



## FINGERPRINT OR PHOTOGRAPH? THE FICTION OF BIOGRAPHICAL FACTS

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How, in a time without photographs, with few portraits, without tape recorders, without fingerprinting, without identity cards, without birth certificates — how did one establish a person's identity beyond doubt? (Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*)

### I

Biography collars life, relying on fingerprints as much as photographs. The former documents uniqueness, the latter interprets it. The intersection of these two forms of record creates a narrative marked by fiction, as much as fact. How and why this occurs, while establishing a subject's identity, is the focus of this paper.

Fingerprints are indelible, unchanging, individual. Photographs are creative, critical and impermanent, relying on techniques of representation. Fingerprints identify; photographs analyze. Originally used for authentication and recognition, fingerprints confirm our uniqueness by registering our individuality. Photographs establish our type, fashioning a contested site of meaning, restructuring and refashioning a moment into an image. Biography duplicates this double act through narrative, which identifies as it analyzes. It is both a fingerprint *and* a photograph of its subject, documenting and evaluating almost simultaneously.

The crossing of these two competing modes — the record and the interpretation — creates a narrative, one that the biographer sustains and the reader desires. And as the biographer maintains the unity, balance and self-contained character of his subject in his text, the reader seeks similar signs of coherence in the subject's life through his or her story. The irony, however, is that as a photo opens up an image to a series of meanings caused by transfixing a moment in time, so, too, does a biography as it constructs a sustained narrative out of moments of individualised experiences.

A scene is the biographer's photograph. Boswell's first encounter with Dr. Johnson in Mr. Davies' bookshop in 1763 is one example; Isaiah Berlin's 1945 meeting with Anna Akhmatova in Leningrad is another. Both are lynchpins for understanding the emotional life of the lexicographer and political thinker, which their biographers, Boswell and Michael Ignatieff, understand. But other "readings" of

such scenes counter the biographical narratives of such events and these readings set against the biographical portraits, create a tension that challenges the dominance of either fingerprints or photographs. How representation rewrites the record is the centre of my analysis.

Compare Boswell's *London Journal* and his account of meeting Johnson with the event in his biography of the man of letters. When Boswell first met Johnson, he was shocked by his appearance, demeanor, and apparent disdain for all Scotsmen. In his generally riotous journal, narrating sexual as well as social adventures, Boswell emphasises his embarrassment at first encountering the great man. Knowing Johnson's dislike of the Scots, for example, Boswell tells Mr. Davies, in whose tea-shop Johnson unexpectedly walks, "don't tell him where I come from". Davies playfully disregards the stricture, telling Johnson that Boswell is, indeed, from Scotland. The young man responds by saying it can't be helped, prompting Johnson to reply, "that I find is what a very great many of your countrymen cannot help". In response to the comic insult, Boswell records the "dreadful appearance of Johnson", a big man troubled with sore eyes, palsy and the scars of scrofula. Furthermore, he has an "uncouth voice" and is slovenly dressed". His "dogmatical roughness of manners", he concludes, "is disagreeable" [BOSWELL 1950 : 260-261]. Yet, Johnson has great humor and knowledge.

In the actual biography, Boswell is more dramatic than accurate, beginning his entry for 1763 by writing "this is to me a memorable year; for in it I had the happiness to obtain the acquaintance of that extraordinary man whose memoirs I am now writing" [BOSWELL 1986 : 93].

At 22, however, Boswell was noticeably nervous, but not in the biography. In the *Journal*, he is particularly critical; in the biography he is all praise. Introduced to him, Boswell emphasises Johnson's wit, not physical appearance. Boswell then comments on his own *faux pas* in criticising the actor David Garrick and realises that his chances of becoming acquainted with Johnson are sunk. But he never loses comic sight of himself in his narrative or the authenticity of his experience. Despite his surprise at Johnson's manner and commentary, Boswell stays at Mr. Davies' shop and enjoys the "vigour of his [Johnson's] conversation" [96]. No negative comments appear in the text, or a single word on his appearance. Art overtakes fact, the latter evident in the journal (akin to a fingerprint) but de-emphasised in the biography (closer to a photograph). The dramatic necessity of the scene replaces the facticity of the event. Narrative transforms fact into action.

A similar transposition occurs with the momentous meeting between the philosopher and political theorist Isaiah Berlin and the famed Russian poet Anna Akhmatova in Leningrad in November 1945. Sent to Russia from Washington by the British Foreign Office, Berlin was enthralled by the Russian poet whom he long

admired and many considered the most celebrated living Russian writer.<sup>1</sup> Meeting her in her Leningrad apartment was an indelible experience for the Russian-speaking thirty-five year old Oxford lecturer, then First Secretary of the British Embassy in Moscow where he had already met Boris Pasternak and the film director Sergey Eisenstein.

But the encounter with Akhmatova at 34 Fountain House, Leningrad, was transformative and yet open to various interpretations, not the least of them Berlin's. His account of their meeting in *Personal Impressions* (1980) provides a more intimate and romantic slant. György Dalos's *The Guest from the Future* (1998) offers a more historicised and contextual view partly based on meeting Akhmatova many years later. There is also Akhmatova's perspective on their meeting: two poems in her cycle *Cinque*. She was fifty-five, Berlin twenty years younger. Their exchange, initially interrupted by Randolph Churchill, lasted twelve hours. Eighteen years later, she remembered it in a work entitled "The Visit at Night". But shortly after Berlin finally left, Akhmatova wrote a stanza of *Poem without a Hero* about him headed "Guest from the Future". Dylos calls Berlin "unquestionably the central figure in the last period of Akhmatova's life"; officials condemned her for permitting a visit by a liberal, Western intellectual [DALOS : 43].

Akhmatova's reputation and situation at the time — under KGB watch and considered politically problematic — meant isolation: culturally, socially and artistically. She suffered from a publication ban that lasted from roughly 1925-1940. Yet, she was famous. She lived through the siege of Leningrad making radio broadcasts to resist the Germans. Yet persecution and confiscation of her works continued throughout the war, causing her to entrust new works to the memory of friends. They memorised passages of her poetry, including corrections, of her ongoing "Requiem" (on the victims of the 1937 and 1938 purges) and *Poem without a Hero* (pre-Revolutionary St. Petersburg). Only in the nineteen sixties did the poems take form as typescripts.

In the Akhmatova/Berlin encounter, at least three "photographers" have recorded the scene: Berlin, Akhmatova, and Dylos. But their interpretations vastly differ. Each observer of the 1945 visit includes or excludes elements, recalling Susan Sontag's remark in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, that "to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude" [46]. Importantly, as the critic Caroline Brothers states, the camera "adopts the ideological perspective of the institutions [or individuals]

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<sup>1</sup> "The encounter took place after Berlin accidentally met the literary critic V. N. Orlov in the Writers' Bookshop on the Nevsky Prospekt. Orlov facilitated the meeting that afternoon after calling Akhmatova. Berlin was unsure if she was even still alive" [DALOS : 18-19].

which employ it" [17], shaping, altering and remaking the subject. This is true of biography as much as photography. In the process of mediating experience, photographs almost always misrepresent, although viewers almost always turn into "literalists" [SONTAG 2003 : 47]. Alternate or rival versions of events, even when photographed, have now become commonplace, initiated perhaps in the modern period with photographs from the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). Relativism suddenly competes with fact as alternate truths emerge. What we see of a life is what the photographer or biographer chooses to portray. Photography appears to be documentary but the image is always constructed if not composed. We always "sit" for our portrait. While photographs communicate, they fail to represent accurately.

## II

The control and definition of fact is the issue, biography becoming, in the words of Hermione Lee, biographer of Virginia Woolf and Edith Wharton, "a process of making up or making over". The appropriation of the subject by the biographer remakes the experience of the life, causing subjects to worry. As the poet Ted Hughes expressed, facts have owners and "I hope each one of us owns the facts of his or her own life" [quoted in LEE 2005 : 37]. But if excessive fact makes a work unreadable, excessive fiction makes it unbelievable. The presentation of events in biography illustrates the critical implications of Emily Dickinson's statement, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant".<sup>2</sup>

Emily Dickinson is, herself, a remarkable case in point beginning with her image. Photographs of her are rare. Although there are numerous photos of Walt Whitman and hundreds of photographs of Ezra Pound, there is only *one* of Emily

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<sup>2</sup> The complete poem reads:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant,  
Success in circuit lies,  
Too bright for our infirm delight  
The truth's superb surprise;

As lightning to the children eased  
With explanation kind,  
The truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind.

Dickinson, a daguerreotype made between December 1846 and March 1847 by William C. North when she was sixteen.<sup>3</sup>

But Dickinson recoiled from the lifeless image of herself sitting next to a book, and never sat again. Yet, this single photo has played a critical part in establishing her iconography. Painters, book designers and critics have used the image to fashion her face. There is currently debate, however, over whether or not a second photograph of Dickinson exists. An image of Whitman, by contrast, idealises the concept of the poet as bard and Bohemian, his informal posture and rakish hat suggesting the Romantic notion of the irregular but creative life of the artist. Dickinson, frankly, looks prim, unadventurous and hardly a poet.

Another, more disturbing example of photography as cultural intervention offers a biography without a subject: the image known as “The Falling Man” taken on Sept. 11, 2001 by Richard Drew. It is of an unidentified man falling between the towers of the World Trade Center, an instant framed and isolated. But in a sense, it misrepresents because it captures the descent of the individual for only a fraction of a second. He kept falling and without such exactness. He continued falling, in the words of the journalist Tom Junod:

with neither the precision of an arrow nor the grace of an Olympic diver. He fell like everyone else, like all the other jumpers — trying to hold on to the life he was leaving, which is to say that he fell desperately, inelegantly. In Drew’s famous photograph, his humanity is in accord with the lines of the buildings. In the rest of the sequence — the eleven outtakes — his humanity stands apart. He is not augmented by aesthetics; he is merely human, and his humanity, startled and in some cases horizontal, obliterates everything else in the frame.<sup>4</sup>

This dimension, of course, we do not see. Our vision and imagery is always controlled, sometimes by history. All death certificates for those who died at the World Trade Center, including those who jumped, read death by homicide.<sup>5</sup>

But, if a photograph cannot document reality, or does so only incompletely, what about facts? Can they? Facts have always been ambiguous, their history as

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<sup>3</sup> There is currently debate, however, over whether or not a second photograph of Dickinson exists. See GURA’S account of his discovery and attempt to authenticate a possible second photograph.

<sup>4</sup> Also see LEVY. Singer made a 2006 documentary on the photograph.

<sup>5</sup> See Jacyn KIROUAC-FRAM, “‘The Most Disturbing Aspects’: Apprehending Public Reaction to Photographs of 9/11 Jumpers”.

uncertain as their treatment. They have often been disparaged, as Oscar Wilde announces in Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*: "Art deals with exceptions, not types. Facts deal only with types" [STOPPARD : 96]. But facts change and have a history, if not a life cycle, originating, some historians believe, in the Renaissance with double-entry bookkeeping introduced by the Florentine Amintore Manucci in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. Mary Poovey discusses this in *A History of the Modern Fact* (1998). Other historians believe codified laws of evidence introduced facts, leading to corroboration and documentation established first in court, and then in society. Barbara J. Shapiro outlines this theory in *A Culture of Fact* (2000), arguing that legal discourse is the origin of the reliability and verifiability of fact related to sworn testimony and expert evidence.

Another perspective is that facts are merely social constructions, the result of social or scientific consolidation. Here, the writing of Ludwik Fleck is important, especially *The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, originally published in 1935 (English translation, 1979). For Fleck, social conditioning formulates facts that are invented, not discovered. Therefore, facts are both transient and stable, important for understanding the fluid nature of biography. Truth, he believed, is "a stylised solution" — not a convention, but either an event in the history of thought or in its "contemporary context, stylised thought" carefully contained. Furthermore, for Fleck, facts are never completely independent of each other but occur

as more or less connected mixtures of separate signals, or as a system of knowledge obeying its own laws. As a result, every fact reacts upon many others. [...] each new fact harmoniously — though ever so slightly — changes all earlier facts [100-102].<sup>6</sup>

More recent explorations of the life of facts include *How well do facts travel? The dissemination of reliable knowledge* (2011), edited by Peter Howlett and Mary S. Morgan and Stephen Neale's *Facing Facts* (2002), which untangles the philosophical issues surrounding representation and fact. Hermione Lee also argues that facts always change, reflecting shifts in the cultural and social landscape [LEE 1996 : 769-770].<sup>7</sup>

Every biographer struggles with fact, creating a text that is despised equally for its facts, if they are undigested, and its fiction if it seems to overtake the narrative. The

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<sup>6</sup> Written in German by a Jewish physician-scholar from Poland and first published in Switzerland, the work has strongly influenced such historians of science as Thomas S. Kuhn. Facts, according to Fleck, "represents a *stylised signal of resistance in thinking*" related to what he calls "thought style" defined as "*directed perception*" [98-9].

<sup>7</sup> Also see 10-12.

analogy is to the photographer who seeks authenticity but cannot avoid interpretation, since the photograph's "transparency to the real allows the ideological to pervade the visual" [BROTHERS : 11]. John Tagg's *The Burden of Representation* confronts the problem by emphasising the context in which the image is used. The same image appearing in a popular newspaper would evoke a different response than if it appeared in a scientific journal. Location and use determine the meaning [16]. Photographs are "never evidence of history; they are themselves historical", Tagg states [17].

The issue of too much fiction versus too much fact is clear in the reception of Mitchell Leaska's biography of Virginia Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow*. Praised for his "compelling narrative style" and sense of humour, the book was also criticised for its tendency to dramatise and then present causal if not reductive explanations of the life and work [FURBANK : 9]. The intersection between the documentary and the interpretative may establish coherence via the fiction the biographer sustains and the reader desires, but critics question its authority as a non-fictional record.

Henry James expressed this dilemma in the "Preface" to *The Aspern Papers*: "The historian wants more documents than he can really use, the dramatist only wants more liberties than he can really take" [480]. Virginia Woolf, however, had a solution: "let the biographer present fully, completely, accurately the known facts without comment; then let him write the life as fiction" [LEE 2005 : 10]. "Biography is the mesh through which our real life escapes", Oscar Wilde depressingly observes in Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*. But in reply to A.E. Housman's declaration that the event in one of his poems is true, Wilde corrects him: "On the contrary, it's only fact. Truth is quite another thing and is the work of the imagination" [STOPPARD : 95, 96].

Yet for biography, photographs have become more important. Hardly a biography today appears without them, functioning as visual documents supporting and enlarging the reality of the life described in the text. They offer a set of semiotic codes that suture the verbal with the textual to ensure the authenticity of the content. They also delineate modernist biography, since photographs did not begin to appear in biography until the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century. 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century biographies had frontispiece engravings, occasionally presenting an image of the subject. This extended to the Victorian period, a tradition even Lytton Strachey maintained in his radical *Eminent Victorians* of 1918, a work illustrated with photo portraits. Today, the reliance on photos has peaked with so-called photo biographies of figures ranging from James Joyce to Bob Dylan.

But distortion or, if you prefer, fiction also remains. The "slant" Emily Dickinson referred to is unavoidable and the very requirement of a well-done life, one that offers the reader the contradictions, confusions and gaps in a life that we all

possess and which humanises the form, while explaining its appeal. Fiction, rather than distort biography, is a necessity. "Accuracy is a high price to pay for truth", Tom Stoppard once remarked [STOPPARD 1994 : 96].

### III

But what of the fingerprint? Is that a surer way to identify a subject and a more positive model for biography? But before a short history of fingerprints, photographs again: photography began as a form of identification, specifically of criminals. The mug shot, used as early as 1841 in France, established basic identity but that eventually proved too unreliable. Individuals changed their appearance. Not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were cameras sophisticated enough to capture the authentic image of the subject who, as with fingerprinting, had to cooperate. A slight movement might blur the image or change an appearance that might question the photographic record. Imposters did not help, nor even scars, which could be faked.

No less than Alex de Tocqueville recognised the problem. "Where passports do not exist", he wrote in *Democracy in America* (1833), "nothing is easier than to change one's name". The absence of a central police bureau to obtain information concerning the previous life of a criminal made it likely that "courts condemn, almost always, without knowing the true name of the criminal, and still less his previous life" [TOCQUEVILLE : 72]. Without a coordinated identification process, a criminal could repeatedly change his name and identity with impunity. The alias grew in popularity.

One solution was the Bertillon method, instituted by the French police official who began to take body measurements to corroborate photographs, relying on physical recognition. Adopting the technique of anthropology practiced by his father, Bertillon began to record eleven different measurements using special calipers, gauges and rulers. Instructions were precise and the recording of anthropometric measurements soon became the new standard (with a new morphological vocabulary) with the key and most consistent physical feature of record, the ear.

Every Bertillon card included two photos, one a profile, one full-face, although they offered no obvious basis for classification and could not be easily indexed. The record cards were arranged according to measurements which themselves proved unreliable. Nevertheless, the *portrait parlé* (spoken portrait), consisting of precise descriptions with standardised abbreviations summarising the most prominent aspects of a suspect's body, became a regular form of identification relying not on photographs or sketches but only language. Bodily features were transferred into a semi-scientific, universal language [COLE : 45, 48-9].



But the uncertainty of photographs remained: widely different images could be obtained from the same face. The technique and light involved would influence appearance. Photos also became obsolete the moment they were taken. While the face aged, the image did not. Bertillon put his faith in numerical and verbal descriptions instead of visual images. It seemed that in this system, no name change or shift in appearance or personality could prevent confirmation of identity. Defining an individual was his body.

Fingerprinting, by contrast, was simpler: the method was direct, the filing system clear, the confirmation definite. Indeed, it could even identify unidentified people. Fingerprints are the tiny ridges, whorls and valley patterns on the tip of each finger formed from pressure on a fetus' tiny, developing fingers in the womb. No two people have been found to have the same fingerprints — they are totally unique and confirm the body to be a mechanism always writing itself and leaving its mark, transforming itself into a text. Fingerprints could even determine a person's true identity when the body was disfigured.

Most interestingly, fingerprinting began in the British colonies, and then worked its way to the centre of the Empire. India led the way because colonial administrators and justices needed some method to corroborate names with people to counter forgery, fraud, impersonation and perjury. Administrator William Herschel, beginning in 1858, in reaction to the Indian Mutiny, and facing the threat of double agents and imposters, turned to ink and the fingers as a technique for civil, not criminal, identification [COLE : 63-69]. He seems to have gotten the idea from Chinese and Bengali culture where a thumb print was used to seal letters and documents with the mark of the author as a sign of authenticity. And those best prepared to take fingerprints? Professional printers who knew how to handle ink and impressions.

The issue of identifying repeat offenders remained, however, and after a brush with Bertillon's method (found inadequate in its method of physical description and inconsistency in the skill of its "operators"), fingerprinting emerged as a new and reliable method administered by even the least able official. But again, a similar challenge emerged: how to index the records according to fingerprint patterns? Henry Faulds a physician serving in Tokyo began to notice fingerprints on ancient Japanese ceramics and thought it might be used as a form of identification, especially of criminals. Faulds, who believed fingerprints were actually genetic codes, shared his interest with Charles Darwin, who forwarded the information to his cousin Frances Galton, who began the first serious scientific study of finger ridges, ink and their interpretation [75-78].

Importantly, no instruments were required to take a full set of prints, which could be done in five minutes or less. Soon, systems of identification emerged, based on

Galton's three basic pattern types: the arch, the loop and the whorl. Sets of sub-classifications also emerged, and by June 1897 the Governor-General of India decided to switch entirely to fingerprinting as the method of identification. Today, one needs twelve data points to identify a match among finger points.

But reaction against fingerprinting was strong, one of the most compelling a fear of abstraction. The abstractness of fingerprint patterns contradicted anthropometric reliance on the body and face. In fingerprinting, "the identifier did not even resemble the body or the face" [162]. In replacing bodily or facial recognition, fingerprinting relied entirely on the abstract, becoming metonymic. *Personal Identification* (1918) by Harris Wilder and Bert Wentworth, however, advocated fingerprints as the only reliable form of identification, adding that the recording of information and its retrieval was faster. Only in 1920, however, did the New York Police Department, with the nation's largest identification bureau, cease to record anthropometric measurements. But as early as 1904, the St. Louis, Missouri police force established America's first fingerprint file — in conjunction with Scotland Yard as a security measure to protect the British crown jewels on display at the St. Louis world's fair.

But even today, the seemingly incontrovertible evidence of fingerprints can be questioned. The most recent and dramatic example stems from the 2004 Madrid bombing when a certain Brandon Mayfield, an Oregon lawyer, was identified as a participant in the 2004 Madrid train bombings based on a fingerprint match by the FBI. The FBI Latent Print Unit processed a fingerprint collected in Madrid and reported a "100 percent positive" match against one of the 20 fingerprint candidates. Subsequently, however, Spanish National Police examiners suggested that the print did not match Mayfield and, after two weeks, identified another man (an Algerian) whom they claimed the fingerprint belonged to.

The FBI acknowledged their error, and a judge released Mayfield, who had spent two weeks in custody, in May 2004. In January 2006, a US Justice Department report criticised the FBI for sloppy work, but exonerated them of some of the more serious allegations. The report found that the misidentification had been due to a misapplication of methodology by the examiners involved: Mayfield is an American-born convert to Islam, and his wife is an Egyptian immigrant, but these are not factors that should have affected fingerprint search technology.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For an interview with Mayfield and an FBI representative, see "The Real CSI", Frontline, PBS [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/real-csi/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/real-csi/). The show investigates forensic science and debates the reliability of fingerprinting. [Also see MNOOKIN.] Human factors in fingerprint identification, plus the question of cognitive bias, are also now under study.

But our belief in fingerprinting with its basis in scientific observation remains, supported from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards by literature, as much as forensic science. In Chapter XXXI of Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), fingerprints identify a murderer. The chapter title is "A Thumb-print and What Came of It". The chapter outlines in detail the new method of fingerprinting. Initially, the narrator states, one would photograph the criminal and hang his picture "in the Rogues Gallery for future reference". But in France, the method was to "take a print of the ball of a new prisoner's thumb" and put it away for future reference. An old Frenchman and former jailer, known to the narrator, always said "that pictures were no good — future disguises could make them useless. The thumb's the only sure thing . . . you can't disguise that" [TWAIN : 426]. And when in the story the fingerprints match that of a thumbprint on a bloodied document from a robbery/ murder, the narrator is able to identify the criminal.

In Twain's 1894 novella *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, there is a dramatic court trial confirming, again, the validity of fingerprint identification [Ch. XIX]. Early in the work, the title character reveals a fascination with the new fad of "finger-marks", asking people to run their fingers through their hair and then pressing finger marks on a glass strip with their natural hair oil on their hands. Under the faint grease prints, he would record the name, time and date on a strip of white paper [923].

Twain's source for the presentation of fingerprints was Sir Francis Galton's 1892 work, *Finger Prints*, the first book on the subject. Twain requested a copy from his London publishers and later claimed that Galton changed the plot and plan of his book. Some questioned his use of fingerprints for a scene set in 1830 but Galton refers to a university thesis on the subject at Breslau in 1823 (the other important early study is that by William J. Herschel, *The Origin of Fingerprinting*, 1916. Herschel published on the subject as early as 1880).<sup>9</sup>

Twain's earlier use of fingerprinting in *Life on the Mississippi* occurred when there was little was known about the regularity of such markings. And in an earlier version of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, he planned to use footprints as a means for

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<sup>9</sup> In 1880, Dr. Henry Faulds, a Scottish surgeon in a Tokyo hospital, published his first paper on the subject in the scientific journal *Nature*, discussing the usefulness of fingerprints for identification and proposing a method to record them with printing ink. He also established their first classification and was also the first to identify fingerprints left on a vial. Returning to the UK in 1886, he offered the concept to the Metropolitan Police in London but they dismissed it at that time. By 1894, however, the London police began to take fingerprints of suspected criminals and by 1901 Scotland Yard opened the first fingerprint bureau in England called the Criminal Record Office. For a recent treatment of fingerprinting and the Bertillon method, see *The Alienist*, a crime novel by Caleb Carr first published in 1994. It takes place in New York City in 1896.

establishing identity, a practice preferred by Sherlock Holmes. However, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle did write a short story about Sherlock Holmes, which features a fingerprint: "The Adventure of the Norwood Builder", a 1903 Sherlock Holmes short story set in 1894 (before any European police force officially adopted the method). It involves the sudden appearance of a bloody fingerprint, which helps Holmes to expose the real criminal and free his client. The story also includes a defaced photograph of a woman, sent to warn her of impending violence. *The Red Thumb-Mark* (1907) by the British detective writer R. Austin Freeman also features a bloody fingerprint left on a piece of paper with a parcel of diamonds inside a safe-box. It becomes the focus of a medical-legal investigation. However, not every detective writer found solace in fingerprints. Poirot in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* exclaims, "I am not one to rely upon the expert procedure. It is the psychology I seek, not the fingerprint or the cigarette ash" [CHRISTIE : 73].

#### IV

But where does this leave biography once we establish the difficulties and complexities of photography and the seemingly iron-clad evidence of fingerprints? Where and what confirmatory methods for the biographer exist and how does he answer a set of questions, beginning with:

1. If we possess a photograph of a man, how do we know that the man appearing before us is the man in the photograph? How do we attach a photograph to a person or a name?
2. Is a name enough to link an image to a person?
3. Is a life best defined by a biography — or are there other, equally powerful sources?
4. Can a biography be truthful without being documentary?
5. Is a fingerprint more reliable than a photograph?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Errol Morris addresses a number of these questions in part 2 of "What's in A Name". His concern is how photographs may not resemble their subjects whether immediately after they were taken, or years later. He cites the famous case of the two Wests in 1908 and 1909. A man named Will West was sentenced to the US Penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kansas. It was discovered that there was already a prisoner at the penitentiary at the time, whose Bertillon measurements were nearly the same, and his name was William West. Upon investigation, there were, indeed, two men who looked exactly alike. Their names were Will and William West. Their Bertillon measurements were close enough to identify them as the same person. However, a fingerprint comparison quickly and correctly identified them as two different people. Prison records later discovered later that the West men were apparently identical twin brothers and each had a record of correspondence with the same immediate family relatives. For a summary see Robert D. Olsen Sr., "A Fingerprint Fable:

The challenge today is how to build a narrative out of data when we have so much of it, realising that it is not the granulated data but the aggregate that matters. Only aggregate data has significance and can create what biography should address: character, not identity, nor event. As Stoppard's Oscar Wilde declares in *The Invention of Love*, "I was said to have walked down Piccadilly with a lily in my hand. There was no need. To do it is nothing, to be said to have done it is everything. It is the truth about me" [96]. What you do with the information is more important than the information itself.

The task of writing biography today is to derive meaning through relationships, between moments in a life. Or as Virginia Woolf noted in writing about Stopford Brooke, it is in the relationship between events, not the events themselves that is the fact. A good biography, Woolf believed, is a record "of the things that change rather than of the things that happen" [184]. What changed, not what happened, forms biographical content and action.

This, of course, creates immense challenges for the biographer because he constantly struggles against fiction — that is, the arrangement of facts, narrative, themes and imagery that are creatively imposed and often do not match the chronological order of the subject's life. Nor should they. Fiction is necessary to make sense of a life. Our lives are generally inartistic, anti-poetic and mundane, but if every life is a story, it must be shaped like one. And as readers, we seek artistically shaped lives, although the danger is that we write what we want to happen, not what actually happened [HOLROYD : 8].<sup>11</sup> Virginia Woolf was conscious of these discrepancies and wrote her most successful biography as fiction: *Orlando*. This, she believed, would be more truthful; the best biographies, she suggested, leave out the details.

Biography is the visualisation of a life in prose, drawing on multiple sources with the basic act the representation of data. In the future, biography may be only a form of infographics: a Cubist collage of photos, charts, illustrations, documents, or even book jackets, to represent, rather than document, a life. Today we find life in images (or scenes) not words or even facts. Think Facebook, not textbook. The infographic designer Nicholas Felton may chart the next step as he addresses the key question: how can we deal with the overwhelming amount of data about us and around us? We know too much but do we know what to do with it? We have to interpret it, analyze it. The Feltron Report offers a model: Nicholas Felton kept a

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The Will and William West Case", which first appeared in November 1987 in the *Identification News*. At the time, Olsen was with the Kansas Bureau of Investigation.

<sup>11</sup> Holroyd also writes that "though it still has its uses as a reference work, biography is no longer a mere inventory of facts" [19].

record of every event in his daily life for a year. The material was overwhelming, so to interpret it, he turned to images to create a set of visual/virtual place marks and identities. His *Personal Annual Reports* weave numerous measurements into a tapestry of graphs, maps and statistics to reflect the year's activities.

Another approach or clue to the new biography may exist in narrative therapy, its major assumption that narratives or stories form a person's identity. The accounts of our lives found in our stories (or narratives) shape who we are — in the past as well as the present. A biographer's task is to identify carefully and then fashion those sometime competing accounts into a meaningful whole, via research, interviews, archives and thought. His task is to tease out the stories of the subject, which are retold through narrative choices.<sup>12</sup> Socially constructed identity parallels the process of the biographer who generates his account partly in response to context, social values, access to "facts", and cultural theory (hence our need for multiple lives of the same subject: times change, questions differ). Such an approach holds that identity is chiefly shaped by narratives or stories: how a life is told through story shapes its meaning, equally true for biographical, as well as psychological, truth.

In the preface to *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Mark Twain refers to writing as photographing with a pen. That is what the biographer does, aware of the genre's limitations, but also of its discoveries. Looking at images never disappoints, while constructing them is both satisfying and incomplete. The Irish writer Colum McCann recently said that of greatest interest to a writer are the blurred spaces between fiction and nonfiction, the "real that's imagined and the imagined that's real" [LOVELL]. Biography, then, must replace the fingerprint with the photograph, privileging interpretation over fact, the "reading" over the document, exchanging the record of a life for the character of the subject. Biography is no more than the postcard of a life, a narration of unfinished moments, but unfinished is the point.

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<sup>12</sup> This form of psychotherapy relies on narrative which separates persons from qualities or attributes that are taken-for-granted. Externalising allows people to consider their relationships with problems, adopting the motto that "the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem". Distance is created by focusing on problems' effects on people's lives rather than on problems inside or part of an individual. Such objectification makes it easier to investigate and evaluate a problem's influences. Once a biographer or therapist identifies values and hopes located in specific life events, he/she may "re-author" a person's experience. "Narrative" reflects, one might say, the multi-storied nature of our identities and related meanings. Narrative conversations help people clarify for themselves an alternate direction in life to that of the problem. [See WHITE].

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