CA News No. 34, June 2006

GREEK LIVES

Christopher Pelling

Biography is in fashion: one has only to scan the shelves in W. H. Smith's to see that. And we all know what biographies and autobiographies are, don't we? They start at the beginning: so many autobiographies open with those depressing words 'I was born...'. And they go on to the end, wherever the end may be. For biographies, that usually means, almost literally, cradle to grave; for autobiographies, it means 'as far as I've got so far'. It all seems so natural that we feel thoroughly at home in Plutarch's Lives, which pretty well share that structure; we feel at home too when those Lives are, at least mainly, stories of achievement, as Plutarch tells of the firm, directed, swiftly moving advance of an Alexander or a Pericles or a Caesar. That ideal of directed rapidity is even captured in the metaphors we use for lives today, with 'careers' and 'trajectories' and even that 'running-course of life', the 'curriculum vitae'.

We feel so at home that we can easily miss how original Plutarch was being in doing biography like that. Perhaps, indeed, Plutarch has a lot to answer for in *shaping* biography in its modern form. For linear, cradle-to-grave narrative was by no means the only, and not the most obvious, way of telling a life. Nepos had done it that way, but only sketchily, and he was the exception. In the fourth century BC Isocrates' *Evagoras* and Xenophon's *Agesilaus* had organised a good deal of their material in a non-chronological way, summarising the qualities of the man as well as giving a narrative. Biography was even flexible enough to include at least one writer, Satyrus, who wrote in dialogue form, and also Dicaeopolis' *Life of Greece,* a picture of the way Greeks lived rather than anyone's narrative story. And one of the most strikingly individual portraits of all comes in a work that has very little narrative, Xenophon's *Memoirs of Socrates.*

Nor is that coincidence. Socrates was a fascinating figure, to his contemporaries and to later generations as he is to us; but it does not look as if anyone tried to turn his story into a cradle-to-grave narrative. His death mattered a good deal, but not his childhood. He indeed seems a more or less timeless figure, perpetually of a certain age, perpetually up for a good conversation, perpetually bald. It was *how* he lived and died that mattered, for Xenophon as for Plato. After all, once one had really come to understand virtue and wisdom, one's life would not change much. 'Trajectories' were

for lesser people, the self-willed and ambitious, those who wanted to be more worldly achievers.

Other intellectuals, too, lent themselves to a less chronological structure: that sort of life may not transpose readily into a steady forward-moving story, any more than it suits a modern c.v. (What, indeed, *would* Socrates' c.v. look like? '440-399: conversation in the *agora,* with intermittent military service. Publications: nil.') Thus Diogenes Laertius' or Philostratus' *Lives* of philosophers and sophists are not specially linear, or rather the linearity is not so much *within* an individual's life but *across* a sequence of lives, so that it builds up a picture of how philosophy or rhetoric developed through several generations. It is a way of doing intellectual history, in fact. Plutarch's contemporary Suetonius may have been unusual in adapting to political figures this 'how he lived' type of biography, in his case through combining a narrative with a set of 'categories' for describing an emperor's qualities, but in many ways he is the more traditional figure of the two. He, too, was compiling a series, and we should see Suetonius' *Caesars* as working together to plot the development of the early principate, tracing not merely how different qualities combine in a single person but also how related qualities came back and developed from one reign to the next.

So one Life is not enough: not enough, anyway, to do the more interesting things that biography can do. That is often true of more recent biographies too. There are all those series of Lives of Great Men (and usually it is Men rather than Women): Lives of the Composers, of the Jurists, of the Artists, of the Saints (a few women may be grudgingly admitted there), of the Admirals, and also of the Pirates, squaring up to the Admirals for all the world as if they were baseball teams. Most of those do adopt something like a narrative structure; most, after all, treat Persons of Achievement. But it is probably the saints who have least overall narrative structure in their lives, at least after their conversion and before their final days. As with Socrates, once they have made it to being good, nothing much alters until it all changes so catastrophically at the end.

Recently, too, there has developed a new sort of series of lives, one more respected by 'serious' historians: the lives of people who are not at all great, who lived humdrum lives at a low social level. Collecting the lives of, say, a series of northern

mill-workers or American slaves becomes a worm's-eye-view way of doing social history. Here, at last, women do finally find their place.

Typically there is much less narrative in these Lives, and that is only partly because usually not enough is known to tell a full story. Part of the point is again that nothing much changes and there is no 'trajectory': every day is much like the next, the personal dramas that turn a life upside down strike out of the blue and could have happened a year before or a year later, and once they have gone more years pass in the same rhythm. Here too there may be a broader narrative, one that overarches an individual's life but is felt in a whole series: a narrative of the development of black identity, perhaps, or of increasing or diminishing prosperity or despair. But again a single life is only a small part of the larger historical story, together with an extra suggestion that those overarching themes are equally only a small part of the story for the individual: it is the personal that really counts in most of our lives, not to play an infinitesimal part in a wider social trend.

Northern mill-workers or American slaves may seem some way from Plutarch. His men – and they are indeed men – have non-humdrum lives of achievement. They do have trajectories. They fit the linear narrative, though he also uses that form deftly to convey 'how they lived' and what they were like. Yet the two sorts of biography have more in common than one might think. For Plutarch too one Life is not enough. Nearly all his biographies are in pairs, so that we are constantly using one life as a benchmark for another. And, as a series, they build up a picture of whole cultures, not just of the individuals. Nor is Plutarch shy about making big generalisations about those cultures: 'Did not Rome make her great advances through warfare? That is a question that requires a long answer for those who define "advance" in terms of wealth, luxury, and empire rather than safety, restraint, and an honest independence' *(Comparison of Lycurgus and Numa* 4.12-13). And Plutarch's friends and readers, especially the Roman ones, included men of contemporary achievement. He made them think, and about more than a single person's story.

Plutarch's subjects are achievers too, but there is more to their life than worldly success. He is interested in other aspects as well, especially in their womenfolk (and women are prominent in these lives, even if they do not get a Life to themselves: one has

only to think of Cleopatra, or Coriolanus' terrifying mother Volumnia). Often, too, the men's choice of an achieving life was not the only possible one. The uxorious Pompey would far prefer to spend more time with his family than to continue as the man of action; Antony would prefer to party with Cleopatra; Sertorius would like to get away from it all to the Isles of the Blest; Cicero is deeply torn between studious contemplation and political mayhem. And in most, perhaps all those cases (even Antony!) Plutarch seems to like the man the more for being torn, for feeling the attraction of those alternative lives where one day was like the next and there were no trajectories. And as for the man who is supremely directed and ambitious: Julius Caesar 'had sought doniinion and power all his days, and after facing so many dangers he had finally achieved them. And the only benefit he reaped was its empty name, and the perils of fame amid his envious fellow-citizens' *(Caes.* 69.1)

So Plutarch may indeed have a lot to answer for, but it is not, or not only, for fixing biography as a genre that celebrates conventional achievement. There is also that awareness that there are alternative ways to live, choices to make, values other than those of worldly success.

And yet, had any of them made the choice to abandon the life of achievement, they would not have made it into the series at all, for there would have been no story to tell. No one should pretend that these choices are easy. Plutarch certainly doesn't.

Christopher Pelling is Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford University. This is an abbreviated version of his inaugural lecture, delivered on 20 *May* 2004. *The full version was published as 'Greek Lives' in Ploutarchos n.s.* 2 (2004-5), 71-88: *for details go to http://www.usu.edu/history/ploutarchos.*

[Reproduced from *CA News* No. 34, June 2006]