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“Domestick Privacies”: Biography and the Sanctifying of Privacy, from Johnson to Martineau¹

MODERN SOCIETIES MAINTAIN A number of conflicting attitudes towards privacy. On the one hand, privacy is widely considered a right deserving of protection under the law. Australia and Canada both have federal “privacy commissioners,” and in April 2000 the Canadian government enacted a “Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act.” “Data Protection” is written into law in the United Kingdom, so that government agencies, banks, and insurance companies cannot pass on information about clients without their knowledge. In the United States, a statutory right of privacy protects personal information, with certain exceptions, and the First, Fourth, Fifth, and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution have been interpreted as in limited ways establishing the right of individuals to personal privacy.² Yet many people feel that it is increasingly difficult to keep their private affairs private, and our public culture actually demands regular invasions of people’s privacy. At least, this is what’s suggested by some well-known television programs, and the tabloid newspaper

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² Privacy law in the United States of America is a complex matter. For a good overview, see the Legal Information Institute website at: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/topics/privacy.html>.

business thrives on the public appetite for exposés of the private activities of the very famous. Sometimes journalists writing for the more high-minded publications express concern about this. But I would guess that, on the other hand, few ordinary citizens are concerned about either the unwanted publicity sometimes endured by film stars, or the legalized invasions of privacy necessary to catch, say, traffickers in child pornography.

Despite these contradictions in modern public culture, the right to keep *some* things private, and a consensus that public exposure (when not actually sought by an individual) is painful and humiliating, are considered fundamental to modern society. This is the argument of the American left-liberal philosopher Thomas Nagel, who in an essay first published in 1998, when President Clinton's extra-marital relationships were being subjected to intensive investigation both by the press and by judicial authorities, expressed concern about the intrusions of the media into the private lives of politicians and others. Nagel argued that it is in everyone's interest—not just that of people in the public eye—to maintain and respect the boundary between public and private. This boundary, he wrote, “keeps the public domain free of disruptive material; but it also keeps the private domain free of insupportable controls.”³ In another essay, he expands the point: “The distinction between what an individual exposes to public view and what he conceals or exposes only to intimates is essential to permit creatures as complex as ourselves to interact without constant social breakdown” (28). Nagel's case, as summarized by a recent commentator in the *London Review of Books*, is that “it is through our restraint—our willingness not to speak everything that we think—that we show our capacities for forbearance, kindness, respect for others, and trust.... For Nagel, learning to pass back and forth between our inner worlds and the public domain is what growing up is all about.”⁴

Nagel's ideas about privacy probably strike most of us as reasonable, and even as very timely given recent developments in public culture, particularly in the US. However, it's important to recognize that privacy is a cultural value that has evolved over several centuries. It has a history, in other words. In Nagel's writings, as is often the case, public and private are envisaged in spatial terms: we move between “the private domain,” or even an “inner world,” and “the public domain.” These metaphors of space place us in Habermas territory—the division of life into the “public sphere”

³ Thomas Nagel, *Concealment and Exposure and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 18.

⁴ Nicholas Spice, “I Must be Mad,” *London Review of Books* (8 Jan. 2004): 11.

and the “domestic sphere.” The history of concepts of privacy is clearly in some degree a history of spaces, and particularly the development of the modern home out of its contrasting ancestors, the landowner’s mansion and the farm labourer’s cottage. But print culture also had an important role in the development of modern notions of privacy, and in the wake of Habermas’s work literary scholars have examined the relationship between literary production and the interconnected notions of a private sphere and individual autonomy. As Cecile Jagodzinski points out in *Privacy and Print*, in sixteenth-century England the act of reading in a private place became an integral part of the practice of a religious discipline which one might not necessarily wish others to know about, particularly if they held legally-sanctioned authority.⁵ In the religious controversies of the early seventeenth century, the connection between fidelity to one’s religion and reading a Bible, prayer-book, psalter, or doctrinal text in one’s own private space was further consolidated, so that by 1700 the association between private space and reading, as well as that between private space and the inner self, the location of the conscience, was deeply-rooted.

The work of sanctifying domestic space as the preserve of the private individual, and more particularly of limiting women to the role of being moral guardians of this preserve, was continued in the eighteenth century—as many critics have noted—by the novel, in so far as the novel became first a rival and then a triumphant successor to the conduct books: “literacy,” as Nancy Armstrong puts it, “offered the most efficient means for shaping individuals.”⁶ Here, I want to make the case that, from 1750 onwards, biography had at least as important a role in defining and contesting the boundary between private and public. Moreover, I want to argue that early nineteenth-century controversies about the extent to which biographers should make use of private information helped to set the terms for more recent battles about the protection of individuals’ private spaces from public intrusion.

⁵ Cecile M. Jagodzinski, *Privacy and Print: Reading and Writing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 1999) 19. See also Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

⁶ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 100. See also Mary Jean Corbett, “Literary Domesticity and Women Writers’ Subjectivities,” *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998) 255–63; Christopher Flint, *Family Fictions: Narrative and Domestic Relations in Britain, 1688–1798* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998) 289–91, 304.

The arrival of biography as a major genre was one of the most significant changes in literary culture to take place between 1750 and 1820. Scholars have linked the emergence of "life-writing" (including both biography and autobiography) to the expansion of the book trade, as well as to readers' taste for personal narratives and their preference for personalized accounts of historical events.⁷ It was Samuel Johnson who most authoritatively extolled the usefulness of biography, linking the reading of biography to the inculcation of virtue. He upheld biography as superior even to history in transmitting those patterns of virtue which would inspire the reader to emulate past greatness. For Johnson, writing in *Rambler* no. 185 (24 December 1751), the pursuit of virtue ought to be the supreme goal of life: "The utmost excellence at which humanity can arrive, is a constant and determinate pursuit of virtue, without regard to present dangers or advantage; a continual reference of every action to the divine will; an habitual appeal to everlasting justice; and an unvaried elevation of the intellectual eye to the reward which perseverance alone can obtain."⁸ As H.J. Jackson comments in relation to this passage, Johnson disdains the Aristotelian notion that virtue lay in the *via media*. Human nature is so inclined towards seeking comfort and ease that it is necessary to aim well *above* the mid-point.⁹ The pursuit of virtue takes effort, as Johnson emphasises through his stress on "perseverance," and his use of the adjectives "constant," "determinate," "continual," and "unvaried." Moreover, Johnson accepts that most of us cannot readily learn virtue from abstract principles. It is with this assumption in mind that in *Rambler* no. 60 he proclaims biography a better vehicle of instruction than history. Historical narratives, Johnson argues, "complicate innumerable incidents in one great transaction" and "afford few lessons applicable to private life." Biography, on the other hand, has the great advantage of communicating its useful lessons in ways that irresistibly engage our feelings:

⁷ See John Brewer and Iain McCalman, "Publishing," *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776–1832*, ed. Iain McCalman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 198; Jon Mee, "Autobiography," in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age* 411; Jane Stabler, "Biography," in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age*: 425; Joseph W. Reed, Jr., *English Biography in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1966) 14–25; and Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591–1791* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997) 42–43.

⁸ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, ed. W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, *Works*, ed. W.J. Bate et al., 13 vols to date (New Haven: Yale UP, 1958–) vols 3–5 (1969) 5:209.

⁹ H.J. Jackson, "The Immoderation of Samuel Johnson," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 59.3 (1990): 393.

Those parallel circumstances, and kindred images, to which we readily conform our minds, are, above all other writings, to be found in the narratives of the lives of particular persons; and therefore no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition. (*Works* 3:319)

In contrast to the modern assumption that a biography is a window into the different, exotic life of another person—the thrilling revelation of what Wilde's *Lady Bracknell* refers to as “a life crowded with incident”—Johnson bases his promotion of biography on the judgment that human beings everywhere share the same characteristics. “We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies . . .” (*Works* 3:320). Moreover, private individuals (which is to say, most of us) need models of behaviour that are relevant to domestic life rather than affairs of state. This is why Johnson exhorts the biographer to pay particular attention to the private life of his subject:

the business of the biographer is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents, which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestick privacies, and display the minute appearances of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue. (*Works* 3:321)

This, then, is the rather remarkable Johnsonian rationale for promoting biography as a highly instructive, morally useful genre. He clearly realised that biographies would have to portray the errors and failings of their subjects, and in fact specifically warned that respect for the dead does not cancel out the higher respect owed to truth (*Works* 3:323). But, surprisingly in view of his general pessimism about human nature, he does not seem to have envisaged the possibility that biographies would be read for their scandalous exposés rather than for their exemplary models of virtuous private conduct. For Johnson, since the solid virtues like prudence appear best in private life, biographers often need to pay more attention to “domestick privacies” than to their subject's public achievements.

It is ironic, then, that when Boswell's *Life of Johnson* appeared in 1791, many of the Great Cham's admirers felt Boswell had disclosed too much of his subject's personal life. The idea of biography as an inducement to virtue took an even more serious blow in 1798, when William Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* appeared. Notoriously, that biography included accounts of Wollstonecraft's sexual attraction to the painter Fuseli, the relationship she entered on while in Paris with the American entrepreneur Gilbert Imlay, her relationship with Godwin himself

before their eventual marriage, and her death from a fever contracted after giving birth to her second child—elaborated with the sort of medical details that would rarely have appeared in print other than in medical textbooks. Godwin's refusal to conceal or gloss over these episodes outraged even many of those who had been his political allies and disciples.

By 1800, then, the boundary between private and public had become complicated in a way that Johnson did not foresee, and it was biography that most often made this line of demarcation controversial. Biography was considered a new genre, too, and its boundaries were not firmly settled. While Johnson had tried to fix the boundaries of literary genres, including biography, the Romantic period rapidly unsettled them.¹⁰ Biography and other kinds of life-writing had in a curious way taken on some novelistic features, just as the novel had earlier borrowed the epistolary form from life-writing. (As Pam Perkins has shown, in the late eighteenth century the intimacy, fragmentary form, and other characteristics of personal letters “had been appropriated and professionalized by novelists.”¹¹) One consequence was that readers came to expect biography and auto- or ‘self’-biography to offer the same narrative momentum and revelation of passionate feeling that novels did. It was an aspect of a new phenomenon, the invention of “the author,” in the new sense of the word initiated during this period: one who is presumed to be personally the originator of a work, as opposed to being “master of a body of rules, or techniques,” and who claims the work as his or her own “product—and property.”¹² The favourable public response to Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* exemplified this development. Nevertheless, those who feared that the press would intrude upon writers' private space viewed Godwin's scorn for the customary discretion, in his *Memoirs*, as exceeding all reasonable limits.

The Johnsonian view was still alive, however, and was vigorously defended in 1813 by James Field Stanfield. His *Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* emphasized the biographical subject as the hero

¹⁰ See Richard C. Sha, “A Genre Against Genre: The Visual and Verbal Sketch in British Romanticism,” *Genre* 28.1/2 (Spring/Summer 1995): 146.

¹¹ Pamela Perkins, “Anne Grant and the Professionalization of Privacy,” *Authorship, Commerce and the Public: Scenes of Writing, 1750–1850*, ed. E.J. Clery, Caroline Franklin and Peter Garside (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 30.

¹² Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 36–37. For a more recent account of the development of authorship from c 1590 to the 1700s see Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 325, 445 and passim.

of the story and (ideally) as a model for the reader to emulate, rather than as a potential victim of scandal. Stanfield, who was active in the movement for abolition of slavery, unabashedly claimed for biography an exemplary and didactic role. He wrote the *Essay*, he tells us, “to promote, in students as well as writers, through the medium of biography, a more attentive examination of the principles of the human character; and a very ardent hope, that the effects of such investigation may be actively applied to the improvable points of education and conduct.”¹³ Discussing in Part II the requirements of a good biographer, he comments that a biographer needs, above all else, “a mind unoccupied by prejudice, and a heart untainted by corruption . . . the object being truth, and the end instruction” (85). This is all very much in the high-minded Johnsonian tradition, emphasizing the function of biography as a genre that can foster “moral rectitude” (83), as indeed the conduct books did, but with the inestimable advantage over them of being exciting to read, while at the same time being—unlike novels—truthful. What makes Stanfield’s *Essay* particularly interesting, however, is not his rather schoolmasterish proselytizing for the usefulness of biography but his almost comically contradictory stance on the matter of privacy and a biographer’s discretion. A biography must above all be truthful, he affirms: “utility can only proceed from faithfulness of representation” (134). What is more, this truth is not only a truth of outward appearances, or of actions carried out in the public eye, but a truth of inner character. “The character,” Stanfield proclaims, “is all in all” (276). The biographer must therefore show us not only what Johnson called the “domestick privacies” of the subject, but his or her mind and motivation. The biographer should therefore study any available journals or diaries, since they give the “minute” detail of a subject’s thoughts and purposes (88). Similarly, a person’s letters reveal his or her real inner nature much more fully than even the most intimate observation: “observation can only furnish us with the view and tenure of a man’s ostensible actions; but letters lay open the communication of his very thoughts and purposes” (175). Stanfield actually takes issue with Johnson on this point, arguing (contrary to what Johnson believed) that letters do reveal the true character of the writer. So do we take it that the biographer should make free use of the subject’s personal correspondence? Apparently not: Stanfield advises that “cool discretion will be necessary” (175). It appears that there is an important judgment to be made about just *how much*

¹³ James Field Stanfield, *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography* (Sunderland: Printed by George Carbutt, 1813) vi.

truth should be conveyed in a biography, and the criterion to be applied is the mind of the biographer, which must be impartial, yet enthusiastic; upright, yet unprejudiced; judicious, yet capable of empathizing with the motives of others (23, 27, 85, 109, 149).

The contradictions implicit in this analysis of the biographer's art emerge most startlingly in Stanfield's extraordinary discussion of Rousseau's *Confessions*, which he at one moment praises for displaying "the nature, rise, secret progress, and continuation, of distinct passions" (37), then roundly condemns for its "insatiable vanity," "inordinate pride," and "degrading propensities obtruded into view" (38). Stanfield's contradictory stance perfectly demonstrates the conflict that was emerging in the early 1800s between the ideal of biography as the most engaging way of teaching morality (he ascribes to Johnson the "elevated character of a moral biographer" [147]), and the growing public curiosity, assiduously fed by printers and publishers as well as by the new conception of the "author" as original genius, about the private lives of the famous. If Robert Southey's *Life of Nelson* (1813) is an example of the first type—for Southey certainly exercised "cool discretion" in omitting all the more intimate details of Nelson's private life—then the reception of James Currie's *Life of Robert Burns* (1796, republished many times) exemplifies the second. I will return shortly to Currie's *Burns*, and particularly the matter of Wordsworth's much-discussed reaction to it.

Coleridge's one venture into the genre of biography, the "Sketches of the Life of Sir Alexander Ball" which take up the last six essays in the 1818 *Friend*,¹⁴ opens with some observations about the ethics of biography that combine Johnson's and Stanfield's emphasis on "instruction," or biography as offering examples of moral rectitude, with a reticence about the private and domestic that is more characteristic of conservative Romantic-period biographers such as Southey and J.G. Lockhart.

Being merely "Sketches," these essays pretended to a certain artlessness and informality. The biographical sketch, even more than the full-length biography, could claim to escape constraints of genre, as Richard C. Sha suggests (156). Nevertheless, Coleridge carefully distinguishes between the public realm, in which Sir Alexander was a fairly important actor (administrator of the island of Malta during the Napoleonic Wars) but which did not give him the recognition that Coleridge felt he really deserved, and the private realm, about which Coleridge knew something, but considered it would be wrong to bring into public view. "[H]aving received neither

¹⁴ S.T. Coleridge, *The Friend: A Series of Essays*, 3 vols (London: Printed for Rest Fenner, 1818).

instructions nor permission from the family of the deceased," Coleridge writes, "I cannot think myself allowed to enter into the particulars of his private history, strikingly as many of them would illustrate the elements and composition of his mind" (3:282). Therefore Coleridge's biographical sketches would emphasize the achievements and public service by which Sir Alexander should be remembered, and the exemplary nature of these achievements. Coleridge remarks: "When we are praising the departed by our own fire-sides, we dwell most fondly on those qualities which had won our personal affection, and which sharpen our individual regrets. But when impelled by a loftier and more meditative sorrow, we would raise a public monument to their memory, we praise them appropriately when we relate their actions faithfully: and thus preserving their example for the imitation of the living, alleviate the loss, while we demonstrate its magnitude" (3:286). For Coleridge, then, the published biography has some affinities with the eulogy, but should also motivate readers to take the subject's life as an example ("preserving their example for the imitation of the living"). The biographical sketch retains a sense of high moral purpose.

It is in this context, then, that I want to consider Wordsworth's much-ridiculed *Letter to A Friend of Robert Burns: Occasioned by an intended republication of the account of the life of Burns, by Dr. Currie* (1816).¹⁵ Ostensibly, Wordsworth published his letter in order to help defend the reputation of a brother poet from the "injurious assertions" and "misrepresentations" contained in the biography which Currie wrote for the 1796 edition of Burns's *Works* and which he expanded—adding many letters from Burns and his friends—in later editions. Wordsworth rather unfairly represents Currie as bearing the main share of responsibility for disclosing the distressing history of Burns's susceptibility to alcohol and its contribution to his last illness and death. Wordsworth accuses Currie, in fact, of not knowing when to keep quiet. Quoting Burns's "Address to the Unco' Guid" as a plea for magnanimity in our judgment of other people's weaknesses, Wordsworth claims that Currie showed no such magnanimity when "revealing to the world the infirmities" of this poem's author: "here is a revolting account of a man of exquisite genius, and confessedly of many high moral qualities, sunk into the lowest depths of vice and misery!" (3:119). Wordsworth moves quickly to his main criticism of Currie: that as a professed friend of the poet, as well as his biographer, he should have "known when to stop short" (3:120). Currie should have said as little as possible about Burns's so-called

¹⁵William Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

intemperance. Wordsworth extends his attack to include Francis Jeffrey, who in the *Edinburgh Review* criticised Burns for showing “contempt ... for prudence, decency, and regularity,” and for conveying, in too many of his poems, “a character of immorality at once contemptible and hateful” (quoted, 3:126n).

A number of hasty and hostile judgments have been made about both Currie’s biography and Wordsworth’s attack on it, and at present I am less interested in defending either Wordsworth or Currie than in understanding this controversy as an episode in the development of modern biography. A great deal was at stake: national pride, since Burns’s achievement constituted Scotland’s best claim to greatness in poetry since the era of Dunbar, Henryson, and Douglas; class, and what might be seen as the exploitation of a labouring-class hero, or “peasant of genius,” by the “Enbrugh gentry”; the claims increasingly being made for poetry and imagination; and, not least, what came to be known as “the dignity of biography.”¹⁶

It is (firstly) very evident to anyone who actually reads Currie’s *Life* that, though his interpretation of Burns is profoundly coloured by his assumptions about the poetic temperament, Currie did not set out to sensationalise the narrative of Burns’s last years. If anything, he is (by modern standards) excessively reticent and tactful, both on the subject of Burns’s many love affairs and on that of his consumption of alcohol. He holds to the Johnsonian view that there are lessons to be learned from every human life, and especially from the lives of those who distinguish themselves in some area of endeavour. Truth must be respected: “It is, indeed, a duty we owe to the living, not to allow our admiration of great genius, or even our pity for its unhappy destiny, to conceal or disguise its errors”—the biography-as-moral-example argument. He nevertheless insists that respect is owed to the dead: “let those who moralize over the graves of their contemporaries, reflect with humility on their own errors, nor forget how soon they may

¹⁶ The phrase “peasant of genius” is David Daiches’: “Robert Burns: The Tightrope Walker,” *Love and Liberty: Robert Burns: A Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. Kenneth Simpson (East Linton, East Lothian, Scotland: Tuckwell Press, 1997) 24. On Burns’s reputation and legend, see also Richard J. Finlay, “The Burns Cult and Scottish Identity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Love and Liberty* 69–70; Robert Crawford, “Robert Fergusson’s Robert Burns,” in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, ed. R. Crawford (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1997) 7; and Nicholas Roe, “Authenticating Robert Burns,” in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority* 159–60. On the “dignity of biography,” see Reed’s chapter “Dignity and Suppression,” *English Biography* 38–65.

¹⁷ James Currie, “The Life of Robert Burns,” *The Works of Robert Burns; with an Account of his Life, and a Criticism of his Writings*, 5th edition, 4 vols. (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1806) 1:251.

themselves require the candour and the sympathy they are called upon to bestow.”¹⁷ Following the principle of truthfulness, Currie’s account of Burns’s decline does not so much represent the poet as inherently weak but rather shows how he was drawn into overindulgence by the social pressures attendant on being a famous poet, and by the nature of his appointment as exciseman. It is true that, as Leith Davis has pointed out, Currie highlights Burns’s excessive “sensibility,” and connects it with his hypochondriasis, as if to suggest that hypochondriasis, or excess of sensibility, is the poet’s occupational hazard. Davis also makes a convincing case for seeing Currie as having a barely-concealed political agenda in this biography, since he “associates this sensibility unequivocally with the poet’s ‘national prejudice.’”¹⁸ In other words, Currie is hostile to Burns’s brand of Scottish nationalism, and tries to neutralize and deflect attention from it by associating it with the poet’s nervous state. The tone that Currie assumes is certainly that of the wise and judicious doctor, required to be concerned for the health of his patient:

Hitherto Burns, though addicted to excess in social parties, had abstained from the habitual use of strong liquors, and his constitution had not suffered any permanent injury from the irregularities of his conduct. In Dumfries, temptations to *the sin that so easily beset him*, continually presented themselves; and his irregularities grew by degrees into habits. These temptations unhappily occurred during his engagements in the business of his office [as gauger or excise-man], as well as during his hours of relaxation; and though he clearly foresaw the consequence of yielding to them, his appetites and sensations, which could not pervert the dictates of his judgment, finally triumphed over the powers of his will. Yet this victory was not obtained without many obstinate struggles, and at times temperance and virtue seemed to have obtained the mastery . . . there were never wanting persons to share his social pleasures; to lead or accompany him to the tavern; to partake in the wildest sallies of his wit; to witness the strength and the degradation of his genius. (1:203–04)

This predisposition to disease, which strict temperance in diet, regular exercise, and sound sleep might have subdued, habits of a very different nature strengthened and inflamed. Perpetually stimulated by alcohol in one or other of its various forms, the inordinate actions of the circulating system became at length habitual: the process of nutrition was unable to supply the waste, and the powers of life began to fail. Upwards of a year before his death, there was an evident decline in our poet’s personal appearance, and though his appetite continued unimpaired, he was himself sensible that his constitution was sinking. (1:218)

The severity of Currie’s judgment is directed less against Burns than against those who made themselves his boon companions, and irresponsibly encour-

¹⁸ Leith Davis, “The Politics of Hypochondriasis: James Currie’s Works of Robert Burns,” *Studies in Romanticism* 36 (1997): 50.

aged him to perform the role of the daredevil rhymester and “peasant of genius.” To the modern reader, his remarks certainly sound patronising and occasionally preachy (he speaks of the “pollution of inebriation” [1:219]). Davis’s analysis of the *Life* also points to political bias on Currie’s part, suggesting that he represents Burns’s nationalistic feelings as a symptom of emotional immaturity. However, if there is such a concealed motive for this emphasis on the poet’s weak physical constitution and emotional instability, a complete picture of what Currie is up to must also take into account the expectations about biography that Currie would have imbibed from the Johnsonian tradition. As we have seen, the Johnsonian model required the biographer to be candid about the subject’s weaknesses as well as praising his strengths. Further, Currie should perhaps be given credit for a clear-eyed analysis of Burns’s social predicament after the publication of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*: his loss of social moorings, and his exploitation by those who wanted the social kudos that went with being known as a tavern companion of the native-born genius.¹⁹ Poets who emerged from a labouring-class background—even though, in Scotland anyway, such a background was consonant with a high level of formal education—were too often forced into the romantic mould of the leader of the bacchic revels, the “inspired charity-boy.” Anya Taylor has discussed at some length this element in the way the age treated Burns, but rather romanticizes both Burns himself and the contemporary view of him, mainly by ignoring the astute awareness of class that is evident in Currie’s biography and the fact that Currie was not so much blaming Burns himself for his decline as showing how this very stereotype of the poet as bacchic reveller was a convenient way for the middle class to neutralize the supposedly “self-taught” labouring-class writer. Taylor titles her chapter “Romantic Homage to the Dionysian Burns” and rather misleadingly, I think, suggests that Wordsworth’s chief purpose was to rescue Burns’s reputation by praising him as a free spirit, and more or less excusing his alcoholism.

Wordsworth insisted that Burns, like himself, was at the mercy of uncomprehending critics. His rage against these critics ... and his allegiance to his fellow poet against them, transformed Wordsworth’s ideal of the poet, for even a dissolute poet is better than a carping critic. Where the Preface of 1800 had called the poet “a man speaking to men,” here the “privilege of poetic genius” is to “catch ... a spirit of pleasure wherever it can be found.” The poet has the licence to cultivate excess in the search for Dionysian rapture²⁰

¹⁹ See also Henry L. Fulton, “From Mrs. Dunlop to the Currie Edition: The Missing Links,” in *Love and Liberty* 256–63.

²⁰ Anya Taylor, *Bacchus in Romantic England: Writers and Drink, 1780–1830* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) 53.

Wordsworth certainly does associate the poetical character with an ability to enter into others' pleasures (*Prose Works* 3:124), and, against the increasingly evangelical tone of much contemporary discourse, he hints that occasional alcoholic indulgence should not destroy a man's reputation. It is also true that he elsewhere pays homage to Burns as the authentic voice of "humble truth," and in "At the Grave of Burns, 1803" hints that he had been "wronged."²¹ But what principally emerges from the *Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns*, I suggest, is not a tribute to the "Dionysian Burns" but rather what might be called a panic about privacy. John Wilson, writing in *Blackwood's* in 1817, detected personal animus in Wordsworth's *Letter*, accusing him of "hypocritical zeal" in that he merely used the republication of Currie's *Life* as a pretext for an attack on Jeffrey and the *Edinburgh Review*, which had censured his own poems: "It is not Robert Burns for whom he feels,—it is William Wordsworth" (quoted, *Prose Works* 3:112n). Hazlitt similarly mocked Wordsworth's defence of Burns as unconvincing, coming from a Tory who in 1813, unforgivably, had accepted a government job (see Wordsworth *Prose Works* 3:113n). As Hazlitt's comment suggests, it is a distortion to see this simply as a matter of personal animosity (Wordsworth's dislike of Jeffrey) or as an example of the excessive "irritability" of which poets are frequently but—according to Coleridge—wrongly accused. What is at issue here is the politics of biography, and especially the growing role of biography in furthering the romantic image of the poet as the self-taught, inspired, but possibly unstable genius. Once a poet like Burns has been identified as the true voice of his nation, the events of his life, including any peccadilloes, suddenly become a matter of intense public concern. At some level, Wordsworth surely sensed this and saw that the unforgiving light of public scrutiny would before long be turned on him—for had he not presented himself both as the voice of a dying rural England and as Milton's true successor? As Leith Davis says, pointing out the relevance of Burns's life to what she calls "the literary negotiation of the British union," the "re-creation" of Burns had to do with "presenting an image of a Burns who could represent an approved Scotland in the cultural realm."²² Wordsworth was hardly an innocent observer, in this regard: his "Letter" amounts to an implicit condemnation of Burns for failing to remake

²¹ William Wordsworth, "At the Grave of Robert Burns," *Poetical Works*, ed. E. De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols, Volume 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946, rpt. 1968) 65–66 (2.36, 70).

²² Leith Davis, *Acts of Union: Scotland and the Literary Negotiation of the British Nation, 1707–1830* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998) 122.

himself into a dignified representative of his culture (a potential Scottish Poet Laureate, perhaps). Since the nefarious reviewer Jeffrey wrote for the powerful *Edinburgh Review*, we can see that Wordsworth's "Letter" is in one sense, as Davis says, an attempt by an English writer to regain control of his readership (*Acts* 139). But it is surely also significant that the territory over which this battle was fought was not that of critical judgments about Burns's poetry, but rather the image of his life.

What Johnson called "domestick privacies" had now become not merely ancillary to literary achievement and the public activities of poets, but absolutely central both as poetic material and as a symbol of approved political values. For if the domestic life of the author was now a focus of public fascination, it was partly the poets themselves who were responsible. As Paul Magnuson argues in *Reading Public Romanticism*, volumes such as Coleridge's 1798 *Fears in Solitude* collection defensively portrayed the poet no longer as a fearless outsider and Tom Paine radical, but as "a patriotic poet, whose patriotism rested on the love of his country and domestic affections."²³ Wordsworth celebrated the domestic and private with even more consistency and credibility, both in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* and in his well-known letter to Charles James Fox (14 January 1801). In the letter, he praises Fox for his efforts on behalf of the independent farmers of the north of England, "men of respectable education who daily labour on their own little properties," a "class of men" that was "rapidly disappearing." One of Wordsworth's chief points is how "their little tract of land serves as a kind of permanent rallying point for their domestic feelings, as a tablet upon which they are written which makes them objects of memory in a thousand instances when they would otherwise be forgotten."²⁴ Many of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* poems, too, have been read as conveying what one critic calls "the Wordsworthian version of the belief which considers the household as the site of economic, social or moral value," with "Michael, a Pastoral" usually chosen as the outstanding example; and Theresa Kelley goes so far as to suggest that the crucial tension in Wordsworth's poetry "turns on an implicit distinction between sublime heights (and abstraction) and the domesticated enclosures of ordinary life and the beautiful" (141).²⁵ In both his poetry and his prose writings, then, like Burns before him, Wordsworth

²³ Paul Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998) 78.

²⁴ William Wordsworth, *Letters: A New Selection*, ed. Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Oxford UP), 42-43.

²⁵ See Huei-keng Chang, "Wordsworth, 'Michael,' and John Clare," *Studies in Language and Literature* 4 (1990): 71; Theresa Kelley, *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) 141.

makes domesticity the fount and origin of everything that is most to be valued in our daily lives.

This privileging of the domestic achieves its fullest expression in *The Excursion* (1814). The poem is studded with images of modest, poor, but well-maintained rural cottages. The abandonment of the cottage is a frequent and focal symbol of distress and dysfunction in the community. At the opening of Book V, for example, the Solitary utters a melancholy farewell to his house in the “deep Valley,” later described as “a spot that seemed / Like the fixed centre of a troubled world.”²⁶ At the end of Book VI, the Vicar leads the Solitary and Wanderer to admire another cottage, that of the widower and his six daughters: “when the gloom / Of night is falling round my steps, then most / This Dwelling charms me; often I stop short, / (Who could refrain?) And feed by stealth my sight / With prospect of the company within ...” (VI.1173–77). The latter passage beautifully focuses the paradox: the domestic life of this family is so precious, so laden with significance, that the Vicar cannot resist peeking in through the window, just like any ignorant tourist, thereby compromising by his actions the very seclusion and innocent domesticity which he pretends to value.

Given that “the domestic” had by 1816 accumulated so much positive significance for Wordsworth, it is not surprising that he should resist the invasion of privacy by what he evidently saw as the mean-spirited and prurient scandal-mongering of both critics such as Jeffrey, and biographers such as Currie. A writer’s personal life furnishes material for his work, but only on his own terms: the writer’s biographer must respect the dignity of the subject, and refuse to feed the idle curiosity of the public. Those who do not are, like hostile reviewers, the enemy, threatening not only that intangible thing called “reputation” but the actual private space that had become the objective correlative of the autonomous creative self. Further, the use of the medium of print as the instrument of such intrusions can only have increased the sense of panic that Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge all felt in different degrees. Not only was print the medium by which the domestic idyll had been created, and adopted by the poets as their preferred mode: a century earlier it had been through print that the modern concept of privacy had been constructed in the first place, since, as Cecile Jagodzinski points out, “reading (and writing) in private help create a sense of the self that may differ from the individual’s public presentation

²⁶ William Wordsworth, *The Excursion, Poetical Works*, ed. E. De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols, Volume 5 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949, rpt. 1972), Book V.1, V.15–16.

of himself or herself” (133). Jagodzinski also discovered, in studying the changes brought about in the “sense of the self” by early modern print culture, that the reading experience was more important than she at first allowed for: “The consciousness of one’s physical surroundings created also a new awareness of the boundaries of the human body and the experience of owning or having custody of the self and one’s personal possessions” (164). That is, reading became an activity that helped to define the space immediately around the body as personal and inviolable. What we find when we look at the print culture of Wordsworth’s time is that, on the one hand, the consumption of purely secular publications (novels, reviews, essays, biographies, and volumes of poetry) continues to be for the middle classes an important means of fostering the private self; but, on the other hand, some of these productions, biographies in particular, are now seen by those who depend on the book trade for their living as threatening the precious private space which they need in order to be productive. Like the periodical press (the *Edinburgh Review*, for instance), biography has started to jeopardize some prominent individuals’ possession of their private space, and the associated freedom to think, speak, and write without fear of public intrusion. To that extent, what I have called the panic over biography as a threat to privacy should not be seen just as a conflict between the public’s right to know and the individual’s right to privacy, or as a quarrel between two different kinds of literary taste. It is more revealing to see it as a conflict between two imperatives of modern bourgeois culture: the economic imperative to consume cultural products, thereby achieving the status of a active participant in consumer culture and a person of taste; and the libertarian imperative to be an autonomous individual, for whom the “mind” should be both a sacrosanct private preserve and the foundation of one’s social status as a free subject, *homo liberalis*.

One later work in which the encroachments of biography on private space quite evidently work to reinforce a modern notion of personal privacy as something that needs to be fiercely guarded is Harriet Martineau’s *Life in the Sick-Room*.²⁷ This autobiographical work was first published in 1844, the author identifying herself merely as “An Invalid”: the first edition sold out in less than two months (see Frawley’s “Introduction,” 15). Martineau’s authorship was soon discovered, and the second edition appeared with her name on the title-page—itsself an intriguing instance of the interpenetration of private and public life, and the fact that the boundary between the two

²⁷ See Harriet Martineau, *Life in the Sick-Room*, ed. Maria H. Frawley (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2003).

had become highly permeable. Martineau is concerned that personal letters, where such letters have the slightest connection with “people of note,” have become the target of biographers, journalists, and critics:

It is to be hoped that the privacy of *viva voce* conversation will ever remain sacred: but it is known that that which ought to be as holy, that of epistolary correspondence,—(the private conversation of distant friends,) is constantly and deliberately violated . . . the moment it can be made out that the publication of anything will and may do some ostensible good, the thing is published,—whatever considerations of a different or a higher sort may lie behind. (91)

The result is that when a famous writer’s letters are kept by their recipients, after the writer dies,

these recipients are plied with entreaties and remonstrance,—placed in a position of cruel difficulty (as it is to many) between their delicacy of affection for the deceased, and the pain of being made responsible for intercepting his fame, and depriving society of the benefit of the disclosure of his living mind. (92)

For a writer such as Martineau, privacy has become a right to be jealously guarded against the invasive instincts of a profit-driven publishing industry that carefully fosters the public appetite for knowledge, and biography has come to be perceived as the chief threat to privacy in the nineteenth century. Martineau is careful to emphasize that the appetite for knowledge is a good thing, but it has gone beyond its legitimate scope: “The press works so diligently and beneficially for society at large, that there is a tendency to commit everything to it, on utilitarian considerations of a rather coarse kind . . .” (91). For Martineau, the Johnsonian view of biography as a means by which the general reader can learn and become wiser about moral choices and standards of conduct must have seemed naive, if well-intentioned. It was Romantic-era biography—biographies of Burns and Wollstonecraft, and later of Byron, Shelley, Scott and others—that turned the genre from an acceptable substitute for the conduct-book to a greedy monster threatening the very environment in which the writer works.

Let me return now to the present. As scholars, we benefit from the efforts of those contemporaries of the Romantics who preserved and published letters, journals, and similar materials; but a complex network of interests is involved. It would be hard to imagine a Wordsworth scholar who would seriously argue that details of the poet’s affair with Annette Vallon ought to have been kept secret, but at the same time we should be able to understand the conflict of ethical imperatives faced by both G.M. Harper and Gordon Wordsworth in 1915, when Harper approached the poet’s grandson seeking permission to mention the Annette Vallon affair in