

## On Biography

*Being a series of peremptory injunctions to myself.*

Seize upon the detail, the flash of sense that evokes the person, the place, the moment in history. No need to call it a biographeme.

Don't spoil the shape of the story with cherished but inert accumulations of fact. Don't display your omniscience. It is of no great interest.

Escape from the writing desk. Cultivate the sense of place. You will never *be* your subject, but you can at least be *there*, in the same place, though in another time.

Don't wait until you know everything. Get writing: sketches, a time-line, a speculation. Because you will never know everything.

Don't conceal the gaps. Use them. The gaps are part of the story, part of the effect. The gap is like the jump-cut in a film, a pleasant little shock that will refocus the attention of the delighted reader.

Learn to inhabit the past, to walk up and down in it. Learn to read old buildings, old maps, old newspapers, old drawings. What did that room smell of? What were the sounds from the street?

Don't moralise. You may disapprove of your subject's sexual habits, his political loyalties, his financial competence. Keep it to yourself. It is no part of your task to pass judgement.

Cultivate a generous intellectual amusement. Since Lytton Strachey and Jean-Paul Sartre biography is allowed to be comic-satiric as well as sympathetic-evocative.

The biographer is master of the archive, but also and equally master of the subjunctive. Explore the might-have-been, the path not taken, the life not lived. Where does your subject keep those buried treasures?

Learn to write the simple things, the things that don't come easily, description, dialogue and narrative. For this you must renounce obstinate fantasies of intellectual omnipotence.

Don't idealise your subject. Don't be pious, benign and reverential. Your subject would rather you were moderately demonic.

Attend to changes of tempo in the life of your subject. Some days are gloriously picaresque, full of bold adventures, exotic landscapes and strange encounters. Some days are havens of creative stillness. Some days are boredom or misery. The larger truth lies in the sequence, the progression, the transformation.

The inevitable dream-encounters with your cherished subject are an excellent opportunity to speak your mind. Make the bugger listen, for once.

Write a letter or two to your subject. Never post them.

Conjecture: originally, a throwing or casting together. Legitimate conjecture flows from your sustained, playful, obsessive, inward, conversation with the subject. Conjecture needs to come clean. Let the reader to be your judge.

Without that lucidly affectionate union of the archival and conjectural, how can you produce that compassionate effect of the real, that sudden and delicately compelling enlargement of human sympathy that constitutes the principle intellectual pleasure of the genre?

Cherish the optimistic possibility, at the heart of the enterprise, that we *can* know other lives. An audacious optimism? Yes indeed. A certain naivety is probably *de rigueur*.

*Geoffrey Wall 2009*