The Methodology of Psychological Biography

Even the harshest critics of psychological biography concede that the application of psychology to biography makes sense. Since comprehensive biographical studies inevitably include an analysis of the subject’s personality, it is reasonable to carry out such analysis systematically and with psychological sophistication. But, as even the fiercest proponents of psychobiography admit, psychobiographical studies tend to be reductionistic, narrow, and disparaging. A marked disparity exists between the potential and the execution of psychobiography.¹

A substantial body of literature now exists which explains this disparity and formulates ways of lessening it; one bibliography includes more than 100 entries pertaining to the methodology of psychobiography.²

This essay synthesizes the work which has been done on the methodology of psychobiography. The focus is on the six principal difficulties that critics have identified as inhering in the psychobiographical approach. The difficulties are discussed sequentially, and strategies which have been suggested for overcoming or at least minimizing each of them are considered. Through this discussion of the suggested ways of coping with the difficulties, an attempt is made to develop a coherent methodological approach, combining several of these strategies, which offers the possibility of decreasing the disparity between the potential and actual execution of psychological biography.
Meyer writes that in the hands of unskilled authors the field of psychological biography "enjoys a sort of perpetual open season, during which a gaggle of sitting subjects may be peppered with analytic buckshot." Many psychobiographers assume that the application of fixed psychological formulas to the lives of historical figures constitutes sufficient analysis. Such an unsophisticated use of psychology is based on two faulty assumptions. The first assumption is that a one-dimensional analysis can explain all of the complex psychological dimensions of a subject's life history. The second assumption is that psychological factors by themselves are fully determinative of the subject's personality and that other factors—sociological, cultural, or historical—do not matter.3

For example, Karlinsky presents the thesis that repressed homosexuality is the key to the work of Nikolai Gogol. Gogol may have been a repressed homosexual but to identify him as such tells us little about his personality. The problem with a reductionistic interpretation is not that it is incorrect—often it may be correct as far as it goes. The problem is the implied claim that such an interpretation explains all that we need to know about the subject.4

There are two particular ways in which psychological reductionism often distorts our understanding of what it is purported to explain. One is what Erikson calls "originology": "the habitual effort to find the 'causes' of a man's whole development in his childhood conflicts." An originological explanation overemphasizes childhood factors at the expense of later ones. The second is the emphasis on psychopathology. Since a theory such as psychoanalysis was constructed through work with patients, the portions of the theory which deal with psychopathology are the portions which are most developed. Consequently, there is a tendency for the psychobiographer, often unintentionally, to build a portrait of his subject which is one-sided because it overemphasizes the subject's psychological difficulties. For example, Nagera, in the introduction to his study of Vincent van Gogh,

writes that a psychoanalytic biography must concentrate on the “less favorable aspects of personality,” such as intrapsychic conflicts, and then in the body of the work he goes on to stress van Gogh’s psychopathology at the expense of, for example, his artistic genius.5

In another form of reductionism the investigator relies on a highly speculative, sometimes far-fetched psychological notion but makes little attempt to explain why such a notion is applicable to his particular subject. For example, Hitschmann declares:

The vision of fire appeared in the revelations of Moses and Mohammed. There is much to suggest that this symbol represented incestuous excitement over the mother, which was warded off by revelation of and identification with God, the father.6

Hitschmann gives no further explanation of why one should accept such a fantastic notion—that fire represented to Moses and Mohammed “incestuous excitement over the mother”—except to say that “[t]here is much to suggest” it.

Of the four possible precautions which a psychobiographer might observe to minimize reductionism the first involves thorough research. Some psychobiographers presume that psychological analysis offers a shortcut around the hard work of historical research. For example, Wolfenstein bases his study of Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Mohandas Gandhi almost exclusively on secondary sources, and the work abounds in reductionistic interpretations. A psychological biography can be no better than the research on which it is based. An interpretation, no matter how elegant and persuasive, is simply wrong if the information on which it rests is mistaken.7

The classic example of an error of this type occurs in Freud’s study of Leonardo da Vinci. Freud rests an important interpretation on his understanding that the bird in one of Leonardo’s early memories was a vulture. But, as Schapiro has pointed out, Freud was relying on an inaccurate translation of the Italian word

which actually means another kind of bird, a kite. Eissler argues that Freud’s error was understandable since all the German translations to which he had access included the same mistake. But still, Freud’s error illustrates the point that there is no alternative to doing extensive research, whenever possible in the primary materials. Furthermore, immersing oneself in the materials helps the psychobiographer develop a complex understanding of his subject and therefore counteracts the tendency to be reductionistic. 

A second precaution relates to psychological terminology. As Manuel notes, “If the historian eschews technical words, he is less likely to be seduced into dogmatism.” There is something about the use of psychological jargon which tempts the author to feel that just by applying the term he has done enough; he has provided sufficient explanation. Psychobiographers such as Manuel and Edel propose that psychological terminology be omitted altogether. Mazlish argues that it is acceptable to use such terminology as long as the author is clearly aware that the terms are meaningless if they stand alone and that they gain force only from the “density” of the data which underlie them. For example, near the end of his work on James and John Stuart Mill he notes that “it is the detail, the building up of the fragments into a coherent picture, rather than any generalized statement, such as ‘John Stuart Mill had an Oedipus complex,’ or ‘James Mill was a ‘self-made’ man,’ that matters in this sort of work.”

The third precaution involves the recognition that events result from multiple causes and not, except in rare instances, from a single psychological cause. Explanations on different levels, such as psychological, economic, and cultural explanations, are generally not competing; rather, they point to “coexisting or corresponding processes.”


10 Mazlish, In Search of Nixon, 156.
Wolfenstein's analysis of Gandhi provides an example of a reductionistic interpretation. Wolfenstein attempts to explain Gandhi's choice of salt as the target for a non-violent protest march. After noting that Ernest Jones, the psychoanalyst, said that human semen is one of the "symbolic significances" of salt, he continues:

If it had this unconscious meaning for Gandhi, then we may understand his depriving himself of condiments, including salt, as a form of sexual abstinence, involving a regression to an issue of the oral phase. In the context of the Salt March, Gandhi's taking of salt from the British can thus be seen as reclaiming for the Indian people the manhood and potency which was properly theirs.11

Erikson examines this same incident and concludes that Gandhi's choice of salt as the target for his protest campaign reflected a number of concerns. He shows that, totally apart from any possible sexual correspondences, salt was symbolically important because of its food-preservative qualities in a nation chronically threatened by semi-starvation. Furthermore, the same qualities made it an important economic commodity. And it also served to illustrate the injustice of British imperial rule: the climax of the Salt March involved picking up salt which the sea had deposited on the shore; such an act was illegal in the Raj because it amounted to an evasion of the salt tax. Erikson concludes that in deciding on the Salt March Gandhi "was obviously in command of his political and economic as well as his psychological wits. And in any context except that of irrationality clearly attributable to sexual repression, one should take any interpretation that explains a human act by recourse to sexual symbolism with a grain of salt."12

The fourth precaution amounts to maintaining an appreciation of the complexity of an individual's personality as opposed to assuming that any psychological analysis, no matter how refined, can capture it. As Edel notes, the psychobiographer should be able "to recognize the existence of a series of possibilities rather

11 Wolfenstein, The Revolutionary Personality, 221.
than accept smugly the single answer to any given question projected by himself.” Crews, speaking of the use of psychological analysis in literary criticism, makes a similar point: “A critic’s sense of limits . . . must come not from the fixed verities of a doctrine but from his awe at how little he can explain.” If the psychobiographer maintains such a stance, then he will not impart the impression, even when making a psychological interpretation, that he feels his interpretation says all that there is to be said about the subject. He can make a connection, which may be helpful in increasing our understanding of his subject, without suggesting that the connection undermines or supersedes other levels of explanation.\(^\text{13}\)

### INFLATED EXPECTATIONS

Manuel has stated that:

> When a new instrument for the study of man [such as psychoanalysis] is developed, believers in its potency tend to conceive of it as a panacea, a solution to a wide range of problems, ultimately including the historical. . . . Revolutionary results are awaited, as it pretends to answer questions for which there already exist explanations more elegant and plausible or more nuanced.\(^\text{14}\)

A close reading of the literature suggests that inflated claims for psychohistory are not prevalent and seem to be more a fear of critics than a widespread problem. However, biographers do, at times, focus almost exclusively on psychological factors and pay no more than lip service to historical, economic, or political forces.\(^\text{15}\)

The psychobiographer should keep in mind two particular limitations of psychobiography. First, his psychological explanations do not replace, but only add to, other types of explanations. For example, Waite argues that in his search for Adolf Hitler, his biographical subject, he was “not constrained to choose between clinical psychology on the one hand and, say, political history on the other. Our task is rather to join hands in a cooperative effort to find the most satisfying explanation of the man

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15 See, for example, David Abrahamsen, Nixon vs. Nixon: An Emotional Tragedy (New York, 1977), vii, xii.
and his times.” He then goes on, not only to make use of psychological approaches to Hitler, but also to undertake a careful examination of the way German history, from the time of the First Reich, produced a culture that would be receptive to Hitler.16

Second, the psychobiographer’s explanations should be recognized as speculative. “In the vast majority of biographies,” Garraty comments, “no one should object to the use of Freudian techniques if they are explicitly described as speculations. . . .” Perhaps simply identifying such interpretations as speculations is not enough, but it would help readers avoid mistaking speculations for finished conclusions. An example of a psychobiographical work in which the authors are aware of the limitations inherent in their approach is the essay of Wyatt and Willcox on Sir Henry Clinton, the Revolutionary War general. They concede that their psychodynamically based analysis of Clinton’s personality is “unprovable.” But their analysis, they argue, has “a high degree of plausibility” because it is consistent with the evidence and internally consistent and because it accounts for behavior which is difficult to explain in any other way. They argue that what recommends their theory is its plausibility, although the theory is not unquestionably true—just as, one might add, no psychological explanation is ever unquestionably true.17

DISPARAGEMENT There is a tendency for psychobiographers to be disparaging. The most thoroughly developed parts of the theories commonly employed in psychobiography deal with psychopathology. Pathologically oriented theory offers a ready conduit for an author who wishes to denigrate his subject. This process need not be conscious; it is possible for an author to believe he is simply describing his subject’s personality, but he may be venting his dislike of the subject by emphasizing the pathological components of the subject’s personality.

The study of Woodrow Wilson written by Freud and Bullitt is one of the most extreme examples of a disparaging psychobiography. It is thought that Freud probably had a small part in the writing of this study, but in any event he did, according to

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Bullitt, sign the manuscript, and his dislike of Wilson is well known. In the introduction, the one part of the work which Freud is certain to have written, Freud confesses “that the figure of the American President . . . was from the beginning unsympathetic to me, and that this aversion increased in the course of years the more I learned about him and the more severely we suffered from the consequences of his intrusion into our destiny.” Freud claims that his emotions “underwent a thorough subjugation” and asks the reader not to reject the work as “a product of prejudice.” But it is clear from an examination of the work that it remained just such a product.18

Freud and Bullitt consistently betray their desire to see Wilson in the worst light. In one passage they comment: “As always, he needed to have a mother representative in his life; but apparently he had no great somatic pressure to satisfy and even during his adolescence, as throughout the rest of his life, his relations with women remained polite and dull.” The passage is not only belittling; it is also erroneous. As Wilson’s letters to his first and second wives and to various female friends reveal, his relationships were anything but dull, and there was no lack of sexuality in at least some of these relationships. In another passage Freud and Bullitt discuss the “immense flood of energy” which enabled Wilson, while president of Princeton University, to bring about a major academic reform. They could have concluded that Wilson’s ability to marshall his energy to accomplish a goal was one of his strengths, but instead they wrote: “That he should have been able to find such energy in his frail body indicates the dimension of his libido which had begun to flow into his reaction-formation against his passivity to his father.”19

A number of recent psychobiographies are disparaging in a subtler way. As Donald notes, “Even when there is no conscious

animus, the psychobiographer may unwittingly belittle his subject.” As an example, Donald then cites a second psychobiography of Wilson, the highly respected study written by the Georges. The thesis on which the Georges’ study is based is that “[p]olitical leadership was a sphere of competence Wilson carved out for himself . . . in order to derive therefrom compensation for the damaged self-esteem branded into his spirit as a child.” This thesis is both incorrect and, as employed by the Georges, disparaging. An examination of the source material on Wilson’s childhood does not bear out the Georges’ analysis of his early experience.20

In addition, the Georges’ treatment of Wilson’s career provides a highly distorted picture. They pay inadequate attention to Wilson’s considerable successes, such as his accomplishments in obtaining reforms during the early portion of his Presidency and his leadership during World War I. And in their treatment of the controversies in which Wilson was embroiled they attribute his difficulties to intrapsychic conflicts and scarcely acknowledge other factors. For example, they imply that Wilson, while president of Princeton, became involved in a disagreement with Dean Andrew F. West because he was looking for a way to transfer his repressed hatred of his father to West, but they overlook the agreement of the majority of the faculty with Wilson’s position. In other words, the Georges’ disparagement does not emerge—as in the Freud-Bullitt book—from extravagantly reductionistic interpretations, but from their emphases, from shades of meaning, and from their over-reliance on a central, pathologically based thesis.

The first step which a psychobiographer may take to lessen the possibility of being disparaging is carefully to examine his feelings about his subject. Barzun, with the following comment, offers an entree into the issue, which is far more complicated than it may at first seem to be:

Psycho-historians see others moved by unconscious forces that distort vision and compel strange behavior, but they assume themselves to be clear transmitters of light and judgment. Why is their vision of persons and events not blurred and skewed as well, and their interpretations forced upon them by dark needs rather than evidential reasons?\textsuperscript{21}

Certainly some psychobiographers are susceptible to such criticism, but the more sophisticated practitioners give the examination of their own inner, potentially distortive forces a central place in their methodological approach. They do not assume that they are free of unconscious biases but deliberately try to cope with them. Erikson provides the most detailed consideration of this issue. He notes that a technique from psychoanalysis which can be adapted to psychobiography is the analysis of countertransference.\textsuperscript{22}

Countertransference refers to the analyst’s transferring his accustomed ways of viewing others, along with the unconscious strivings which he originally developed during his own childhood, to the patient, with the result that he sees the patient in a distorted way. Erikson writes that it is inevitable that a psychobiographer will have countertransference-like reactions to his subject. But, he contends, countertransference, if recognized, can be turned into an advantage rather than a hindrance. The advantage is that a writer’s own countertransference reactions can offer an indication of how people who interacted with the subject during his lifetime may have felt about him. The difficulty is for the psychobiographer to understand the sources of his feelings well enough so that he will be able to differentiate what feelings he may expect others also to have had and what feelings may be idiosyncratic to himself.

A second step which may enable the psychobiographer to avoid even unconscious disparagement of his subject is the development of empathy. Greenson explains the role which empathy has played in his work with a particular patient:

As I had worked with this patient day by day, I had slowly built up within me a working model of the patient. This consisted of her physical appearance, her affects, her life experiences, her modes of behaviour, her attitudes, defences, values, fantasies, etc. This working model was a counterpart or replica of the patient that I had built up and added to from my new observations and insights. It is this working model which I now shifted into the foreground of my listening. I listened through this model.

In a similar way the psychobiographer can build up a “model,” in his own mind, of his subject and “listen” to the subject through this model. An example of a psychological biography which employs empathy is Edel’s five-volume work on Henry James.23

Ironically, the Georges provide one of the best discussions of the use of empathy in psychobiography, even though their work on Wilson wants empathy. And Freud not only was the originator of the concept of countertransference, but also, as noted before, was consciously aware of his hostile feelings toward Wilson. Yet both the Georges and Freud (in his collaboration with Bullitt) were unable to avoid writing disparaging, distorted works. Nonetheless, the recognition of countertransference and the development of empathy are the two techniques most likely to safeguard against the tendency to be disparaging. What the two studies of Wilson point out is that it is exceedingly difficult for a psychobiographer to prevent his inner concerns and conflicts from causing him to make distorted psychological interpretations.24

APPLYING CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY TO ANOTHER ERA

The next difficulty, as Fischer has defined it, follows from the false assumption

that people are intellectually and psychologically the same in all times, places, and circumstances. . . . People, in various places and


times, have not merely thought different things. They have thought them differently. . . . Their deepest emotional drives and desires may themselves have been transformed.25

Frequently, psychobiographers attempt to apply psychological concepts developed in the twentieth century to subjects who lived in earlier eras; the likelihood is that the cultures within which the subjects lived would have been sufficiently different from our culture so that the concepts would not be applicable.

In order to minimize this difficulty the psychobiographer must, as LeVine notes, “do extensive historical research to provide the cultural basis for his own empathy with historical figures.” He must take an approach similar to the emic approach of the anthropologist; this involves going as far as he can in the direction of knowing the culture from the viewpoint of the people who live in it, particularly from his subject’s viewpoint. Only then can he attempt to develop an empathic understanding of his subject.26

Murray provides a particularly clear example of this combination of an empathic relationship to the subject and familiarity with the subject’s culture. The setting for the example is an imaginary conversation which Murray has constructed between his psychobiographical subject, Herman Melville, and several unempathic Melville scholars. In one exchange a scholar talks about the “prohibiting and punishing, Calvinistic and puritanical aspect of God that was implanted in Melville’s soul at an early age.” He then continues: “I would like to ask Mr. Melville whether or not marriage was his wall, his prison, in 1850, and, if so, why did he tantalize his readers with so many references to a wall without giving a few decipherable clues as to what it stood for.”

Murray has Melville reply as follows:

Why should I put so private and delicate a matter before the eyes of a “bantering, barren, and prosaic, heartless age,” a generation of censorious, nominally-Christian hypocrites? To my world, with

its pride of purity, marriage was a sacred, inviolable institution, guarded and walled-in by the most powerful moral sentiments. You people, with your permissive attitude toward sex and your lenient divorce laws, cannot possibly imagine what it feels like to be in the position I was in in 1850. . . . But since I had to be frank with myself, I could not omit the wall.27

Murray’s ability to understand Melville from within the context of Melville’s culture emerges from this passage. The comment by the unempathic scholar is a cold, exterior description of Melville’s puritanical religious code. Murray, speaking through Melville, manages to express how Melville’s entrapment must have felt from the inside: Melville had an unhappy marriage, but he shared in his culture’s view of marriage as a sacred institution, and so he did not feel comfortable stating explicitly how imprisoned he felt. But he also needed some outlet for his “walled-in” feelings; hence, the oblique references to a “wall.”

INADEQUACIES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY The difficulty in applying contemporary psychology to another era points to the more general difficulty of finding an adequate theory upon which to base psychobiography. Not only does psychological theory rarely give due emphasis to cultural factors but it tends to be unvalidated and simplistic. Within the limitations of this essay it is possible only to suggest the type of theory which can be used most profitably in biographical work and to indicate something about the manner in which that theory would be employed. Unfortunately, there is little discussion of these issues in the literature.28

The type of theory used by a psychobiographer ought, first, to be psychodynamic. Several anthropologists have suggested that the general process underlying psychodynamic psychology seems to be present in individuals in different cultures—that is, individuals have psychological conflicts and repressed concerns which influence their thought and behavior—but the nature and content

of these conflicts and concerns have a great deal of cross-cultural variation. If the observation of these anthropologists is accurate, then the psychobiographer should start with the assumption of the psychodynamic process, but be careful to search out, for each subject, what his particular conflicts, concerns, and preoccupations might be. The use of a psychodynamic approach is suited to the kind of question which frequently leads a biographer to attempt psychological analysis. Often biographers find that there are problems concerning their subjects, such as inconsistencies in behavior, which do not seem explicable without recourse to psychodynamic analysis.29

Second, it should include the concept of character, but not fixed notions about character types. The concept of character holds that an individual develops a relatively stable and systematically organized way of thinking, feeling, and acting. A psychobiographer, then, should attempt to reconstruct his subject’s character, remembering, however, that character is extremely complex. As Murray notes, “even by restricting one’s attention . . . to the most important properties, a personality cannot yet be adequately represented as a functional and temporal whole in less than 5,000 words, let us say.” It is because of the complexity of personality that trait-psychological approaches have had so little success; it simply is not possible to discover one-dimensional traits which an individual will express in a variety of situations.30

In using personality theory the psychobiographer should avoid applying it in a wholesale fashion; rather, he should continually evolve his theoretical notions as he evaluates the fit between them and the subject’s experience.

Wolfenstein provides an example of what Coles convincingly argues is an improper use of theory. Wolfenstein comments that Lenin, Trotsky, and Gandhi all had “stormy” experiences during

adolescence and, then, as if to explain why this occurred, states that adolescence is "the period of the 'crisis of identity.'"31

Coles, in discussing this use of Erikson's phrase "crisis of identity," writes:

Here a phrase of Erikson's has been turned into a new label. . . . What is meant to inspire in others one kind of response (does this way of putting things fit? is it helpful? or ought I look elsewhere, perhaps use my own words, or simply keep looking and listening?) gets quite another response (that is the answer, or what I want to prove, or what I had better well prove, since everyone else these days is doing so).32

In other words, Wolfenstein fails to use the psychological term as a starting point—as a hypothesis to be tested—but instead applies it as an explanation in such a way as to curtail further exploration.

Mazlish, in his study of the Mills, provides an example of how a psychological concept can be refined as it is used. He starts with the hypothesis—one part of the theoretical concept of the Oedipus complex—that there is often rivalry between father and son, but he also assumes that father-son relationships would likely have been different during the Mills's era than they are in the twentieth century. The theoretical concept provided Mazlish with an issue on which to focus and with some suggestions as to what the nature of the relationship between the Mills might have been. His study demonstrates that there was rivalry between James and John Stuart Mill but that this rivalry did not take the precise form conceptualized in psychoanalytic theory. Mazlish's use of the concept of the Oedipal complex helped him perceive the rivalry between James and John Stuart Mill. But at the same time, his undoctrinaire examination of this rivalry enabled him to add to our understanding of the Oedipal complex by pointing out some of the ways father-son interaction patterns can vary according to historical setting.33

Psychological theory cannot explain an individual; but, by

31 Wolfenstein, The Revolutionary Personality, 97.
33 Mazlish, James and John Stuart Mill.
pointing to areas on which to focus and suggesting possible connections between different aspects of the subject's personality, it can guide the investigator in his attempt to draw from the data a coherent portrait of his subject.

ANALYZING AN ABSENT SUBJECT Barzun has stated the final difficulty to be discussed:

Everything he [the psychohistorian] uses—his "tools," his "method," his "data"—is indirect and necessarily scant: the patient is absent, and the clues he may have left to his once living psyche are the product of chance. Diaries, letters, literary works form a random record, in which expressions of mood are more frequent than evidence of actions. "Dream-material" is extremely rare. Compared to the volume of data elicited under therapy and consciously directed at relevance and completeness by the analyst, this trickle from written remains seems almost negligible.34

The psychobiographer is at a disadvantage compared with a psychotherapist because the data which one can extract from historical sources are considerably sparser than the data which a therapist derives from his direct contact with a patient.

But, as various psychobiographers have commented, there are several respects in which the psychobiographer, in comparison to the psychotherapist, is in an advantageous position. The psychotherapist generally has only one informant concerning the patient's experience, the patient himself. By contrast, the psychobiographer has access to informants other than the subject. He is able to learn how these informants described the situations in which the subject was involved and also how they viewed the subject's personality. In addition, the psychobiographer is able to look at the subject's whole life. He can analyze events in the light of their eventual effects. Wyatt puts this point well: "From his relatively distant vantage point he can watch the patterns of a life, or of a historical period, assert themselves by their own force and inherent logic. Things seem to 'fall into a pattern' also in history if we do not insist on imposing prematurely one of our own contriving . . . ." Finally, the psychobiographer is not limited by therapeutic considerations. For example, a therapist may develop

34 Barzun, *Clio and the Doctors*, 46.
a distorted view of his patient because he focuses on the aspects of the patient’s behavior which are maladaptive, whereas a psychobiographer is free to develop a balanced, well-rounded portrait of his subject.35

With a subject who lived more recently, or who is still alive, there are additional advantages. It is possible for the psychobiographer, in studying such a subject, to interview individuals who knew the subject. For example, Erikson, in doing research for Gandhi’s Truth, learned a good deal from Indians who had been followers of the Mahatma and derived one of his central themes—having to do with the way the lives of many young people were changed as a result of their personal interactions with Gandhi—from these interviews. By contrast, Mazlish’s study of Richard Nixon suffers from Mazlish’s almost total reliance on published sources and his failure to seek out individuals who knew Nixon.36

The ultimate possibility for research comes when the subject is still alive and the psychobiographer is able to interview him. Becoming personally acquainted with the subject, however, can cause additional troubles. For example, Zeligs, in his study of Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers, interviewed Hiss and exchanged much correspondence with him, although Chambers refused to talk with Zeligs. It is likely that Zeligs was influenced by the affection he developed for Hiss; the dual-biography has been widely criticized for being biased in Hiss’s favor. Also, in making psychological interpretations about Hiss, Zeligs was no doubt constrained by his knowledge that Hiss would read the finished work.37

Kearns avoided this latter difficulty in her study of Lyndon Johnson since she did not publish it until after his death, and in

36 Erikson, Gandhi’s Truth; Mazlish, In Search of Nixon.
general her study benefits greatly from the information Johnson imparted to her in their many intimate conversations. But one shortcoming of her work is that she did not adequately analyze Johnson’s transference to her. Kearns writes that she often wondered why he talked so openly with her. “One day he took me on a long car ride. He wanted to tell me, he said, that all along he’d been hiding from me the fact that I reminded him of his dead mother. In talking with me, he had come to imagine he was also talking with her, unraveling the story of his life.” But Kearns does not seem to take this revelation seriously. She comments, “Perhaps this was so, but it is more likely that he talked to me simply because I was there, present, as he moved, knowingly, terrified, toward death.” Kearns did not take the opportunity to understand Johnson’s way of relating to her as an indication of how he may have related to other important people in his life, such as his mother.38

With the exception of these atypical cases in which there has been personal contact with the subject, the psychobiographer still suffers from two particular disadvantages, as compared to the psychotherapist: the psychobiographer cannot gain material by questioning his subject directly, nor can he refine his hypotheses by checking them with the subject. However, there are possible strategies which would tend to minimize these difficulties.

Although a psychobiographer will rely on personal materials, such as diaries, letters, and private notebooks, several psychobiographers have used sources of data other than those on which the writer of a conventional biography would rely. Donald notes that a psychologically sensitive biographer “finds in his subject’s doodles, scratch-paper, and odd jottings glimpses into his mental processes.” Davis, in his work on Theodore Roosevelt, analyzes Roosevelt’s drawings and caricatures. For example, at age 14 Roosevelt made some fanciful drawings inspired by the concept of evolution in which he portrayed himself and members of his family turning into animals. Zeligs examines a translation which Chambers executed and finds passages in which Chambers’ translation differs from the original in ways that make the story seem close to Chambers’ own experience. The suggestion is that the story had personal meaning for Chambers and his alterations

38 Doris Kearns, Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream (New York, 1967), 18.
would be indicative of how he viewed his own experience. Glad suggests that a psychobiographer can make use of medical and psychiatric records when they are available. For example, Macalpine and Hunter located George III’s medical records and found evidence in them that his aberrant behavior was probably the result of porphyria, a hereditary metabolic disturbance, rather than manic-depressive psychosis, as prevailing opinion had held at the time of their reassessment. Miale and Selzer obtained the Rorschach protocols of sixteen of the Nuremberg defendants, including Hermann Goering and Albert Speer, and attempted to gain insight into their personalities through interpretations of the protocols.39

In addition, the resourceful psychobiographer can look for different kinds of data in these unusual sources. Meyer gives an example of a parapraxis which he considers to have been significant. In an autobiographical work the novelist Antoine Saint-Exupéry referred to his brother’s death—which actually took place when his brother was 15 and he was 17—but Saint-Exupéry made a slip and wrote that his brother was 17. Meyer suggests that the parapraxis reflects Saint-Exupéry’s identification with his brother. Weinstein finds in Wilson’s use of figurative language an indication of his inner preoccupations. Wolfenstein argues that “the juxtaposition of images or events in a text often implies unconscious as well as conscious connections between the phenomena thus brought together.” Manuel, in his psychobiography of Isaac Newton, provides a particularly ingenious example of this sort of analysis. Manuel found a notebook in which Newton had made random lists of words beginning with a given letter. For example, on one line he began with the letter “F” and the word “Father.” Manuel notes that this was “followed by Fornicator, Flatterer, and then two geographic proper nouns with overtones of sin and sensuality to a young puritan, Frenchman and Florentine.” Manuel relates this evidence to other evidence; the

data taken together suggest that there was considerable disturbance in Newton’s relationship with his step-father.40

A psychotherapist is able to refine his hypotheses about the patient by constantly checking them against additional data that surface during the therapy session. Zonis proposes a comparable strategy which is available to the psychobiographer:

The careful investigator can use his empathically derived understandings as hypotheses which can be applied to subsequent events in the life of the subject. As those hypotheses are refined in terms of the ways in which the subject apparently responded to those subsequent events, the investigator can assume with greater and greater confidence that he has succeeded in uncovering the meanings which the subject must be bringing to his historical circumstances in order to have responded to them in the ways in which he did respond.41

There are some rare occasions when the psychobiographer does have an opportunity to find confirmation for his hypotheses. For example, Wyatt and Willcox report that, after they had formed their basic hypotheses about Clinton, a previously unknown collection of his papers became available, and they were able to check some of their hypotheses against data in the papers.42

The strategies discussed in this essay for minimizing the difficulties in writing psychobiography do not clash; rather, they fit together into a coherent approach. This approach requires the psychobiographer to do thorough research and immerse himself in the source material; to develop an empathic relationship with his subject, a relationship which aids him in “listening” to the material through his model of the subject’s personality; to eschew dogmatic personality theories; and, by continually going back and forth between hypotheses and the data, gradually to build a portrait of the subject.

Even with the use of this approach, no biographer can claim that he has achieved an accurate portrayal of his subject; psychological interpretations are never certain. Why then should the application of psychology to biography be undertaken in the first place if it provokes so many difficulties and if the results are so uncertain?

The biographer’s “real battle,” as Edel has remarked, is his search for “the figure under the carpet, the evidence in the reverse of the tapestry.” Describing the facts of the subject’s life is easy enough, but a mere recital of facts does not penetrate the surface. Every individual has his practiced way of presenting himself to the world, but underneath that outer self is “the secret self, the inner myth” which shapes it. The nature of the inner self is that it is hidden; consequently, the biographer who would attempt to unearth it must take advantage of all available resources, and psychology is one of those resources. “[W]e must read certain psychological signs,” Edel comments, “which enable us to understand what people really are saying behind the faces they put on . . . .” Henry James, Edel’s biographical subject, once declared, “Never say you know the last word about any human heart!” Any biographer must admit that he does not know the last word, but what psychology offers the biographer is the hope of approaching closer to the human heart.43

43 Edel, “The Art of Biography: The Figure Under the Carpet,” The New Republic (Feb. 10, 1979), 26; idem, Henry James, IV, 8.