that Athanasius wants the reader to understand that Antony attributed the power to live ascetically to God. Antony tells his followers that it is God who works for good with everyone who chooses the good and reminds them that it is not they who are strong but God who works in them.⁹⁰ If MacMullen is right in saying that pagans were converted to Christianity after observing the virtue of Christians in extraordinary circumstances then the way in which Athanasius portrays the virtue displayed by Antony in his ascetic practices is consistent with this conversion pattern. Like the martyrs, Antony is portrayed as living a life of virtue which would be impossible were it not for the power of God which enabled him to live the way he did.

Finally, MacMullen observes that the wonder-worker was prominent in mission work. The wonder-worker combined the virtuous life with the ability to prove the power of God by the miracles God performed through him. Athanasius reports that Antony performed many miracles. Like Jesus, Antony healed many “who suffered from bodily ailments; others he purged of demons.”⁹¹ Even though Antony was sequestered in his cell many came to him asking for healing. A military officer named Martinianus knocked on Antony’s door until Antony, unwilling to come out, told him that God would heal his daughter. In a like manner great numbers of those afflicted simply spent nights outside his cell and they were cleansed when they believed and prayed sincerely.⁹² Another time, Antony took a trip with his monks in which the company ran out of water and would have perished except that Antony prayed to God and the

⁸⁸Ibid., 40-41

⁸⁹Ibid., 64.

⁹⁰Ibid., 36, 45.

⁹¹Ibid., 42.

⁹²Ibid., 67.

Lord made water gush forth from where he was praying.⁹³ Again, the emphasis is on the power of God in each of these circumstances. Antony tells Martinianus “Why do you cry out to me, man? I too am a man like you, but if you believe, pray to God, and it will come to pass.”⁹⁴ It was only when the soldier departed that his daughter was healed. When the parents of a young woman from Buiris in Tripoli come to Antony seeking healing for their daughter’s ailment Antony sends them away saying that the girl will be healed. But Antony wants the parents to know that “this good deed is not mine, that she should come to me, a pitiable man; rather, her healing is from the Saviour who works his mercy everywhere for those who call on him.”⁹⁵ Athanasius reports that when the parents returned to their daughter they found that she was, indeed, healed. The power of God was demonstrated to the masses through the miracles of Antony but Antony in turn insists that it is not he who performs them but God. Again and again he tells those who come to him to pray to God and believe in God.

In addition to persuading non-Christians about the truth of Christianity, the details of Antony’s life are meant to persuade the monks in matters of practice. Antony is presented as an example of balanced ascetic practice. The monks would do well to imitate Antony. The opening address of the biography commends the monks for their desire to imitate Antony.

Since you have asked me about the career of the blessed Antony, hoping to learn how he began the discipline, who he was before this, and what sort of death he experienced, and if the things said concerning him are true—so that you also might lead yourselves in imitation of him—I received your directive with ready good will . . . I know that even in hearing, along with marvelling at the man you will want also to emulate his purpose, for Antony’s way of life provides monks with a sufficient picture for ascetic practice.⁹⁶

Athanasius is here encouraging his readers to imitate Antony in ascetic practice. They should convert from their present practice to a discipline more like Antony’s should their current habits differ from Antony’s. The final paragraph of the work expresses Athanasius’ hope that those

⁹³Ibid., 71.

⁹⁴Ibid., 67.

⁹⁵Ibid., 74.

⁹⁶Ibid., 29.

who read the treatise will use it as a standard for monastic life. “Therefore, read these things now to the other brothers so that they may learn what the life of the monks ought to be.”⁹⁷ This is the function that Gregory of Nazianzus attributed to the text. Gregory wrote that Athanasius composed the *Life of Antony* as a “rule for the monastic life in the form of a narrative.”⁹⁸

The *Life of Antony*, a biography by Athanasius, is a conundrum for today’s historian. On the one hand, Athanasius uses the methods of Classical history-writing in this biography. Athanasius intends for the reader to believe that his presentation of Antony is an accurate representation of the real Antony. Like other ancient texts of history, this biography should be read as a generally reliable presentation unless there are good reasons not to. For some, these good reasons to reject *Life of Antony* as accurate are found in Athanasius’ converting agenda and the correlation of issues, for example the denunciation of heresy, between what is known about Athanasius’ career battles and anecdotes in the biography. For some the descriptions of miraculous events further disqualify the historical reliability of this text. In order to assert that the Antony of Athanasius’ biography bears no resemblance to what the real Antony was, however, you must have made an *a priori* judgement that trustworthy historical reporting cannot co-exist with authorial concern and agenda. What then do we today do with this text? Do we distrust it because it disobeys the rules of contemporary objectivity? Would trusting this text be an act of naïvety?

The *Life of Antony* is not notable because it represents an exception in ancient history-writing or biography. It might be argued that that it can claim some degree of singularity in that it is an early example of the Christian adaptation of Greco-Roman biography. However this is an adjudication of much later centuries. In the medieval era *Antony* was used as a formulaic guide. We look back at this text and assign it the special designation of “progenitor of hagiography.”

⁹⁷Ibid., 99

⁹⁸Gregory of Nazianzus. *Or* 21.5. 6-7 as translated by David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 201.

That Athanasius intended his text to achieve such an afterlife is doubtful. For all we know Athanasius might have been pleased if he could have known the enduring appeal of the *Life* and its influence on later authors. Ironically, the *Life of Antony* is a significant text to consider also because it has gained this special status as a standard example of bad biography or bad history-writing. If you hold to a modern conceptualization of history-writing then, yes, *Antony* is bad. This biography is offensive because it embraces a thoroughly non-modern function of history-writing. Close examination of contemporary historiography, however, calls into question whether twenty-first-century historians really do have good reasons to rejecting the functions of history-writing embraced by Athanasius and other ancients.

In *Listening for the Text* Brian Stock outlines the uses of the past in contemporary scholarship. One of the themes of his book is the relationship of history and literature. Stock believes “it is possible nowadays as it has not been in the immediate past to envisage serious cooperation between the study of history and literature.”⁹⁹ His first chapter optimistically discusses the “complementary forces”¹⁰⁰ active among both contemporary historians and literary theorists that have contributed to the possibility of mutual interaction. These factors include such developments as the death of positivistic assumptions on the part of historians and a growing interest in historical context amongst literary scholars. Stock’s fourth chapter, however, laments that despite the possibility of interaction, such cooperative work does not interest many scholars in either history or literature. “From within history and the study of literature the foundations of a joint structure have been laid, but the edifice itself has never been built.”¹⁰¹

Failure to collaborate can be blamed on the different methods each group employs as their preferred way to work. According to Stock, the ideal way in which a text is handled in

⁹⁹Brian Stock, *Listening For the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University, 1990), 16.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 76.

history is essentially antithetical to how it is handled in literature. “The central concern of the student of literature is synchrony. He or she analyses a text as a timeless set of interrelations.”¹⁰² On the other hand, “the historian is diachronic in perspective . . . The historian normally wants to place events in a linear sequence . . . Rarely in historical writing is the central task envisaged as the analysis of a text on its own.”¹⁰³ A literary analyst works synchronically and a historian diachronically. Stock’s use of “synchronic” and “diachronic” is similar to previous discussion of present-day scholarship. Stock’s diachronic mode is much like Harlan’s comments about the contextualizing habits common to professional historians and Stock’s depiction of the synchronic task is similar to Harlan’s call for engaging moral dialogue in his petition for scholars to pay attention to the conversation between text and reader. Edifying discourse is not specifically mentioned by Stock but he is calling for increased contemplation of meaning on the part of historians. A historian who would initiate ethical dialogue shares with the literary scholar a desire to reflect on the meaning of events. And while some historians have written synchronically, Stock’s comment that the two tasks are rarely done together still holds. Averil Cameron, for example, used to write diachronically but in assessing various biographies from late antiquity, she advocates a switch to the synchronic—examining texts as rhetorical creations. She does not combine the tasks but rather switches from one to the other. Stock’s complaint is timely. For the successful amalgamation of what Stock calls diachronic and synchronic is most congenial to the composition of converting history-writing. However challenging, the minute diachronic work of understanding events in context, and the “big picture” contemplation of meaning, specifically the moral evaluations and ethical implications of past events, can commingle.

Stock notes that there is nothing new in the adversarial relationship between synchronic

¹⁰²Ibid., 90.

¹⁰³Ibid.

and diachronic. He dates the antithesis in methods as far back as the differing approaches to knowledge found in Plato and Aristotle. What is different in the twentieth century is the “profound moral and philosophical scepticism [which] assumes more radically than does Kantianism that an understanding of external reality is unattainable. Yet that remains the stated goal of much [historical] investigation.”¹⁰⁴ Historians continue to work diachronically yet want to avoid the naïve belief that they are working with “pure facts.” In Stock’s estimation the results of diachronic scholarship performed in a culture of doubt have been mixed. On the one hand, historians now understand what constitutes valid historical explanation better than ever before. The price for this gain, on the other hand, has been “the abandonment of some areas of inquiry in which forms of behavior and communication intermingle with ideas.”¹⁰⁵ More specifically, I would extend Stock’s comments to the function of ethical discourse in history-writing. The refinement of historical method has marginalized the ability to contemplate and subsequently incorporate such discussion. It is a loss the ancient history-writers would have rejected.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced quite a number of threads which now need to be woven together. It began by engaging the traditional and postmodern modes of contemporary history-writing. Both are responses to the agreed admission that historians can never fully divest themselves of their biases and unavoidable presence in their research and writing. The response of traditional historians has been to advocate a practical objectivity. Others suggest that the facts of the past don’t matter and insist that the proper focus of historians is on that bias. Jenkins, for example, has argued that the proper realm of the historian is historiography in order to blunt the potentially oppressive power inherent in history-writing.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 92.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

By identifying both of these as responses to an agreed epistemology, I want to suggest that there is a third response that is preferable to the other two. This third response is inspired by the ancient historians. These forebears had the idea that contemplation of the past could be part of a society's on-going dialogue of right action and right attitude. It is a response that shares characteristics of both traditional and postmodern history-writing. This third way researches what happened while welcoming edifying engagement. It seeks to persuade you to certain actions and beliefs. But as long as the mere detection of authorial concern and agenda are reasons for rejecting a historical narrative as trustworthy, this welcome cannot be achieved.

In addition to sharing some epistemic tenets of traditional and postmodern history-writing, the kind of history-writing I advocate also rejects aspects of both. Even though traditional and postmodern historians agree that the objective author does not exist, both offer insufficient responses. The "death" of the objective historian is not a loss to be mourned or overcome. Neither is it cause to suggest that the past cannot be known or that all ethical dialogue equally valid. The historian comes to his task with his concerns and with his agenda and attempts to convert his reader. Once advised of the author's ethical positions the reader becomes co-participant in the examination of the past. The reader evaluates whether the author has created a compelling case. The historian should be judged not for having concerns or agenda. Rather, if he is to be viewed with suspicion, it should be based on his attempt to conceal himself from the reader. The most suspicious of texts are those that profess to have no intention to convert.

Several times throughout the dissertation I have hinted that history-writing could learn from other disciplines. Literary scholars probe the meaning of fictive works. Earlier in this chapter Brian Stock was noted as one who called for interdisciplinary co-operation. History-writing that engages its society in ethical dialogue may well be a community enterprise. The historian may have to work closely with ethicists, political scientists, philosophers or other

specialists in the research and composition of a text. Recall that both Marwick and Jenkins justified their particular style of history-writing on the grounds that their chosen methods helped to bring about societal betterment. I agree that history-writing should seek to contribute to dialogue about society. Both traditional and postmodern history-writing, however, seem to make minimal or confused progress on this front. Edifying history-writing seeks to engage its reading community in precisely this kind of dialogue.

This chapter has been in dialogue with historiographical texts. The following chapter will move from texts of method and theory to the question of the place of edifying discussion in biographies and history-writing by religious historians. The three authors that will receive particular attention are Martin E. Marty, George M. Marsden, and Harry S. Stout. First, I will examine how these three authors have explained their historiographical positions. These authors can be considered as traditional historians. The second part of the chapter examines key selections from their scholarly work in order to ask how these texts could have been written. What has been lost in traditional history, as exemplified in these specific texts? Is the history-writing which I endorse possible to perform? I believe that a close look at these recent books will demonstrate the desirability of edifying discourse in biography and history-writing.

Chapter Six: The Critical and Edifying Impulse and Recent Christian Biography

The main trajectory of my dissertation has been to trace the critical and edifying impulse in Christian biography. A secondary theme has been the techniques employed to convey that edifying content. Perhaps these techniques could be referred to as modes or categories of interpretation. In what mode is the interpretation taking place? The two broadest divisions of these modes of interpretation are implicit and explicit. These two divisions could be further subdivided into different forms of implicit or explicit interpretation. You could, for example, list different ways of communicating explicit interpretation (digression, paratextual commentary, and analogy, to list a few). At various points throughout the dissertation I have noted different kinds of explicit interpretation methods. Polybius, for example, directly addressed the reader with the moral implications of events. Polybius recounted the story of Regulus, for example, and then explained what can be learned from this episode before moving on to the next event. Palladius used a similar method in his biography of John Chrysostom. Palladius would describe a certain part of Chrysostom's life and then discuss the importance of the episode. A second form of explicit interpretation is exemplified by Gregory the Great in his biography of Benedict. Recall the textual community of interpretation which Gregory created with his literary embodiment of himself and a monk named Peter.

Similarly a number of implicit interpretation methods have been noted. Herodotus was a great interpreter and he used a number of methods. The comparison of Croesus to Xerxes and the implied similarity of both these men to the current Athenian situation was one way of communicating the edifying content. A second method was the arrangement of material. Herodotus would use extended digressions to make particular edifying points. In a third method Herodotus would let the story communicate most of the message and then he would add a line or two to make sure the point was taken. Recall, for example, that Herodotus explained the character and origin of Egyptian religion and then added that this demonstrated that the Greek

Gods did not originate with the Greeks. A fourth method, also evident in Herodotus, was the primary method of the Biblical authors. At times Herodotus would let the story itself communicate the message. Recall the account of the Persian debate about government. The point of the story was that tradition determined which government was best for a particular people but the message was implicit. Much of the Bible is given to explicit interpretation. The Prophets and the epistles of the Apostle Paul are examples of such interpretation. Biographical portraits, both in the OT and NT, rely more on implicit interpretation and let the stories communicate the message.¹

Both levels of interpretation and the various methods of both levels have been treated as valid. This assessment will not change. As I engage contemporary Christian authors, however, I wish to encourage these historians with the possibility of increased explicit interpretation. I think that these authors would welcome the opportunity for increased explicit interpretation but have felt constrained in one way or another. I do not think that any of these authors are methodologically naïve or unreflective. Quite the contrary! In particular, George Marsden's *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* is compelling. He outlines the ways in which Christian scholarship can flourish in the academy. He indicates that Christian scholarship must be somewhere between the extreme positions of silence and heavy-handed moralizing.² Regardless of my admiration of his various points, however, I will note that he has little explicit interpretation in his biography of Jonathan Edwards. I think that judicious and sensitive overt discussion of interpretation can be clearer and more respectful to the reader than implicit interpretation.

¹Richard Burridge has argued this point about the Gospels. He states that the primary way in which characterization occurs in the Gospels is indirectly. Thus, the Gospel writers do not directly tell us Jesus was a good man or that he was divine or that you are supposed to imitate him, but you are meant to understand that this is true by the stories that are told about Jesus. In addition to Burridge's observation I add that the letters of Paul, then, helpfully instruct Christians about these points (Jesus was divine and to be imitated). See Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison With Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992), 205.

²George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 9.

Confining History

In *Patterns in History* David Bebbington demarcates the domain of the historian by contrasting the historian's output with works produced by authors of historical novels. Unlike historians, historical novelists "avoid what is at once the discipline and the delight of historians, the responsibility of confining themselves to what took place."³ Historians confine themselves to what happened whereas novelists, lacking this imperative, are free to fabricate at will. I am particularly intrigued by the implications he evokes when he says that *historians confine themselves*. Bebbington's next sentence would seem an almost unnecessary clarification of the previous one. "What historians write must correspond in some sense with the past itself."⁴ In one sense the implication of confinement is simply the self-imposed restriction to write about what took place in the past, explanation of causes and the continuing implications of an event. It is a concise and useful sketch of the historical task. It is, however, a little too confining. Bebbington has equated refusing to fabricate with confining one's self to discussion of what took place in the past. It is a convincing but not quite perfect correlation. If ethical discourse is to be a part of history-writing, it must be agreed that the historian can only use data with a high degree of probability that they are correct, certainly, but that the historian is also free to move the discussion of this information into other non-fiction realms. The historian is not, in fact, to be confined to merely what took place. Other modes of discourse, from other academic disciplines, might be incorporated into historical analysis. The discipline and delight of the historian, in this instance, would be to judiciously account for what actually happened in the past while also contemplating the meaning of the past.

The imperative to not-making-stuff-up when writing history was made by ancient authors such as Thucydides and Polybius. Thucydides claimed to be keeping all romance out of

³David Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 2.

⁴Ibid.

his account in order to provide the reader with an accurate sense of the past. Polybius devotes an entire book to berating other authors for not making more of an effort to interview eyewitnesses or investigate for themselves and by this inattention compromising vividness and accuracy. Both ancient and contemporary historians agree. History-writing must report what really happened in the past and not fabricate like a novelist. The two groups differ, however, on the implications of that dictum. In the case of the earliest historians, confining history-writing to the events of the past was not a means of circumscribing other forms of discourse in the text. Confinement to the sense of the past did not exclude methodological, autobiographical, or edifying examination. By contrast, the confinement of which Bebbington speaks is more restrictive. Quite literally, today's historian confines himself to relating what took place. In saying this I have not forgotten what I said in the first chapter with regard to the three levels of interpretation. In addition to description a historian can explain and provide some degree of interpretation without having to stray far from what happened. I can explain an event by describing what happened before and after it. I can interpret an event by tracing what happened between then and now.

The comparison of historian to novelist is a common motif in historiographical discussions. Arthur Marwick, for example, aggressively denies that historians are *auteurs* in *The New Nature of History*.⁵ What if, however, the comparison with fiction was disallowed and instead historiographers had to think through a comparison of historians with philosophers, ethicists, authors of autobiography and social critique. If one or more of these kinds of authors were his required contrast group, what kind of comparisons would he make? Do historians do

⁵Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Chicago: Lyceum, 2001), 38-39. In this section Marwick also complains that Richard Evans speaks of his writings as displaying the talents of a novelist. Marwick's footnote sends the reader to pages 142-48 of Evans's *In Defense of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997). Evans does note that interest in social history has attracted an audience eager to know "the past for its own sake and for what it tells us about the human condition in a wider sense." Ibid., 142. Contrary to Marwick's summation, Evans's point in this section is not an explicit endorsement of novelistic modes but an explanation of why history-writing has fragmented into so many sub-disciplines. Also recall John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "Writing History Instead of a Novel: Is Description Creative?" *Fides et Historia* 23 (Summer 1991): 4-10, compared history-writing with the novel.

what these authors do? Or is that outside the confines of the discipline and delight of the historian? Even if these latter authors do not “make stuff up?” Are there any common features which all share? Bebbington is not the only historiographer to compare the historian to the novelist. Why this repeated comparison of history to fiction? The attractiveness of the historian/novelist dichotomy is its clear explication of the historian’s prime directive: confining discussion to what happened. History-writing is the opposite of fiction. I suggest that defining what you *are* by invoking comparison to what you *are not* limits your ability to fully know and explore what you actually *are*. Analyzing how history-writing shares common goals and features with other forms of non-fiction discourse (such as philosophy, autobiography, ethics, social critique and so forth) would make for a more difficult and more interesting discussion of what makes each distinctive from the other. The boundary separating one from the other might be less sharp than with the novelist. These comparisons would lack the simplicity and perhaps the comfort of the “either/or” of the historian/novelist comparison. If overlapping tasks were to be found, the need for confinement from these other modes of discourse might itself be questioned. Bebbington might agree with such a task but as he does not engage this matter I will pursue it further.

Bebbington’s book is meant to be a Christian reflection on the practice of history-writing. It is, more exactly, a late-twentieth-century Christian reflection on the history of history-writing. If one would look to Christians of other eras, examples of Christian historians who incorporated explicit interpretation could be found. Christian authors from other ages, such as Gregory of Tours and Bede, wrote a different style of Christian history-writing. What about the modern confinement, purportedly the joy and the delight of historians, would be particularly attractive to a modern Christian? Medieval historians are “known” to be inaccurate. Just as bad, medieval histories are meshed with the authors’ beliefs about the supernatural and other ahistorical perceptions of reality. It is precisely the repudiation of the perceived transgressions

of previous centuries that makes Bebbington's line in the sand a helpful way of creating distance between "us" and "them." Even though it has been many centuries since the end of the Middle Ages, historians remain haunted by the medieval forms of history-writing. Such is the case especially for historians of religion and historians with known religious affiliations. Perhaps nowhere is this phenomenon more observable than when these modern religious historians write biography. The spectre of medieval biography is the historian's most pernicious ghost. Bebbington's contrast of the historian to the novelist and the clear and precise boundary of confinement to what happened in the past is an attractive way of distinguishing modern biography from medieval biography. All want to avoid the charge of hagiography and its implications: inadequate research methods, obeisance to a clerical tradition rather than independent thought, skewing of details in order to pander to a patron, and worst of all, the re-creation of a character whose literary embodiment bears little resemblance to the historical. Panegyric; encomium; eulogy: such labels are applied to what is agreed to be bad biography. The Christian historian, well aware of this "known" heritage, will want to confine his writing so as to prevent such accusations.

The relevance of medieval biography to this dissertation is threefold. The first is to note that the reluctance of religious historians to engage in the ethical dialogue which is advocated here has its own historical context. The second is that the ghosts in the closet might not be quite as scary as was previously thought. Medieval biographers intended to communicate a true past. Light reveals clothes, albeit foreign clothes, not wraiths. The third is to observe that, similar to their ancient predecessors, the medieval biographers believed that it was part of the historical task to engage in ethical discourse while writing accurate history. Carolly Erickson makes a fascinating observation about medieval biography. The authors intended to be historically reliable—medieval biographers did not consider themselves to be writing fiction. It is not that the medieval scholars were ignorant of the difference between reality and fiction. Rather, there

is a profound dissonance between the modern and medieval conception of what constitutes reality. The modern believes reality to be that which can be perceived by the senses. The medieval author believed that the physical world was a veil hiding internal reality. The goal of the medieval biographer was to pierce through the observable and reveal the reality hidden behind. Thus, the medieval writer believed that anyone could *report* the chronological occurrence of an event but doing so showed no wisdom. The real task was to communicate the *meaning* of the event. The meaning of the event had moral and ethical implications. Good and evil could be discerned. Right and wrong action was identified.⁶ The ancients and medievals wrote history that, according to their own understanding of reality, was historically accurate and edifying. The rejection of edifying discourse in history-writing is a modern development and the exception in the history of history-writing. The medieval writers sometimes took the interpretive task too far, asserting, for example, that events should be understood as omens, portents or judgments. Today we would want to resist the “omen” part of medieval thinking while retaining the “meaning” part in some way. In the contemporary context meaning may need to be linked to some form of evidence. This too might be an opportunity for interdisciplinary cooperation as discussion of meaning could incorporate practitioners from many fields who could reflect on and apply historical research.

When present-day historians recount the life of another they take great pains to be factual. What a particular biography intends to do, the author typically informs the reader in the introduction, is to portray the subject and his or her times in a manner that is comprehensible to the modern reader. Furthermore, the author usually continues (somewhat paradoxically), the depiction will be such that if the subject (and those who knew the subject) would read the

⁶Carolly Erickson, *The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 213-219. Both medieval intellectuals and the illiterate shared the belief that truth was not merely a matter of temporal experience. Rather, events were but one part of a vast web of interrelated truths. Analysis of events was simply to make the more obscure parts of the web a little less opaque.

biography, the subject would recognize that the book creates a reasonably credible likeness. The author undertakes every effort to write precise, critical history. Few would view contemporary insistence on historical veracity as problematic. Yet for all the accuracy and clarity that modern historians bring to their biographies, something valuable, something intrinsic to the medieval biographical process, has been lost. The primary purpose of medieval “lives” was the edification of the reader. In writing the lives of the saints, medieval authors incorporated moral adjudication (individuals praised or chastised for right or wrong actions) and exemplary models (imitation of the saints and rejection of the non-saintly). Could today’s religious historian convince an editor to include edifying discussion in a biography? Should a scholar reflect on the instructive implications of his or her historical findings, the veracity of the work would likely be regarded as suspect. Much has been improved in the process of writing history since the ancient and medieval eras. But when historians hesitate to engage in interpretation as assisted by other non-fiction modes of discourse, historians are avoiding the potential weaknesses of ancient and medieval biography but also its strengths.⁷

Recent Christian Biography

It is widely known that many of the most important scholars in American religious history are Christians. Harry S. Stout and George M. Marsden identify themselves as Evangelicals. Martin E. Marty was a Lutheran pastor prior to becoming a professor at the University of Chicago. Furthermore, these three exemplars have published articles in which they discuss the connection between their faith and their scholarship. They have produced biographies acclaimed by Christians and non-Christians alike. What are these biographies like? How do modern Christian historians write biography? How could these biographies be different if they embraced the ancient function of history-writing?

⁷I am particularly interested in religious biography. I see the possibility in future work for examining the interpretive methods in modern political biography and comparing these biographies with those by religious historians.

Martin Marty

The prefatory material in Martin Marty's *Martin Luther* covers similar terrain to that claimed by Marsden in his biography of Edwards and Stout in his history of the Civil War. Marty will not be a hanging judge for Luther since Luther's flaws are "obvious" and "revolting" so that Luther condemns himself "without much help from this biographer interfering as a righteous scold."⁸ Marsden, Stout and Marty share an aversion to direct assessment of the biographical subject. Marty's introduction also repeats the literary justifications of Marsden. The format of the biography is story, claims Marty. The first line of the preface indicates that the book is "the story of Martin Luther, not a history of the Protestant Reformation."⁹ Like Marsden, Marty will not interrupt his text because "in this story" Luther's own actions are sufficient to explain both Luther's positive and negative contributions.¹⁰ Similar to Marsden and Stout, Marty agrees that it is not the historian's task to explicitly guide. The biographical challenge is to draw the reader into the world of the subject. "It is the biographer's task to make [readers] feel sufficiently at home in that world that they can make judgements about the story and sufficiently ill at ease in that the telling can provoke them into fresh thinking."¹¹ The biographer paints the world and the subject and each reader makes his own assessment. Finally, there will be no occasion to accuse Marty of presentism. This biography of Luther will not "visit the twenty-first century" until a brief afterword.¹²

Even in that afterword, the twenty-first century is a shadowy and secondary presence. The character of the afterword is akin to Abelard's list of apparent contradictions in *Sic et Non* but instead of yes and no Marty uses Luther's own *simul*, "at the same time." Marty's afterword is predominantly a setting out of the seemingly contradictory characteristics of Luther in order

⁸Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (New York: Viking, 2004), xi, xii.

⁹*Ibid.*, xi.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, xii.

¹¹*Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

¹²*Ibid.*, xi.

to demonstrate the ambiguity of Luther's legacy. For example, while Luther broke the hold of one religious system in order to allow individuals to make their own religious choices, at the same time he forced many to submit to his religious system. While Luther was a hero for the peasant class and took pride in his peasant status, at the same time he feared disorder so much that he gave the nobility license to cruelly suppress the peasants. Of the less than four pages of the afterword three are given to this succession of brief paragraphs which juxtapose Luther's ostensibly contradictory characteristics. What the reader is to do with all these apparent contradictions is not discussed. The final two paragraphs of the afterword refer the reader back to the epigraph and a quotation taken from a letter by Luther encouraging the reader to sin boldly. As was portrayed in the biography, Luther did sin boldly and also rejoiced in grace even more boldly. Marty notes that since Luther, his followers have chosen safe middle paths between the contradictory characteristics Luther bequeathed to the movement that bears his name. Marty seems to bemoan this safe decision. The final sentence of the afterword ties together Luther's boldness with the future of the Lutheran church: "Whether many can or will choose to share [Luther's] boldness in the new millennium will help determine how his influence will find expression in the centuries ahead."¹³ Based on the preceding three pages of Luther's apparent contradictions, I'm guessing that bold Lutherans of today are in for a rough twenty-first century.

Is this really what Marty wants to communicate through his examination of Martin Luther's life? Most likely not. Must an author choose between silence and a "righteous scold" as the only possible responses to a subject's flaws? Marty is entirely correct to assume that a self-righteous diatribe is worse than nothing at all. Somewhere between silence and scolding I want to engage Luther's flaws so that I may understand him better and thereby hopefully illuminate the prejudices of Luther, the people of the Reformation and potentially myself. Marty had

¹³Ibid., 194.

published a pastorally-focused book the year previous to the publication of the biography.¹⁴ The intention of this text is to address Lutherans at a time when many in the denomination asked questions about their faith. In this pastoral mode Marty takes Luther and the Gospel texts as guides. In the biography, however, Marty neither guides nor allows Luther to guide. Marty fulfills his goal of portraying Luther as one who wrestled with God, the perspective from which Marty claims Luther makes the most sense.¹⁵ What all the wrestling and contradiction amounts to, however, Marty will not judge and will not guide. Luther is, as Marty says, easy for the modern person to misunderstand. If in portraying the perplexing character of Luther Marty will not guide, how then is the reader to find in Luther a way of learning from him? Marty might be saying that Lutherans should imitate Luther's wrestling boldly rather than following a Catholic magisterium. How would this translate into the present context? Should Lutherans wrestle with the literal Catholic magisterium or is there a new "Catholic Church" to be wrestled?

George Marsden

Although not primarily a historiographer or philosopher of history, Marsden's secondary interest in the relationship of Christianity and history-writing is evident in a number of important pieces on Christian historiography. Marsden's topics range from a consideration of what kinds of discourse are appropriate in the public space of the University, to what Christian scholars have the right to expect of the academy, to the implications of Christian belief for scholarly output. In books and articles on these topics Marsden seems the most sympathetic to the argument of this dissertation. And yet, as we shall see later, when Marsden writes biography, his engagement with the subject is not a return to pre-Enlightenment reflections on doing and being.

Marsden's *The Soul of the American University* is a history rather than a methodological

¹⁴Martin Marty, *Speaking of Trust: Conversing with Martin Luther about the Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2003).

¹⁵Marty, *Luther*, xii.

text, but his epilogue, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” received at least as much attention as the 400 pages of history which came before it. Affinities between Marsden and myself appear promising after the first sentence: “Since no historical interpretation lacks an agenda, it is appropriate to elaborate how this history bears on some current issues in the light of my own interests.”¹⁶ Marsden agrees that agenda is part of history-writing and rather than attempting to eliminate or mitigate agenda, he will instead be a participant in his own text. What is the meaning of the more than 400 pages of interesting details that the reader has just learned about the history of the American university? What should be done in American academies? It is a discussion that can now take place since the past has been described and explained. Are there, Marsden asks, good reasons for continuing the “strong prejudices against traditional religious viewpoints?”¹⁷ In the epilogue Marsden argues that there is no reason for this continuing prejudice. Marsden then advocates for the inclusion of traditional religious perspectives on intellectual grounds (including a critique of so-called academic pluralism) and academic freedom (a phrase actually used as a tool to ostracize traditional religious viewpoints rather than include them). Marsden believes that true pluralism and real academic freedom make room for traditional religions at the academic table.

It is a powerful postscript. Marsden has identified a particular practice of exclusion and made a moral judgement: it is wrong. He has advocated an ethical response: the cessation of this kind of prejudice. He outlines these conclusions clearly and directly. They are not implicitly embedded in the historical narrative requiring prior knowledge of Marsden’s religious commitments, specific policy positions, personal history and so forth in order to ferret them out.

Further encouraging comments were included in an article on the current state of divinity schools in America. In “The Naked Public Classroom” Marsden again argues for the place of

¹⁶George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University, 1994), 429.

¹⁷Ibid.

religion in the university but suggests that the study of religion should not be confined to the Religious Studies department. He compares the case of religious belief with Feminism. Should Feminists be forced to restrict their viewpoint to the Women's Studies department, the Feminists' case would be lost. To treat Feminists in such a way would be equivalent to saying that Feminist critique is best "safely cordoned off in its own strictly limited territory, where it is to be dealt with by specialists and experts. That leaves everything else free from the taint of [Feminist] perspectives."¹⁸ It would be unthinkable to treat Feminist perspectives this way and in fact would be a loss to the project of higher education. Feminist viewpoints are to be welcomed in the various disciplines. Similarly, religious perspectives should not be confined to Religious Studies but welcomed in the various disciplines. One might observe that Marsden's career, as a religious historian who is part of a History department rather than a Religious Studies department, is a testament to a certain degree of success already. Even so, Marsden believes it is necessary to make these arguments to bring treatment of religious viewpoints into equal alignment with other perspectives.

The importance of intentional dialogue between author and reader and the importance of not separating theological and moral perspectives from scholarship are points with which Marsden opens and ends the article, "What Makes Scholarship Christian?" "Scholars do not operate in a vacuum," Marsden writes, "but within the frameworks of their communities, traditions, commitments, and beliefs. Their scholarship, even when specialized, develops within a larger picture of reality." Such comments make me hopeful that Marsden is endorsing scholarship that engages the full range of interpretive dialogue. The final sentences of the article are similarly promising.

¹⁸George Marsden, "The Naked Public Classroom: Exploring New Strategies for Teaching Religion at Secular Universities and Divinity Schools," *Books and Culture* 2 (September/October 1996): 30. This sentence is actually used as a way of describing how religious perspectives are treated rather than Feminist. However, it is part of an extended comparison of religious and Feminist perspectives. The implication of the paragraph is that treating either group this way is inappropriate.

One of the great tasks of Christian scholarship is to recover some dimensions of Christian teaching that have been alienated from their theological roots. This task is particularly urgent in an era when secular morality is adrift and traditional Christianity itself too often beholden to the politics of self-interest and simplistic solutions.¹⁹

Although these are the sentiments of the introduction and conclusion, the body of the article significantly qualifies these comments. One of the problems, which Marsden says is often put to him, is the accusation that a lot of the time Christian scholarship does not seem to differ from that produced by anyone else. In response Marsden asserts that Christian scholars do believe differently than others. For example, as Christians, scholars reject *a priori* assumptions which assert that the supernatural and natural realms are “closed off to each other,” or which assert that humans “cannot get from the contingent truths of history to the timeless metaphysical truths of religion.”²⁰ Furthermore these beliefs do make a difference, Marsden states, but not always a perceptible difference. The article then makes a significant shift. Yes, Christians believe these things and they will have implications for their thinking which will somehow be a part of the scholarship they produce. At the same time Christians are members of the pluralistic community of the university and they may choose to be secular in method even though not secular in belief. A Christian physicist, for example, will use the same methods as a non-Christian physicist even though the two physicists may disagree on the ultimate meaning of the results. Marsden uses an example from the world of aviation in order to explain and defend such methodological secularization. Everyone, including Christians, wants the pilot of the airplane they’re flying in to trust the radar and other related equipment at least as much as or more than the power of the Holy Spirit when it comes time to land the plane. To the observer, the Christian pilot does nothing different than a pilot of any other religious or philosophical viewpoint. Analogously all historians use the instruments and tools of history-writing in the same way regardless of

¹⁹George Marsden, “What Makes Scholarship Christian: The Difference the Incarnation Makes,” *Books and Culture* 3 (January/February 1997): 13.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 12.

individual beliefs.

Marsden's points in "What Make Scholarship Christian?" are explained in greater detail in a previous article, "Common Sense and the Spiritual Vision of History." Marsden observes that usually the output of a Christian historian is indistinguishable from a non-Christian historian. In the conclusion of the article Marsden gives four reasons for this similarity. In the technical aspects of history-writing we should expect no difference between Christian and non-Christian work since all work with a common method. Even though a Christian may see particular events as being part of a larger pattern, a point of view not shared by colleagues, the Christian historian chooses not to discuss the larger picture in order to work with colleagues in the shared domain of the smaller focus. While a Christian lens may change the questions we ask about a particular topic it does not change the details. As a result scholarship can seem no different because the same details are used by all. Although the details may be unaltered, the Christian perspective does make a difference in the kinds of questions that are brought to a particular set of details. In a Gestalt image, an example of which is included in the article, one person sees a detail and thinks it is the chin of a young woman and another looks at the same image and thinks it is a nose of an elderly woman. The former scholar asks questions about the chin and the latter about the nose. Yet the image is identical. One is asking questions about the black spaces and the other about the white spaces even though the two scholars are talking about the same data. The difference being a Christian makes is the ability to see patterns that others may not be able to discern. Finally, even though being able to put a particular event into a broader context may be *spiritually* important, "often the broadest insights are both the most important and the least practical academically."²¹ Although the difference in perspective may be ultimately important, it is not important to the task at hand. These are some of the reasons why

²¹George Marsden, "Common Sense and the Spiritual Vision of History," in *History and Historical Understanding*, C.T. McIntire and R.A. Wells, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984): 65.

Christian historians produce scholarship that appears no different than anyone else in the academy.

Marsden's historiographical reflections are wise, challenging and insightful. He has not written anything which would condemn the thesis of my dissertation and although Marsden may be even empathetic to my thesis he has not concluded that Christian scholarship can be edifying. He appreciates how difficult it is to write history that is both critical and edifying. He resolves the seemingly inherent tension between the critical and instructive task with a two-part methodological answer. In the writing of history beliefs, edification, instruction and interpretation can be imperceptible. Such aspects of scholarship occur at the research and arrangement stage. In the parts of the text which are not historical narrative *per se*, such as the preface, introduction, afterward or epilogue the author can reveal to reader those facets of personal belief, political allegiance and so forth which can acquaint the reader with how the author chose and arranged the material. This aspect of self-revelation in prefatory or ending material is not discussed in his historiographical rumination but rather is notable in his historical monographs. His biography of Edwards is an example. In his historiographical work as well as his history-writing Marsden has gone further than most historians to align critical practice with the traditional function of history-writing as moral and ethical discourse. It seems to me, however, that Marsden's writings represent a point of progress rather than the end point in the return of history-writing to a dialogue of wisdom rather than mere information.

Marsden's biography of Jonathan Edwards incorporates and exemplifies the best of Marsden's historiographical methods and history-writing. By examining it closely I intend to challenge points of Marsden's historiographical assumptions and suggest junctures at which Marsden could move from "imperceptible" to "helpfully perceivable." More significantly, closely examining this biography suggests ways in which the critical task and learning-from-history task can be more satisfyingly presented. The methods of the ancient history-writers will

assist in this task.

Marsden generously discloses his methodological framework and his personal beliefs in the beginning and concluding segments of *Jonathan Edwards*. This information enables me to engage his text in meaningful yet challenging ways which I hope Marsden would welcome. Marsden reveals, for example, that in the process of writing this biography, people frequently asked him, “Why would you spend years studying a figure as well researched as Edwards?”²² Marsden replied with a number of good historian’s reasons (for example, there are no recent critical biographies of Edwards’s whole life; there has been a recent transcription of his journals which had never before been available; and scholarship on Edwards has added a great deal of data and interpretation that helps make a comprehensive critical biography feasible). These answers might satisfy guild members, but surely at least one reason for travelling such well-worn terrain as the life of Edwards is to learn from him. At some point, author and reader will transition from learning about Edwards to learning from Edwards. Somehow Edwards is germane to us beyond the details found in the journals and, indeed, the details found in the journals make him germane to us.

The frequent use of the word “critical” in the introductory matter reveals Marsden’s intent. He explains that he wants to portray Edwards as a real person in real time. Marsden’s presentation of historical context is vivid and rich. In addition to historical-critical goals Marsden also states that the reader should learn from Edwards. What Marsden means by learning from Edwards, however, is not the same as what I have been arguing for. Marsden expands what he means by explaining that the reader should not think of Edwards as American since that would be anachronistic—rather, the reader should think of him as British. Further, the reader needs to appreciate that eighteenth-century New England was characterized by hierarchical structures in all aspects of life. Finally, that personal attitudes in Edwards’s time

²²George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2003), xvii.

were shaped by backgrounds, such as the Puritan religion, and current events, such as continuing conflict with Indian tribes.²³ These are fine observations to make. That he includes them as ways to learn from Edwards, however, points to a different idea of what it means to learn from Edwards. That is, Marsden equates the contextualization of Edwards with learning from Edwards. I acknowledge that I have given too narrow and ungenerous an assessment of Marsden. Marsden likely believes that the observations about Edwards' context do amount to "learning from him." He is entrusting the reader with the tools to complete the hermeneutic task. The reader, after all, is not someone to be dictated to but also responsible for his or her share in the edifying discourse. Nevertheless, I will continue to reflect on where the bulk of the responsibility lies: with the author or with the reader.

While contextualization is a fundamental task that, if left undone, jeopardizes any further interpretive discussion, I question not only Marsden's linking of context to the task of learning from a subject but also the reason he provides for the necessity of contextualization. Marsden believes that knowing context prevents the imposition of twentieth-century judgments on an eighteenth-century figure. This kind of judgmentalism, complains Marsden, has been the habit of some twentieth-century historians.²⁴ While I absolutely agree that the hard work of historical contextualization is necessary for understanding Edwards, I am puzzled by historians who believe that the moratorium on judgement can never be lifted. Yes, without completing the first Rankean task of understanding and evaluating the past by its own context the classic Butterfield complaint of Whiggism is valid. Such history-writing really does risk being merely a proof text for current ideas. However, Marsden's response has its own difficulties. Equating contextualization with learning from the past avoids an important step in the process. An important corollary to the contextualization task would seem to be to ask and attempt to answer,

²³Ibid., 2-4.

²⁴Ibid., 2.

“And what do we think of that now?”

Several times in the biography proper Marsden explains aspects of Edwards life that would be easy to misunderstand from a modern perspective. For example, he notes that the Edwards family owned slaves. Another time he reports an entry from Sarah’s personal papers in which she says she will trust God even if Jonathan should horse-whip her. Again, when describing parenting methods, Marsden explains that sensibilities pertaining to acceptable forms of child discipline and philosophy of childrearing differed between then and now. In each of these examples Marsden explains what we can and cannot know about what actually happened in these situations. There is, for example, no evidence the Jonathan *did* whip Sarah. Further, he evaluates each topic and related evidence by the standards of the eighteenth century. It is explained, for example, that the Edwards family is not especially reprehensible for owning slaves since many New England families had slaves. Furthermore, he notes that Edwards was troubled by the practice of slavery and regarded Africans as spiritual equals. On the slavery issue Edwards believed that one simply had to make the best of imperfect social structures.²⁵ However, I am left wondering whether Edwards actually did make the best of imperfect social structures. Was freeing slaves an option in that time and place or not? Is there some reason why freeing them would have made their situation worse? If not, why did he not free his slaves and what can we say about his actions or inactions?

Marsden provides critical commentary on the historical evidence and places these events in context. When Marsden comments on what can be learned from these aspects of the Edwardses’ lives he gives more contextualizing than adjudication or application. Thus Marsden tells us that what we learn from Sarah’s diary entry regarding her trust in God even if Jonathan should whip her is that “the Edwardses valued submission far more than it is usually valued

²⁵Ibid., 20, 255-58.

today.”²⁶ Similarly the eighteenth-century belief that the role of the parent was to break the will of the child, which in practice meant suppressing any sign of a child’s self-will, is explained as a practical application of the Puritan theology which sought to bring all of creation into a state of submission to God. One must understand, explains Marsden, that when people genuinely believe the character of God to be as the Puritans believed it to be, the most loving response to your children is to raise them in such a manner.²⁷ Fair enough: in these instances the Edwardses acted appropriately for their time and really we cannot expect them to have acted much differently. It is not that Marsden’s analysis is problematic but rather I am asking him to go further in helping the reader understand how Edwards’ actions can instruct him or her.

Moral adjudication is a task that should not be taken lightly. An author must think quite carefully about making such comments. Perhaps some of the potential harm could be mitigated if it is understood that adjudication is not meant as a kind of pillorizing of Edwards but rather the goal is to learn from him. If this is the goal then it would not be inappropriate to say that certain actions were in fact unhealthy and therefore to judge them as undesirable ways of being or doing both then and in the present. We learn from the past precisely by judging it by our perspective. “Our” perspective could be an ideology, such as feminism, or a religious perspective, such as Christianity. Of course whatever perspective might be adopted, learning from the past occurs only after understanding the past sympathetically within the context of its own times. How then, might we learn from Edwards today? Is Edwards’s attitude towards and practice of slavery, for example, commendable or repulsive? Thoughtful judgment will guide our own actions. If we say that Edwards’ compromise, to make the best of imperfect social arrangements, is good then we can look to Edwards as a positive guide for our own interaction with imperfect society. If we conclude that Edwards thought and acted poorly, then we will

²⁶Ibid., 247.

²⁷Ibid., 20-21, 321-22.

consider other ways of acting in similar social settings. Or we could look at the Puritan perfectionism and total submission which parents demanded of their children. Biographer and reader could ponder the Puritan imperative to break the will of the child, as exemplified by the parenting methods of Timothy (Edwards' father) and Sarah. Then we could apply that consideration to our own childrearing practices. The process of application, however, requires some form of judgement. Were particular practices or beliefs good? Were the consequences of particular beliefs or practices such that would support judging them as good? Just because the characters of the past really believed them to be so does not mean we must also say they were good. We can in fact say something like the following: Even though the New England colonists believed their intensely hierarchical social arrangements—between masters and slaves, between husbands and wives, and between parents and children—were God-ordained and good, they were in fact destructive in some sense. The reader could then be encouraged to think about why the actions or attitudes of the subject were not good or what alternatives, if any, the subject had. We learn from Edwards by judging him and subsequently applying that judgement to the formulation of our own attitudes and practices. Such judgements eschew shaming the people of the past but rather respect them enough to think carefully about how they can instruct us. It is not only a negative task of avoiding their pitfalls but also a positive task of seeing how the subject illuminates our own present inadequacies. If, for example, we observe that Edwards' engagement with the pre-eminent scholars of his day enhanced his spiritual sensitivity, we could question whether the spiritual descendants of Edwards are right to fear the intellectual pursuits of the university.

Has not most of modern interpretation of Puritan values already thoroughly indicted the hierarchical tyrannies of Puritanism? So why should Marsden repeat this familiar terrain? First, because modern interpretation might be wrong. Careful contextual work might show that Puritan hierarchies were not that tyrannical and perhaps not that hierarchical or that hierarchy

can be a good social structure. This interesting and unexpected observation might help the reader re-think both past and present. Second, because (in my opinion) human society has not yet come to a point where thinking about tyranny is not relevant.

Perhaps Marsden would respond that such learning is the responsibility of the reader, not the historian. Sometimes Marsden does use the first person plural to explain the learning process. From the introductory matter: “We must first try to enter sympathetically into an earlier world and to understand its people. Once we do that we will be in a far better position to learn from them.”²⁸ In practice, however, this “we” becomes divided into “I” and “you.” “I” will describe Edwards and his times and “you” are going to learn from Edwards. It is not a journey together but apart. Later introductory comments explain what Marsden will and will not do in the biography. Marsden will assist the reader in learning about Edwards but he will not be part of learning from Edwards. In practical terms this means that Marsden will not disrupt the historical narrative. Why won’t he do this? At the end of his section on the summary of historical context, Marsden states that the goal of literature is to enter imaginatively into another time and place. It is for this reason—a *literary* reason—that Marsden says he will not interrupt his historical narrative with personal comment or interpretation.²⁹ Certainly literature employs a “show, don’t tell” format in order to meet literature’s goal of imaginative engagement of other times and places. Another goal of literature is the exploration of meaning which is similarly accomplished without the novelist interrupting the narrative. Marsden is here assuming that the “show, don’t tell” method of literature is equally suitable for history-writing to accomplish both imaginative engagement of the past and conveyor of meaning. But is it? As Bebbington has noted, there is a significant difference between history and fiction. A historian must explore only the real sense of the past rather than a made-up past. Perhaps the historical text needs to be

²⁸Ibid., 2.

²⁹Ibid., 5.

interrupted in order to communicate the same end. For literary reasons Marsden says he will not make explicit interpretative comments as he goes through the text.

Marsden's interpretation incorporates implicit devices. Marsden returns to comparisons with literature in the final paragraphs of the introduction. He states that the first goal of the biographer is to tell a good *story*.³⁰ Illumination should come from the *story itself*. According to Marsden, elements which make a good story such as drama and intrigue are present in Edwards's life and therefore the biography of Edwards is a good story. This dissertation has several times noted the conjunction of literature and history. Brian Stock lamented that the synchronic nature of literature did not more frequently mingle with the diachronic nature of history-writing. Thus, Marsden's linking biography to literature is not unwelcome. The important commonality between biography and literature, however, is not that an uninterrupted story is told but rather that they explicate meaning. In literature, story is the vehicle for conveying meaning and truth, but is story the vehicle for conveying meaning and truth in history-writing? Certainly good historical narrative is desirable but is that identical to a literary story, albeit a non-fiction story? I suggest that in real life events rarely align themselves as conveniently as in fiction and therefore require explication and perhaps outright digression in addition to an epilogue in order to discuss judgements, meaning or application.

Ancient historians were similarly concerned that their texts be literarily pleasing. This did not mean that they were beholden to *all* of literature's rules. Historians digressed, adjudicated and guided. Thucydides, usually considered the objective exception by modern observers, is in fact exceptional because he was most like the forms of literature of his day. In fact, Thucydides's history-writing was less interrupted than the tragic plays. And even the tragedies had a chorus which would come on stage intermittently to explain actions and

³⁰Marsden states: "Unlike specialized studies that analyze every intellectual issue and historical debate, much of the illumination should come simply from the telling [of] a *story*. That story should reveal a real person whose successes were achieved in the midst of anxieties, weaknesses, and failings." *Ibid.*, 10.

denounce or celebrate the characters. Historians were concerned that their writings be pleasing to read but such a goal does not necessarily mean that all of literature's rules need be assumed. Even in biography some authors such as Plutarch and Tacitus felt free to digress, adjudicate, or insert tangentially-related material. Where the life of Edwards illuminates and guides, Marsden's entry into the text would be welcome. Historians, after all, write history instead of a novel.

Marsden is appropriately autobiographical as justified by accepted examples in disciplined history-writing. After a reference to Thomas Haskell's *Objectivity is Not Neutrality*, Marsden admits that he like everybody else is not a neutral observer. The best way to deal with the inability to achieve complete objectivity is to admit your viewpoints, which Marsden then proceeds to do in the next three paragraphs.³¹ The nature of these admissions is as follows. Marsden notes that Edwards was intensely pious and disciplined. While such traits may be admirable, they make Edwards daunting for those who are less pious and disciplined. Furthermore Edwards was a serious person and that made him a difficult person to spend time with as a casual acquaintance. Even so, Marsden slips into a speculative tense. Marsden suspects that Edwards would have been fascinating to talk to about matters that concerned him. I rather think Marsden is saying that *he* should like the opportunity to chat with Edwards. In the end, Marsden's revealed viewpoints are simply an admission that some of Edwards's character traits make it difficult to love Edwards but nevertheless Marsden harbours interest and admiration for his subject. Marsden has revealed that it will be an honest but sympathetic account rather than antagonistic. There is nothing objectionable in this passage except to note that while his autobiographical disclosures are a guide to reading the text, they are not a guide to learning from Edwards.

Marsden will need to be bolder in revealing his insights if Edwards is to be a guide.

³¹Ibid.

Marsden does move a little closer to this goal in the next paragraph. Marsden observes that understanding Edwards helps the modern reader to understand Edwards's heirs, particularly on the question of how the exclusivist claims of Christianity survive in a pluralistic culture. For Marsden, Edwards is an example of someone who was raised in a conservative environment yet attempted to relate his exclusivist faith claims to a pluralistic society. The Puritan theology of Edwards's heritage, like that of today's ethno-religious groups in the USA, understood it to be a matter of eternal life or death to hold to its precise beliefs. Thus, if we want to understand these groups today, Edwards is an aid.³² The relationship of the eighteenth century to the twentieth century is again invoked in the tensions between the exclusivist Christianity and modern life. You can't fully understand this phenomenon in the twentieth century, Marsden says, until you understand it in the eighteenth century. Edwards is a window on that previous century. Again, this is all very encouraging. After reading the introduction there is an expectation that Marsden will show the reader what can be learned about exclusive faith claims and pluralistic society. About half-way through the biography Marsden records a sermon in which Edwards attempted to assess the progress of the Reformed church since the Reformation. Edwards described Catholics, Quakers, Socinians, Arminians, Arians and Deists and used less-than-ecumenical terms, such as apostasy and infidelity.³³ Elsewhere Marsden demonstrates how Edwards very much wanted both the Church and the structures of society to be pure Christian entities.³⁴ Here then are two interesting examples in which the exclusivist faith claims of Edwards are in tension with his pluralistic world. Was Edwards successful in negotiating that tension? Where did he falter and where did he excel? How does Edwards guide Christianity in America today and its relationship to non-Christian fellow citizens? On these latter specific questions Marsden does not speak directly at any point in the text.

³²Ibid., 6-8.

³³Ibid., 199.

³⁴Ibid., 350

Marsden has identified Edwards as a guide and suggested at least one area in which Edwards can be instructive. But Marsden goes no farther than that. There are no cautions, endorsements or ethical discussions. David Harlan has commented on the difficulty of finding guides. Harlan wants history-writing to resume its place as part of the moral dialogue of society. He admits that choosing who will guide you in this dialogue is indeed a difficult decision. But once he has made that choice, it seems important that whatever guide he has chosen will, at some point, guide. Marsden has chosen a guide and suggested topics or subject areas in which Edwards might guide. What he does not get to is the actual guiding itself. This is the direction I challenge Christian historians to choose. This is the aspect of history-writing and biography that has been lost.

How could have Marsden's *Edwards* been different? Marsden does not defend his choice of literature as a guideline for uninterrupted narrative but rather simply tells us that it will be so. Could he have taken the earliest examples of history-writing for his mould instead? The Polybian digression, for instance?

Indeed, what does Marsden think about Edwards' historiographical style? Marsden and Edwards share an interest in the methods of historical inquiry and interpretation. The historical methods Edwards uses, however, are at significant variance with Marsden's. Most notably, Edwards was what Harry Stout would call a providentialist. It is a mode of engagement which Marsden would also avoid. Yet Edwards, as described by Marsden, is a providentialist who kept track of historical events in order to ascertain God's hand in events and determine God's will, favour and displeasure. Edwards was not particularly sympathetic towards Catholic expressions of faith and Edwards kept track of Catholic events as part of his providentialist ruminations. Catholic setbacks, such as military losses suffered by the French forces in Canada, were signs of

God's displeasure and the coming of the millennial age.³⁵ True to Marsden's contextualizing task Marsden explains that providential historiography was also characteristic of other Americans such as Charles Chauncy and Thomas Prince.³⁶ Thus the methods and outlook of Edwards are comprehensible within their historical context. But comprehensible historical context is as far as Marsden will venture. What does Marsden, historian of American fundamentalism, evangelical historiographer, Calvinist, and professor at the University of Notre Dame (French Catholic origins) learn from Edwards' providentialism? Perhaps Marsden would respond to my comments by saying that the story itself communicates that today we should reject the providentialism of Edwards. I concede that this response would be fair and that I must be content with it on some level. The trajectory of my work is to argue that good historical interpretation need not always remain implicit. If Marsden has more to say about the providentialist history-writing of Edwards than just implied rejection of it, he has licence to do so. Furthermore, not only would I benefit from Marsden's interaction with Edwards but I would also look to Marsden as a guide to the kinds of interaction with the past that cultivates wisdom in the present.

Harry Stout

Harry Stout's biography of George Whitefield lacks the historiographical discussion found in the introduction and conclusion of Marsden's biography of Edwards. Also in contrast to Marsden, Stout makes no claim that one can learn from the past in general or from Whitefield in particular. Although Stout claims that Whitefield is the prototype for nineteenth- and twentieth-century evangelists (such as Billy Sunday, Aimee Semple McPherson, Oral Roberts and Billy Graham), Stout's focus remains on Whitefield and does not stray, even briefly, to

³⁵Ibid., 311.

³⁶Ibid., 313.

consider the relationship of Whitefield to present day revival preachers.³⁷ It is a biography and the focus on Whitefield is what a biography of Whitefield needs to maintain. However, the subtitle of the text, “George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism,” gives the expectation that past and present will be meaningfully linked. One could respond that by “modern” Stout is indicating the early eighteenth century: such a point would be within the broad demarcations of ancient, medieval and modern used in surveys of western civilization. One could further argue that the emphasis should be placed on “rise of” rather than “modern.” Still, Stout wants to claim for Whitefield the designation of prototype—or, as Nathan Hatch refers to Whitefield in the foreword, “the herald of the revival-centered voluntary movements that have been so characteristic of American religion.”³⁸ So are Billy Sunday and Billy Graham really the heirs of Whitefield? I must take Stout’s word for it because the meaning of the past to its purported descendants is unexplored.

Stout’s biography was published just after studies in modern American evangelicalism were beginning to blossom. The twentieth century had recently received significant attention. Ernest Sandeen’s *The Roots of Fundamentalism* and George Marsden’s *Fundamentalism and American Culture* had explored the early part of the century. David Bebbington’s *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* would have been relevant to the trans-Atlantic nature of Whitefield’s career.³⁹ Given the attention being given to the twentieth century and the claim that Whitefield was the prototype of those eras, it would be reasonable to wonder what relevance Whitefield had for the present.

Perhaps my quarrel with Stout’s biography could be better expressed as an irritation with

³⁷Harry Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), xiv.

³⁸*Ibid.*, x.

³⁹George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University, 1980). Ernest Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970). David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

his choice of implicit rather than explicit discussion of his insights. On the whole it is unfair to single out Stout for censure. The charge of presentism is a grave one in history-writing and Stout is often praised as a superior historian partly because he does not write about the past with reference to the present. It is not, however, quite as simple as that. Stout's insights on the relationship of Whitefield to the present are submerged. Or, as Marsden would describe them, they are almost imperceptible. If you are already familiar with the evangelical subculture, there are vague winks and other gestures toward contemporary issues. It is mostly guesswork, however, to know when he is making these connections. One possible connection between Whitefield and the present could be embedded in Stout's emphasis on the thrill audience members experienced when they heard Whitefield's dramatic sermons. People who attended Whitefield's services reacted with intense emotion. The power of Whitefield's extempore and enacted sermons caused people to laugh, cry, tremble in fear or fall into a swoon. Such descriptions would resonate with those readers who had been part of, or knew about, some of the charismatic movements of the late twentieth century, such as the Vineyard movement. This could be a nod to a continuing American preference for emotive, extempore preaching and the eliciting of intense emotional reactions which some Americans identify with experiences of the Holy Spirit. But Stout never actually says so.

Another possible correlation between past and present is Whitefield's decision to desacralize church attendance. Whitefield abandoned the traditional venue of the preacher, the church pulpit, for the mundane theatre of the marketplace or open field. Whitefield moved into these secular locations and competed directly with the rest of the marketplace for the attention of the people.⁴⁰ In doing so, he created an independent movement that was held together by the sheer force of his personality. Again, for those familiar with late-twentieth-century evangelicalism, certain resonances might be perceived between Whitefield and the proliferation

⁴⁰Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, 204-5.

of parachurch organizations. Parachurch groups are Christian movements which exist independently of any church and compete for the support of the populace. Indeed, they often operate essentially as businesses except for the fact that they are non-profit organizations. One such example that I am familiar with, the Navigators, has a president, board, and other elements of business structure. Even some churches, which do not incorporate the business model to the extent that parachurch organizations do, mimic the appearance of businesses, if not the substance. The buildings of the Willow Creek Church, for example, were constructed in imitation of office buildings (including a cafeteria and foodcourt) rather than traditional church forms. Furthermore, today's evangelical is probably familiar with the phrase "marketplace theology." It is a shorthand way of expressing the attempt to make evangelical ideas relevant to the workaday person and the relevant application of Christianity to everyday life.

A third example of possible connection between Whitefield and the twentieth century might be manifested in Stout's preoccupation with size—of crowds who attended, of numbers of converts, of amount of money collected in offerings, and of names of notable figures who Whitefield had as his supporters. In order to portray Whitefield as America's first superstar Stout necessarily pays heed to the super-sized nature of Whitefield's appeal.⁴¹ Repeatedly, Stout describes the vast crowds that would gather in the many places Whitefield preached. By the late twentieth century the megachurch phenomenon among evangelicals was, well, increasing in size. It is a tantalizing parallel between past and present that is left unexplored and indeed only perceptible to those who are already familiar with the sub-culture. Alternately, Stout could have discussed the importance of crowds in American religious experience, perhaps tracing backwards from Billy Graham to Billy Sunday, Charles Finney and the Cane Ridge Revival. The beginning of this phenomenon in American religion would be Whitefield. Again, Stout does not discuss the relationship of past to present or the development from Whitefield to present and

⁴¹Ibid., 74, 78-79, 111, 122, 123-27, 213-14,

so it is difficult to know whether Stout's emphasis on Whitefield's popular appeal was anything more than description of Whitefield's popular appeal. Stout might not have intended to draw any parallel between Whitefield and contemporary American evangelicalism with these topics. It is possible, furthermore, that Stout was not making any comparisons between past and present with his description of size, marketplace venues or dramatic flair. It may be that other details were instead intended for such comparison. Perhaps Stout did not intend any detail to link past and present. Without explicit discussion, I do not know for certain what Stout intends, if anything.

A few years after the publication of Stout's biography Mark Noll explored the scandal of the evangelical mind—specifically the possibility that there is no such thing.⁴² The last chapter of this text is titled “Hope?” in reference to developments in evangelicalism in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the subtitles in that chapter Noll would use the charged word “awakening” to discuss evangelicalism from the 1940s to the present (mid 1990s). Using this term indirectly evokes Whitefield, the principal character of the First Great Awakening. In a prior chapter Noll provides a thumbnail sketch of revivalism beginning with the activities of Whitefield. Noll specifically mentions Stout, saying,

As shown in a splendid recent biography by Harry Stout, Whitefield's style—popular preaching aimed at emotional response—has continued to shape American evangelicalism long after Whitefield's specific theology (he was a Calvinist), his denominational origins (he was an Anglican), and his rank (he was a clergyman) are long since forgotten.⁴³

Really? Stout shows how Whitefield continued to shape the style of American evangelicalism? That would be an unexpected accomplishment considering that Billy Sunday, D.L. Moody, Aimee Semple McPherson, Billy Graham, Oral Roberts and Jimmy Swaggart do not appear as entries in the index. There is no epilogue to provide a brief summary of what happened to

⁴²Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

⁴³*Ibid.*, 61.

Whitefield's movement after his death. In fact the biography ends by looking back, not forward: Stout includes long quotations from a number of eulogies of Whitefield. In actuality it is Noll who explains what characteristics these later figures shared in common with Whitefield.⁴⁴ Thus Noll, an expert in American religion, could link past with an ongoing tradition continuing into the present. Noll could make some guesses about what the descendants of Whitefield could learn from Whitefield. To those unfamiliar with the evangelical sub-culture, Stout's text reads as pure history, free of presentism and also of any obvious relevance.

It is not, however, the buried insights (real or imagined) or the failure to connect Whitefield with later developments for which Stout received the most criticism. Academic historians commended the biography. Members of Stout's own Reformed religious tradition, however, expressed a sense of betrayal. As described in my introduction, authors such as Iain Murray repudiated the biography for failing to portray Whitefield in a way that was spiritually relevant. In response, Stout insisted that a historian should not interpret the past in a providentialist manner—a mode which Stout implied characterized the writings of Murray and the critics who agreed with Murray. On this point Stout was clear—he was not a providentialist.

Providence and other grammatical forms of this word appear frequently in Stout's recent monograph, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*.⁴⁵ It is not a biography but a history of the American Civil War. Intriguingly enough, Stout claims that the kind of history-writing that *this* text represents is moral history. The term "moral history" is unfamiliar enough in modern dialogue that Stout deems it necessary to define what he means by it. Thus, for Stout in this text, moral history is history-writing on a topic that brings up moral issues. Furthermore, and this is somewhat unexpected, the historian makes normative judgements in moral history. In adding this last aspect Stout goes beyond other recent descriptions of moral history. In a *History and*

⁴⁴Ibid., 61-64.

⁴⁵Harry Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006).

Theory article C. Behan McCullagh lists the different modes of historical interpretations of which moral interpretation is one. For McCullagh, however, moral history is simply that which brings up moral issues. McCullagh writes that some kinds of history-writing are not intended to be comprehensive but to point out patterns of interest in the past that are of moral, political or aesthetic interest.⁴⁶ In academic writing making normative judgements is not a necessary part of moral history-writing. Indeed, making such judgments may still be seen as improper to the historical enterprise.

After defining moral history, Stout explains what he means by normative judgements. He won't, he claims, raise the dead to judge them. (One recalls, in this metaphor, that nearly twenty-five years after John Wycliffe's natural death, Church magistrates from Rome dug up his bones in order to try, condemn and execute him on charges of heresy.) The dead, Stout suggests, do not care about our judgements. So if he will not make judgements on individuals, what then is adjudicated? The answer is actions, rather than individuals. What will make Stout's text a moral history will be the description of and subsequent normative judgements upon the justice of the conduct of warfare. He is careful to explain that he will not be adjudicating the cause of the war—he will not say whether the decision to enter into the war, by either North or South, was just.⁴⁷ Stout chooses two principles of just war, proportionality and discrimination, upon which he will base his normative judgements. Proportionality refers to acceptable numbers of military casualties relative to the gains made in combat. Discrimination refers to the deliberate decision to not wage war on civilian populations.

⁴⁶C. Behan McCullagh, "What Do Historians Argue About?" *History and Theory* 43 (February 2004): 19.

⁴⁷Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, xiv. Stout distinguishes between *jus ad bellum* (reasons for going to war) and *jus in bello* (conduct in war). James McPherson, "Was It a Just War?" review of *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War*, by Harry Stout, *The New York Review of Books* 53 (March 23, 2006): 16-19, criticizes Stout for failing to adjudicate *jus ad bellum*. McPherson finds Stout's reasons for avoiding this discussion less than persuasive. Stout had claimed that the discussion of *jus ad bellum* is usually meant for wars of nations rather than civil wars and that the claims of justice of both Union and Confederate sides are complex. McPherson wonders what civil war has not had complex and competing claims of justice. Furthermore, as McPherson points out, Stout does adjudicate the *jus ad bellum* in the case of the slaves participation in the war (McPherson, 16). Stout does not argue but rather states that "if anyone had a 'cause' that could meet all the moral scruples of a just war, it was the slaves and freedmen."

Stout's book is more than simply a judgement upon the justice of the conduct of war. In fact, on that particular judgement there can hardly be much surprise. The staggering number of casualties and the well-known destruction of personal property (most notably remembered in Sherman's so-called March to the Sea) should suggest to even the non-expert what Stout's final adjudication on the justice of the war will be after reading the introduction. Certainly, it is worth reading past the introduction since careful examination of the stages of the war reveals an interesting progression in the morality of the rules of engagement. Stout argues that both sides conducted themselves and their troops in accordance with the rules of just warfare at the beginning of the war. The only casualty in the attack on Ft. Sumter, for example, was a horse. And, until being relieved of command, General McClellan refused to abandon the West Point Code. He practiced and advocated for a gentlemanly approach to warfare that followed the rules of proportionality and discrimination. By the middle of the war, however, both sides were committed to total war and the horrifying deeds that accompany the shift from just war to total war.

At times Stout's adjudication of justice is further interestingly complicated. For example, even in cases in which the conduct of war was just, the individual following principles of just rules of engagement might have been morally culpable in other aspects. McClellan, for example, might have been a gentleman soldier but in matters of race he was less than exemplary (discrimination in warfare being quite another matter than discrimination against slaves). Nevertheless, these relatively minor complications aside, Stout's final adjudication—the Civil War was conducted unjustly by both Northern and Southern military and political leaders—is hardly unexpected. Stout's monograph is a moral history in the sense which McCullagh defines it: as history-writing that illuminates patterns of moral interest. Although Stout does make normative judgements, these are neither the strength nor the interest of the text.

The strength and interest of *Upon the Altar of the Nation* lies elsewhere. Stout's text is

an intensely engaging and provocative study of the Civil War. In truth, I could hardly put the book down. When I read his text I felt like I understood the people of this era, their motivations and ideological assumptions, better than most histories. This is in part because the book is primarily a history of ideas. Stout accesses ideas of the era by analyzing its rhetoric. He examines sermons, newspaper articles, political speeches, and the conversations of everyday folks (as recorded in diaries and letters sent from men on the front to their loved ones back home) in order to examine the rhetoric by which Americans justified their participation in a most horrifyingly bloody contest of wills.⁴⁸ What Stout believes discernible in all the rhetoric of those few years is the birth of American civic religion. In a previous monograph Stout had argued that the colonial New England Puritans were the progenitors of American civil religion.⁴⁹ No doubt the influence of the Puritans continued into the time of the Civil War. The link between the Puritans, together with the rhetoric of the Civil War, and American civil religion is encapsulated in the word “Providence.” In examining the use of the word Providence it would seem that there is within Stout’s moral history-writing an argument for a specific historiographical approach.

In recounting the rhetoric of the Civil War the word Providence appears with singular frequency in the citations from original sources and in Stout’s narrative. Stout’s less-than-penetrating question—was the war conducted justly—is compensated for by his investigation of

⁴⁸Benjamin Schwarz, review of *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War*, by Harry Stout, *The Atlantic Monthly* 297 (April 2006): 97. Schwarz complains that there are longish sections of potted histories and battle scenes. Grant Wacker’s review of *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War*, by Harry Stout, *Christian Century* 123 (May 30, 2006): 33, makes a similar complaint. Both comment on the inclusion of overly gruesome details. I, however, was glad for descriptive sections (call them potted if you will). As a non-specialist in American history and a non-American I did need the potted histories in order to know what happened when and where. Furthermore, if battles are discussed as if no blood and guts are involved war seems more like a combination of mathematical exercises (counting of troops and casualties) and chess game instructions (discussion of tactics and movements) than what it really is. Stout’s history is, after all, a moral history. His point is that atrocious and unjust acts were committed. It would be odd, then, not to discuss battles and describe what happens to the humans who participate in them. I will readily grant, though, that however valid and relevant the battle scenes and especially the description of the prisons may be to Stout’s point, they are not for those with a weak stomach.

⁴⁹Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University, 1986).

sub-questions such as the role of rhetorical discourse in the transition from an initial just war to what Stout terms total war. Whether in a political speech, newspaper article or sermon, Americans of both the North and the South claimed to have Providence on their side. Stout depicts the extreme polarization of the Northern and Southern rhetoric even while they shared a similar method. Both sides believed their cause to be just and therefore could be sure that God was on their side. Since God was for them each side could trust the Providence of God for their victory.

Some examples demonstrate that the people of this era routinely interpreted events by recourse to “Divine Providence.” When Lee beat back McClellan’s troops from their position around Richmond in 1862 President Davis assured the soldiers that divine providence was on their side. Davis wrote: “Soldiers: I congratulate you on the series of brilliant victories which, under the favor of Divine Providence, you have lately won.”⁵⁰ Another time Union troops had advanced to within four miles of Richmond. In order to address the fears of the city’s residents President Davis declared a fast day and wrote the following to his fellow Confederates:

Recent disaster has spread gloom over the land, and sorrow sits at the hearthstones of our countrymen; but a people conscious of rectitude and faithfully relying on their Father in Heaven may be cast down, but cannot be dismayed. They may mourn the loss of the martyrs whose lives have been sacrificed in their defence, but they receive this dispensation of Divine Providence with humble submission and reverend faith.⁵¹

Northern citizens invoked Providence as much as the South. Private John Emerson Anderson, soldier in the Union Army wrote about the war thus:

May they realize that the sacrifice of our brave and noble comrades who have fallen in the struggle are every one of them martyrs. Justice demands at our hands that they shall not have fallen in vain, but that every vestige of the great National Sin, slavery, shall be washed away with their blood, that future generations may look back upon the records of these times and say with pride as well as with reverence these men were our preservers under God, for they saved our Republic. I believe God is certainly with us. And if so who can prevail against Him.⁵²

⁵⁰Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, 133.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 340.

The American people, from President Davis to the common Union soldier, talked about Providence and the just nature of their side but could not discuss just conduct. As Stout observes, “moral certitude and patriotism blocked all reflection and ethical analysis on moral issues of just conduct in the [Civil War].”⁵³ Later Stout states that when “Providence explains everything in absolute categories, it explains nothing in particular.”⁵⁴ The particular is precisely the province of historical investigation.

Given these and other examples of rhetoric I understand Stout’s anti-Providentialist stance a little better. He portrays the North and South as incapable of listening to reason or being swayed in their chosen course of action by the actuality of bloodshed because they had been so thoroughly convinced by Providentialist rhetoric. Americans, both North and South, lost their ability to talk about or put into practice rules of just war because they were blinded by their Providentialism. *Is this the lesson of Stout’s book?* It would seem that Stout could be leading the reader in that direction.

Stout’s evaluation of the battle of Cold Harbour is one of the few times he invokes the present in this text. This battle was a colossal mistake on the part of General Grant. Even before it began the Union soldiers knew they would be the ones who would be paying the price for that mistake. In the only instance of its kind, the day before the battle most soldiers pinned their names to their uniforms with the message, “June 3 Cold Harbour I was killed,” in order to assist their families to more quickly find and identify their bodies. The soldiers knew that Grant was about to abandon any pretence of proportionality. In later memoirs Grant would admit his mistake but justify it on the ground that the high number of deaths on the battlefield probably shortened the war and prevented deaths in prisons and winter camps—that is, they would have died anyway. Stout notes that

⁵³Ibid., 54.

⁵⁴Ibid., 93.

for the most part, [contemporary] American military historians agree [with Grant], chalking the episode up to bad judgment, forgiving Grant because he admitted his mistake, and then moving on to the next great battle. In this way, Americans past and present manage to record and solemnize battlefield deaths without judging them. Somehow, in ways they could not explain then or now, Americans accepted the levels of destruction as secondary to the work of national redemption America's God required.⁵⁵

The American Civil War is an example of how Americans are prevented from engaging ethical dialogue by their Providentialism.

Both sides were so totally convinced of their own moral justness that they could not engage in an ethical discussion of the conduct of war. It is in the seeming contradiction of highly charged moral rhetoric actually preventing rather than engendering ethical reflection that Stout shows his keenest insights. Repeatedly Stout presents instances in which speakers would expound on the justness of their cause and the work of Providence on their behalf while remaining silent on immoral actions, such as the pillaging of private property or forced displacement of civilians, and immoral attitudes, such as racism.

Stout was severely attacked by providentialist historians after his biography of Whitefield was published. Whether intended as such or not, his later depiction of providentialist interpretation of history and of current events as performed by the characters of the Civil War, is a condemnation of providentialism itself. What is the problem with providentialism? Among other things, it can be blamed for the horrifying excesses of violence, destruction and inhumanity of the American Civil War. The providentialist rhetoric of the war years rendered the American people largely incapable of forms of interpretation that allowed or encouraged censure of the injustices of the war. The detractors who repudiated Stout's biography have been responded to, whether they know it or not.

Neither the history of history-writing nor historiography are topics explored in *Upon the Altar of the Nation*. By an interesting coincidence, however, the start of the Civil War coincides

⁵⁵Ibid., 348.

with the date generally assigned to the start of professional history-writing. Ernst Breisach assigns the year 1860 as the beginning point of his section on “Modern Historiography.”⁵⁶ Breisach notes that most of the developments in historiography during the 1860s and 1870s occurred in France, Germany and England and that American historiography did not embrace the European developments in the direction of Positivism until the 1880s.⁵⁷ Stout’s portrait of the Civil War depicts a nation so totally occupied with its own political and military conflicts as to explain why it would lag behind in intellectual developments. More importantly, Stout’s picture of the kinds of historical interpretation that dominated during the Civil War suggests to me *why* the Americans would have been attracted to European Positivism once the Americans had finished fighting and recovering from their war. The preachers and politicians of Stout’s text so mishandled historical interpretation that this task really did need to be taken out of their hands and put into the university where rules of objectivity could be enforced. And this is precisely what happened. The historical task moved from the pulpit and political stump into the offices of the university professor. And from their desks overlooking the academic quads the scholars exorcised providentialist interpretations from history-writing. The Positivism of the late nineteenth century was a repudiation of the self-serving and unreflective clerical and political historical interpretation of previous decades.

Stout now, however, appears to be in difficulty. Stout is a scholar who affirms the modern historical-critical mode. In this role he cannot investigate the Civil War with overt regard for the present. Neither can he engage in ethical reflection. There is a certain irony in his moral history. Like the Providentialists of the Civil War, Stout retains moral certitude: failure to attend to the rules of proportionality and discrimination in warfare is wrong. But because he is also a “proper” historian, he cannot engage in ethical discussion. Perhaps he expects the reader

⁵⁶Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), ix, 268.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 286-87.

to assume that rules of just conduct of war apply equally to the present as to the past, but he does not say so. Even if he is correct that most readers would make this assumption, he has not gone very far in helping the reader to understand how we can learn from the past. The final paragraph of Stout's final chapter has the potential to be a blistering judgement on the American people of 1865. Stout is noting that the rhetoric which pervaded all aspects of life during the war simply came to a halt with the end of the war.

With news of the last armies' surrender, the war disappeared from discourse as suddenly as it had appeared in the aftermath of the surrender of Sumter. After four horrendous years of bloodshed, God or the gods were propitiated and all that remained was the reconstruction of the Union. Never did a war end with more anticlimax. The costly conflict that had obsessed a nation for four years passed into silence. Religious and secular papers spent little time on peace, except to run brief headlines celebrating "End of war!" With that, they moved on to mundane events, as if the war had never taken place.⁵⁸

As had been their practice during the Civil War, the American people could not or would not engage in ethical dialogue. According to Stout, Americans did not ask "What have we done?!" They did not learn from the past. The American people remained Providentialists who would continue in their moral certitude and not reflect on the ethics of their deeds. How different, really, is Stout's text from the Americans of 1865? If critical history-writing cannot reflect on the ethical implications of past events for present action, is Stout really that much further ahead of the Providentialists? Recall Herodotus. He warned the Athenians regarding the potential consequences of their actions by recourse to description and explanation of the past. If both Providentialism and modern critical history-writing, ironically, do not engage in ethical discourse—albeit for very different reasons—is this reason to look back to the ancients for models that do?

The Atlantic Monthly review of Stout's *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, by Benjamin Schwarz, was not particularly positive. Throughout the review Schwarz suggests that readers

⁵⁸Ibid., 456.

interested in certain aspects of the Civil War would be better served by reading other books which he then names. By the end of the review Schwarz's evaluation that pretty much any book on the Civil War is a better read than Stout's is hardly a surprise. I heartily disagree with Schwarz. Not only was Stout's book a fascinating read, it was also brave. Stout has made a rare foray into an infrequently traversed form of history-writing: moral history. Whether he ultimately succeeds or not subtracts nothing from this admirable venture.

Schwarz did use an insightful phrase, however, that caught my attention. Schwarz says: "the question of what, precisely, Stout makes of that civic religion is among the many things left frustratingly vague in his book."⁵⁹ Stout, premier historian that he is, has absented himself from the text and Schwarz (and I) would rather he clarified what he makes of the historical data. Instead, Stout is indeed frustratingly vague. The result of this vagueness can lead to minor misunderstandings. Schwarz, for example, believes that Lincoln is one of Stout's heroes, which does not seem in accord with the blame Stout places on Lincoln for the decision to engage in total war. A much worse result is the possibility that the reader will finish Stout's text and move onto the next book as if he had never read it. As in his biography of Whitefield, what meaningful insights the reader is to glean from the narrative are buried. The reader makes his own guesses and his own applications. Perhaps he won't bother with such a task at all. I note that all of Schwarz's recommendations for other texts amount to an evasion of moral and ethical dialogue. If you want to know about the horrors of war, states Schwarz, your time would be better spent reading the memoirs of Ambrose Bierce for Bierce was able to depict the war "as a murderous enterprise without uplift, without virtue, and without purpose—a rendition far more honest than either the North's Battle Cry of Freedom or the South's romantic idea of the Lost Cause."⁶⁰ In the end Stout has failed to convince Schwarz of possible meanings of the Civil War

⁵⁹Schwarz, 97.

⁶⁰Ibid., 98.

for today. Schwarz already knows the war was horrific. What he has not considered is what can be learned from the war. Earlier in the review Schwarz describes Stout's insights as "unintended."⁶¹ Had Stout begun an ethical dialogue, perhaps Schwarz would have had to meet him on those terms instead of easily evading them due to the frustratingly vague presence of possible insights for the present.

Stout or his readers might protest that I have so far ignored the "Afterword" in *Upon the Altar of the Nation*. "Stop berating," some might say. "Stout does everything you ask in this section." Well, yes and no. Stout should be commended for certain aspects of the conclusion. As in the introduction Stout moves out of the wings of third-person historical narrative into the first person declaration of normative judgements. However obvious, muddled or conflicting the moral judgements may be, he makes them.⁶² By making these judgements Stout sets the stage for further discussion. A reader knows that Stout thinks that disregarding rules of proportionality

⁶¹Ibid., 96.

⁶²Some of Stout's judgements seem obvious. It is unlikely that many people start Stout's book thinking that deliberately starving civilians and prisoners to death is good. I admit, however, that since no reviewer has suggested that Stout's judgements are elementary, they may just seem obvious to me rather than to others. Some of Stout's judgements are questionable. Far from obvious but even more surprisingly not commented on by reviewers is Stout's jaw-dropping assertion that the Americans of the Civil War were right to believe that America was the world's last best hope. Although Stout says in his introduction that he won't adjudicate the cause of the War, in the "Afterword" he explains he will briefly do just that. So was the War just? Stout says the War was just because the people who fought it said it was just. Why did they believe it was just? "I can only conclude that they supported the rightness of the war because at some profound level they believed in Lincoln's characterization of America as the world's last best hope. And, further, I can only conclude that for reasons Americans don't deserve or understand, we are." Ibid., 458. At several points throughout the text Stout does note that Americans of the Civil War did see themselves this way. Ibid., 249, 272, 391, 427. But how does Stout come to agree that they were right and furthermore that America today is indeed the world's last best hope? The next paragraph gestures vaguely towards abolition as the reason America is the world's hope. The paragraph directly after that lists the aspects of America which he does not include as being part of this global hope, including particular battles or wars (none of which are specifically named), a sense of Divine Providence, and *emancipation*. So abolition makes America the world's last great hope but emancipation, which Stout describes as a noble end nonetheless, does not? How is abolition distinct enough from emancipation to warrant such different treatment? More importantly, how does abolition make America the world's last hope? England also abolished slavery. Would England also qualify as the world's last best hope? It's more than a little unclear. Some of Stout's judgements lack internal coherence. In the first paragraph of the "Afterword" Stout notes that he has so far set aside questions of *jus ad bellum* "because secession is a moral issue with no moral criterion for a sure answer." In the next paragraph, Stout says, "But secession was the catalyst of 1861. The war came. Now it is 1865. All the battles have been fought. The issue of secession has been settled once and, to all appearances, for all" Ibid., 457. For the sake of argument, let's just grant Stout's assumption that secession is a moral issue and that it is relevant to the adjudication of just cause for war. Why is only a sure answer the single criterion for moral issues? Is Stout implying that the only way to resolve difficult moral issues is through politics and war? Is that why this comment is followed by discussion of secession not as a moral issue but as a political issue (the catalyst of war) and that the war settled the issue of secession. Does war qualify as a sure answer, then?

and discrimination is wrong and can, if he or she chooses, argue back that there is really nothing immoral in choosing to set those rules aside.

On other points, however, Stout comes up short. Stout cannot or will not move his discussion into the present. In the Introduction Stout states that

only when the reader hears the anguished cries of the suffering—My God, why have you forsaken us?—will the full moral dimensions of “America’s costliest war” be revealed for him or her to judge, and in judging, to learn timely lessons for today.⁶³

Given that these are the words with which Stout ends the Introduction it seems reasonable to expect Stout to enumerate those lessons when we move to the conclusion. It’s time to answer the question, *Such as?* Is there anything about his examination of the Civil War that is applicable to today? In the “Afterword” the closest Stout can come to the present is in mentioning the Holocaust and the Vietnam War. The thing is, it is not 1941 or 1966. The present does not enter Stout’s text. It’s almost as if he is afraid to mention the present. In another paragraph Stout says, “there is no lack of such conflicts that were (and are) demonstrably unjust and immoral.”⁶⁴ If any present-day examples come to Stout’s mind he does not mention them. A major theme in the book is the creation and nature of American Civil Religion. But even on this topic, a career-long interest for Stout, he will make no direct link to the present nor reflect on possible lessons for today. What does the history of American civil religion and its influence on the way Americans wage war teach us about today’s American civil religion and how it influences American conduct in today’s wars? If Stout will not begin a discussion on this question, is it up to the reader to do so? Why shouldn’t Stout at least begin this conversation?

Stout can be credited with a certain consistency in his refusal to move into the present. If it is, after all, up to the *readers* to judge then the readers may choose or not choose to discern the lessons for today. But Stout himself does make judgements. In the introduction he says he will

⁶³Ibid., xxii.

⁶⁴Ibid. 458.

make normative judgements and he does. He does not leave all the judging to the reader. Yet no specific aspect of the present ever enters his text and all discernment of application is the reader's task. That may be moral adjudication but it is not ethical discourse. Stout's own text should warn him of the dangers of this practice. Whatever my criticisms of Stout's history of the Civil War I do recognize that Stout took significant risks by writing, to use his term, "moral history." I should very much like to see Stout move still further in his next text to a critical history that is also edifying. Even better, I would hope for that kind of biography. May I suggest a highly revised second edition of *The Divine Dramatist*?

Constructive Biography

This chapter began with Bebbington's statement that the delight of historians was to confine their work to the discussion of what happened. I agree that historians cannot write fiction. Other forms of dialogue, however, can be a legitimate part of writing history. If history-writing is to be a form of moral discourse as Harlan would desire and as the ancient examples demonstrate, then history-writing cannot be confining in the sense of limiting discussion to only what happened. Bebbington used the term "discipline" to describe the delight of the historian. What is argued for here is the delight of inter-disciplinary work. The ancient examples show us some of the methods by which history-writing can include the inter-disciplinary nature of history-writing. Contemporary historians, however, have an opportunity to go beyond even their ancient predecessors. Reflection, digression, methodological investigation, social analysis and other tasks intrinsic to the task of learning from the past can be done with the cooperation of colleagues in other disciplines. Such experiments in interdisciplinary history could begin anywhere, but why not first in biography, that genre for which we have so many precedents?

Chapter Seven: Critical and Edifying History—What Might Be Regained

At the beginning of the dissertation I noted that Protestant Christian historians had some unexpected allies. I will now return to that discussion. Several feminist and Catholic historians have written historically critical and edifying biographies. Feminist authors are particularly instructive in this regard. Further, it is my opinion that the Catholic branch of the Christian family tree may have important authors who, while appreciated, might not be appreciated for their methodological insight and practice. The historians discussed in the previous chapter were all from the Protestant branch of Christianity. The inclusion of Catholic authors here will strengthen and diversify my portrait of the critical and edifying impulse of Christian history and biography in the present. The authors discussed in this chapter agree that it is insufficient to merely witness to an event. Biographies by such authors provide an account of a life and also initiate a discussion of understanding and integration. There is an appreciation that the life of another has implications for the life of the reader.

The authors discussed in this chapter take a certain degree of risk to write as they do. As they express a commitment to a particular ideology, they risk being dismissed as being biased to the point where their research cannot be trusted. Further, readers may be suspicious of the author's accuracy because the author is committed to a particular ethical position or because the author engages in ethical dialogue in the text. Historians who write this way must be willing to risk censure and even welcome suspicion. Some feminist and Catholic historians treat suspicion as an opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to accurate and fair reporting and to persuade the reader to enter into a dialogue of meaning. Finally, in treating even the seemingly mundane events of the past as worthy of close factual and ethical analysis feminists and Catholics tacitly agree that such discussions are not limited to only a few special cases that tend to elicit moral dialogue. Discussion of the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide, for example, often and rightly engender moral discussions. Edification, however, can be found in unexpected events and

people too. Feminist and Catholic approaches to history-writing in some examples of biography are already moving in the direction of a critical and edifying discussion of the past. To the extent that such authors and their texts are suspicious, precisely because they engage in moral and ethical dialogue, is the extent to which the validation of such writing requires a defence. In the following section feminist and Catholic biographies will be discussed in order to observe the ways in which moral and ethical dialogue has been incorporated into historical research.

Feminists

Toril Moi's *Simone de Beauvoir* is not a lionization of the subject. At various points Moi judges Beauvoir's character or actions as less than heroic and even sordid at times. These words are used by Moi when she sums up Beauvoir's duplicitous actions towards the various people she claimed to love.¹ Moi's portrait of Beauvoir attempts to be true to the historical person and character of the subject. Moi points out that what should be a relatively non-controversial approach is in fact difficult to execute in the case of her subject since Beauvoir's admirers and detractors both want Beauvoir to be cast in a particular kind of storyline. Those who feel Beauvoir betrayed her own intellectual independence want Beauvoir castigated for her self-imposed subservience to Jean-Paul Sartre. Women who regard Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as *the* text which initiated their own actions towards independence tend to reject portraits of Beauvoir in which she is less than an idealized projection of an intellectual, self-realized woman.² Throughout the text Moi convinces the reader that she is presenting a fair representation of Beauvoir's real rather than idealized life.

Even though Moi's biography follows the rules of standard historical inquiry, the presentation of the subject practices the ethical discourse I wish historians (particularly Christian historians) would embrace. The introduction and afterword of Moi's book focus the subject's

¹Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 234.

²*Ibid.*, 253-256.

exemplary features most pointedly but Moi does not limit herself to these sections. Throughout the book Moi adjudicates particular aspects of Beauvoir's life and suggests ways in which Beauvoir is exemplary for today's woman. In particular Beauvoir is emblematic of the difficulties of being an intellectual woman. This aspect of Beauvoir's life is what attracted Moi to her subject in the first place. Moi reveals that after

reading Beauvoir's critics, I realized just how difficult it is for a woman to be taken seriously as an intellectual, even in the late twentieth century. The indignation I felt—and still feel—at the discovery provided much of the energy required to write this book.³

Moi does not simply disclose why Beauvoir is important to her personally but wants to persuade her readers that Beauvoir should be important to them, too. One aspect of Beauvoir's life in particular should cause the reader to rethink the present day. Until about the age of forty Beauvoir did not believe that academic institutions were prejudiced against women. Like the young Beauvoir, many intellectual women today believe that prejudice based on gender is a part of the past. Moi marshals statistical analysis of post-secondary institutions to suggest that if prejudice really had been eliminated the numbers would be quite different. The number of female professors, for example, should be roughly equal to men.⁴ In addition to a realistic portrait of her subject, Moi hopes to persuade the reader to at least consider the possibility that Beauvoir's early naivety and later battles against patriarchy continue to be the reader's naivety and future fight.

Even in the 1990s women who set out to become intellectuals have to face personal, social and ideological obstacles not generally placed in the way of aspiring male intellectuals. This is why I am convinced that Simone de Beauvoir still has much to teach us, for better and for worse. Intellectual women today cannot afford to ignore her experiences.⁵

In other instances, Moi examines aspects of Beauvoir's life in order to recommend that the reader think carefully about what illumination Beauvoir's experience might offer to the

³Ibid., 74.

⁴Ibid., 2-3, 38-39, 49-50.

⁵Ibid., 3.

modern experience of being an intellectual woman. Moi, for example, neither defends nor berates Beauvoir for her relationship to Sartre. Rather, Beauvoir's choices, which seem so repellent to other women because she continually described herself as second-rate when compared to Sartre, are an opportunity to reflect on how someone of a previous generation went about being both an intellectual and a woman. Moi addresses her readership directly on this matter. It is easy, Moi empathizes, to want Beauvoir to find ideal happiness and when she fails to do this to disdain her for putting up with what was less than ideal. Moi suggests that many of her modern readers might, like Beauvoir, make compromises or settle for less than ideal situations but ones in which both their minds and bodies were equally respected. Moi concludes that Beauvoir settled for real when ideal was unattainable and in this choice today's woman can find both comfort and challenge. Like Beauvoir, women can make the best of their current circumstances even while working to change them. As in Beauvoir's life, this "making the best of, while working for change" may lead to seemingly inconsistent actions. Nevertheless her inconsistencies are precisely what make Beauvoir both admirable and imitable. The "pioneering example" of Beauvoir "makes it easier for us to live our lives as we wish, without regard to patriarchal conventions."⁶ Note that Moi is addressing her fellow intellectual women in this section. Beauvoir's "absolute insistence, in the face of patriarchal prejudice, on her self-evident right to emotional and sexual happiness is truly exemplary."⁷ The complexities of Beauvoir's life, both successes and failures, do not detract from this exemplary function but reinforce it. "We do not need to be perfect, Simone de Beauvoir teaches us, we simply need never to give up. To me, that is both a comforting and an utterly daunting prospect."⁸

Moi's biography puts into practice a number of biographical principles proposed by another feminist author, Carolyn Heilbrun. First, like Moi, Heilbrun insists that the best way to

⁶Ibid., 256.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., 257.

learn from a subject is to be as accurate as possible. Heilbrun is particularly irritated by biographies that place the subject's life into a scripted storyline. Attempting to lop off all the parts of a woman's life that do not fit the storyline typically assigned to women is actually a misrepresentation of that woman. Instead, insists Heilbrun, biographers need to develop a way of expressing a woman's life that is true to the woman herself rather than as society would want to script women in general.

Also like Moi, Heilbrun believes a true telling of a life allows for the possibility for instruction. Using a biography of Dorothy Sayers by James Brabazon as a negative example, Heilbrun demonstrates how putting Sayers into a storyline that was not hers prevents such interaction. Brabazon gives unthinking allegiance to the so-called proper woman's storyline—courtship, marriage, motherhood—and thus, when analyzing Sayers's untraditional lifestyle choices, can only describe Sayers's life in terms which make continual reference to the “proper” woman's story. He cannot, for example, allow Sayers to have chosen her life. Rather, her unattractive face and figure combined with a keen intellect (a combination which very few men would want in a “traditional wife”) were factors which predetermined Sayers life. Instead, a biographer should let the actual actions and character of the subject determine the storyline and thereby the biographer will get at the truth of her life and also the edifying parts of the subject's life.⁹ Sayers chose her life instead of the typical pattern and thus broke through traditional boundaries. It this careful attention to what really happened (as opposed to following a pre-determined pattern) that will produce the most satisfying biography of a woman.

Heilbrun believes the result of placing women in male-constructed plotlines is to make isolation in the nuclear home the norm and to make deviation from the norm monstrosity. “There will be narratives of female lives only when women no longer live their lives isolated in

⁹Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 16, 40-47.

the houses and the stories of men.”¹⁰ Permitting the real details of a woman’s life to determine the plotline will result in new ways of being a woman. The most important manifestation will be in how women relate to one another. Heilbrun believes that freedom from male-imposed plotlines will result in constructive female collectivity. This is both Heilbrun’s call to action and her prediction. In biography Heilbrun seems agreeable to the task of adjudication and application. What she hopes for is

for women to see themselves collectively, not individually, not caught in some individual erotic and familiar plot and, inevitably, found wanting. Individual stories from biographies and autobiographies have always been conceived of as individual, eccentric lives. I suspect that female narratives will be found where women exchange stories, where they read and talk collectively of ambitions, and possibilities, and accomplishments. I do not believe that new stories will find their way into texts if they do not begin in oral exchanges among women in groups hearing and talking to one another. As long as women are isolated one from the other, not allowed to offer other women the most personal accounts of their lives, they will not be part of any narrative of their own.¹¹

Following the index there is “A Reader’s Guide” and the back cover encourages readers to “look for the reading group discussion guide at the back of this book.” Heilbrun’s call for collective sharing is meant to be implemented. Heilbrun is convinced that telling true accounts of women’s lives will have important implications for women’s attitudes and actions.

Heilbrun’s critique of pre-determined formats for biography and the practice of making the details of a woman’s life fit that formula, is similar to modern critiques of medieval biography. Moderns note that medieval biographers inherited and perpetuated formulaic plotlines for saints’ lives. Thus one saintly life reads very much like another. Heilbrun makes no comparison with medieval texts but I think she is making a similar kind of critique. Let the woman be presented as she really was! Heilbrun believes that the interpretive grid she uses for Sayers is better because she has let how Sayers really was determine the plotline of the story. Suspicious people might wonder if Heilbrun has actually let a feminist interpretive grid have

¹⁰Ibid., 47.

¹¹Ibid., 46.

more weight than she admits. However I appreciate that Heilbrun points out the interpretive grids that are sometimes unconsciously applied to a woman's life. Moderns criticize medieval biographers for formulaic patterns that prevent a historically accurate depiction. Heilbrun is right to critique formulaic patterns that occur in the present.

At the same time, many feminist authors seem to accept one of the functions of pre-modern biography, namely, edifying intent. At a session in the "Women and Religion" section of the 2006 American Academy of Religion, a panel of women discussed the work of Dorothee Soelle, a feminist theologian.¹² Ann Herpel of Union Theological Seminary began her discussion of Soelle by explaining the contemporary world events which influenced Soelle's theology (the increased number of missiles placed along the East/West borders of Europe in 1979 and the growing threat of nuclear war). Herpel explained how Soelle's theology criticized what Soelle termed the world's "death machines." Shortly into the presentation, however, Herpel also explained that Soelle's critique is still important because even though the Soviet threat has ended, there has been no abatement of death machines. Herpel outlined two aspects of the present that were of particular concern to her (foreign military sales and the global strike alert policy which was made operational in 2005). Herpel suggested that if Soelle were still alive in 2006 she would push her readers to address these two issues and urge people to choose life by resisting the death machine. Herpel ended the discussion by outlining what she had learned from Soelle and how it was applicable to today. According to Herpel, Soelle was right to insist that the work of resistance is not done until the last weapon is gone. Furthermore, people must start talking about life, peace and resistance to the death machine. Also, war is not a single event that comes to an end when a particular document is signed or a particular action is taken. Soelle had made this observation about the Second World War and Herpel believed it was an insight for the

¹²Ann Herpel, "How Do We Live Whole Lives in the Midst of a Death Machine?": Dorothee Sölle and the Empire of Full Spectrum Dominance" [lecture, American Academy of Religion, Washington, DC, November 18, 2006].

present war. That is, signing a treaty or pulling troops out of Iraq is not peace but war in disguise. The factors which led to the war most likely continue and will lead to a continuation of war later on. People must keep on questioning and critiquing even after the troops are gone.

The second presenter, Dianne Oliver of the University of Evansville, began her discussion by explaining that Soelle had had a significant influence in her life and not just because she wrote her dissertation on Soelle's poetry and theology. Rather, Soelle continued to be important to Oliver because Soelle's theology made Oliver think of another way of living life.¹³ Such a result is similar to the intent of medieval biography. Early Christian biography was also interested in persuading readers to think of another way of living. In *Confessions* Augustine reveals that the story of the Antony, the desert monk, was an important part of his conversion experience. That day Augustine did indeed decide to pursue another way of living. Although Augustine's new life was not precisely like Antony's, he did, like Antony, chose celibacy and renounce so-called worldly ambition.

These feminist authors share common ways of talking about the life of another that demonstrate an affinity with a fully interpretive discussion of a subject. First, these feminist authors communicate what they learned from the study of their subject. They take it for granted that their personal engagement with the subject is a valid part of the discussion of the subject. Part of this engagement is adjudicating what is admirable or not. Second, the feminist authors believe that the study of their subject is relevant to the life, judgements and actions of the present day audience. These feminists speculate about what their subject would urge the present day reader to do. Further, these scholars communicate to two target audiences at once. For those readers who simply want to learn about the subject, but who might not share a feminist perspective, a clear and accurate presentation is available. Readers who share at least some of

¹³Dianne Oliver, "'Bound Into the Web of Life': Remembering Dorothee Sölle's Mystical-Political Vision of God through the World" [lecture, American Academy of Religion, Washington, DC, November 18, 2006].

the author's ideological commitments, however, can find interpretive discussion intended for them. Finally, the feminist authors believe that the best way to learn from a subject is by the truest correlation to how it really had been. In summary, feminist authors are comfortable weaving together two kinds of discourse. These feminists speak autobiographically of their interaction with the subject. Ethical dialogue, in these examples presented as a form of social criticism, is applied to past and present. According to Moi, for example, Beauvoir was right to denounce patriarchy in the past, and it is right for the reader also to resist patriarchy. These writers examine the past believing that our own actions can be guided by it. Soelle's forms of resistance, for example, can be forms of resistance for today. Such discussion is understood to be an acceptable and even intrinsic part of writing critical history. In their biographies feminist authors continue the ancient and medieval function of biography.

Catholics

As previously discussed, in the early stages of the European Enlightenment a small group of Jesuit priests formed a special order whose exclusive task was the historically critical engagement of the lives of the saints. Beginning in the early seventeenth century and continuing to the present, the Bollandists' primary occupation is to free the biographies of saints from fictitious accretions. The Bollandists have never had many members. According to David Knowles there has never been more than six Bollandists at any point of their history.¹⁴ However this Knowles text is from several decades ago and according to the Bollandist website there are currently eight members of the Bollandist Society.¹⁵ Despite the small numbers in the order, their accomplishments are impressive. The Bollandists produce a number of kinds of scholarly dialogue, including the *Analecta Bollandiana* (a periodical dedicated to discussion of sources and methods) and the *Tabularium Hagiographicum* (publications examining the Bollandist's

¹⁴David Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1968), 30.

¹⁵Société des Bollandistes, <http://www.kbr.be/~socboll/> [accessed July 20, 2008].

own archives and studies of the lives and work of previous generations of Bollandists). The main work of the Bollandists, however, is the publication of the *Acta Sanctorum* of which there are approximately 60 volumes containing their research on the lives of the saints. The Bollandist website describes the *Acta Sanctorum* in terms of its historical accuracy and critical method.

Begun over 350 years ago, the *Acta Sanctorum* have from the start been at the forefront of critical method and of scholarship. Rare indeed are those historical works which can be compared to them, by reason either of breadth of documentation or precision of detail.¹⁶

Other practicing historians have described the *Acta Sanctorum* as “a collective historical endeavour of unexcelled continuity, intensity, and thoroughness”¹⁷ but have also noted that the “life stories of saints” is a “surprising topic for a critical historical investigation.”¹⁸ A term that appears on both the Bollandists’ website and in articles about the Bollandists is “critical hagiography.”¹⁹ It is a curious term but one that seems to express what instinctively feels incongruent in the critical study of a saint’s life. Isn’t the critical analysis of a saint a destruction of the sacred? Shouldn’t a religious order avoid such a task? The Bollandists disagree. They believe it is a service to the Church to suggest that certain stories ascribed to a saint are most likely not what happened but that others *are* likely to have occurred. At various points throughout their history, the Roman Catholic Church has not always agreed that the Bollandists’ work *was* a service to the Church and has several times suppressed the work of the Bollandists. The Holy See of the late nineteenth century, for example, did not welcome their critique of miracle stories purportedly performed by popular saints. Even so the Bollandists have continued with their critical hagiography from within a Church order rather than as secular professors of

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 194.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹C.J.T. Talar, review of *Hippolyte Delehaye: Hagiographie Critique et Modernisme*, by Bernard Joassart, *The Catholic Historical Review* 87 (Fall 2001): 520-522.

history. The Bollandists describe the *Tabularium Hagiographicum* as a service to the church.²⁰ For the Bollandists critical hagiography is a spiritual undertaking.

Praise for the critical historical scholarship of another Catholic order is also notable. The Maurists, a Benedictine order, were leaders in historical methods in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. One Maurist, Jean Mabillon, wrote a handbook on methods for working with medieval sources. Another, Bernard de Montfaucon, created the science of Greek palaeography.²¹ The Maurists have been less interested in biography but *Acts of the Benedictine Saints*, edited by Jean Mabillon, is a notable exception. In Mabillon there is again the combination of critical historical method and spiritual interest which the Bollandists share.

Biographies written by religious orders are nowadays among the most suspect of historical documents. Yet in the early modern era the leaders of critical history were monastic orders writing about the lives of saints. Their example should give present day scholars two reasons to pause and reflect on their task. Religious scholars might pause to re-consider their differentiation between history for the academy and history for the church. Protestant historians would agree with the critical agenda of the Bollandists and Maurists, but might protest that as Protestant professors they are not, after all, in a religious order, but rather the pluralist setting of the university. I certainly grant that not every historian who writes a biography must include reflection on the adjudication and application of the subject's life. In fact, if a historian is sufficiently uncomfortable with these tasks, he or she should be more than reassured that an accurate presentation of the subject is a worthy task. Again, although I wish Stout or Marsden had included moral adjudication and ethical dialogue in their biographies, at the end of the day these historians have put in a good day's work. Their texts are the fundamental basis without which the edifying task could not be done. And so even though I might want Stout and Marsden

²⁰Société des Bollandistes, "Tabularium Hagiographicum" <http://www.kbr.be/~socboll/P-tabularium.html> [accessed July 30, 2008].

²¹Breisach, *Historiography*, 194.

to go farther, at some level I must be content with the good work they have done.

Moving Forward and Working Collaboratively

Parts of my dissertation were destructive in the sense that I lingered on aspects of historical scholarship that I deemed unhelpful or inconsistent. Christian scholars bore the brunt of my comments. A brief construction section may be in order. If the Christian scholars are getting it wrong, what right directions can they now take?

I wish to emphasize that a historian who does not explore moral and ethical discourse is doing a good day's work, so to speak. The study of the past, the quest to answer the question "what did happen back then?" is neither a simple nor a lesser task. Some historians may feel sufficiently uneasy entering into moral and ethical dialogue as to simply refuse to enter that arena at all. Such a decision too is respectable. As much as I admire Harry Stout's *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, Stout's "Afterword" was a troubling ethical dialogue. It was not problematic because I disagreed with certain parts of it. The value of an ethical discussion is not simply saying what *I* want to hear. Rather Stout's "Afterword" made assertions that were only tenuously linked to the preceding chapters. Stout asserts, for example, that America is the last best hope for the world. Such a point might be a perfectly reasonable assertion provided he explains why this is the case and what it means for me today. Stout does not do this and he needs to have some link between this assertion and the foregoing historical analysis. Compare Stout with Herpel's discussion of Soelle. Herpel explained the context of the past and the specific situations of concern in today's context, the similarities of the past to the present, and the relevance of Soelle's critique to both past and present. Stout must do more than demonstrate that such an attitude (America as the last best hope for the world) prevailed during the Civil War if he then wants to assert that this attitude is right for today. What about today's context makes such an attitude acceptable? His text may have been better had Stout deleted the "Afterword." He had done very good work by that point. A historian should be encouraged to discern whether

he should continue exploring the meaning of the past for the present or whether he should end his work confident of the task he has fulfilled.

While an author may be confident in the fulfilled task of describing and explaining the past he should be aware that it is not a completed task. As an individual, a scholar may be correct to finish a history text without examining moral and ethical implications. As a scholarly community, however, a different viewpoint should be adopted. It is, in fact, a call for much more intentionally collaborative work. Stout assigns the sub-title “A Moral History” to his text and it is an apt designation as the events of the American Civil War do raise important moral and ethical questions. What is needed to complete the task, however, is cooperative reflection that not only asks, was this or that action or attitude right or wrong (although it is a good start), but why it was so, and what could have been done differently. What has the present inherited from the past, and how could the present be different? What actions should be taken now as a result of learning about the past? Historians, ethicists, political scientists, and others as appropriate (possibly theologians or scholars of rhetoric) could come together to write that “Afterword.” The good work of both Stout’s biography of Whitefield and history of the American Civil War certainly warrants that kind of substantial reflection. It is possible that some individuals are skilled in the many aspects required for moral and ethical reflection on the past. However, the many challenges of mastering all these fields may mean that the norm in this kind of discussion is collective input.

I have made the case for collaborative scholarship in history-writing. I believe that such cooperative efforts are even more pressing in the biographical task. It seems to me that in the writing of biography an important shift takes place. While a history of an event is composed of the actions of various individuals, such people come and go as required by the telling of the event. When the event becomes a person, the switch in focus between historical event and historical person, a different kind of relationship between reader and text is initiated. To me this

is indicative of the great potential of biography to be both critical and edifying.

Interdisciplinary Cooperation

Although I believe that collaborative reflection on the moral and ethical meaning of the past for the present is the highest aim of the historical task, I observe that historians will have to set themselves in opposition to certain entrenched patterns characteristic of the academy, especially some of the results of making scholarly individualism the ideal. Many excel in the academy because their own disposition tends more toward self-reliance than collaboration. Furthermore the academy rewards individual effort. It is difficult, for example, to know how much credit to grant an individual scholar for a co-written book. How much of the work did he do? Were the best insights of the work his or the co-author's? Individual scholars must own their own work. Their future and status as scholars depend on it. Think of tenure processes and the goal of establishing your personal platform of authority. Plagiarism rules are based on the individual ownership of ideas. Collective work makes such boundaries less distinct. If historians and the academy continue to value the patterns of individualism above questions of meaning, it will be difficult to foster the collaborative effort necessary to include edifying discourse. Therefore it is my hope that this dissertation sets forward an apology which defends such engagement and thereby encourages this kind of interdisciplinary work.

Conclusion

A number of themes have been a part of this dissertation. The edifying and critical intent of biography was traced through a number of important pre-modern texts. A sub-theme of this selected history of biography was the method (or methods) which a particular author used to communicate that edifying intent. It was noted that there were both overt and indirect ways in which the edifying intent was communicated. I am particularly interested in the overt ways of communicating that edifying intent. In Herodotus and Polybius the use of digression was noted. In the medieval era I noted that Palladius structured his account of Chrysostom in the form of a

dialogue. This form allowed Palladius to alternate between biographical narrative and reflection on the meaning of Chrysostom's life. Stout included an "Afterword" at the end of his history of the American Civil War.

My interest in the direct ways of communicating edifying intent are related to the question of how to communicate edifying intent in a world that is characterized by pluralism. Some might say that writing edifying biography was easier in pre-modern times because there was a religious unity in the world that does not exist now. Authors from the Middle Ages, for example, could expect to be read by a relatively homogeneous audience. In other words, a sacred biographer from the Middle Ages could count on an audience that was almost entirely Christian because all of society was Christian. Perhaps that is true. I wonder, however how uniform the Middle Ages really was, and in particular how homogeneous Christianity would have been. I note that Christendom was separated into at least two distinct expressions. The Christianity of the Byzantine Empire and the Christianity of the West had distinctly different expressions of the same faith. One issue on which the East and West differed was the use of icons. This difference might have had implications for the way in which a biographical subject was treated, since many of the icons were of saints as well as Christ. I will not develop this point but simply raise it to note that underscore that the medieval period was not monolithic. Besides the differences between Eastern and Western Christendom, there were differences of faith within the West. In the Late Middle Ages a number of so-called heretical movements began in the West. The Waldensians and Cathars were two such movements. These groups, of course, considered themselves to be Christians even if they were deemed to be heretical by those with the power to do so. There were also differences of Christian expression based on region. The Synod of Whitby in the seventh century brought together Irish and Anglo monks with Roman monks. These two regions (Ireland and England) celebrated Easter on different days. The Synod resolved this issue in favour of the Roman practice and thus uniformity was restored. I simply

note that until the Synod, there was a difference in practice. I wonder, first, how uniform does a society have to be in order for edifying biography to be easier to communicate? Second, how much less of challenge would it have been to write edifying biography in the uniform world of the Middle Ages?

In noting the differences within Christianity in the Middle Ages I concede that the Middle Ages were probably more uniform than the present and that this greater uniformity may have fostered the production of edifying biography. Author and audience may have agreed on the character of God and the world and thus communicating edifying content would be less controversial. At the very least, a medieval author could likely count on an audience that expected a biography to be edifying. In conceding this point I return to the topic of the overt way of communicating edifying content. *If* we do live in a world that is characterized by pluralism, then the need for direct discussion of edifying content is that much more urgent. In a world of pluralisms an author cannot count on shared assumptions or beliefs. If the author “buries” his edification in indirect forms of communication, many may not be able to uncover its presence. Furthermore, if we live in a world characterized by pluralism, an author respects his or her fellow citizens by revealing the edifying content and thereby communicating honesty about his or her perspectives. Furthermore, an author blesses his or her audience by including overt edifying material. I may disagree with some elements of another person’s worldview, but there may be degrees of overlap between my worldview and another’s. I might not consider myself a feminist, but I might agree with a feminist’s edifying reflection on a biographical subject. Quite possibly I could be persuaded that a feminist worldview has come to a better ethical conclusion than my worldview has offered me. My worldview and that of the feminist (and many other worldviews) agree that the goal of historical study is greater understanding of the past and the world. That people have different worldviews seems to be insufficient reason to forego edifying dialogue. This dissertation, then, is a kind of history of the critical and edifying

intent of biography but also an argument for the judicious use of direct ways of communicating that edifying intent.

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