

THE BURDENS OF BIOGRAPHY*

BY MARK SCHORER

MANY OF YOU KNOW the anecdote about Samuel Johnson and James Boswell in which Boswell, with his obsessive concern for the accumulation of more and more details of Johnson's life and character, was questioning a third person about Johnson in Johnson's presence, when Johnson suddenly thundered at him, "You have but two subjects, yourself and me. I am sick of both."

Let this anecdote serve as my text, and in a more special way than the exasperated Dr. Johnson intended, namely, that biography itself has two subjects, and two subjects only—the figure whose life is being recreated, of course, and the mind that is recreating it, the scrutinizing biographer no less than the object of his scrutiny. Let me use it, too, to suggest that the largest burdens of biography are twofold: one, of course, on the man who has undertaken the work, responsibilities much more subtle than may at first appear and conceivably so enervating that he may well be tempted to throw up his hands and shout, "I'm sick of it"; the other on the ghost of the man who is not to be permitted the decent obscurity of death and

who, seeing how he is being made to live, might well, had he a voice, shout, "I am sick of both!" And let me use this anecdote finally as a kind of warning, even as a request for forgiveness of what may well seem to be an exercise in egocentricity that goes far beyond Boswellian vanity. For I must be personal if I am to speak on this subject at all.

I spent some years in research for a biography and some more years in writing what proved to be a rather large book. I had not intended to speak directly about that book or of my experience in writing it. I had hoped to speak generally on biography as an art. I had written a biography but I had never read much about the nature of biography or how to write it. In preparation—as I thought—I have read a half dozen books, or more, on this subject, and I regret to say that I learned very little. It is difficult, but not impossible, to set up a definition of the novel more precise than E. M. Forster's quotation from the Frenchman, Chevalley, that a novel is "a fiction in prose of a certain extent." It is even more difficult to define biography, so various is it, or to set up rules for its composition, although this has been attempted. I am forced, for this reason, chiefly to posing some questions and then to answering them as well as I can from my own experience.

In the Hopwood Lecture for 1962 MARK SCHORER, discussing the demands made by biography on those who would write it, makes frequent reference to his own experience in writing the biography of Sinclair Lewis (*Sinclair Lewis, An American Life*) which appeared last autumn. Dr. Schorer, A. B., Wisconsin, '29, A. M., Harvard, '30, Ph.D., Wisconsin, '36, began his teaching career at Harvard and is now Professor of English at the University of California. Author of several other books besides the Sinclair Lewis biography, he has held Guggenheim Memorial Fellowships on three occasions and was this year selected a member of both the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

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A WRITER of fiction, turning to biography, discovers the difference immediately (later, he will discover the similarities as well); as a writer of fiction he was a free man; as a biographer, he is writing in chains, as it were. As a writer of fiction, he invented his subject, even when he modeled it on real events and real people, and was free to handle it as he pleased; as a biographer, he is given his subject and is obliged to stay

rigorously with its facts. This is, of course, a burden, but often, one discovers, a burden that it is a pleasure to carry. For facts can be surprisingly friendly, and they have, not infrequently, an eloquence, even a kind of poetry, that may well go far beyond the inventions of imagination.

I had thought, as I came to the end of my biography, that I would next write a short novel—a novel about Sinclair Lewis, no less, in which I could do some telescoping and some embroidering which the limits of biography did not allow, and also in which, with the happy disguises of fiction, I could use some episodes that my at least rudimentary sense of the power of legal restraints had not allowed. I gave up that idea. Almost simultaneously with the publication of my biography, a novel about Sinclair Lewis was published. It provided a sharply drawn picture of some of Lewis's most striking characteristics, but in its invented elements—chiefly, its plot—it did not do so well. It is known that toward the end of his life Lewis enjoyed the company of a young actress as his mistress. She was a few years younger than the older of Lewis's two sons, and in real life Lewis would try to amuse her with the company of people of her own age, including this son. But when now and then he urged the young man to take her out for an evening, to dinner or to the films, he complained to his mother: "I don't want to take her out. She bores me." In the novel I have in mind, the aging novelist's son falls in love with the young woman, and when in the climax of the story the father discovers the affair his world at last crashes into total ruin. But the facts, while less melodramatic, were much more interesting, certainly more macabre. After the young woman left Lewis to marry a man of roughly her age, Lewis decided to go abroad; but he wanted a companion, and he invited a number of old friends and a number of near strangers to travel with him. All refused. Then he turned to the young woman's mother, a plain, inarticulate, simple New Jersey housewife, who accepted. And Lewis, with his extraordinary gift for self-deception, wrote back to his friends to say how graciously the Florentines were receiving her. "Donna Caterina," they

called her, he said. But in the obituary columns of at least one Florentine newspaper, she was referred to as *una vecchia governante*—an old governess. Here I am happy to be confined to the pathos of fact.

Let me give you another and a much briefer illustration of what I have called the friendliness of facts. Lewis died of what we would call a heart attack; but in the official records of the Roman hospital in which he died, the cause of his death is given in another terminology, presumably a commonplace in the vocabulary of Italian medicine: *paralisi cardiaca*. Could I possibly have invented it? Paralysis of the heart. This, in its metaphorical significance, I had long before discovered was the very theme of Lewis's life and a major theme of the whole book: his incapacity for love. Is this not poetry? and more than that, magnificently, poetic justice?

THERE IS THEN, first of all, the body of fact about one's subject. These details, if one is a responsible biographer, one accumulates with all the hoarding assiduity of a Boswell, the most trivial along with the most striking. One *must* accumulate them all, or as many of them as can be retrieved from mouldering documents, for until one is in possession of them all, one does not know two important things: one, what the book is to be about; and two, what shape the book will have. It is probable, however, that about halfway through the process of accumulation one begins to have some sense of each of these matters, since the accumulation is not made according to chronology but in a hit or miss fashion as one picks up scrap after scrap at whatever point it is offered. (For my book, for example, my earliest extensive researches, because I happened to be living in Italy when I began, were with the end of the Lewis life.) Italy, except for some newspaper accounts, did not provide much by way of documents, but it contained the places where he lived—his Florentine house, his last, gave me more eloquent facts than scores of documents could have—and it contained besides a host of living witnesses.

When one is writing the life of a person only recently dead, living witnesses are, of course, an essential source of information.

And one discovers all too soon the burden that such evidence entails. Sometimes I wished that I had ten years more, for in that time most of those people would have gone away and I would no longer be confused by their conflicting tales and would in fact be free to say what I wished about *them*. Quite as often I despaired when, just as I was about to get to an important informant, he *did* suddenly go away.

The first problem with living witnesses is simply human vanity. It is natural enough that anyone who knows that he is to appear in a book will wish to appear to the best advantage. Inevitably, then, he will do one of two things, or both, when he talks to the biographer: he will be exasperatingly reticent or he will dress up the circumstances. Then there are those who wish to be memorialized as having had a more important association with the subject than the facts will support. Fortunately, if one has enough living witnesses, one can generally check the accuracy of one against the testimony of another or of others. And often, of course, a letter, a scrap of entry in a diary or a journal, a casual item in a newspaper, a published reminiscence will turn up to provide the control for which one is looking. This is not to say, of course, that documents in themselves are to be trusted simply because they are documents, even of the most personal kind. Leon Edel, the biographer of Henry James, who has read some seven thousand letters by James, tells us of the analytical scouring he must do to get beyond the "mere twaddle of graciousness" to the trustworthy kernel, if it is there at all. And Sinclair Lewis, after he was famous but still writing his aged father faithful weekly letters, mainly from Europe, enjoined his young nephew, who read these letters with adolescent fascination, not to take them very seriously, that he wrote his father only what his father wanted to hear. So documents, too, must be checked against other documents, and back against that talk from personal witnesses that may or may not represent the truth.

A THIRD KIND of difficulty presented by living witnesses evidences itself immediately when one is dealing with a person-

ality like Sinclair Lewis's—at once so extreme in gregariousness and so short in patience. The number of associates that resulted from the first quality proposed an almost endless round of interviews which I finally ended rather arbitrarily, but I am not thinking of that problem so much as I am of the hurt feelings that resulted from the second quality. Lewis was like Richard Savage in at least one item in Johnson's life of that unhappy man:

It was his peculiar happiness, that he scarcely ever found a stranger whom he did not leave a friend; but it must likewise be added that he had not often a friend long, without obliging him to become a stranger.

Hurt feelings lingering, even festering over the years, do not make for highly reliable testimony. One tends to come away with only the anger, the rancor, the wound—and beyond a certain point, these are not of much use to the biographer.

A more serious difficulty with living witnesses is the simple fallibility of human memory. I have told this anecdote before, but let me tell it again, because the general principle involved has again been amusingly illustrated, for me, since the publication of my book. Biography, as Bernard de Voto wrote, "is not concerned with the *must* but only with the *did*." Yet one soon finds, when writing the life of a man who gained great public prominence, that in many minds certain things *must* have happened even if they *did* not. A prominent man is, in many ways, a mythological man.

If Sinclair Lewis became the most famous man ever to have grown up in Sauk Centre, Minnesota, his youth there must have held the evidence, even if it was only belatedly observed. Thus, one of my witnesses, a contemporary of my subject, told me how, in June of 1902, graduating from the Sauk Centre High School in a class of seven, Sinclair Lewis, that baffled, awkward boy of seventeen, gave a brilliant valedictory address on the subject of "The Westward March of Empire." The subject was appropriate enough to the time, but the address itself was not appropriate to the academic circumstances of Harry Lewis. In this detail, the documentary control was easy enough to

come by: the local newspaper under the proper date, which summarized the famous address and demonstrated quite clearly that it had been delivered, not by my subject, but by my informant himself. There is touching humility in this anecdote, but I fear only a rudimentary sense of history. On his graduation from a high school with a class that had three places of honor open to it, Sinclair Lewis was, for a change, completely silent.

This curious experience came back to my mind a few months ago when I had a letter of congratulation from my high-school English teacher in my sophomore year in the Sauk City (Wisconsin) High School—named after the same Indian tribe, an almost interchangeable town with Sauk Centre, Minnesota, but, it happens, a different one. She was writing to congratulate me. She always knew that some day I would be famous. (Let me say quickly that this is only *her* view.) She supposed that I would not remember her (of course, I do; did she not dismiss me from class for snickering about a word in *Macbeth* for which Sauk City preferred a euphemism?) She was always, she said, afraid of me, because she felt that I knew so much more about the subject than she did, and that I would expose her ignorance. I was the “brightest boy in the school.”

Ha! My academic record in Sauk City is no doubt quite as available as was Sinclair Lewis' in Sauk Centre, but I have no wish to examine it. I know what it was—highly undistinguished. And so was all my academic work until I was well into graduate study. My undergraduate record, today, would not admit me to any self-respecting graduate school, certainly not that of Michigan, probably not that of Harvard, where, as gawky as Sinclair Lewis at Yale, I mysteriously went.

This is all parenthesis, but not, I hope to indicate before I finish, as gratuitously parenthetical as it may now appear. And it leads me to the next point that I would like to raise; who is the best biographer for a given subject?

OF ALL the living witnesses whom I approached, only four declined to be of help. Two of these were men who had

known Lewis intimately and planned to write biographical memoirs of their own; naturally, they did not wish to share their material with me. A third was a man who had known Lewis during a very large part of his life, had been Lewis's editor for many years, but unfortunately, was also the editor of one of those first two men who planned to write his own Lewis biography; naturally, his interests were with that book, not with mine. The fourth was Lewis's last secretary, the man with whom Lewis was living at the time of his death, the man who, in the last years in Europe, managed his affairs. His refusal to see me, made on the telephone in Rome, remains a mystery to me; but I am grateful to him, for his refusal also enabled me to make something of a mystery of him. Since he would not see me, I had to depend upon the only available evidence for that association—hearsay. Much of it came from interesting sources—Bernard Berenson, for example, who declared to me, “I know a minor Central European adventurer when I see one.” It is only in this part of the book, I believe, the very end, and only because of the lacuna which the obdurate ex-secretary provided, that my fictional impulses necessarily came into play. They made for a nice bit of implied melodrama and, I believe, for truth of its own kind as well. And for once I was freed of the vexatious business of trying to force an informant to be truthful!

Now it is possible that those two men who had known Lewis over a number of years, or even his editor, would have written better biographies than mine. Samuel Johnson would have thought so. The best biography, in his view, is written by the subject himself; in other words, the best biography is autobiography. Had Johnson had the interest to write his autobiography, it would, I suspect, have been brief and incisive and honest and masterly; but we can be certain that it would not have given us that full-bodied portrait that the patient drudgery of Boswell created in the great masterpiece of all English biography. In the degree to which it would have been shorter it would have been less true. Johnson was a man of unusual self-knowledge, but he was also a man of unusual reticence. Boswell's very naïveté

gave him an advantage; so did his habit of garrulousness. And Johnson, we should remind ourselves, was an exceptional man, fearful of a number of things but never of contemplating his own nature. Most men are. Certainly my subject was. He wrote many autobiographical sketches, and all of them are inaccurate and untrustworthy, deliberate softenings of what was harsh, deliberate alterations of fact for the sake of entertainment, confusions of fact, obfuscations—all in need of correction. One of my informants has told me that, toward the end of his life, Lewis spent many hours, usually in drunken rages, dictating fragments of his autobiography to her, all later to be assembled in a book. I have not been permitted to see her notes, if they exist, and until I am, I shall permit myself to doubt that they exist. Nothing in Sinclair Lewis's writings suggests that he could have been his own biographer.

I SHALL HAVE something to say presently about the uses to which a writer's own works can be put by his biographer. At this point I wish only to point out the hazards. With a writer such as Sinclair Lewis, so little inclined toward candor with himself, it would be fatal to take with any literalness those fictional passages of his that do seem to arise from his immediate experience. Like Richard Savage, to whom I shall come in a moment, Lewis had mistaken preconceptions about the simple life but no gift for living it, yet he always yearned for a wilderness excursion. When his brother finally made such a trip into Saskatchewan possible, it began, for Lewis, as a series of drunken adventures and ended as a number of days so acutely uncomfortable that he abandoned the trip before it was half over and headed back for civilization. When he came to use the experience in fiction—in a melodramatic novel called *Mantrap*—the figure who corresponds to Lewis is the heroic and vindicated city man in the wilderness, and the novel provided a suitable film script for the talents of Clara Bow. In *Dodsworth*, which has commonly been read as an account of the decay of Lewis's first marriage, nothing can be trusted but the *feelings* of the hero for his first wife, and his *feelings* for the woman who

was to become his second. But feelings are not precisely biographical fact. Alcohol was a grave problem for Lewis, who on untold occasions suffered the horrors of hang-over and the acute pangs of guilt that go with that condition; but he almost never wrote about these matters. In one foolish story he began to, but soon turned the truly reported details into the mechanics of a tricky plot directed toward the kind of "happy ending" that he himself was never to know. Never trust the author, said D. H. Lawrence. Trust the tale. Do not, he meant, believe the author when he lectures us; believe only the conduct of the narrative itself, and the resolution of its values. If we follow this sound advice with Sinclair Lewis, we arrive at one conclusion: self-deception.

AFTER the subject himself, the best biographer was, Johnson thought, a close friend, a man who had seen his subject in the most intimate circumstances of his life over a long period, who knew the accents of his talk, who knew his physical habits, the way he walked, the way he behaved at table, the way he laughed, the degree to which he permitted his sorrows to show. Again, one can only wonder.

Johnson himself, when he came to write the life of his friend, Richard Savage, produced a work of art—he could not do less; but did he, in a strict sense, produce a proper biography of Richard Savage? Had he known Savage less intimately, might he not have paused to question Savage's own account of his birth and upbringing, found his friend not the innocent victim of monstrous abuses but an unsuccessful fraud, found his friend's supposed mother not the implausible fiend who has come down to us through the *Life*, but an indiscreet woman unsuccessfully put upon by a small villain? Recent scholarship suggests such miscalculations in Johnson's narrative, and so, indeed, does the narrative itself on any close inspection. Even Boswell, that glorious simpleton, had his doubts about this much of the narrative. And it is all the more surprising in that, at other points, Johnson could estimate his friend so ably. With what lovely irony he writes when he tells us how Savage's friends, eager to remove him

from the threats of his debtors, arrange to ship him off to the wilds of Wales. Savage, London-born and bred, familiar only with the city, low life, and literature, had certain preconceptions about the country that Johnson was perfectly capable of defining and enjoying:

. . . he had planned out a scheme of life for the country, of which he had no knowledge but from pastorals and songs. He imagined that he should be transported to scenes of flowery felicity, like those which one poet has reflected to another; and had projected a perpetual round of innocent pleasures, of which he suspected no interruption from pride, or ignorance, or brutality.

With these expectations he was so enchanted, that when he was once gently reproached by a friend for submitting to live upon a subscription, and advised rather by a resolute exertion of his abilities to support himself, he could not bear to debar himself from the happiness which was to be found in the calm of a cottage, or lose the opportunity of listening, without intermission, to the melody of the nightingale, which he believed was to be heard from every bramble, and which he did not fail to mention as a very important part of the happiness of a country life.

And yet, in spite of such perspicacity, the whole may very well be based on a miscalculation for the very reason that these men were intimates, had loved one another too much in life, too little, perhaps, in the imagination. There are deeper forms of intimacy than friendship.

PERSONAL INTIMACY with one's subject would certainly have those advantages for the biographer that Johnson names, but does it not have certain disadvantages, too, and perhaps larger ones? Personal intimacy can readily lead to panegyric, which is not biography, for there are obligations to friendship even after one's friend is dead. Inversely, if hurt feelings are involved, it can lead to self-protective distortions and omissions, which are the chief faults of the first Mrs. Lewis's *roman à clef*, *Half a Loaf*, and her more recent biography of Lewis, *With Love from Gracie*. Personal intimacy, more significantly, may lead to mere memoir, which again is not proper biography, books of the

"I Knew Him When" variety, or at least may permit intrusions of personal reminiscence which, if they do not decree the total shape, may yet throw the whole off balance (the only flaw in Andrew Turnbull's otherwise beautiful life of Scott Fitzgerald).

There is a further limitation: an intimate friend would almost certainly feel that he knew his subject to start with and conclude that much plain drudgery in accumulating all that detail, which a more impersonal biographer regards as essential to his enterprise, was not essential at all. For, believe me, the first thing that a biographer must be is a drudge. I wonder if either of those two men—one old and tired, the other a very busy and highly successful foreign correspondent—would, for example, have been willing to read through (and take the full notes which are routine for a trained scholar) Lewis's twenty-one novels, all but five of them of small literary worth and some of them almost unbelievably poor, let alone track down in any number of different libraries the hundred-odd stories, almost all of them worse than poor, which Lewis published in the highly paying but also highly ephemeral national periodicals of large circulation. I cannot believe it. And yet I do believe, with Professor Pottle, that among the obligations of a man who proposes to write a *literary* biography one of the first is to read through the complete works of his subject. And I will add a point that Professor Pottle does not, I think, make: that he will find that much of them he will have to read a second time, and some a third and a fourth.

And all this for extra-literary purposes, for reasons that have little to do with the literary worth of his subject's works. I do not mean to suggest that a literary biographer is not expected to deliver a literary judgment, indeed, a whole series of them; of course he is, that is his ultimate obligation. But even if the works are treated mainly as biographical events (as I chose, on the whole, to treat Lewis's) they must be read and analyzed, for in some important ways they are the clue to and even the chart of the mind and being of his subject. This is particularly the situation if the work is imaginative, and even if it is not generally autobio-

graphical in the usual sense (and Lewis's certainly was not), it is nevertheless an auto-biography of the spirit. Its lineaments are to be detected in the situations and themes that recur, in repeated and developing images, in certain character types that seem to haunt the author. Almost all of Sinclair Lewis's works, one discovers after a time, are built on the same general idea, of a character who is trying to escape from something restrictive into some kind of freedom. In the novels, the restrictions—convention, hypocrisy, injustice, institutions, et cetera—are metaphors, one finds at last, for a restriction that was unutterable for him in his life. For the second large theme of that life is Lewis's own frenetic and endless and impossible attempt to escape from the restrictions of his self into a freedom that does not exist.

WE HAVE GONE beyond the drudge, who must accumulate, to the critic, who must analyze, and who is perceptive enough to see what is basically *there* in the work. The drudge alone could compile his material into a chronological catalogue, even a chronicle of sorts; but that is not proper biography. The critic alone, if he can see not only what is basically there in the work, but also how it threads its way through the whole mass of accumulated detail, will have moved toward the formal skeleton of a biography; but that is not yet proper biography either. No, now we need a third man, and you must forgive me for saying that he must be an artist, not only the man who can bring shape out of the mass but more especially the man who can give it living shape; and I do not mean only that he must make his subject live, but also that he must make him live in the reanimated history of his time, make him live in a living world. And now that we have come to the most interesting point, I too have reached the unutterable, the burden that is ineffable: I do not know how it is done. I can only hope that in some small way, perhaps, I did it.

We can talk about the shape if not about its animation. This brings us to the similarities with fiction, for biography, also, is a narrative art, and it seems probable that all the principles that pertain to fiction except

for one—the free exercise of invention—pertain to proper biography. A novelist has his whole world of experience, real and imaginary, to draw from; how does he carve out of that limitless and undifferentiated mass the materials that fall into pattern in his beautiful, autonomous units? He has, of course, for each work, a theme, and his theme determines his selection of detail. The biographer finds his themes—the strains that seem most persistently to recur—in that mass of accumulated detail and selects from the mass accordingly. I am aware that some of my readers do not think that I selected drastically enough and others think that I did not select at all; the fact is that I did not, for example, report on every drunken rumpus, as one reviewer has complained, but only on, I suppose, some six or ten of them, whereas there must have been at least ten times ten and possibly one hundred times six of them. But if from my mention of six or ten, my exhausted reader has some sense of the exhausting intemperance to which Sinclair Lewis, in long stretches of his life, was addicted, I am at least partially vindicated: the reader, who carries the least burden, except perhaps on his pocketbook, has at least been made to suffer with my subject and with me. And while we are on intemperance and the problem of selection from the whole possible body of detail, may I remind you that it was only as recently as 1903, the year after Sinclair Lewis's inauspicious graduation from high school, that Sir Edmund Gosse arrived at the conclusion that the one horrendous fact about his subject which a biographer should under no circumstances reveal is his addiction to drink. If we were today to eliminate this phenomenon, what would the biographers of American writers have to write about?

For several centuries "the ethics of biography" (as Sir Edmund entitled his essay of 1903) was the subject of much discussion: what, in any body of accumulated detail, was clearly inadmissible by the biographer? Gibbon, in the eighteenth century, thought that everything was admissible, and so did Johnson except for one occasion when he reversed himself and opined that it was better to repress a detail than hurt the feelings of

"a widow, a daughter, a brother, or a friend." In the nineteenth century, while biographies grew longer and longer, they tended to revert to their origins in England and become mere works of hagiography. Today, I believe, the problem of selection is not made more acute by what were once thought of as ethical considerations. One should write in anything that is true and relevant to one's themes—anything, that is, that will not bring us into court. In this sense, at least, therefore, the biographer today enjoys some of the freedom of the novelist, and he does not have to publish that famous and foolish disclaimer at the front of his book about how nothing in it has any relation whatever to any real person, now living or now dead.

ASSUME that our biographer has his several themes, those tensions or preoccupations or behavioral patterns that occur most frequently in the mass of the life, and that he can select his details accordingly. Like the novelist he faces a second step. All those themes must somehow be unified, the biographer, like the novelist, must find an appropriate emphasis, or general meaning. When I was about midway in my research, I decided that I would try to summarize Lewis's biography in a subtitle: *An American Life*. I had in mind at least a dozen things, not really separate but separable. I can mention a few. I saw Lewis's life, for instance, as representative of the curious social mobility of American life in general—the poor beginnings and the sudden, fantastic, uneasy success. I saw it more specifically as an extreme example of the fate of so many American writers—the quick supremacy and the long, dreary decline joined with an equally dreary debauchery. I began to see Lewis's life as peculiarly American in the very ambiguities that tore it apart—his love for his country, sometimes nearly chauvinistic, and his unhappy dislike of much of it. I might have borrowed a subtitle from Melville and called it *Sinclair Lewis: The Ambiguities*. Or *The Paradoxes*. For the very ambiguities of American life, those paradoxical polarities of an individualistic society which destroys individuality,

an affluent society which does not permit millions of its citizens the merest decencies, a peace-loving society which does best in a wartime economy—all those ambiguities that engendered Lewis's ambiguous feelings about his country are also represented in the profoundest ambiguities of his own character. And now perhaps you can see how the biographer, subjective being, enters the objective facts. For clearly I am talking like a novelist, talking about America as it seems to me, and finding in the objective materials of a single life facts that will support that view.

We have, then, some themes and what is meant to be a unifying attitude. We must have, beyond these, a general shape, or form, or rhythm—again, like the novel. Themes and attitude, taking always into account the general chronology of real events which in large part determined them, will in turn determine this. The shape of my book seemed fairly obvious long before I was into it very deeply—a general pattern of rise, climax, and frenzied fall, containing within it many lesser patterns of rise-climax-fall, a few of them large. And like the novelist, the biographer needs still another element; he needs a plot, an element of persistent conflict that will animate not only the subject himself but that pattern which his life enacts, over and over in little, and once and once only in the whole that it was. Here the facts of Lewis's life were most obliging, and the central conflict (highlighted, of course, by my own view of things) seemed clear enough; first the quarrel of his environment with him, then his quarrel with his environment, and that quarrel turning very early but with slowly increasing intensity into his quarrel with himself and his attempt to escape it, to escape the self.

I BEGIN to sound like an amateur psychologist and for that I am sorry, since I tried very hard in my book to avoid precisely that. A biographer, like any other civilized man, should know about the developments of modern psychology, but I do not think that he should write as if he were indeed a psychoanalyst. Some of my reviewers wished that I had; they wished that at some point I had said plainly, flatly, what was

wrong with Sinclair Lewis. It was precisely because I was unwilling to make such a statement that I made the book so long. I wanted to give the reader all the evidence that I coherently could which would permit him to say to himself what was wrong with Sinclair Lewis. But more than that, I wanted him to believe that Sinclair Lewis was a living man, and I wanted him to be moved by his life. I do not think that the jargon of psychoanalysis would have heightened either the comedy or the pathos of that life. A friend of mine, a psychoanalyst, has recently sent me a paper of hers on a phenomenon that she has observed and calls "the Pollyanna Paranoid." This is the person who conceives of an impossibly beautiful future which, when it does not develop, as it cannot, permits him to feel betrayed and persecuted. The concept can explain a good deal about Sinclair Lewis, if not everything. But I insist that the term would hardly have improved my prose.

AND THIS is the final matter that I must touch upon, and probably the most important. Thomas Carlyle, I believe, said that a well-written life is a much rarer thing than a well-spent one. I do not know if my life of Lewis is well-written, but I do know that I gave as much thought as a novelist does to the kind of prose that would be most appropriate to that subject, to the tone that my prose would strike. Recently I was invited to attempt now a biography of Stephen Crane, and while I have still a good deal to learn about Crane's life (and hence of my relation to that subject) I know most of his writing, and already I am wondering what tone will be most appropriate to that subject. (I am thinking about something that I call to myself "*athletic elegance*.") But for the life of Sinclair Lewis, I decided, lived with so little dignity and so much fret and fury, and, on the literary side, producing so much loose and garrulous bulk, the tone must be casual—never exalted, seldom formal, but rather conversational, perhaps rambling a bit, frequently ironical, now and then a little snide. I wanted the reader to feel that I was talking to him, or as if he were overhearing me as I talked to Sinclair Lewis, saying in

effect over and over, You did that . . . it was funny, wasn't it . . . how did it go again? . . . why?

It was only after I was well into the book, accustomed to that tone—or whatever tone it was that I achieved—that I began to wonder about my relationship to Sinclair Lewis and to begin to understand how much of that relationship was making the substance of the book. Not the facts; they were there. Not the themes; they were there. Not even the plot; that was there. But the general attitude, the whole coloration, because that was I, or rather, the two of us together. Here we can differentiate between what goes into fiction (*I*, really), and into history (*they*, really), and into biography (*he and I*). For is not biography, when we reduce it to its essential nature, simply—or complexly—the interpenetration of one mind by another, and is this not, for all the apparent objectivity one may achieve, a considerably subjective operation? "History," said the great Theodor Mommsen, "is neither written nor made without love or hate." He could have made that observation even more appropriately of biography. In my relationship with Lewis, as I began to scrutinize it and as it was revealing itself in my tone, there were both love and hate, and there were also pity, shame, much impatience. There were also self-love and self-hate and self-pity, and the shame and the impatience were as much for myself as for him.

WHY DID I—first of all—and now we are at what is really the beginning—why did I choose to write this life? It is true that I was invited to write it, but surely I could have said no. I believe now that from the outset I was challenged by what I unconsciously felt to be a strange affinity, an affinity perhaps only demonstrated by the fact that my literary tastes, as they matured, had moved about as far away from his as is possible. There was, of course, the obvious affinity of our beginnings—the same kind of raw small Midwestern towns, probably much the same kind of inept and unsuccessful boys in that particular man's world. But I discovered many more, and many that were more subtle. Should I try to spell them out now I would

be writing my autobiography, or even confession, and I have no such inclination. But I can give you a hint or two: all the careless writing, all the ill-conceived ambitions, all the bad manners, all the irrational fits of temper, all the excesses of conduct, all the immature, lifelong frivolities and regrettable follies. That is a little of it. There is much more. And those of my critics who have complained of an imputed lack of sympathy with my subject might have said with equal accuracy and greater justice, with sharper perception certainly, and probably with more kindness, that I had refused to be self-indulgent.

Perhaps this is where the psychoanalyst is really needed—not in the biographer analyzing his subject, but beyond both of them, analyzing their symbiotic relationship. And

it is perhaps this relationship that explains why one of those critics who complained of my want of sympathy—Mr. Irving Howe—found the book paradoxically moving, in spite of all my icy refusal to be moved.

Critics are not as wise as they sometimes sound and never as wise as they believe. I speak now as a critic, and a self-critic. My long conversation with Sinclair Lewis—my nine years captivity with him, one witty journalist called it—taught me a good deal. As I learned about him with all his stubborn deficiency in self-knowledge, I believe that I gained in self-knowledge. I am not a better man, certainly, for having written his life; but I think that I am a wiser one. And I can only hope that my gratitude to him for that will lighten a little the onus of the life with which I have burdened him.