

SAMPLE CHAPTER

from

***Uncovering Lives: The Uneasy Alliance of Biography and
Psychology***, by Alan C. Elms

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The Psychologist as Biographer

Homo sapiens is the biographical animal. Humans differ from other creatures not only in anticipating their group and individual future but in reviewing and recounting their personal past—and in being fascinated by the personal pasts of other humans. Even in cultures where formal biography has remained undeveloped, details of individual life history are shared and spread by gossip, rumor, and personal confession.

In our culture, the biographical impulse still operates much of the time at this informal level. But a tradition of formal biography has evolved as well, beginning with Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. In this tradition, the biographer studies an individual's life and prepares an orderly account of it. Factual accuracy is balanced with an attempt to tell a good story. The biographer not only lists the surface events of the life but seeks to identify the subject's primary motives, goals, or ambitions. Lessons for the reader may be pointed out, or left for the reader to discover.

Over the centuries, biography has shifted in style and emphasis. Its formal tone has increasingly yielded to a casual or even racy voice. For much of its history it was largely hagiographic, recording the saintly qualities of genuine or putative saints. Then it developed at least a pretense of being "objective"—a pretense that often served as pretext for the latest compilation of malicious gossip. Perhaps the most dramatic changes in the very essence of biography took place when broad theories of personality, developed by psychiatrists and psychologists, began to be adopted by biographers. Psychological approaches to biography flowered in the 1920s and 1930s, languished for several decades, then flourished anew in the 1970s and 1980s. Early on, these approaches acquired a generic name: psychobiography.

The word *psychobiography* looks innocent enough. It's a syllable or two too long to come trippingly off the tongue, but it gets easier with practice. It has good Greek roots, which separately entered the English language a long time ago. And

it means pretty much what it says: biography that makes substantial use of psychological theory and knowledge.

But even as the approaches it describes have gained rapidly in numbers of practitioners and readers, *psychobiography* has become a dirty word. Critics now apply it with a sneer to any biography whose inferences strike them as dubious. George Will's definition is representative:

In "psychobiography" the large deeds of great individuals are "explained" with reference to some hitherto unsuspected sexual inclination or incapacity, which in turn is "explained" by some slight the individual suffered at a tender age—say, 7, when his mother took away a lollipop.¹

Entire books have been written to denounce psychobiography and its sibling psychohistory as conceived in sin.² Even scholars who conduct careful psychobiographical research often prefer more innocuous labels for their work: *Life history*. *Narratology*. *Psychological biography*.

Some of those who denounce psychobiography would still reject it no matter what it's called or how carefully it's done. They yearn for a bygone world of genteel biographers and unblemished heroes. But psychobiography has not been an innocent spectator at the sharp decline of its own reputation. Its biggest problem is obvious: Bad psychobiography is easier to write than good psychobiography. Psychobiography may be written for the wrong reasons or for no good reason. It may rely on shoddy data or misguided methods or inappropriate theories, or all of those together. Writers have used psychobiography to grind axes from the right (for example, Nancy Clinch on the Kennedy family³) and from the left (for example, Fawn Brodie on Richard Nixon⁴). Writers have claimed to augment their biographies with serious psychological analysis, when all they've done is to shove famous people into pathological pigeonholes (for example, Albert Goldman's diagnosis of Elvis Presley as a "split personality" and a "delusional paranoid"⁵). I've never encountered a real psychobiographical explanation quite as silly as George Will's fictional Lollipop Hypothesis. But reductions of an adult personality to the child's earliest and crudest motives happen often enough for Erik Erikson to have given the process a gently sarcastic label: "originology."⁶

The first originologist was Sigmund Freud, who practiced his trade on such complex geniuses as Leonardo and Goethe. Freud usually displayed at least a modicum of restraint in his applications of originology to genius. Many later psychoanalysts and pseudoanalysts have applied Freud to biography with such abandon that the term "Freudian biography" is now an even more derogatory term than "psychobiography."

Ironically, Freud himself has become a prime target of such Freudian excesses. One writer has built an elaborate analysis of Freud's personality and theories on the teetering foundation of the punchline to one of Freud's jokes. According to this writer, the punchline contains a concealed reference to the secret sins of

Freud's father, which were somehow sensed and then repressed by Sigmund the child.⁷ Another writer continues to argue that Freud's major theories must have derived from a hypothesized affair between Freud and his wife's sister, which led to a supposed attempt by Freud to procure an alleged abortion of the postulated child his sister-in-law had presumably conceived.⁸ Still another writer has interpreted various remarks in Freud's letters and books to mean that Freud was an "obsessed murderer" with a "necrophiliac passion" for his victims.⁹ Little wonder that in order to avoid being lumped with biographers as imaginative as these, more data-bound researchers run for cover.

But running for cover is not the best response to bad psychobiography. The best response is good psychobiography. The best response to traditionalists' demands for less psychology in biography is more and better psychology. The best response to the gradual takeover of psychobiography by people who don't know what they're doing is a takeover by people who do know what they're doing.

Eighty-five years ago, Freud told Jung it was time for psychoanalysts to "take hold of biography."¹⁰ Freud produced the first psychobiography less than a year later, and biography has not been the same since. Now it's time to issue a similar call to psychologists: "Take hold of psychobiography!"

Psychobiography is not only a way of doing biography; it's a way of doing psychology. Most psychologists have been trained to stay as far as they can from looking at one whole human being or one life at a time. But they can learn a lot about psychology by taking such a look, and by doing it over and over again. At the same time, they can bring a great deal to the field of psychobiography.

The domination of psychobiography by psychoanalysts has produced a modest number of capable works, a few masterpieces, and some genuine disasters. Good psychobiographies have been written by psychoanalytically-inspired political scientists, historians, and literary scholars. The personal qualities needed to become a decent psychobiographer can be found in any field: a controlled empathy for the subject and a devotion to collecting solid biographical data. Nonetheless, leaving psychobiography largely to psychoanalysts and their disciples has not yielded a coherent, cumulative, consistently responsible discipline of individual life history. Psychoanalytic contributions may have been a necessary part of the development of psychobiography, but they are not a sufficient base for its continued development. An infusion of research-trained psychologists, skilled in diverse approaches to the study of human behavior, can remake and reinvigorate the field.

Imagine where psychobiography would be now if it had developed as a recognized part of research psychology, starting seven or eight decades ago. Imagine that in the mid-1920s a few eager young psychologists began to make psychobiography the center of their theoretical and methodological attention. The field might still have detractors in our time—as any area of psychology does—but by now it would be a field that could comfortably tolerate such detractors. In my

alternate-world fantasy, I see dozens of experienced psychobiographers expertly plying their trade, while book reviewers bitterly criticize any biography that fails to ground its efforts in sound psychological thinking. I see rows of library shelves weighed down with thoughtful research monographs that examine the psychological histories of every major creative artist, scientific theorist, and political leader of the past century. In the next row over are shelves of critiques of these studies, adjacent to shelves of methodological handbooks designed to refine and strengthen the psychobiographies of the next century. It could have happened that way. Perhaps it almost did.

In 1925, a brilliant young scientist named Henry Murray began to write a biography of Herman Melville. This was Murray's first effort at psychological analysis. Indeed, as he told me some 50 years later, it was the first professional research he had ever attempted, "outside of chemistry and embryology and things like that."¹¹ His scientific training had been in medicine and physiology; he became a psychologist on-the-job, first as Assistant Director and then as Director of the Harvard Psychological Clinic. Off the job, he continued to explore the psychology of Melville. After working on the biography for several years, Murray asked a newfound literary friend, Conrad Aiken, to look at the first hundred pages. According to Murray, Aiken "spent a day over it and then he said, Oh, it was just terrible. . . . He said, 'Start again, throw it away, no good, can't do anything with it.'"¹² Murray may have exaggerated Aiken's negative response, but he took it to heart. Though his interest in Melville remained, he left the manuscript largely untouched until the late 1930s. When Murray showed Aiken a revised draft in 1939, Aiken's response was even more devastating. The book was never completed.¹³

Murray did eventually publish something on Melville. But it was neither a full-scale psychobiography nor an incisive psychological journal article. Instead it was a 90-page introduction to one of Melville's least-read novels, *Pierre, or, the Ambiguities*.¹⁴ His introduction to *Pierre*, together with an essay on *Moby-Dick* that appeared in a literary quarterly two years later,¹⁵ represented only a fraction of Murray's thinking and writing about Melville across a quarter-century. Nonetheless, the psychological insights contained in those two publications "transformed Melville scholarship," according to a later scholar.¹⁶

Had Murray published his full-scale study of Melville in the 1920s or 1930s, in a form readily accessible to other psychologists, he might have transformed scholarship in biographical psychology as well. Indeed, he might have *created* a scientific discipline of biographical psychology through his bold and brilliant example. But although Murray was one of the most courageous figures in twentieth-century psychology, a leader in the struggle against both physiological and behavioristic reductionisms, he feared to make a fool of himself concerning Melville. He was afraid his biographical conclusions, as thoroughly researched and inno-

vatively conceptualized as they were, would be ridiculed by other psychologists, by literary critics, and especially by other Melville scholars. He also feared that his book on Melville might reveal too much about his own private affairs, so intertwined had Murray's personal passions become with his thinking about *Pierre* and *Moby Dick*.¹⁷ For strongly psychobiographical reasons, then, Murray's Melville studies failed to establish psychobiography as a legitimate area of psychological research.

Murray's own career did not end there. He moved on to provide a solid and expansive foundation for a psychology of the whole personality. He pioneered a wide-ranging eclecticism in personality theory, borrowing openly and skillfully from the narrower formulations of a variety of theorists. He invented, refined, or incorporated into his studies of personality an impressive array of personality assessment techniques, ranging from the collection and comparison of semi-standardized autobiographies to the motivational analysis of imaginative story sequences (the Thematic Apperception Test, or TAT). Murray published few case histories and made only one or two limited excursions into psychobiography beyond his Melville work.¹⁸ But throughout his long life he remained firm in his insistence that psychology must attend not only to its usual bits of behavioral data but to the entire life history:

[T]he life cycle of a single individual should be taken as a unit, the *long unit* for psychology. . . . The history of the organism is the organism. . . . [W]ith the perishing of each moment the organism is left a different creature, never to repeat itself exactly. No moment nor epoch is typical of the whole. Life is an irreversible sequence of non-identical events. Some of these changes, however, occur in a predictable lawful manner These phenomena make [psychological] biography imperative.¹⁹

Perhaps another psychologist could have taken up the psychobiographical torch that Murray never quite ignited. Indeed, several soon-to-be-prominent psychologists turned to individual biography for a time in the 1920s and 1930s. One of Gordon Allport's earliest efforts at personality theory was an analysis of a bizarre autobiographical volume called *The Locomotive God*.²⁰ Abraham Maslow's ideas about self-actualization grew out of his fascination with the lives and personalities of two exemplary individuals, anthropologist Ruth Benedict and psychologist Max Wertheimer.²¹ Even B. F. Skinner, early in his career, taught and wrote about the psychological development of such writers as Lewis Carroll, D. H. Lawrence, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky.²²

But Maslow abandoned his early biographical studies for more theoretical enterprises. Gordon Allport, always a champion of individual psychological uniqueness in the abstract, apparently found the messy individuality of *The Locomotive God*—and later the *Letters from Jenny*²³—so distressing that he de-

clined to pursue other examples in greater detail. Skinner soon concluded that science has no place for human individuality—or for personality, consciousness, or the Freudian unconscious.

Without strong scientific role models, psychobiography went on to develop in haphazard fashion at best. Sages such as Erik Erikson and Leon Edel have occasionally issued pronouncements on proper methodology, with the hope of improving the field.²⁴ An occasional psychologist has added his or her methodological voice.²⁵ But most psychologists have not been listening. Leave psychobiography alone, they seem to feel, and it'll go away. Call it by another name without the “psycho-” prefix, and psychologists needn't even feel guilty about ignoring it. What can psychologists really offer biography, anyway? And when did biography ever do anything for psychology?

What Psychologists Can Do for Psychobiography

Good biographies, even exceptional biographies, can still be written with little formal use of psychological concepts. A recent example is David McCullough's *Truman*.²⁶ McCullough is a careful researcher and a sensitive writer, who sets Truman firmly within his time, his family, and his culture. Truman's character is depicted largely through uninterpreted quotations from his diaries and letters, and through descriptions of his behavior as seen by others. McCullough doesn't probe more deeply. He mentions Freud only to say that Truman never mentioned him. Even so, we come away from the biography feeling we know Truman well—a good deal better than we know most of our friends and neighbors.

And yet, and yet . . . I suspect that even as fine a traditional biography as *Truman* will leave many readers vaguely dissatisfied. They may wonder about Truman's strongly conflicted relationship with his father, who seems to have been his model for uncomplaining hard work and for his intense political interests—but also his model for gambling repeatedly on the “main chance,” the big but risky decision that might bring either bankruptcy or wealth. They may wonder about Truman's years of passive devotion to Bess Wallace, and about how he dealt internally with the frustrations he must have often felt before she finally agreed to marry him. They may wonder whether the emotional patterns of Truman's youth later contributed to his decision to bomb Hiroshima—a “main chance” if ever there was one.

If you're writing a biography of Nixon—any sort of Nixon biography—you're virtually obligated to do a certain amount of psychological analysis. Truman biographers face a wider array of options. David McCullough appears to have made a deliberate decision to go with his own strengths as a researcher and writer, leaving the deeper psychological probing to others. But McCullough's superb example of traditional biography may be one of the last of its breed. Psychobiography, for all its failings, is now an essential approach to the study of

lives—famous lives, well-known lives, obscure lives. It cannot and will not be abandoned in order to satisfy certain critics' continuing desire for unanalytic books of polite admiration. But it can be improved, and psychologists can do much to improve it. Indeed, they are strategically positioned to deal with the most frequently heard criticisms of psychobiography. They can help psychobiography move from theoretical narrowness to a range of theoretical choices; from methodological looseness to methodological restraint; from a passion for pathography to examinations of psychological health; and from explanatory reductionism to explanatory complexity.

From theoretical narrowness to theoretical choice Perhaps the most frequent criticism of psychobiography concerns its heavy dependence on psychoanalytic theory. Freudian interpretations are a pervasive feature of psychobiography, whether they involve identifying the sort of "hitherto unsuspected sexual inclination or incapacity" that so distresses George Will, or a more serious version of his Lollipop Theory of childhood trauma, or a developmental chronology of the continuing battle among an individual's unconscious armies of the night. There are good reasons for that pervasiveness; analytic theory directly addresses an array of powerful emotional issues that define the course of many lives. But the basic elements of psychoanalytic explanation have been overused and underelaborated. Down through the years we've been given a lot of Oedipal explanations of famous writers—so many that ownership of an Oedipus complex seldom seems to explain much any more, unless it comes with an elaborate package of optional accessories.

Psychoanalytic theory has continued to develop beyond Oedipus, and certain of those developments have found a place in psychobiography: Erikson's psychosocial development stages (identity crisis and all),²⁷ Kohut's or Kernberg's versions of self and object-relations (especially the narcissistic varieties),²⁸ Winnicott's emphasis on transitional objects.²⁹ But psychologists who don't cloister themselves within one or another psychoanalytic camp can offer a much broader array of potentially applicable theories. Psychobiographers should be able to make effective use, for instance, of Henry Murray's inventory of psychological needs, plus the psychosexual stages he added to Freud's list;³⁰ David McClelland's and David Winter's extensions of Murray, especially in terms of power motive patterns;³¹ Theodore Millon's classifications of character problems, already incorporated into standard diagnostic manuals;³² and Silvan Tomkins' script theory with its "nuclear conflicts,"³³ especially as explicated by Rae Carlson.³⁴ And there's much else out there.³⁵

Henry Murray's great contribution to personality theory was not any specific idea about the need for achievement or the claustral stage of pre-birth personality development; it was his eclecticism. He began with the basic psychoanalytic concepts, but he concluded that understanding either personality-in-general or

personality-in-particular requires an openness to theoretical ideas from all over. Contemporary research psychologists may favor one or two pet theories, but they've usually been trained eclectically, to seek out and to use whatever is useful from the known universe of psychological theories. No one psychological theory can effectively elucidate every personality we want to understand. Therefore psychobiography needs to incorporate as much eclectic diversity as it can find.

From methodological looseness to methodological restraint Too many psychobiographers have become true believers not only in psychoanalytic theory but in psychoanalytic method. Freud and his followers made several valuable contributions to research methodology—free association, close examination of slips of the tongue or pen, symbolic interpretation of dreams and other imaginative productions. But in many psychoanalytic psychobiographies, “method” seems to refer mainly to reliance on the analyst’s intuitive ability to divide the wheat of clinical insights from the chaff of ordinary verbal conventions. This self-confidence in one’s own interpretive skills, little restrained by clear judgmental criteria or procedural rules of thumb, often yields interpretations of biographical data that strike the unconverted as far-fetched at best.

The standard training of research psychologists rarely touches upon single-case research methods, even in the most psychobiographically relevant areas: personality, developmental, social, and clinical psychology. But most research psychologists do learn to be eclectic in their methods as well as in their theories. If they’re trained well, they also learn restraint in their application of any particular research method. Are my conclusions closely tied to my data? What alternative interpretations are available, and how do I decide among them? Can the data be grouped into different patterns, and if so, why is one pattern superior to the others—more meaningful, more elegantly explanatory? Will my method of analyzing the data yield the same results if someone else tries it, and if not, what’s wrong with it or with my explanation of it? Would another method work better, be more clearly communicable, yield a more persuasive analysis of the data? These kinds of questions arise constantly in other kinds of psychological research; all are applicable to psychobiography. Psychobiographers should have been asking them often, of themselves and of others in the field. Most have not.

From pathography to psychological health In the first paragraph of his first psychobiography, Freud insisted that he was not writing a pathography, an account of the psychological failings of a great man.³⁶ Few people believed him then, and few believe his followers’ similar disclaimers now, for good reason: psychoanalytic biographies are still much more often pathographic than eugraphic. (If you’ve never heard the latter term, neither have I—a strong indication that psychobiographies rarely map out how their subjects became psychologically healthy.) Erik Erikson made a point of de-emphasizing not only originology but

pathography in his own work. But even Erikson, in books like *Young Man Luther* and *Gandhi's Truth*, had a hard time staying away from the clinical-diagnostic mode.

Clinical psychologists are almost as likely as psychoanalytic psychiatrists to approach biography with pathography on their minds. But many other psychologists are trained to deal not with patients *in extremis* but with fairly normal people: school kids, college students, average citizens who just happen to be included in a research sample. Whenever these psychologists take up psychobiography, they may expect to find a few abnormalities in their chosen subject; after all, totally "normal" people don't get famous enough to be chosen as subjects, except perhaps for Harry Truman. But such psychologists will probably also be more attentive than most clinicians to how their subject responds creatively to the demands of ordinary life and to the challenges of a career. In their previous studies—of children-as-survivors, of highly intelligent women and men in the prime of life, of psychological adaptations to old age—these psychologists have accumulated useful comparison data for individual studies. At the same time, and maybe more significantly for the long run, they've been training themselves to do those individual studies from a nonpathographic point of view.

From reductionism to complexity As psychobiographers look for the pattern in the weave, for the keys to a padlocked personality, for the clues that will solve a psychological mystery, they seek to reduce complexity to simplicity. Their aim is reasonable, but it's often pursued with too much enthusiasm and too little subtlety. As published critiques of such works often run, "This biographer claims to explain So-and-so's political career/literary oeuvre/theoretical system/life history entirely in terms of _____." (Fill in the blank with your favorite explanatory variable.) Typically, the critic has further simplified the biographer's simplifications, by ignoring the reservations and qualifications that surround the central hypothesis. Nonetheless, the critic is often largely on target.

Psychology is itself, by and large, a reductive field. Large portions of contemporary psychology are busily concerned with reducing human complexities of thought and emotion to simplicities of cognition and neurology. Therefore, bringing a randomly assembled cadre of psychologists into psychobiography will not automatically cure its endemic reductionism.

However, a substantial number of psychologists do deal in their daily research with whole human beings—with people who talk and behave as people, not as bundles of nerve fibers or as simplified sensory systems. Sooner or later, many of those psychologists realize that reductionism as an overriding research strategy doesn't work. The more research they do in human development, personality, and social psychology, the more complicated their findings get and the more complicated their explanations must become. A Theory of Everything may be near enough in physics to keep a lot of physicists awake at night, but in psychology it's

not even a believable dream. In the middle decades of this century, psychologists often seemed to assume that the basic secrets of human behavior were nearly within their grasp. Today that kind of illusory confidence is reserved mainly for psychologists whose research focus permits them to ignore human complexity. Psychologists who are familiar with such complexity among humans *en masse* should be able to recognize it even more clearly when they study a human *en solo*.

What Can Psychobiography Do for Psychology?

If you know anything about the current state of psychology, you may find it peculiar that I'm calling on psychologists to save—or at least to improve—the field of psychobiography. Psychology has its own serious problems as a scientific enterprise and especially as a source of wisdom about the human condition. Research psychology as a whole, including my favorite sub-fields of personality, developmental, and social psychology, continues to suffer from a heavy emphasis on the statistical analysis of data as the ultimate criterion of “truth.” That means it also suffers from emphases on easily testable hypotheses and on studying the general rather than the specific. The one area of psychology that could be regarded as an exception, clinical psychology, has its own problems from a research standpoint. Special difficulties arise from its dependence on essentially private data, which have been collected from patients and which are therefore ethically unavailable for public study. Fortunately, at the same time that psychology goes about remedying psychobiography's problems, an infusion of psychobiography could substantially remedy some of the problems faced by psychology, at least in the following ways:

Testing the statistically significant against the personally significant As a college freshman, I was taught John B. Watson's dictum that the scientific goal of psychology is “the prediction and control of behavior.” That wasn't *my* goal in becoming a psychologist, and it wasn't the initial goal of most of the psychologists I know or have studied. But we all did want to be scientists, and scientists do often predict things, and scientific prediction often involves numbers, and because humans aren't precisely predictable, the numbers usually involve calculations of statistical probability. To get data that can be statistically analyzed, it helps to have some control over the organisms you're studying, through experiments or short-answer questionnaires. You can't let your “subjects” behave any old way they please, or you'll end up with a statistical garbage heap. Science is clean, science is abstract, or so we were taught. Psychology can be a science only by controlling its frisky data-sources while the data are being collected, and then controlling the data even more tightly through statistical data analysis.

However, lives are not lived in the laboratory (except for the lives of a few thousand researchers). In the real world, personalities are not divided into statis-

tically analyzable compartments. Experiments and correlational studies, and statistical analyses of the data they generate, may identify significant variables in the lives of people-in-general. But I haven't encountered a psychologist yet who could put together a whole person from those statistical body-parts and honestly cry out, "IT'S ALIVE!" As Gordon Allport often suggested, the final test of a psychological hypothesis comes not when it passes a cut-off level for statistical significance, but when it makes sense within this life here, or that one there, or another over there. Statistical analysis has become sophisticated enough to detect amazingly subtle experimental effects and very complex correlations. In the end, though, we need to know whether these statistically significant effects and correlations display any personal significance when we look at one life at a time. Psychobiography is one good way to look.

Making comparative analyses of an individual case through use of public data
One kind of psychologist already has a substantial history of studying one life at a time: the clinical psychologist. However, the data collected by clinical psychologists are problematic in more ways than one. First, they're basically pathographic in orientation: concerned with individual lives, true, but most often with lives being lived at far less than an optimal level of functioning. Second, the data themselves are bounded by various legal and ethical constraints. The clinician may draw conclusions about his or her clients, and may under certain circumstances share those conclusions with the rest of us. But the clinician is rarely free to share with us the full range of data on which those conclusions were based. Instead, we must trust that the clinician has drawn reasonable conclusions from an unseen body of data—data whose full dimensions are unspecified and which are represented to us only by the clinician's chosen examples. Furthermore, this mostly unseen body of data was initially generated by questions and suggestions put to the patient by the clinician, in a process largely unobserved by anyone else. The possibilities for unchecked bias are obvious. Even on those occasions when an extensively detailed clinical case history is published—a rare event among the large number of clinical cases actually treated—the client's identity must be carefully concealed. The clinician must not only omit any readily recognizable details of the client's life, but in many cases must actually misrepresent some significant aspects of the life, in order to mislead readers who might otherwise be able to identify the client.

The further development of personality psychology requires, as in other sciences, that competing hypotheses be tested on publicly available bodies of data.³⁷ Several critics of clinically based personality theories have argued that case-history data on personality are inherently unscientific, because they're so strongly contaminated by the private biases inherent in the therapeutic relationship.³⁸ But psychobiographical data are in most cases fully public—drawn from published biographical data and accessible archives. The psychobiographer doesn't need to

disguise the identity of the subject, as in clinical cases; the main point of most psychobiographical research is to provide a clearer understanding of the psychology of a public figure. So psychobiographical data can make such criticisms moot. When a psychobiographical study is published, other researchers can examine the same data and evaluate the first researcher's interpretations, or even offer their alternative versions of the subject's life. In the process, the study of that life moves from case history to science.

Gaining ideas for new theories, new hypotheses, or new groupings of data This is perhaps the most readily accepted use of individual case-history research in psychology. Even psychologists who sternly insist on the most rigorous forms of empirical research are usually willing to admit that a good theory can come from anywhere—even from a psychobiography. Indeed, the comprehensive study of a single human life is likely to generate so many theoretical questions that the overwhelmed researcher may return eagerly to studies of maze-running in rats or five-interval attitude scales. Theory generation may be better served by narrowing the research focus to the features that are most strongly represented in a particular life.

Ordinarily I leave theory-building to other people. But a few years ago I tried to use a construct I had already identified among 1960s activists, a process I called “superego-tripping,” in a psychobiographical study of the statesman and moralist John Foster Dulles. I had originally conceptualized superego-tripping as a kind of moral self-aggrandizement, expressed in a person's firm belief that the external world will always fall into congruence with his or her most strongly felt superego concerns. The world doesn't always work that way, of course, as Charlie Brown lamented in *Peanuts*: “How can we lose when we're so sincere?”³⁹ But the superego-tripper goes on expecting sincerity and morality to triumph, and denying their frequent failures.

As Eisenhower's Secretary of State, Foster Dulles was well known for his endless moralizing about the sacred mission of the United States and the inevitable downfall of the godless Communists. But try as I might, my superego-tripping construct didn't seem to describe much of Dulles's experience or thinking. Eventually I was forced to distinguish superego-tripping from a related construction that I called *ego-idealism*: judging external events and behavior principally in terms of how well they measure up to one's standards of moral perfection, rather than in terms of their pragmatic effects. When you're superego-tripping, you expect reality to fall into line with your moral certitudes; as a practicing ego-idealist, you feel your moral certitudes are always more important than any other considerations, and reality be damned if it doesn't square with those certitudes. (See Chapter 14.) Ego-idealism worked much better than superego-tripping in analyzing Dulles. I suspect it will do the same for similar biographical subjects as I encounter them in the future.

Sometimes a psychobiographer chooses a specific biographical subject with the idea that this subject may be especially useful in teasing out the strands of a new theoretical understanding. Freud seems to have chosen Leonardo as a subject partly so he could work on his theories about homosexuality. Freud may also have felt ready to make his initial formulation of the Oedipus complex more complex. Leonardo was useful there too, since he (perhaps) didn't live in a patriarchal family during his early childhood. (See Chapter 3.) But in many other instances of life-history research, the choice of subject is not so deliberate. New theoretical constructs rise unbidden, perhaps not even closely related to the subject at hand. The specific biographical subject in such instances serves mainly to keep the theoretical pot bubbling, not to provide the clay for a specific theoretical brick. I don't know of a single major theoretical construct that grew out of Henry Murray's six-decades-long study of Melville. But Murray felt *challenged* by Melville until the end of his own life—challenged to understand more, to conceptualize personality in new ways, to keep revising the hypotheses he had already formulated. Melville was a large enough subject to maintain such a challenge; indeed, he proved to be the giant white whale that Murray never successfully harpooned. Though Murray expended much of his explanatory effort on smaller fish, his career as a personality theorist gained a great deal from the Melvillean challenge.

Understanding important single cases In their continuing struggle for scientific respectability, most psychologists steer away from pronouncements about any specific case. Instead, they relentlessly pursue the general. They tend to dismiss individual variation as statistical "error." They ignore the work of scientists in other fields who celebrate detail, diversity, or contingency. One of those scientists is the brilliant physicist Freeman Dyson:

[W]e have two kinds of scientists, the unifiers looking inward and backward into the past, the diversifiers looking outward and forward into the future. Unifiers are people whose driving passion is to find general principles which will explain everything. They are happy if they can leave the universe looking a little simpler than they found it. Diversifiers are people whose passion is to explore details. They are in love with the heterogeneity of nature and they agree with the saying, "Le bon Dieu aime les details." They are happy if they leave the universe a little more complicated than they found it.⁴⁰

In psychology, Dyson's distinction between unifiers and diversifiers is described by the terms *nomothetic* and *idiographic*. Gordon Allport introduced the nomothetic-versus-idiographic distinction into American psychology as a way to advocate the increased study of the individual.⁴¹ Allport's intentions were good, but he initially defined the idiographic approach with language as extreme in one

direction as any of the positivists or statisticians had used in the other. Idiographic personality research was to be a science of the totally unique—altogether distinct from the generalizing nomothetic approach prevalent in psychological science then and now.

Allport preached his idiographic gospel for 25 years. Then one of his former students, Robert Holt, published such a devastating criticism of it that few psychologists remained willing to attempt individual case-history research of any sort, except as an idle exercise in “artistic” psychology.⁴² Holt repeatedly drew the line: idiographic equals art, nomothetic equals science. For example, “On this particular point, I shall try to show, the artist in [Allport] has probably dimmed the vision of the scientist.” “[T]he feeling of understanding [rather than prediction and control] is a subjective effect aimed at by artists, not scientists.” “There is a legitimate art of personality, literary biography. An artist like André Maurois is not hindered by not being a scientist of any kind.”⁴³ And so on.

Allport quickly realized that he had made a strategic error in trying to draw so sharp a contrast between idiographic and nomothetic approaches. He thereafter tried to replace “idiographic” with a less extreme term, “morphogenic,” which refers to studying individualized patterning processes in personality rather than totally unique personalities.⁴⁴ As Allport recognized, a personality researcher can find ways to capture the processes that *create* a subject’s individuality, while remaining a serious scientist who abides by all the unartistic “hindrances” involved in responsible treatment of data. But the word “morphogenic” never really caught on. The word “idiographic” remains a term of opprobrium among psychologists who want to think of themselves as scientists and not artists. In fact, it’s right up there with that bad word “psychobiography.”

But it’s time for psychologists to sniff a rose or two, instead of merely measuring the mean attitudes of a thousand-person random sample toward red roses versus white. It’s time for psychologists to hold that rosy scent in their own nostrils long enough to appreciate its distinct rosininess, instead of struggling to identify the basic sensory processes that make us prefer the scent of roses to the stink of sewer sludge. At least some psychologists, some of the time, need to subdue their urge toward the nomothetic, to relax their hold on an outdated scientific puritanism, to look at a real life because of the sheer interest and individual value of that life.

Surely the understanding of a single life can be an important goal in itself, with no necessity to justify it by reference to other ends. That’s especially true when the life being studied is of one of the greats among humanity: Melville or Gandhi, Einstein or Freud, Florence Nightingale or Thomas Jefferson. Leon Edel didn’t set out to write a five-volume biography of Henry James in order to see how well a Freudian interpretation would fit *Daisy Miller*. Rather, he felt that James was “a Shakespeare of the novel” who demanded close attention.⁴⁵ And if James was a Shakespeare of the novel, who is the Shakespeare of rock ‘n’ roll singers? That’s

why clinical psychologist Bruce Heller and I have been working on a psychobiography of Elvis Presley for the past decade.⁴⁶ We aren't seeking to test a particular brand of psychological theory or to develop a nomothetic typology of rock musicians. We just want to gain a better grasp of the personal psychology and charismatic appeal of one of the key figures of contemporary culture. After all, Elvis was The King. For many people, he still is. What greater justification do we need?

Lesser figures demand attention as well. The sheer particularity of personality should provide sufficient grounds for us to say, "Sometimes let's look not only at what is found in everybody or in most people, but in a few or in one." The old woman whom Gordon Allport called Jenny contributed little to our culture. In her final years she probably caused more hurt than help to a variety of people. She might well have died unknown and unlamented. But she wrote a stack of letters to Allport and his wife. In those letters she emerged as a distinct individual, not easily pinned down or pigeonholed by any single theory, but worth looking at for her own singularity.⁴⁷ Obviously that's a statement of value. But what value is worth defending more vigorously in these times than the value of the individual human life? And won't psychology as a field be the better—the more responsible, the more inclusive—for recognizing and acting upon that value?

The Rest of the Book

The next fourteen chapters show a psychologist doing psychobiography. I hope these chapters will interest readers who have no intention of ever doing a psychobiography themselves, will instruct non-psychologists who want to do something psychobiographical but aren't sure how to go about it, and will inspire psychologists who already know how to do it but just need a little push. Two chapters are mainly methodological, but they refer to specific cases as well. Twelve chapters are mainly discussions of specific cases, but they also illustrate and explain my psychobiographical methods. The case-history chapters are grouped into three content areas, which happen to be three of the major areas of psychobiography in general: studies of *theorists* (mine are all psychological theorists); studies of *creative artists* (mine are all writers of the fantastic); and studies of *politicians* (mine are all Americans, except for one anti-American).

In these remaining fourteen chapters, will I practice what I've preached in Chapter 1? Most of the time, but perhaps not always. Psychobiography is a tricky business and it's hard to keep all the balls in the air all the time. The range of theories I've used isn't as wide as it might be, though I've tried in each case to choose the theory that best explains the person I'm studying. My methods are often whatever will work at the time, rather than a carefully-planned-in-advance strategy of data collection and analysis. Sometimes I had a careful strategy and it didn't pay off, so I dumped it and took advantage of a fortuitous combination of

circumstances. I do usually try to look for evidence of psychological strengths in the people who most interest me, though I may not have done that quite enough for Henry Kissinger and Alexander Haig in Chapter 14. I may be more reductive than some readers would like when I discuss their favorite author or theorist—but I'm not offering my conclusions as full or final answers to anybody's life mysteries.

Do I really expect other psychologists to answer my call to get involved in psychobiography? A few already have. A few others had begun to work the field before I ever gave a thought to proselytizing. There are still too few of us to have made a strong impact yet, either on psychology or on psychobiography, but we're gaining strength.⁴⁸ Biography is one of the most popular genres in publishing today. Psychobiography, whether it's called that or something else, is an increasingly popular approach to biography. Psychobiography and psychologists need each other. I don't expect a flood of applicants to my so-far-imaginary Institute of Psychobiography, or a mountain of manuscripts to my so-far-fantasy *Journal of Biographical Psychology*. But the seeds are there. As Thoreau said, "Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."⁴⁹