

# PLOUTARCHOS, n.s.

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Plutarchus



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# Greek Lives

by

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delivered in St John's College, Oxford, on 20 May 2004*

## Abstract

This was the text of my inaugural lecture, and the editors of *Ploutarchos* were kind enough to suggest to me that, given its Plutarchan emphasis, it might have interest to a wider public. They also, even more kindly, suggested that it would be best in its original oral form, including the local pleasantries and some references—for instance to the party which followed—which are extremely occasion-specific. I hope that the informality of style will indeed convey something of the flavour of the occasion. It was also marked by a momentary failure of electricity half way through, plunging the audience of some 200 people into darkness. Plutarchans may take some malicious pleasure that this happened exactly on the word ‘Nepos’.

Madam Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Ladies,  
and Gentlemen:

When one thinks about it, the notion of a ‘curriculum vitae’ is a curious one. The metaphor is odd: ‘curriculum’ should most naturally mean a running-track, and if one’s pedantic it suggests that you are running round in circles. I suppose it is drawn from the notion of a school curriculum, and – presumably – there the notion is originally one of a yearly round, seen from the teacher’s point of view: you go through the timetable, then go back and start again with the next year. The extension to the

pupil’s point of view, going through from beginning to end, is the one that is then borrowed for the idea of the *curriculum vitae*. Once that has happened, the suggestions are rather the opposite of those of going round in circles: it is rather the idea of a moulded, controlled, and steady passage forwards – ‘progression’, in HEFCE-speak<sup>1</sup> – even if it is rapid too (still ‘running’). And the other metaphors we use when talking of life-planning again carry similar suggestions, though with more of an idea of getting up our own momentum that will carry us forward without even having to do much steering: ‘career’, ‘career-path’, ‘trajectory’, and so on. It is still about shape; it is still about firm, single

<sup>1</sup> HEFCE = the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the government policy and funding institution with which British universities most regularly deal.

direction; it is still, above all, about getting somewhere – about *achievement*.

The phrase *curriculum vitae* is a Ciceronian one, but Cicero does not use it in the way we use it: it comes in grand reflections about this short ‘running-course of life’ that fortune has given us, without breaking that course up into a lot of individual steps (*Pro Archia* 28, *Acad.* 1.44). In English the idea, or at least the name, of the *curriculum vitae* does not go back all that far. The first occurrence listed in the OED is in 1902, but the phrase only seems to have become current around the time of the second world war. And the early uses nearly all have a faintly dismissive tone: I do not know much about X’s *curriculum vitae* (but that does not matter); Y’s c.v. only tells you the bare facts, does not really penetrate to the real personality. It is ironic that some of the details that figured in early cases are precisely the ones that tend not to be mentioned at all in the modern c.v. – where you were brought up, your marital status, parents, children, date of birth, all are increasingly omitted, as being irrelevant to ... whatever it is that the c.v. is for, normally getting the next job, moving on to the next achievement. True, a modern c.v. may have hobbies or pastimes, just enough to indicate that one does have a life elsewhere (as we like to think of that as a part even of an achieving life)– indeed, how do we describe them: ‘other interests’, so it is clear there what is the marked and what

is the unmarked category. They are usually a rather laundered and selective list, too: you do not see ‘going down the dogs’ very often, nor ‘watching *Eastenders*’. And they are kept separate: for the c.v. compartmentalises and fragments, with everything ordered under different headings, all much neater and tidier than life itself tends to be. What is more, that ‘other interests’ part is one section of the c.v. that has no linear structure, no hint of time or sequence, not even a hint of what one did when: just ‘music, reading, country walks’ – even though one suspects some of those ‘pastimes’ entries in *Who’s Who* could well do with a check-up along those lines. ‘Exactly how many Trollope novels *have* you read, Mr Politician, in the last twelve months, and when?’ Most of the rest is ordered as a skeletal narrative, or at least a skeleton for a narrative – or rather several interlocking narratives, one of education, one of jobs, one of presentations or publications. But the fact that the narrative is not filled in explicitly is hardly a postmodern move towards readerly empowerment, it is not a question of leaving it open to the reader what sort of narrative to construct. It is very clear what sort of narrative is supposed to come out, one of a smooth path of one success after another (hence the worry over ‘an awkward gap in the c.v.’ over that year or so when you were out of things): *achievement*, once again. It is achievement that is narrational, linear; it is ‘what you’re like’ that is not.

Not that the c.v. is a constant across all cultures. American c.v.s tend to work backwards, with most recent jobs and publications first; European ones go forward. No shortage of a slick cultural explanation for that: American ones are more geared to the here-and-now, with what the reader needs to know most put first; European ones more diffidently treat life as a forward movement, this is how far I've got so far –more clearly a story-structure, in fact, though an unfinished and provisional one. American ones often start (or rather finish) once you have gone back to the age of eighteen or so, with college education the earliest thing that is worth mentioning: British ones include schooling –especially these days if it is a state school. French ones, at least the ones I have found on the web, often have a punchy first paragraph sketching ambitions and competences and indicating why I am your dream employee– the sort of thing that in Britain might figure in a brief covering letter and in the United States in a rather less brief one. Japanese c.v.s tend to allow slightly more space for 'other interests'. The German equivalent is not really a c.v. at all, but an *Erzählender Lebenslauf* ('a narrative life-course' or more literally 'life-running' again –why do we all have to be running all the time?), and they have to be, or until recently had to be, written in one's own hand –perhaps a more sustained attempt to portray the personality there. Italian ones are similar, except that they are often put in the third person. So

the 'narrative' in those cases is not merely a potential one, something one can reconstruct from the sober British-style listings, but one that you tell for yourself. Academics will be reminded of those fascinating final pages of pre-war German dissertations, telling one about the person's background and parentage and which lectures he or she enjoyed – almost always the most interesting page in the thesis, of course.

With that partial exception, the modern c.v. has come to be very like the ancient *res gestae*, a list of accomplishments, not an autobiographical sketch. (And those two things are indeed kept pretty separate in the ancient world. Augustus wrote both: he would.) But some of its features, not all, do have counterparts in the literary genre of modern biography too –those books which flood the shelves in the W.H. Smith 'Biography' section. There too the systematic linear structure is the thing, this time creating a genuine narrative rather than simply serving as a skeleton for one. And once again it is particularly the people of achievement that this suits, and the fuller and thicker the narrative the better: after all, if one can write 850 pages on a politician it shows that he or she *must have been* important, does it not? Eighty-five years ago Lytton Strachey set himself in *Eminent Victorians* (London, 1918) to show up the arid unimaginativeness of the multi-volume political biographies that were then in vogue. In that generic

battle, Strachey lost: the voluminous cover-everything narrative has won for the sober people of conventional achievement, and the subversive, concentrate-on-personalia-and-keep-it-brief alternative suits only other sorts of celebrity – pop stars, footballers, super-models. Both sorts of biography tend to keep a fundamental narrative structure (as indeed Strachey did); both indeed are for figures of achievement, though in different ways; but my impression is that the non-political biographies tend to break away from linear narrative more often than the political ones do. Garry O'Connor's biography of Ralph Richardson<sup>2</sup>, for instance, intersperses narrative with flash-forwards to the time when he was writing it, describing the interviews with Richardson in which he gathered the information – the evasiveness, the knock-over-the-coffee-cup embarrassment, the appearance on *Parkinson* about the same time when he upstaged his host – a most interesting way of exploring how narrative is always passed through the filters of memory. Sports- and pop-biographies and autobiographies tend to blur the narrative into sweeping 'what-life-is-like-as-a-star' collections of anecdotes and deep thoughts: how embarrassing it can be if you're a touring cricketer to have

four of the loveliest girls in Adelaide lurking you back to their particularly large and convenient bedroom, and how one just loses track of the time in the morning – you know how it is<sup>3</sup>; what a bore it is to have to hold up queues when you're mobbed by autograph-hunters at the lights. (And if anyone saw me deep in Geri Halliwell books in W. H. Smith last Saturday, this is my excuse)<sup>4</sup>.

Even in cases like those you can see Lives defining themselves against – something else, some other possible narrative, some other way of living a life: what it is like not to be a star. There are also *series* of Lives which build on other Lives in a different sense, build indeed on one another: Lives of the Saints, the Artists, the Sculptors, the Musicians, the Pirates (cast as a sort of mirror-image of the Admirals, for all the world as if they were baseball-teams squaring up to one another); the Archbishops – the library in my new college Christ Church is specially rich in the last; my former college Univ. has rather more 'Lives of the Jurists'. Projects like that intimate something more, that the individuality of a saint, artist, musician, admiral, or archbishop goes also with being one of a longer process, with everyone playing a sequential part in the building of a

<sup>2</sup> *Ralph Richardson: an Actor's Life* (2nd ed., London, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> PHIL TUFNELL and PETER HAYTER, *Phil Tufnell: What Now? – The Autobiography*, London, 2000, pp. 88–91.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. GERI HALLIWELL, *If Only*, London, 1999, a book in which traffic is a strangely recurrent theme.

long narrative. And again that narrative is doubtless structured, teleologically satisfying, achievement-driven, at least in most cases: perhaps not the pirates, admittedly. It is a way of doing cultural history, in fact, where influences and trends can be stratified in terms of who-taught-who, whose symphony Brahms was enraptured by at the age of seven. And it goes back to the ancient world, to Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers* and Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists* and possibly to Plutarch too: as some of you may be suspecting, he will be coming along in a minute.

These days, though, there is another sort of series of Lives that is becoming more popular, and one that tells a very different story –or, in a way particularly interesting for my purposes today, collects lives which do not quite tell a narrative story at all. That is the way in which collections of lives, often women's lives, stress the diversity and patternlessness of a civilisation, the way it so often includes life stories which are anything but stories of achievement, and are so often of frustration, exploitation, and loss. To understand Victorian England, consider not merely General Gordon but also a series of Lancashire

mill-workers; to understand the English upper-classes, take some case-studies of divorce, as Lawrence Stone does in *Broken Lives*<sup>5</sup>; to understand America's story, think of 'Narratives of Black Women 1860–1960', as Mary Helen Washington sub-titled her collection *Invented Lives*<sup>6</sup>. It is harder to do it for the ancient world, simply as there is so little evidence; but John Ray's *Reflections of Osiris* does something rather similar for ancient Egypt, collecting a dozen people of very different status over a long period of time, and bringing out the diversity of their experience<sup>7</sup>.

When we do have collections like that which stress diversity, the individual stories often do interesting things with narrative form. They rarely abandon the linear skeleton completely, though often there are big gaps: Harriet Jacobs' picture of her slave-woman existence is tellingly entitled *Incidents from the Life of a Slave-Girl* (1860)<sup>8</sup>. Often a particular 'incident' is not put in a linear framework at all, but Jacobs exploits it for a move into general, paradigmatic statement about how typical this was of southern slave-life, not just her own life but those of many others too. The whole point is sometimes that

<sup>5</sup> *Broken Lives: Separation and Divorce in England, 1660-1857*, Oxford, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860–1960*, Anchor Books–Doubleday, 1987 (repr. Virago Press 1989).

<sup>7</sup> *Reflections of Osiris: Lives from Ancient Egypt*, Profile Books, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> There are now several modern editions; it is perhaps most accessible in the Penguin Classics edition (Harmondsworth, 2000).

each day could be so much like the last and the next, that nothing much changed, that there was no point and no possibility of being linear. When a narrative pattern imposes itself, it can be most telling for its reversal of its expected norm: Harriet Jacobs' narrative often echoes the pattern and rhythms of polite narratives of romantic stories of white women, but her last paragraph begins:

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. ...

So once again it is a life-narrative that bounces off other life-narratives, defining itself by its difference.

There is often a further paradox to such collections of *Lives*, though. These women may in their own lives have struggled against the patterns and the expectations and the control that society assumed over them; and those struggles may be reflected in the narrative or non-narrative way that they tell their stories. And yet one often sees the collectors themselves imposing new patterns, indeed setting those individual stories in a new, highly linear master-narrative. I mentioned Mary Helen Washington's *Invented Lives*, a collection which does a great deal with Harriet Jacobs and her *Incidents from the Life of a Slave-Girl*; yet Washington

herself begins the introduction by regretting that critics rarely place black women's literature in a 'tradition' in the way that they do with male equivalents (pp. xvi–xvii). The cover blurb to that book celebrates 'the struggle to find a narrative structure to accommodate the experiences of black women in this society' – a narrative of 'the uplift of the race' (a phrase Washington often uses); there is even a sense of impatience if a story does not fit the master-narrative pattern, if for instance a black woman writer failed to be explicit enough about her frustration with the constraints of her life<sup>9</sup>. Diversity and patternlessness have their limits: perhaps indeed within every anti-narrative, or at least in every tweak of linear narrative norms, there lies a new, even more masterful master-narrative; perhaps we are not, or not yet, equipped just to layer different experiences and revel in their kaleidoscopic diversity rather than try to find new patterns. After all, kaleidoscopes themselves impose patterns, even if they shift. I am not sure about this: I hope there *are* possibilities for other, less linear and controlling strategies for thinking and writing, as a different strand of feminist criticism sometimes suggests. But it is not at all easy.

If we move to real life, that perennially bewildering and puzzling thing even for an amateur theoretician like

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Washington's comments (pp. 78–9) on Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces* (1900).

me, then we deal in narratives there too. We so often construct patterns about our achievements, or lack of them, to project to others and to ourselves, and very often those stories are crafted to fit a particular narrative-pattern of what one would expect a successful banker, or politician, or cricketer, or undergraduate to achieve at this stage of that 'career' or 'trajectory'. Not all of them are success-narratives either: the pattern of 'sad old loser, about time you did a proper job, and those wild ties are *pathetic*' is at least as appealing to oneself as 'brilliant, debonair, and witty man about town'; the narrative that makes this particular chest twinge the beginning of a story of a heart attack is more seductive than that which makes it an end of a story of routine over-indulgence at lunch, or even the continuation of a story of a hundred and fifty similar scares in the past. Some psychotherapeutic and counselling approaches develop 'narrative therapy', with sophisticated and effective ways for leading patients to examine the narratives they tell about themselves and to replace them with other, more helpful ones. But it must be much more difficult to replace a narrative with no narrative at all, to accept that experience is just one damn uncontrolled thing after another, with no pattern and no particular appropriateness to our own personalities. Writing narratives is tough: writing formal narratives – Simon Schama once commented that if anyone thinks narrative is easy, just try it, buster; writing our own mental self-narratives in

any way that persuades anyone, even ourselves. But doing without narratives is tougher still.

I have said a lot about Lives, but not much about Greek ones. A crude way of putting my argument is that Plutarch has a lot to answer for, as many of the features I have been stressing can be traced back to his *Parallel Lives*. That indeed would be too crude, for I do not want to argue that Plutarch has *influenced* these phenomena: I think he probably has, but that would require a different type of lecture (or rather several books). My point is rather that many of these tensions of modern biography – narrative and non-narrative, this narrative and others, master-patterns and diversity, individual and paradigmatic – can be found already in the very original cast that Plutarch gave to his work.

For it didn't have to be this way. Let us take narrative first. Plutarch's typical cradle-to-grave structure seems so natural to us that it is hard to think of doing it any other way; but there was no strong tradition of doing it like this. Not that any single 'tradition' is particularly straightforward to trace, however much modern critics may want to find one (much as Mary Helen Washington wanted to find one in her sort of Lives). Perhaps we should start with Xenophon's *Agésilas* and Isocrates' *Evagoras* in the fourth century BC: narrative plays a big part in both, but only a part – just about half of each work. Or perhaps with Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, describ-



ing rather imaginatively the life of the Persian king Cyrus the Great, where we do get more of a linear narrative form.

But it is a third work of Xenophon that we should go to if we look for something closer to what we call ‘personality’: his *Apomnemonemata* – anecdotes, reminiscences – collect things worth saying about Socrates, a series of little narratives but not put in an overall narrative form. This way of presenting *what sort of life Socrates had* is most telling. Socrates, of course, is one of the most ‘memorable’ and vividly portrayed figures of classical Athens; yet telling his story, conveying that impression of what he was like, was not something that his followers found natural to cast into narrative form. There is a notable absence of stories told about Socrates’ childhood, for instance. His portrayal is one of a timeless figure, perpetually around in the agora, perpetually up for a good conversation, perpetually of a certain age, perpetually bald. (Not that there’s anything wrong with that). And that fits into a wider fifth-century pattern, with works treating prominent public men in a highly anecdotal style. It is the way of anecdotes to be scurrilous – and so their womenfolk or sometimes their menfolk or boyfolk became prominent and public too. Thus Stesimbrotus of Thasos talked about the love life of Pericles, and Ion of Chios wrote an *Epidemiai* (‘Visits’) describing his meetings with the likes of Cimon, Aeschylus, and Sophocles, with

a particular interest in Sophocles’ taste in pretty boys. Notice that there is no delimitation to political figures there, and it does not look likely that there was a narrative framework. It was what their life was like that mattered.

Plato too gave a vivid impression of what it was to live like Socrates, and that is an important focus of his work. But narrative is no part of it, or at least not a coherent narrative: individual stories, yes – how Socrates behaved at the retreat from Delium (*Symposium* 220e–221c), how he refused to go and arrest Leon of Salamis (*Apology* 32c–e), and particularly how he met his death; but when full life-stories come into play, they are more often to illustrate how *not* to live, as with the life-story of Archelaus of Macedon in the *Gorgias* (4711–e, cf. 525d). (The *Gorgias*, the work on which E.R. Dodds, Regius Professor of Greek during the Second World War, wrote his great commentary: he writes movingly in the preface of lecturing on the work to students just as they were about to go off to war. Those fifth- and fourth-century moral issues of justice and power and tyranny and oppression, and deeply contestable views of good and evil, have a way of coming very close to home, even more then and for Dodds than they must for all of us now). For Plato the point may indeed be that *once you have got it*, once you have understood how to live the right life, the just life, the examined life, nothing much

need change, there is no developing needed other than to pass it on to others. It is the deficient people like Archelaus who have trajectories. For Plato the more authoritative narratives are drawn from myth rather than life: even when an individual human comes into view, the big conclusions are difficult to draw until after he is dead, and the Myth of Er in *Republic*, 10 suggests that a single life-span is too little to complete one person's story, and far too little to allow the biggest moral conclusions to emerge.

In different ways Herodotus and Thucydides too, for all their considerable interest in individuals, develop that interest in terms of how they fit into the bigger picture of nations and cities. To place Pericles, it is not so important for Thucydides to look to his personal life-narrative: it is rather the way he fits into wider patterns of Athenian behaviour and national character, the sort of leadership he could offer, and the gap he left when he died, so that his narrative significance continues to be pored for five books after his death. In a different way but just as clearly as in the Myth of Er, Thucydides prefigures a question of Aristotle: whether death might not be too soon to work out what sort of story a person's life has been (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1100a10–1101a22).

This is not to be a bus tour of ancient biographical writing, don't worry. My point is only that some of the most profound classical thinking –Plato, Thucydides– about a Greek life, even an individual's life, tended not merely to avoid narrative but to be anti-narrative, in the sense that a cradle-to-grave individual story was *in principle* not the right way to explore the biggest questions. And if I *were* to try that survey of ancient biographical form, it would be a very messy and non-linear one, with no sort of narrative or metanarrative at all. But I won't. Those who want can find a splendid brief treatment of all this in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* under 'Biography, Greek', written by ... me.

So: to Plutarch. What did he do to all this? First, the cradle-to-grave narrative structure, and all that goes with it: firm direction, 'trajectory', everything coming together to carry that tale of achievement forward. I have already said that we shouldn't neglect what a tremendous step this was. (Perhaps Nepos was an important precursor here<sup>10</sup>; if he was, then it only brings out how immense is the further step that Plutarch made.) In many ways that bus tour, the one I did not give you, more naturally has its terminus in Suetonius, who at almost the same time as Plutarch was developing his biographical form

<sup>10</sup> As argued by J. GEIGER, *Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography*, *Historia Einzelschrift* 47, Stuttgart, 1985.

in Latin. A Suetonian Life begins and ends with narrative, but much of the heart of it is organised by categories, different aspects of how an emperor lived his life. That can have big corollaries for the way character is conceived. Suetonius' structure allows for different, unreconciled points to emerge under different headings, so that he often prefigures the modern taste for quirky individuals combining unexpected traits. Julius Caesar was thin; he suffered from epilepsy; he was physically unimpressive; and he was very good at fighting. In Suetonius those points are separated under different categories (*Div. Iul.* 45.1, 45.2, 57–66); Plutarch brings them together, stressing that Caesar used campaigning as a way of building up his health and struggling against his sickness (*Caes.* 17.1–3). So Plutarch takes even something that does not seem to fit, the physical frailty, and makes it suit the dominant characterisation of the decisive, effective, determined general. Suetonius gives us the beads; Plutarch makes them a necklace. And that narrative texture and the subject matter –the man of achievement– do go together. Caesar controls his world, subjects it to fit his own singleminded purpose: Plutarch controls the narrative with similar firmness and direction.

Men of achievement ... linear narratives ... single, firm trajectories: why, I sound as if I am making Plutarch into one of my initial c.v.–writers, with added style and perhaps the odd good

story. There is, unsurprisingly, rather more to it than that, and not just because Plutarch very often –sometimes several times in the same Life– stops the narrative action to paint a more timeless picture of what sort of life this person led, Alcibiades' chameleon-like qualities for instance or Pericles' life with Aspasia or Cicero's talent for the good one-liner (*Alc.* 23, *Per.* 24, *Cic.* 25–7). It is also that the Lives are about *choices*. We see so many of these heroes having to decide between one sort of life, one sort of narrative for themselves, and another. Caesar could have become the greatest orator of the day, but he decided to sacrifice everything for power instead (*Caes.* 3). Sertorius was tempted to sail off in search of the Isles of the Blessed; he chose to remain and fight (*Sert.* 8.2–9.3). Cicero could have chosen –was very tempted to choose– the world of contemplation and philosophy (*Cic.* 4.3, 36.7–9, 40.1); he preferred to be a public man. Antony could have been a Roman hero, could have settled into domestic respectability with his wife Octavia (*Ant.* 31.4, 33.5, 53); but glamour and excitement win, and so does Cleopatra. Had they made those choices, then the whole narrative structure would have collapsed: in most cases there would have been nothing to narrate, just one contented day very like the last; and therefore, on one level, it is clear that these are choices which there is no chance they will make. If they *had* chosen the other way, they would never have made it into the series at all: they

would not have achieved enough. Yet they are better as well as more interesting people for being torn, for having lives which run the danger that the 'other interests' part of the c.v. may suddenly rebel and drive out all the rest. The one of those whom the text encourages pity for is Julius Caesar –that is breathtaking, *pity* for the man who conquered the world?

He had sought dominion and power all his days, and after facing so many dangers he had finally achieved them. And the only benefit he reaped was its empty name, and the perils of fame amid his envious fellow-citizens (*Caes.* 69.1).

That recalls the early choice Caesar made, to strive to become first in armed conflict rather than to become the great orator (3.2–4). And if he gets pity, it is partly because he made that choice so unhesitatingly, because he was a man who was so rarely torn, a public man who was *simply* defined by his publicness.

So this choice of 'alternative futures' (to draw a technical term from *Star Trek* studies) is one way that Plutarch's Lives build on other lives, in this case other possible lives that the hero could have chosen. This is waving, still in good c.v. style, to the sort of hinterland and complexity which one would like to see in a successful applicant for admission, in this case admission to the series. There are other ways too in which one Plutarch narrative builds on another. These are *Parallel*

*Lives*, and a Greek life is paired with a Roman: there has been a lot of interest lately in exploring how subtle the comparisons can be. *Coriolanus*, for instance, (exceptionally, in that pair the Roman comes first) establishes a pattern of how *not* to treat a difficult *demos*: he is so clodhopping, his soldierly order-barking is catastrophic when he tries it in politics, and the result is exile and catastrophe. His pair is Alcibiades, so much more charming and charismatic, in many ways so in tune with the Athenian temper: when his pet quail escapes as he is speaking in the assembly, the ordinary Athenians amiably rush around to help him catch it (*Alc.* 10.1–2). Yet *even so* Alcibiades cannot avoid falling into the same narrative pattern that his much cruder Roman counterpart has set. That is not a narrative that Alcibiades wanted, indeed one he struggles against. But one thing Plutarchan biography does is point to those larger patterns that shape a life, and can ensure that your future is not the one you chose.

Comparison has been a big area for the last generation of Plutarch scholars: one life is not enough. The next generation will, I think, see a bigger picture still in the way these narratives combine and interact. That is the way the whole series goes together, building a very much 'bigger picture' of Greece, especially Athens, and Rome, and the career-trajectories of whole cities as well as of individuals. Already in the

life of Theseus one can see the future of Athens shaping, with difficult demagogues, physical concentration of country people into the city and awkward consequences (hello, Pericles), then a final vulnerability to Sparta because of Theseus' love-life with a Spartan queen (hello, Alcibiades). Already in the paired life Romulus meets his end because he puts on an inappropriate show of kingship and tyranny, and verbal parallels mark the hint of the Ides of March<sup>11</sup>. The founders are already foreshadowing their whole city's stories. And Plutarch does not shy from national generalisations: Rome was so preoccupied with smashing everyone else that they did not have time to educate themselves properly (*Marc.* 1.3–5); but didn't Rome acquire most of its empire through fighting?

That is a difficult question, one which will require a long answer for those who define 'advance' in terms of wealth, luxury, and empire rather than safety, restraint, and an honest independence (*Numa* 26 (4).12–13).

The big picture, indeed – and yet again the nod to another, much less achievement-ridden sort of living, one much richer in hinterland. As for Greece, it had spent most of its history smashing itself, so that it needed the Romans to come and sort them out

(*Flam.* 11). So with Plutarch too we have something of that notion of a series of Lives, with everyone, however different, playing a part in a bigger sequence, a master narrative: perhaps not so very different from Herodotus and Thucydides after all, then. Sometimes indeed the narrative of state and individual come into tension: Philopoemen fought inspiringly for liberty, but he is 'last of the Greeks' (*Phil.* 1.7) in more ways than one, for he also embodied the Greek tendency to *philonikia*, bickering contentiousness, and that self-destructive national impulse eventually proved too much for him too. Sometimes, though, the individual narrative prevails over the city one: Aemilius Paullus does manage to be a natural philosopher even in militaristic Rome<sup>12</sup>; Cimon manages to hold Greece back from its natural tendency to self-destruct (*Cim.* 19.3–4). But it is the tension of the two that matters. Cities have their rises and falls as individuals have their births and deaths: one Life indeed is not enough.

Of course it tells us something of Plutarch's own life and times and audience that he thought this would be the most interesting way to do history. But I want to leave Plutarch on a different note: for that phrase 'life and times' is less of a cliché for him than it might

<sup>11</sup> I explore these themes in my *Plutarch and History*, London, 2002, pp. 178–85.

<sup>12</sup> On this see S. SWAIN, *JHS*, 110 (1990), pp. 132–133 = *Essays on Plutarch's Lives* (ed. B. SCARDIGLI, 1995), pp. 240–1.

seem, especially the 'life' part. Amid all those skilful characterisations, possibly the most skilful one is not a narrative characterisation at all, and that is the characterisation of Plutarch himself, his self-depiction through narrative voice. Self-disclosure, as Donald Russell of this college has put it, is 'an aspect of the teaching function of literature'<sup>13</sup> (and so much of what I have been saying here about Plutarch eventually goes back to seminal studies by Donald in the sixties: I was lucky enough to have him as my graduate supervisor a few years later). That familiar picture we form of Plutarch as a generous person, perpetually interested and curious, ethically concerned but sympathetic, learned and knowledgeable even if sometimes a little bumbling, with a taste for a good story and a warm feeling for humanity: that person fills that 'teaching function of literature' by being so infectious and attractive, living so much the sort of life we should like to live ourselves. The ways that this personality is conveyed take a good deal of analysis, but one is certainly the way that we feel the narrator is implicated in the choices his characters make. That choice, for instance, between the life of scholarship and the life of action that Cicero has to make: Plutarch too had to make it, and made it the same way. Visitors to Chaeronea

would laugh when they found him supervising the building of a wall or overseeing some clearing of drains, but this was all for the city (*Precepts on public life* 811c–d), and the library would have to wait. No wonder Cicero is such a good life, for Cicero is Plutarch's sort of person, and we are made to feel it. Plutarch gives no narrative of his own life, but how it is to live – live as a writer, conversing (as he puts it) in his imagination with his heroes, and applying that knowledge and reflection in his own living (*Aem. Paul.* 1) – all that is conveyed too: not through direct narrative of himself, but by the way he writes narratives of others.

One afternoon some 1750 years after Plutarch was clearing the drains of Chaeronea a German visitor came to Oxford to do homage to Henry Liddell, then Dean of Christ Church and deeply engaged on his Greek lexicon. The visitor was taken aback to find the great scholar with only his head and shoulders visible, as he was standing in a drain in the Meadows. Some things do not change. (Though Christopher Lewis, the current Dean, will be relieved that they have changed a little.) Another piece of Liddell practicality that survives in the Christ Church archive is a rather acrimonious pamphlet on, as it happens, the Regius Chair

<sup>13</sup> D.A. RUSSELL, 'Self-disclosure in Plutarch and Horace', in G.W. MOST, H. PETERSMANN and A.M. RITTER (eds.), *Philanthropia kai Eusebeia: Festschrift für Albrecht Dihle zum 70. Geburtstag*, Göttingen, 1993, pp. 426–37 at 436.

of Greek. The chair was founded by Henry VIII in 1546 along with four others, and was assigned to the brand new foundation Christ Church: it is sometimes thought that the influence of Catherine Parr may have been important, persuading her husband that he had a good deal to do penance for – but actually the influence of the Queen is easier to trace in the case of Cambridge, I am afraid. The professor had to swear not to involve himself in college business in any way at all. The stipend was £40, a very considerable sum. By 1864 the stipend was –£40, and there was some pressure on Christ Church to increase it. Dean Liddell politely but firmly observed that there was no record that the crown lands which were supposed to support the chair had ever been transferred. So I am not sure whether to say that you are lucky, ladies and gentlemen, that the Regius Chair still survives at all; that is one of several senses in which I know that I am.

The stipend is now a little more than £40. There are of course other ways too that the job –this particular Greek Life– has changed. The issue of stipend had been coming to a head in the 1850s, when Dean Gaisford was still Professor, that Dean Gaisford whom the Oxford faculty commemorates every year in this same theatre with the Gaisford lecture, thanks again to the hospitality of St John's College (for which I thank the college warmly). There is a certain irony in celebrating Gaisford with a lec-

ture, as not merely did he never give an inaugural, he never gave a lecture. That immersion of his in precise scholarship which produced such an extraordinary series of editions was quite enough – combined in his case, as with his successor Benjamin Jowett, with the headship of a college. Dean Gaisford made it his practice never to reply to any communication received as Dean of Christ Church which concerned university reform. However tempting a position, it was not one adopted by either of his successors, Jowett as Professor and Liddell as Dean, both of them great figures of reform. If those were the days, the days were already changing.

And yet... As I have been reading past inaugurals (true to the principle that the only person who ever reads inaugurals is the one who gives the next one), several things have struck me. One, of course, is the extraordinary distinction of the men –so far only men– whom I have the great honour of succeeding: Gaisford, Jowett, Bywater, Gilbert Murray, E.R. Dodds, Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones, and now Peter Parsons. Peter himself quoted to me the words of Sir Denys Page in his Cambridge inaugural: 'You will not forgive me if I say nothing about my predecessor, and he will not forgive me if I say much': I am not sure quite what tone Page adopted, but if I say the same it would be only in the sense of avoiding making this particular predecessor cringe. Suffice it to say that the humanity, patience, and

wisdom with which he has filled this role for the last fifteen years make it even more daunting a task to take on: and to see Peter at work –to see for instance the way that the Victory of Berenice emerges into coherence and beauty as he fits the pieces together<sup>14</sup>– is to see a model of how the highest technical expertise and the deepest feeling for poetry can work together. It is characteristic too that he is now engaged on a work setting the papyrological finds against the background of life in Oxyrhynchus. For he and his predecessors during the last century have created a tradition of fixing literature firmly in its setting in Greek life (and in Peter's case Egyptian life too), in fact of using literature not simply as some sort of crude 'source' for Greek living but as a *part* of Greek living –another reason for my choice of theme today. The title for a collection of essays presented to Gilbert Murray on his seventieth birthday, *Greek Poetry and Life* (Oxford, 1936), was exactly right for him; it would have suited his successors too.

Another reflection, though, is how many of the same themes recur through those inaugurals, and are recurring still: perhaps my initial image of a 'curriculum', running round in the same circles as many have run before, is all too pertinent. Dodds' 1936 inaugural gave a thoughtful treatment of 'humanism and technique', in ways that still resonated

with the nineteenth-century dispute between Mark Pattison, intent on the university as a seat of learning and research, and once again Benjamin Jowett, with his stress on undergraduate teaching and preparation of students for life – all sorts of life. Those who reflect on HEFCE-like 'transferable skills' will not find the terms of that debate too distant, nor those who are grappling with the current local discussions of academic strategy. In 1961 Lloyd-Jones reminded his audience of the warning example of Sir Charles Firth, who in his inaugural as Professor of History had presumed to recommend some syllabus reforms, and was cut dead by his colleagues during his entire tenure of the chair. Lloyd-Jones went on to suggest some syllabus reforms..., close in fact to those that were realised seven years later, aiming at closer integration of the study of literature with other aspects of the ancient world. A further new syllabus that we are just introducing has very much the same aim. Lloyd-Jones also commented on the work-load borne by his tutorial colleagues, and the difficulty of finding time for research:

'Most of them are desperately overworked. They do not complain.'

At least the first part of that is still true, and that need to strike some sort of balance between undergraduate teaching and research has been complicated

<sup>14</sup> P. J. PARSONS, 'Callimachus: Victoria Berenices', *ZPE*, 25 (1977) 1–50.



by the further task of teaching researchers. We certainly do not complain about *that*: we should indeed welcome more graduate students, if only the AHRB<sup>15</sup> found itself able to pay for a few more pipers as well as calling quite so many tunes. But it all makes works for the working tutorial fellow to do.

Everything expands. A few years ago Walter Scheidel produced a quantitative study of scholarship since the 1920s: he estimated that a researcher spending forty hours a week in a library (that would be nice) would be able to spend exactly eight minutes on reading each work of scholarship produced<sup>16</sup>. Contrast the remark of Wittgenstein, that it was hard to work slowly enough to do Philosophy properly. The *proportion* of scholarship given to each author was, Scheidel found, remarkably constant: Caesar and Cicero were receiving a rather smaller share than seventy years before, but the only author getting a markedly bigger share was ... Plutarch. He wondered indeed whether that might be a statistical fluke, born of an atypical sample: no, it is not. But of course keeping remotely abreast of even one's own corner is now an impossible dream. Just as well, then, that the cliché of 'team-player' has now become one of the impressions that the skilled c.v.-writer strains most assiduously to convey. But

there are teams and teams. One sense is that of the collaborative project, so beloved of HEFCE as it assumes that patterns that work for sciences must work for Humanities too. As it happens, Oxford has nothing to fear from that. Just look at the Archive for the Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, the Beazley Archive, the Lexicon of Greek Personal Names, the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents, the Oxyrhynchus papyri, and more. But the model of the 'lone researcher' –an evocative phrase, that, with its impression of setting out on a silver horse over an unknown frontierland– is often the right one for humanities. Not that we lone researchers are all that lone: even the Lone Ranger had his research assistant Tonto, and I am sure he occasionally needed to rely on specialist discussion with ranger-colleagues; and here the constant trying of ideas on colleagues and graduate and undergraduate students is an important part of what we do. We even, at last, have a home to call our own –the Classics Centre, just over the road in St Giles, about to be refurbished. And even in its unrefurbished state, it is capable of holding a good party, and in a moment I hope you will cross the road and join me there for one.

But this focus is too narrow. Oxford is a part, though not the smallest part, of

<sup>15</sup> The Arts and Humanities Research Board, the principal provider of funding for graduate students in the Humanities in Britain.

<sup>16</sup> W. SCHEIDEL, 'Continuity and Change in Classical Scholarship: a Quantitative Survey 1924-1992', *Anc.Soc.*, 28, 265–89.

a very big world. That is true in terms of scholarship: in Plutarch's case, a great number of those eight-minute portions originated as papers given at meetings held in nice places by the International Plutarch Society, and the hub of the Plutarch world is Frances Titchener and Utah State University (where, incidentally, I'm glad to have a further existence as Adjunct Professor of History). And it is true, and ought to become even more true, in teaching too. One of the most promising projects I have been involved in over the last few months is an ambitious proposal to co-operate nationally over elementary language-teaching in Latin and Greek, pooling our resources to think about teaching strategies and to develop new teaching materials. Both Peter Parsons and I originally learned our classical languages at grammar schools, in my case Cardiff High School (notice the sly insertion of an item from the c.v. there), and we were taught to a level and with a skill that could match anything anywhere. The state sector can seldom fund the time needed for that sort of teaching now, and the elementary language tuition that universities offer is the most important single thing that we do. The interests of Oxford and of other university departments are here at one. Indeed, there are so many areas where we are all on the same side, all the UK Classics golden polygon. Another such area is the retargetting of school-visits and 'access initiatives' at the 16+ rather than the 18+ level, to try to help teach-

ers in attracting students to take a classical subject at least to AS level. That is surely a far better policy than cutting each other's throats to attract the 18-year-olds who have already made their subject-choice. If enough take AS-level, the intrinsic interest of what we do is sufficient to attract more than our share to take A-level; and if there are more in that pool, we will all benefit.

And there *are* already more in that pool: this is where my title takes its alternative inflection of 'Greek LIVES', to rhyme with 'gives'. (Several people have congratulated me on the postmodern wit of the ambiguity: I tell them it was totally unintentional, but then I get puzzled looks – 'and your point is?' Or 'how do you *know*?') To return, parochially and finally, to Oxford: our applications for Classics have risen by 48% since 2000; those for versions of our course which involve learning the languages from scratch by 80%. All of the Classics courses have higher success rates for state school applicants than for independent. Our new course in Classical Archaeology and Ancient History has grown from nothing in a few years to have nearly a hundred applicants. Very able people are taking this subject, and loving it. Perhaps, indeed, we are doing something right. Perhaps that picture of life-series that I drew earlier, with a succession of men and women contributing one after another to a wider goal and a bigger story, may not be so old-hat after all. In his inaugural lecture Gilbert Murray painted a picture of the scholar's life as it was in 1909:

‘a somewhat bloodless company, sensitive, low-spirited, lacking in spring; in business ill at ease, in social life thin and embarrassed, objects of solicitude to kind hostesses.’

Several things there have changed, not least the gendering, as I switch in a moment to being a host, I hope a solicitous one. But still this sequence of Lives is not so bad a narrative to fit our own individualities into.