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Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography

Jill Lepore

One warm August afternoon three summers ago, I sat in the crisply air-conditioned Special Collections reading room at the Amherst College Library, stroking Noah Webster's hair. It was coarse, red, and, needless to say, no longer attached to his head. Earlier that day I had come across the catalog entry "Lock of hair" in the finding guide for the Noah Webster Family Papers and had smiled at the quaintness of it, of someone thinking Webster's hair—his hair!—was precious enough to preserve. I imagined Webster's daughter Eliza carefully clipping a length of her father's hair (and her mother's, too), tying the locks with ribbon, and placing them in a neatly labeled envelope. Keeping locks of loved ones' hair was common in Eliza's time, of course, but it still struck me as terribly sweet. Maybe a bit too sweet, I thought, in my jaded, scholarly way, never expecting the effect it would have on me. In our everyday life, touching someone's hair is an incredibly intimate gesture—exchanged between besotted lovers, between doting parents and their milky newborns—and when I traded in my yellow call slip for that swirl of ginger hair I found myself feeling closer to Webster than I had ever felt when reading even his most personal papers. That lifeless, limp hair had spent decades in an envelope, in a folder, in a box, on a shelf, but holding it in the palm of my hand made me feel an eerie intimacy with Noah himself. And, against all logic, it made me feel as though I knew him—and, even less logically, *liked* him—just a bit better.¹

Finding out and writing about people, living or dead, is tricky work. It is necessary to balance intimacy with distance while at the same time being inquisitive to the point of invasiveness. Getting too close to your subject is a major danger, but not getting to know her well enough is just as likely. Unfortunately, much as biogra-

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¹Lock of hair envelope, folder 18, box 3, Noah Webster Family Papers, Archives and Special Collections (Amherst College Library, Amherst, Mass.).

phers and journalists have pondered the perils of writing about people (a recent essay in the *New York Times Book Review* was titled “Biography: A Love Affair or a Job?”), no one has offered a foolproof solution.² In this essay, I would like to explore whether microhistorians—a relatively new species of writers-of-lives—have any new tricks up their sleeves. While researching that indomitable Federalist, Noah Webster, for whom I have come to have rather powerful feelings, I have wondered if it makes any difference whether I approach him as a microhistorian might. Do microhistorians have more or less sympathy for their subjects than do biographers? It is a question that matters to me, in my own work, and I think, in a general sense, matters to the profession. Much as I, as a historian and especially as a reader, enjoy and admire many microhistories, I have seen little published discussion about the merits of their approach. It seems worth asking, Do microhistorians see their subjects differently? I suppose, for my purposes, what I want to know is, Can microhistorians tell me what to do when I find myself sitting in a well-chilled room, holding a lock of a dead man’s hair in a tender embrace?

What Is Microhistory Anyway?

Surely Noah, lexicographer extraordinaire, would have wanted me to begin with a definition. But perhaps I had better begin with a disclaimer. Any attempt to define microhistory is vastly complicated by the fact that few American works of scholarship ever label themselves microhistory. Alfred Young’s *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, for example, is not subtitled “A Microhistory of George Robert Twelves Hewes.” Indeed, *Through a Glass Darkly*, a recent anthology of essays about “personal identity”—and cited as a key example of microhistory in a call for papers for a recent conference on microhistory—prefers to call its essays “histories of self” rather than “microhistories.” One explanation for this reticence is that microhistory was established among historians of early modern Europe, where it has thrived, but there is no American school of microhistory, only practitioners who rarely if ever call themselves microhistorians and who, at any rate, may only occasionally dabble in microhistory. Sean Wilentz is not a microhistorian simply because he coauthored *The Kingdom of Matthias*.³ Since there is no American school of microhistory, no mission statement, no journal, no professional association, and few if any self-professed practitioners, we are left to define the genre by its examples, except that, if my suspicion is correct, no one agrees on what those examples are. As a result, any claims I might make about microhistory can be easily refuted by pointing to examples (in some cases, of books I might not even consider microhistory) that run counter to my argument. In one sense, then, this essay is a microhistory of microhistory, with all of the genre’s vulnerabilities—including

² Brenda Maddox, “Biography: A Love Affair or a Job?,” *New York Times Book Review*, May 9, 1999, p. 47.

³ Alfred Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston, 1999); Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill, 1997); Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias* (New York, 1994).

being dismissed as selective and unrepresentative. Bearing that in mind, it nonetheless seems worthwhile to offer some preliminary claims about microhistory, if only to invite discussion.

That said, let us attempt a definition. The recent microhistory conference's call for papers defined microhistory, in part, as the history of "hitherto obscure people" that "concentrates on the intensive study of particular lives" to reveal "the fundamental experiences and mentalités of ordinary people." (Many microhistories are about places, such as Montaignou, or events, such as the Great Cat Massacre, but here I will consider only microhistories of people.) Yet consider a few of these "hitherto obscure people": Menocchio, Martin Guerre, John Hu. Certainly all were obscure before Carlo Ginzburg, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Jonathan Spence brought them fame and, in some cases, film stardom. But what about William Cooper? Or Helen Jewett? Or Eunice Williams? In their own day, at least, the subjects of Alan Taylor's, Patricia Cline Cohen's, and John Demos's "microhistories" were actually rather famous, if not notorious. Nor, of course, can any of these people be said to have been truly "ordinary."⁴ William Cooper was a fantastically wealthy judge and United States congressman, Menocchio a fanatic heretic. John Hu traveled from Canton, China, to Paris, France, in 1722, only to be locked in an insane asylum; in the Mohawk village of Kahnawake, Eunice Williams was reborn as A'ongote even as colonists across New England prayed for her soul. Microhistories? These stories are epics.

Why are not these books—studies of the lives of famous people who lived extraordinary lives—considered biographies? As the biographer Robert Skidelsky has pointed out, "Biography had its roots in the Romantic view of the artist as Hero and in the Great Man theory of history." In recent decades, biography has become increasingly sophisticated—and self-conscious—about narrative structure, voice, and context, but, at least as regards its subjects, biography has largely stayed true to its roots: subjects worthy of biographies, if not necessarily Great Men or Heroes, are important people. As Eric Homberger and John Charmley noted in 1988, "biography as we have it has scarcely begun to deal with ordinary life." When observers claim, contrary to Homberger and Charmley, that biography *has* begun to deal with ordinary life, their examples are, likely as not, books many historians would consider microhistories. Thus Paula R. Backscheider, in her *Reflections on Biography* (1999), includes Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's brilliant *A Midwife's Tale* in her list of prize-winning biographies and celebrates it as an example of a new subgenre of biography that explores "a rather ordinary person in whose life many significant social forces and

⁴ Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, "Call for Papers for a Conference on Microhistory: Advantages and Limitations for the Study of Early American History," 1998 (in Jill Lepore's possession). Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaignou: The Promised Land of Error* (New York, 1978); Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984). Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1993); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, 1983); Jonathan Spence, *The Question of Hu* (New York, 1989). Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York, 1995); Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York, 1998); John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York, 1994). Omohundro Institute, "Call for Papers for a Conference on Microhistory."

events converge." Elsewhere, however, Backscheider *excludes* Ulrich's book from consideration as a biography "because it is predominantly a literary and social history."⁵

To argue, then, that microhistorians study ordinary people while biographers study extraordinary people does not get us very far. First, it is wrong: the subjects of some microhistories are important, famous people, and, at least according to Backscheider, the subjects of some biographies are humble folk. Second, it is unhelpful: it simply begs the question of classification, leaving us to ask, not "Is *A Midwife's Tale* a microhistory?," but "Was Martha Ballard ordinary?"—which is not necessarily an easier question.

Are there other differences between microhistory and biography? It might be argued that biographies tell the story of a whole life while microhistories chronicle only key events—Jewett's death, Martin Guerre's deception. Yet this distinction, too, seems specious. Joseph Ellis's National Book Award–winning *American Sphinx*, however episodic an examination of the life of Thomas Jefferson, is never called a microhistory. Perhaps the critical difference between microhistory and biography concerns neither the obscurity or ordinariness of the subject nor its episodic presentation, but the nature of the narrative. Microhistorians, again according to the call for papers, "tend to favor 'narrative' modes of presentation."⁶ But then, of course, so do biographers. Indeed, the narrative, even novelistic, nature of many biographies—and their consequent appeal to general readers—is part of the reason some historians dismiss them as not truly historical (that is, not sufficiently analytical), just as many disdain microhistories.

Is there, then, no salient difference between microhistory and biography? Surely not. Recall that Backscheider ultimately dismissed *A Midwife's Tale* "because it is predominantly a literary and social history," a charge that could be leveled against many a microhistory. Microhistorians do have particular nonbiographical goals in mind: even when they study a single person's life, they are keen to evoke a period, a *mentalité*, a problem: the origins of religious beliefs, the power of popular culture, the clash of Western and non-Western peoples. Ronald Hoffman, in his preface to *Through a Glass Darkly*, observes the same distinction, arguing that the 1990s witnessed "a perceptible turning" from social history "to a concentration on individual life experiences and how they could be probed for deeper meaning." As he writes,

During the preceding decade, a number of historians had begun to approach these questions from a biographical perspective informed by anthropology, psychology, literary analysis, and material culture. A common purpose seemed to mark their investigations—an endeavor to discern through the lives of individuals or families the broader contours of the social and cultural landscape.⁷

⁵ Robert Skidelsky, "Only Connect: Biography and Truth," in *The Troubled Face of Biography*, ed. Eric Homberger and John Charmley (London, 1988), 2. Eric Homberger and John Charmley, "Introduction," *ibid.*, xii. Paula R. Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford, 1999), 49, 21; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York, 1990).

⁶ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1997). Omohundro Institute, "Call for Papers for a Conference on Microhistory."

⁷ Ronald Hoffman, "Introduction," in *Through a Glass Darkly*, ed. Hoffman, Sobel, and Teute, vii–viii.

Here, then, is the closest we have come to a meaningful distinction: not all biographers but most microhistorians try to answer important historical—and historiographical—questions, even if their arguments, slippery as eels, are difficult to fish out of the oceans of story (as anyone who has tried teaching those books knows only too well). We might call this *proposition 1* and restate it more forcefully: If biography is largely founded on a belief in the singularity and significance of an individual's life and his contribution to history, microhistory is founded upon almost the opposite assumption: however singular a person's life may be, the value of examining it lies not in its uniqueness, but in its exemplariness, in how that individual's life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole. Thus, at least traditionally, a biographer might write about the inimitable Amelia Earhart because of her leading role in the history of flight, while a microhistorian studies humble John Hu's life because it allows him to tell a story about the impossibility of East meeting West.

This proposition leads to another. If the subjects of microhistories, however extraordinary, are not valued for their unique contributions to history, they are often people whose incompletely documented lives point historians toward a single question shrouded in mystery: Where did Menocchio get the idea that the world was born in putrefaction? Did Bertrande de Rols lie about Martin Guerre? Why was Hu locked up? Why wouldn't Eunice return to Deerfield? Hence, *proposition 2*: Traditional biographers seek to profile an individual and recapitulate a life story, but microhistorians, tracing their elusive subjects through slender records, tend to address themselves to solving small mysteries, in the process of which a microhistorian *may* recapitulate the subject's entire life story, though that is not his primary purpose. The life story, like the mystery, is merely the means to an end—and that end is always explaining the culture.

Having put those first propositions on the table, I would like to return to the question I raised initially, the question of whether microhistorians have more or less sympathy for their subjects than do biographers.

Love and Betrayal

Biographers are notorious for falling in and out of love with the people they write about. Take a look at the preface to nearly any biography, and you will see what I mean. Consider Joseph Ellis's relationship to Thomas Jefferson. With determined frankness, Ellis admits in the preface to *American Sphinx* that, as a graduate student, he found it almost impossible not to identify with Jefferson. "I was a native Virginian who, like Jefferson, had graduated from the College of William and Mary. I even had reddish blond hair like Jefferson and had learned how to disguise my insecurities behind a mask of enigmatic silence." In the office of his Yale mentor, Edmund Morgan, Ellis found comfort in staring at a Rembrandt Peale portrait of Jefferson hanging on the wall. "Jefferson and I were kindred spirits, I told myself, allies in this alien world." Ellis, of course, insists that when he finally set about writing a biography of Jefferson three decades later he had long since recovered from his

“youthful infatuation,” his “young love” for the man who built Monticello.⁸ But he and we both know that young love dies hard.

Many practitioners and critics alike argue that a biographer’s affection for her subject is essential. Ann Douglas believes a successful biography depends on “a love affair, even a marriage, between author and subject.” But a biographer’s feeling for his subject is often more like that of a crazed stalker than that of a faithful husband. After all, when Ellis refers to Jefferson as his “quarry,” he employs a common metaphor: the biographer as hunter. A biographer, as Paula Backscheider sees it, “becomes the subject’s closest ally and bitterest enemy”:

All biographers must be their subjects’ advocates, taking up the burden of explaining lives and why they were led as they were. And so they become closer than mother, wife, school friend; they see through the subject’s eyes, try to feel exactly what hurt about each painful event. But only an enemy touches the very soul, probes until the deepest, most shameful secrets and the most raw aches lie exposed.⁹

The journalist Janet Malcolm likens the biographer to the professional burglar, “breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewelry and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away.” For Malcolm, the chief flaw, the dirty little secret of biography (as of journalism) is the likelihood of betrayal. When the stalker finally catches up with his prey, the badness of his intentions is revealed. Even—or perhaps especially—when a writer begins by identifying with her subject, even loving him, she may well end up despising and, sometimes quite literally, betraying him. As a graduate student, Joe Ellis may have deeply admired Thomas Jefferson, but we can expect that Jefferson, like the subject of virtually any biography, would have found much to annoy and even enrage him in *American Sphinx* (though surely he would have saved his spleen for his more critical biographers). “In their accounts of others,” according to one observer of biography, “the author’s choice, treatment, and analysis of subject tends to follow a pattern of idealization, revision and rejection.”¹⁰

Malcolm has explored this phenomenon as it affects both journalists and biographers in three book-length essays, the most trenchant of which is *The Journalist and the Murderer*. There, Malcolm examines the story of the journalist Joe McGinniss, who, in 1984, was sued by the convicted murderer Jeffrey MacDonald for fraud and breach of contract because McGinniss, who had pretended to believe in MacDonald’s innocence in order to interview him over a period of years, portrayed him as a cruel, remorseless killer when he eventually published a book about the crime. MacDonald’s suit did not question the truth of McGinniss’s book; it insisted only that it represented a betrayal. As Malcolm puts it, in this case, “the underlying narrative of betrayed love” was “told so compellingly that at trial five of the six jurors

⁸ Ellis, *American Sphinx*, ix.

⁹ Ann Douglas quoted in Maddox, “Biography,” 47. Ellis, *American Sphinx*, xii. Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography*, xv.

¹⁰ Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (New York, 1994), 9. Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact, and Form* (New York, 1984), 119.

were persuaded that a man who was serving three consecutive life sentences for the murder of his wife and two small children was deserving of more sympathy than the writer who had deceived him.”¹¹

Is such betrayal licit? As far as journalism is concerned, Janet Malcolm thinks not. When she first published her essay on *MacDonald v. McGinniss* in the *New Yorker*, “journalists across the country reacted as if stung.” And no wonder. “Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible,” the essay begins. Malcolm sees the journalist, like the biographer-as-burglar, as “a kind of confidence man, preying on people’s vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse.” Still, her bold criticism does not, in the end, amount to wholesale condemnation. Journalists, however treacherous, are only doing what they must. At the time she was writing *The Journalist and the Murderer*, Malcolm was busy defending herself against charges of libel filed by the subject of one of her previous books, the scholar Jeffrey Masson, who had expected to find himself portrayed as a dashing iconoclastic hero only to find himself called an “intellectual gigolo.” Masson accused Malcolm (much as MacDonald accused McGinniss) of the worst kind of journalistic betrayal.¹²

Jeffrey MacDonald’s case against Joe McGinniss ended in a hung jury. Masson’s case against Malcolm was summarily dismissed. Still, journalists have good reason to worry about how their subjects will react to reading about themselves. When the confidence man’s scheme is revealed, Malcolm suggests, the result is catastrophe for the subject. “On reading the article or book in question, he has to face the fact that the journalist—who seemed so friendly and sympathetic, so keen to understand him fully, so remarkably attuned to his vision of things—never had the slightest intention of collaborating with him on his story but always intended to write a story of his own.”¹³

Journalists may fret about the consequences of this catastrophic moment of revelation, but Kenneth Silverman can rest assured that Cotton Mather will never read Silverman’s biography of him, and Joe Ellis has little to fear from Thomas Jefferson. Historians—biographers, microhistorians, all of us—have little need to worry about the dead coming to haunt us or suing us for libel or breach of contract. Indeed, those of us working in early America rarely interview anyone, and few of us ever need to negotiate with descendants for the right to look at manuscripts. When Alan Taylor gained access to a treasure trove of “virtually untapped” papers of William Cooper owned by his descendant, Paul Fenimore Cooper Jr., he knew his was an uncommon find, “the historian’s fondest dream.” That Cooper placed no restrictions on the use of the papers was more precious still. Taylor may well have felt a keen sense of obligation to portray William Cooper in a way true to Paul Fenimore

¹¹ Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (New York, 1990); Joe McGinniss, *Fatal Vision* (New York, 1983); Malcolm, *Journalist and the Murderer*, 6.

¹² Malcolm, *Journalist and the Murderer*; jacket copy, 3. Janet Malcolm, *In the Freud Archives* (New York, 1983).

¹³ Malcolm, *Journalist and the Murderer*, 3.

Cooper's view of him, but his generous benefactor died long before the book was completed.¹⁴ In any case, Taylor's contact with his subject, even so far removed by generations, is extraordinarily unusual for historians working before the twentieth century.

Had Taylor needed to secure Paul Fenimore Cooper's approval for his manuscript before publication, Janet Malcolm would have been worried. She warns,

Relatives are the biographer's natural enemies; they are like the hostile tribes an explorer encounters and must ruthlessly subdue to claim his territory. If the relatives behave like friendly tribes, as they occasionally do—if they propose to cooperate with the biographer, even to the point of making him "official" or "authorized"—he still has to assert his authority and strut about to show that he is the big white man and they are just the naked savages.

Speaking of Anne Stevenson, a Sylvia Plath biographer widely criticized for being unduly influenced by Ted Hughes, Plath's husband, and his sister, Malcolm writes that Stevenson "apparently had not subdued the natives but had been captured by them and subjected to God knows what tortures. The book she had finally staggered back to civilization with was repudiated as a piece of worthless native propaganda, rather than the 'truthful' and 'objective' work it should have been."¹⁵

The ironically colonialist metaphor Malcolm employs in discussing this particular dilemma is jarring, given that the occasion on which early American historians are most likely to run into ethical dilemmas of this sort is when they are dealing with Native Americans. Historians of early American Indians and of Indian-white relations often have contact with present-day native groups or, when they do not, are chastised for neglecting to consult them. When conducting research for a book about a seventeenth-century colonial-Indian war, I approached several New England Indians to ask about their perspective on the war, and, though I learned a great deal, I abandoned plans for conducting more and lengthier interviews when it became clear that it was expected that I would write a history of the war based primarily, if not exclusively, on the contemporary Indian oral tradition, even when it contradicted the documentary evidence. While such an account of contemporary oral history would be invaluable, it was not the project I had originally undertaken, and, since it would have required submitting my manuscript for tribal approval before publication, I was unconvinced that I should alter my course. When the book, which is based on letters and accounts written largely by colonists, was eventually published, several Indians complained to me that in failing to interview them I had failed to get at the truth.¹⁶ Indeed, from their perspective, I *had* failed to get at the truth, while from mine, I had managed to retain intellectual control of my work.

However troubling betrayal is for biographers of subjects whose relatives are still living, it is a problem premodern microhistorians do not commonly face. The odd

¹⁴ Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York, 1984). Taylor, *William Cooper's Town*, 533.

¹⁵ Malcolm, *Silent Woman*, 10–12.

¹⁶ Wood Owl to Jill Lepore, e-mails, Dec. 2, 3, 1998 (in Lepore's possession). See Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York, 1998).

Paul Fenimore Cooper and Narragansett Indian aside, pre-twentieth-century American historians rarely meet “natives,” hostile or otherwise. With little or no contact with the people we write about or even with their descendants, then, does the moral dilemma of betraying our subjects still bear on us? And does it bear on microhistorians differently?

If biographers are hunters, lovers, and betrayers, so too are microhistorians. Jonathan Spence considered himself “in pursuit of Hu,” an elusive quarry if ever there was one, and John Demos, who dedicated *The Unredeemed Captive* to his daughters, mourned with John Williams the loss of his daughter Eunice as fully as any father might. And, just as Eunice appears to have believed her father betrayed her, so Demos seems to feel that he, too, has failed to do Eunice justice, to tell her story the way she herself might have. That microhistorians cannot interview their subjects makes many of them more, rather than less, anxious about betrayal. At the core of *The Unredeemed Captive* lies Demos’s frustration that, even when Eunice’s contemporaries asked her why she was unwilling to return to Deerfield (the question that haunts both Demos and the Reverend Williams), she refused to answer. Desperate to give the silent woman a voice, Demos writes for her a fictional interior monologue, explaining, “we can only speculate—only imagine—but that much, at least, we must try.” Jonathan Spence, too, frets that he may have similarly betrayed John Hu, because, unable to recover Hu’s perspective from the historical record, he is trapped by Jean François Foucquet’s version of events. “I don’t happen to think Foucquet was right in the way he treated Hu,” Spence insists, “but I am only able to make that judgment because he lets me. Thus even if I believe I have confronted him successfully Foucquet remains, in a way, the victor.” To make amends, Spence gives Hu the last word. In the book’s closing scene, Hu returns to his hometown, where children gather around him, begging him to tell the story of his travels.

Hu pauses a moment, and closes his eyes.
“Well,” says Hu, “it’s like this.”¹⁷

The End. Hu tells his story off stage, where we, like Spence, cannot hear it.

Unlike the journalists Janet Malcolm and Joseph McGinniss, John Demos and Jonathan Spence did not interview Eunice or John Williams, John Hu or Father Foucquet, nodding as if in agreement, only to write books that disagreed with their version of events. Foucquet never confided to Spence over a cup of cappuccino, “That Hu is crazy!” and Spence never replied, “You bet, what a starker!” Foucquet, of course, did tell Spence that he believed Hu was insane, in documents he left for him to read, but Spence never promised Foucquet his sympathy. And, in the end, Spence seems to have felt no compunction about betraying Foucquet (which, of course, he did); instead he regretted only that he could not fully answer Hu’s pitiful question: “Why have I been locked up?”¹⁸ Meanwhile, Demos, greatly indebted to John Williams for much that we know about his daughter, did not hesitate to sug-

¹⁷ Spence, *Question of Hu*, xii. Demos, *Unredeemed Captive*, 108–9. Spence, *Question of Hu*, xx, 134.

¹⁸ Spence, *Question of Hu*, 4.

gest that Williams had failed her. Like Spence, Demos seems to regret, not his betrayal of John Williams's version of events, but his failure to get Eunice to speak, to get her to answer the question, "Why won't you come home?" For those microhistorians, the flaw of the genre is not in betraying the loquacious John Williams and the chatty Father Fouquet, but in failing to schedule an interview with the reticent Eunice Williams and the tongue-tied John Hu.

We can, then, introduce another tentative distinction between biography and microhistory. *Proposition 3*: Journalists and biographers of twentieth-century figures worry about getting too cozy with their informants and their subjects' relatives and possibly betraying them. Microhistorians, typically denied any such coziness with actual, living informants and motivated by many of the concerns of social history (and its attempt to tell the stories of the "inarticulate"), betray those who have left abundant records (the Father Fouquets and John Williamses) in order to resurrect those who did not (the John Hus and Eunice Williamses). Yet it is important to remember that, even if the burdens of betrayal weigh differently on microhistorians, especially those whose subjects are long dead, the power of sympathy may be just the same.

Disclosure and Doubt

Janet Malcolm initially decided to investigate *MacDonald v. McGinniss* after receiving a letter from McGinniss's lawyer warning that the case threatened "to set a new precedent whereby a reporter or author would be legally obligated to disclose his state of mind and attitude toward his subject during the process of writing and research." No such obligation weighs on historians, and yet we seem to offer this information voluntarily—if not compulsively—all the time. Consider John Demos's disarming aside in *The Unredeemed Captive*, "to be candid, I felt incapable of understanding Indians well enough to place them right at center-stage." Or Jonathan Spence's bald confession in *The Question of Hu*: "I don't happen to think Fouquet was right in the way he treated Hu."¹⁹

That no legal precedent obligates a historian "to disclose his state of mind and attitude toward his subject during the process of writing and research" does not mean that no compulsion exists. As Scott Casper has observed in *Constructing American Lives*, his compelling study of the history of biography,

If we have a "culture of biography" today, it is a culture that autobiography has reshaped. The "biographical" information that millions of readers want is the stuff of the first-person interview and the psychologist's couch. . . . Even biographers get in on the autobiographical act. . . . They confess how immersing themselves in someone else's life helped them understand their own, as if self-diagnosis were a benefit of writing biography, not just of reading it.²⁰

¹⁹ Daniel Kornstein to Malcolm, Sept. 1, 1987, quoted in Malcolm, *Journalist and the Murderer*, 6–7. Demos, *Unredeemed Captive*, xii. Spence, *Question of Hu*, xx.

²⁰ Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 326. See also Ron Chernow, "Waking the Dead: The Biography Boom in America," *Culturefront Online* (Summer 2000), <http://www.culturefront.org/culturefront/magazine/2K/summer/article_3.html>.

When an author discloses his relationship to his subject, it does not necessarily mean that he has a sophisticated perspective on his work. It is quite easy to say, “In writing this book, I fell in love with FDR,” but it is rather more difficult to know how that feeling corrupts or enhances the book itself. Disclosure, for its own sake, is of little value. Yet, apparently, readers are not particularly interested in what is, at least occasionally, of greater value: discussions of how intimacy and betrayal can lead to doubt and, ultimately, to knowledge. If research is like stalking, a good and honest writer, however assiduous in pursuit of his prey, will still hesitate at the essential sordidness of the task at hand. In recent years, some biographers have even discussed their hesitation and self-doubt, a discussion that Janet Malcolm believes usually confuses but rarely enlightens readers. As she writes, “As a burglar should not pause to discuss with his accomplice the rights and wrongs of burglary while he is jimmying a lock, so a biographer ought not to introduce doubts about the legitimacy of the biographical enterprise. The biography-loving public does not want to hear that biography is a flawed genre.”²¹

Whether it annoys their readers or not, microhistorians, too, like to discuss the rights and wrongs of burglary while jimmying locks. But they are equally likely to pretend they were never in the house in the first place or, if they were, that they had a badge and a search warrant. A striking figure in several microhistories is a character who *legitimately* evaluates, investigates, and, often, judges the subject from a rather lofty distance. Several microhistories include the literal embodiment of the judgmental outsider—a judge himself: Jean de Coras in *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Governor Briggs in *Dead Certainties*, and even the arbiter Father Goville in *The Question of Hu* and the various inquisition officials in *The Cheese and the Worms*.²²

That judges and pseudo-judges are important characters in microhistories has an important consequence. In telling a person’s life story, many biographers identify (and confess their identification) with their subjects. Microhistorians, meanwhile, may identify with a particular *contemporary* of their subjects, in particular, with a person who was in a position to investigate or judge the subject. Because of this, microhistorians are far more likely to become characters in their own books, or, more commonly, to use the detective/judge figure as a loosely disguised version of themselves, a kind of historian’s double. Simon Schama, a non-Brahmin teaching at Harvard when he wrote “The Death of a Harvard Man” about the murder of George Parkman, may well have found himself emotionally compelled by the accused murderer, John Webster, another non-Brahmin who taught at Harvard: Webster’s guilt is by no means clear, and the man’s suffering is deeply affecting. We can almost imagine Schama writing an Ellis-like preface: “I was a non-Brahmin who, like Webster, taught at Harvard.” Yet Schama’s sympathies do not lie with Webster. Instead, he reserves his greatest affection and respect for George Briggs, the Massachusetts governor charged with deciding whether to commute Webster’s death sentence. Schama’s story opens, not with Parkman’s brutal death or with Webster’s agonies

²¹ Malcolm, *Silent Woman*, 9–10.

²² Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (New York, 1991).

while incarcerated, but with Briggs's frustrated musings over the case. "Where lay the truth, the real history of George Parkman and John White Webster?" Schama has Briggs ask himself. "Much as he respected the stern proceedings of the trial, he was too much of a lawyer himself (or perhaps too much of a smithy's son) to imagine that it told the whole story." And Schama ends his story, not with Webster's execution, but with a letter from Briggs to his daughter, relating a charming dream, in which Briggs experienced "perfect quietness and peace of mind."²³ Briggs is, in effect, a stand-in for Schama himself, a man who carefully weighs the question, "Where lay the truth, the real history?," and, having decided on Webster's guilt, Briggs (like Schama) retires with peace of mind. Schama himself never goes out on a limb to declare his own final verdict on Webster's guilt; instead, he speaks through Briggs, who functions as a kind of ventriloquist's dummy.

Similarly, Natalie Zemon Davis, researching *The Return of Martin Guerre*, had many characters with whom to sympathize, not least among them the heroic Bertrande de Rols, but Davis, like Schama, seems most to identify with the judge in the case, Jean de Coras. A chapter devoted to him is titled "The Storyteller," and Davis, wonderful storyteller herself, clearly finds Coras fascinating. As Davis paints him, Coras is a fair judge, a fine scholar, a much-loved teacher, a devoted father, and a loving husband. Like Schama, Davis is also interested enough in her judge to write about his dreams (Coras dreams that his wife cuckolds him) and suggests that Coras's book about Martin Guerre—not a microhistory but a "prodigious history"—is as complicated as her own. Coras, who evinces a "willingness to grow, to rethink, to reinterpret," wrote about the case in such a way as to leave "his audience some room for doubt about whether the Criminal Chamber actually did get the right man."²⁴ That doubt Davis herself leaves with her own readers, again, like Schama, using her own words but attributing them to Coras.

Where microhistorians identify with—and play the role of—detectives and judges, they maintain a kind of distance (or illusion of distance) from their subjects that is less common in biography. This distinction can serve as *proposition 4*: A biographer's alter ego is usually the subject himself, while a microhistorian's alter ego may be a figure who plays the role of detective or judge in relation to the subject. As a result, the question of disclosure and doubt can be altogether different for microhistorians. Davis and Schama do not need to include a revealing preface stating their relationships to the people in their stories and disclosing their doubts about how they are portrayed. Instead, they speak those doubts through their alter egos, Coras and Briggs.

In *The Silent Woman*, Janet Malcolm argues that the biographer's "apparatus of scholarship" ultimately transforms him from a greedy burglar to an almost saintly benefactor who is

seen as sacrificing years of his life to his task, tirelessly sitting in archives and libraries and patiently conducting interviews with witnesses. There is no length he

²³ *Ibid.*, 81, 81, 318.

²⁴ Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre*, 94–103, 112–13, esp. 105, 97, 111.

will not go to, and the more his book reflects his industry the more the reader believes that he is having an elevating literary experience, rather than simply listening to backstairs gossip and reading other people's mail.²⁵

A similar transformation takes place in microhistories, which are often presented as a kind of researcher's *tour de force*. Employing a stand-in such as Coras or Briggs by no means implies that Davis or Schama vanishes. On the contrary, a typical micro-history celebrates the microhistorian (sometimes in the guise of his alter ego, sometimes as the historian/narrator himself) as a careful, assiduous, insightful, and usually brilliant character who tracks down and evaluates evidence with astonishing, even breathtaking skill (much the way a mystery novel is designed to impress readers with the detective's cleverness in solving a murder that the readers, given the same clues, cannot). Yet, far from being a liability for microhistories, this device is exactly what makes the best microhistories so much fun to read, since most readers, myself included, are quite delighted to play Doctor Watson to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's Sherlock Holmes or Captain Hastings to Natalie Zemon Davis's Hercule Poirot.

Devices and Desires

To return, now, to the question with which I began this essay: Do microhistorians have more or less sympathy for their subjects than do biographers? Recall my four propositions:

Proposition 1. If biography is largely founded on a belief in the singularity and significance of an individual's contribution to history, microhistory is founded upon almost the opposite assumption: however singular a person's life may be, the value of examining it lies in how it serves as an allegory for the culture as a whole.

Proposition 2. Biographers seek to profile an individual and recapitulate a life story, but microhistorians, tracing their elusive characters through slender records, tend to address themselves to solving small mysteries about a person's life as a means to exploring the culture.

Proposition 3. Biographers generally worry about becoming too intimate with their subjects and later betraying them; microhistorians, typically denied any such intimacy, tend to betray people who have left abundant records in order to resurrect those who did not.

Proposition 4. A biographer's alter ego is usually the subject of the biography, while a microhistorian's alter ego may be a figure who investigates or judges the subject. For this reason, a microhistorian may be a character in his own book.

Surely whether a biographer or a microhistorian sympathizes with his subject depends to a great degree on the writer himself, as well as on the attractiveness of the subject. Yet, building from these four propositions, it does seem that a microhis-

²⁵ Malcolm, *Silent Woman*, 9.

torian's approach may, at least in some cases, allow for more emotional distance from the subject (although whether such distance is desirable is subject to debate and to the taste of the reader). Microhistory will always draw the writer's, and the reader's, attention away from the subject and toward the culture. And, to the extent that a microhistorian does become entangled with his subject, there are evolving conventions of the genre—in which the microhistorian plays a role in his own book as a crafty detective/narrator or creates an alter ego in the form of another character who investigates or judges the subject—which allow for an authorial presence in the narrative that is at a greater remove than, to take an extreme case, Edmund Morris in *Dutch*.²⁶

Recall, too, my interest in Noah Webster. How might my study of him differ if I were to approach him as a microhistorian rather than as a biographer? Following propositions 1 and 2, it must be said that Noah Webster is not a particularly good candidate for microhistory. It is, in fact, quite difficult to think of him as anything but a man who made significant contributions to postrevolutionary American politics and literature during his very long and productive life (1758–1843). Webster's life and work is also extraordinarily well documented, and there is very little mystery to it, unless it is why he never managed to profit more from his spellers and dictionaries. Yet there remains something promising about making this unlikely figure the subject of a microhistory. My hunch is that to look at Webster the way most microhistorians look at their subjects, as faintly exotic but somehow emblematic, could be very intriguing indeed, in much the same way as it was for William Cooper, another prominent early republican.

Yet I find that my powerful feelings toward Webster interfere. Regarding proposition 3, I have found myself willing, even eager, to betray Webster, to parade his failings before my readers. Truth be told, and that tender hairy moment in the archives aside, I very much dislike Noah Webster. And, in this, I am not alone. Joseph Ellis once confessed to finding Webster “an irascible and stubborn character, difficult to know and even more difficult to like.”²⁷ Webster was a relentless self-promoter who puffed his own accomplishments at every opportunity and attacked his rivals with shocking ferocity. He embodied the worst excesses of Federalism, despising the people and despairing of democracy with every extension of suffrage. He was petty and provincial, all the while believing himself more cosmopolitan and more sophisticated than everyone of his acquaintance. He was, even as a young man, sour, bitter, and friendless.

Honestly, what's to like? The more I get to know Webster, the less fondly I recall holding that lock of hair in the palm of my hand. To be candid, I have wondered whether it is fair to write about a man for whom I cannot help but feel a real distaste. Biographers, of course, deal with this problem all the time. As Paula Back-

²⁶ Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York, 1999). For an insightful essay on Morris's relationship to the history of biography, see Scott Casper, “Going Dutch,” *Common-place*, 1 (Sept. 2000), <<http://www.common-place.org/vol-01/no-01/dutch/>>.

²⁷ Joseph Ellis, *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture* (New York, 1979), 163–64.

scheider has observed, “Biographers do, after all, write the lives of people they consider monsters or repellent human beings.” And, in biographers’ memoirs, there is abundant advice to be had about what to do about it. Robert Tucker confessed that he had “to *be* Stalin” in order to write a biography of a man he considered “loathsome,” an “evil-doer,” a “mad dog.” “How, if you are so angry, can you do justice to Stalin in your role as biographer?” Tucker was asked. Only because, ultimately, he understood that Stalin understood *himself* as “a righteous man and a good and noble ruler.”²⁸

Noah Webster is, of course, no Joseph Stalin. He was an unlikable man, not a dangerous one. But, Ellis excepted, Webster’s earlier biographers have taken Tucker’s approach and have tried to see Webster through his own eyes, portraying him as a “patient, indefatigable laborer for American cultural advancement.” Unlike Tucker, however, who proceeded to demonstrate how wrong Stalin was about himself, Webster’s biographers have generally rallied to his defense and have attempted to rescue him from the disdain of his contemporaries.²⁹ If I were to write a biography of Webster, I would have to wrestle with these problems, of intimacy, of sympathy, or lack of sympathy, and, despite my best efforts to retain some perspective, I suspect I would end up writing a scathing book that offered little more than a portrait of one particular ugly man. Yet another writer, a better biographer, could get inside Webster’s head, could *be* Webster, and write a powerful and evocative book that might have much to teach us about arrogance and loneliness and even postrevolutionary America.

How might a microhistory differ? For one thing, a microhistorian would have a harder time *being* Noah Webster. That kind of identification is exactly what the genre discourages. (John Demos perhaps comes closest when, in his fictional monologue, he tries to *be* Eunice Williams, but ultimately he could not escape how his role, trying to discover why Eunice would not return, allied him with her father.) Given my vexed relationship with Webster, a microhistorical approach is appealing; it allows me to back away from him, to scan the scene from a different angle. But I would need to find *some* angle, another character, perhaps. I might see Webster from his daughter Eliza’s perspective. I might write a microhistory that was more about the decline of patriarchal authority, with Webster as an aging anachronism. If so, following proposition 4, I could employ Eliza as my alter ego, whose bristling against Webster’s rigidity would express my own. Or I might choose as my angle something altogether different, not another character but a theme that might work as an allegory for something important about Webster. My microhistory might focus on the years 1800 to 1828 and narrate Webster’s travels, geographically and

²⁸ Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography*, 39. Robert C. Tucker, “A Stalin Biographer’s Memoir,” in *Introspection in Biography: The Biographer’s Quest for Self-Awareness*, ed. Samuel H. Baron and Carl Pletsch (London, 1985), 263–67.

²⁹ Harry S. Warfel, *Noah Webster: Schoolmaster to America* (New York, 1936), 3–4. Biographies of Webster include Chauncey A. Goodrich, “Life and Writings of Noah Webster,” *American Magazine* (1848), 5–32; [William Chauncey Fowler], “Memoir,” in *A Dictionary of the English Language* (New York, 1845); Horace E. Scudder, *Noah Webster* (Boston, 1881); John S. Morgan, *Noah Webster* (New York, 1975); Richard Rollins, *The Long Journey of Noah Webster* (Philadelphia, 1980); and Richard Moss, *Noah Webster* (Boston, 1984).

intellectually, in his efforts to research and compile his *American Dictionary of the English Language*.³⁰ I might tell this story as a metaphor for the journey of the new nation on the road to a kind of national self-confidence detoured, time and again, by nativist prejudices. I might tell this story episodically, and through anecdote, and would not hesitate to betray Webster, the man, as an unlikable fellow because Webster, the man, would not be my subject.

As it turns out, neither of those is the book I have written, probably because Webster has overwhelmed me.³¹ But maybe someday I will, and if I do, I might be a character in that book in much the same way as I am a character in this essay. Here, I am a person who loves Noah Webster's hair but hates his vanity, who admires Janet Malcolm and Joseph Ellis and Natalie Zemon Davis, who likes a good read, who condemns disclosure but reveals all. I am not the subject of this essay (thank God), nor is Noah Webster. In the end, this essay, a reflection on whether microhistorians have more or less sympathy for their subjects than do biographers, has been, in part, a demonstration of how microhistory works. To arrive at an answer to its question, it has employed anecdotes and characters as allegories. And in the method—using stories and people as devices—lies the answer: because microhistorians' subjects are only devices, they are less likely to fall in love with them, for better or for worse, than are biographers. (Joseph Ellis's subject is Thomas Jefferson, but Jonathan Spence's subject is not John Hu.) And what of Webster? I will probably never write that microhistory. In the meantime, a lock of his hair waits patiently in an envelope, in a folder, in a box, on a shelf.

³⁰ Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (2 vols., New Haven, 1828).

³¹ See, instead, my discussion of Webster in Jill Lepore, *A Is for American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States* (New York, forthcoming, 2002).