

A Biographical Fantasia:
An Essay in Democratic Biography

For Joseph Pujol (1857-1945)

Part I

I

My "Work"

A week or two into my first full-time teaching job, I attended a mixer for new faculty. It was an exciting event for me: it marked a kind of professional coming-of-age, or at least the first installment in such a process. Getting hired to teach at Holy Cross, even for just a one-year sabbatical-replacement position, was a dream come true. The previous year, at the annual MLA convention, I'd had a strong preliminary interview with them for a tenure-track job in creative writing. As it turned out, I didn't make the cut; but I couldn't stop thinking about that interview, and all the hopes it had kindled. Both my grandfather and uncle on my mother's side of the family - the Catholic side - had gone to Holy Cross. My mother, a decidedly lapsed Catholic, used to mention Holy Cross occasionally with an affectionate but gently dismissive tone - my father, after all, had gone to Harvard - and so I had learned to regard it through her eyes, with ironic condescension. But before

my interview, the Chair of the English Department sent me the college catalogue, and a photocopied page from the U.S. News and World Report college rankings, where Holy Cross was listed among the top 20 liberal arts colleges in the country. It was number 20 - but it was there, in the same group as Amherst, Swarthmore, Wellesley and Williams. It was a serious school. I had an interview at a serious school. And I killed it. For days after the interview, I was walking on air, replaying over and over again the high points of that memorable half-hour, unable to stop thinking about the three interviewers who just might become my colleagues. When, some weeks later, I called the chair and found out I hadn't made the cut, I was bitterly disappointed; but the bitterness was sweetened a little when he remarked, about the decision, that he "wished it had gone otherwise". Though my chances of teaching at Holy Cross now seemed over, I kept replaying that interview in my mind, along with my brief phone conversation with the chair. Then, just before Memorial Day weekend, he invited me to apply for the sabbatical-replacement position. I sent in my application Express Mail the following day, and the week before the Fourth of July, he called to tell me I'd gotten the job. Six weeks later, my wife and son and I were living in Worcester, MA. And by the time of the new

faculty mixer in September, my excitement and pride at actually being a member of the faculty at the school I had been fantasizing about for the better part of a year were barely containable. It had happened; I was here; and so far, I hadn't blown it. That was a smaller but no less pride-inducing achievement: I hadn't blown it.

At the mixer, a thin, bespectacled woman approached me, and we exchanged names.

"Josh Gidding, Josh Gidding," she said pleasantly, and also a little diffidently, as if sincerely trying to place me, and apologetic that she couldn't. "I'm afraid I'm not familiar with your work."

I have retold this story many times, and it never fails to amuse. The reasons it amuses are worth looking into. But first of all, let's be clear. I really have no "work" to speak of, and at the time of the new faculty mixer, I had no "work" at all. I was working, yes - I had just started working at what was in many ways my dream job. My disappointment at the non-tenure-track, temporary nature of the job, though a mitigating factor, couldn't change that. But at the time of my unknown colleague's statement, all that I had achieved in the way of writing was an unpublished, never-to-be-published dissertation, a novel that had died upon publication 14 years before that, and a

short story published seven years after the novel, in a small (and soon to be defunct) literary journal. That, and a bunch of unpublished stories and longer fiction manuscripts filed away in the bottom drawer (failed novels, both aborted and completed), were the sum total of my "work". I did not tell that to my colleague, though. What did I tell her? I probably gave her a thumbnail sketch of my dissertation, and asked about hers. Maybe she had published some articles in scholarly journals; if so, that was certainly more than I had done. And yet, in her eyes, I might have "work" she was not "familiar" with. (I love the dual assumption here: that I had a body of work, and that she should be familiar with it.) To her, I was a young scholar in the making. I was a contender. Behind her statement lay such a generous implication that one could not help but feel comforted, reassured, and flattered by it. How kind of her! What if I really were, or were preparing to be, the person her assumptions suggested I was?

How kind - and yet how (unintentionally) humorous, too. (The unintentional humor was part of its charm.) Such that, for a number of years after, throughout our son's childhood, whenever he mentioned a classmate, or someone he knew from summer day camp, whose name I didn't

recognize, I would reply, in secret emulation of my unknown friend (for in my mind, she had come to be my friend):

"Mike Johnson, Mike Johnson... I'm afraid I'm not familiar with his work."

II

Le Pétomane

Whenever I hear the word "work" used in this way, I cannot help thinking of a book I first got in eighth grade (which seems to me the perfect age to get such a book). It was a biography of the professional French farter Joseph Pujol, "Le Pétomane" (1857-1945). I kept my first copy of this book for only a short time, because I stupidly lent it to Joy Polakoff after she asked to borrow it, and never got it back. No matter, Joy. I now have several other copies, including a reprint of the original French version, with its most excellent subtitle: "Sa vie, son oeuvre".

Oeuvre, of course, is the French word for a major work, or body of work (no pun intended). But it also has a certain cachet that the English phrase can't quite convey. The French is succinct; it is classy; it suggests not only magnitude, but quality; it is magisterial; it has gravitas; it is, in a word, definitive. To apply all of this to a

man's farts somehow delights the spirit; indeed, is itself a jeu d'esprit (as well as a jeu de corps). Because really, why not? What is our own "work" - whatever it is - such that we think we can look down on another man's? Pujol's farts - their ingenious range of tones and timbres, the manifold manner of their production, as his biographer Jean Nohain informs us (in considerable detail) - brought hilarity and wonder to many thousands of people. They laughed so hard the management had to station nurses in the audience to attend to people who become apoplectic with laughter. According to Nohain, Pujol could imitate the sound of a cannon's roar, or the piping of a flute. He could blow out a candle from a foot away. (Or was it a meter?) Is all of this not an achievement of note? Does it not partake of a kind of epic immortality, even? For the gift of laughter comes ultimately from the gods. Who am I - who are we, dubious reader - to sneeze at that? We are not, finally, altogether in control of our gifts, such as they are. They come from afar, and are given on loan; we are only their brief stewards. As Henry James wrote, in his short story "The Middle Years", about the writing life:

We work in the dark - we do what we can
- we give what we have. Our doubt is
our passion, and our passion is our
task. The rest is the madness of art.

Granted, Pujol's "work" probably wasn't what The Master had in mind. But what about the "work" of the comedian - any comedian? Is it so far, really, from the work of the writer? The question brings to mind that famous exhortation of Pujol's compatriot of an earlier century, "Il faut cultiver son jardin." "Work your garden." The back-to-basics common sense of Voltaire's advice is incontrovertible, and has a certain Pujolian earthiness, too.

In further contemplating Nohain's subtitle, though, one cannot help wondering what constitutes an oeuvre, and how to recognize it. What (as Aristotle might have asked) is its proper form? Must it exist in a physical medium, like print or the plastic media? Surely not. Take, for one, the example of music, that most sublime and unphysical of all the arts. And what about (drawing from the opposite end of the sublime spectrum, as it were) the art of standup comedy? A "practical" comedian like Pujol relies on physical humor; yet comedy itself, the appeal of comedy, is no less abstract than music - which, like comedy, requires the bodies of humans to perform it, but which takes place as much in the minds of its audience as the bodies of its performers.

But I'm really not interested in anatomizing the nature of comedy here; I'm trying to understand what makes something get to be called a "work". In the case of comedy, is just making people laugh enough? Has someone who's made someone else laugh created a work? Certainly a single joke doesn't qualify. But how about a lifetime of jokes? How about a career as a stand-up comedian? Is that a "work"? Is any career a "work", for that matter? Does anybody who has a career produce "work", in the sense of having an oeuvre? Surely there are qualitative criteria to consider. Some kind of criticism -- critical principles or standards -- is needed in order to determine what is a "work", and what isn't.

A related problem (at least for me it's a problem) is the perceived tension between criticism on the one hand and democracy on the other; between the critical impulse (it's more than an impulse, really - it's a requirement in these matters) and my democratic persuasions; between my wish to establish important principles of distinction and judgment, and my wish for everyone, or at least as many people as possible, to be able to lay claim to having "work". I want the idea of "work" to be opened up, not closed off. But I also want it to be meaningful, and to count for something. Can't I have it both ways? No, you say? Why not? Isn't

the implied opposition between the standards of criticism and the values of democracy a false dichotomy? Yes, I think it is, and the example of the standup comedian provides a case in point.

III

The Question of Don Rickles

Is stand-up comedy "work"? Or is it just work? In the sense of labor, it is certainly the latter - professional comedians work hard to be funny. (But if they appear to work too hard, they fail to be funny. There is an inherent sprezzatura to all comedy; it must come off as essentially improvisatory.) But can stand-up comedy be considered an "oeuvre"? I think we can all agree that Woody Allen and Steve Martin, who started out as stand-up comics, have an oeuvre. But they are unquestionably artists, and all artists have an oeuvre, by definition. If you are loved by the general public and praised by the critics, as those two are, you definitely have an oeuvre. (You don't need to be an artist to have an oeuvre, but all artists have one.) But maybe Woody Allen and Steve Martin aren't such good examples after all, because they are basically geniuses - and not just in one field, either. In addition to writing,

directing, and acting in movies, they both publish in The New Yorker, and have written several books each. Woody plays jazz clarinet, and Steve plays a mean banjo, and now teaches master classes in comedy.

But the argument from genius can be misleading. I think we need to take a comic non-genius as an example. Let's take Don Rickles, alav ha shalom. Did Rickles produce "work"? After all, he acted as well as doing stand-up. Was Rickles an artist? I think the jury's still out on that, and probably will be for a while. We need some historical perspective on Rickles before we can make that call. We need a biography. Rickles needs a biographer - a serious biographer. Will he get one? Your guess is as good as mine.

(It is pleasing to my perverse imagination to assign Rickles a serious German biographer, who could describe the problem concerning Rickles' status here as "Die Ricklesfrage" -- "The Question of Don Rickles" -- and then attack it with the requisite Teutonic scholarly gusto. This would be even more pleasing to me than the celebrations of Jerry Lewis' oeuvre that one hears can be found - or used to be found -- in the Cahiers du Cinéma. Geree Loueeze, c'est un génie, quoi!)

In any case, if Rickles did get a serious German biographer, who put his achievement in historical perspective, could he then be said to have "work"? Work that would be reviewed and assessed in the biography? Perhaps. But this appears to be begging the question, because it is not the biographer who confers the status of "work", but rather the status of "work" - of being recognized by both public and critics to have an oeuvre - that confers the biographer. People who have "work" then get biographers. (We will come back to this idea, which I call "biographical validity", in a moment.) Joseph Pujol, in the biographical subtitle I love so much, was said to have "work" ("sa vie, son oeuvre"). Yes, that was a joke. But why? Because farting for a living cannot be considered "work", but only work? How come?

Once again, we're back at the question of what criteria one's achievement must meet in order for it to be considered "work". Must there be a lot of it? Must it be dignified? Must it be "serious"? Must it be able to be critically appreciated? Must it be thoughtful? Must it be conscious? It's hard to imagine a biography, a serious biography, being done of any person whose "work" did not conform to these criteria, among others. Granted, Nohain's book is not a serious biography, and we aren't meant to

take the "work" it describes seriously. We can look at Pujol's "work" as that of a clown - and a rather lowly one at that. He can be likened to a circus clown - an anonymous circus clown. The very lowest form of professional clown.

IV

"Biographical Validity"

Don't get me wrong - I love clowns, and I have a special place in my heart for anonymous circus clowns. (Who now, with the demise of Ringling Bros./Barnum & Bailey's, seem to be a threatened species, at least in this country.) But to my knowledge, such persons do not normally get biographies written about them - not even facetious ones. Anonymous people, unknown people, are not thought to produce "work", so they are not thought to merit biographies, either. Their achievements, their effect upon other people, aren't considered important enough to deserve biographical treatment. Their work, their lives, are not deemed what we might call "biographically valid". In other words, they are not thought to be a part of history - not even the history of whatever field they happen to work in.

So then, is it history alone that confers or determines "biographical validity"? That doesn't seem to be right, because - for one thing -- you don't need to be dead in order to be biographically valid. The living certainly receive biographical treatment. But maybe, in order for the subject to meet the requisite biographical criteria - in order to be "biographizable" - her field of achievement needs to have a history that is recognized by historians. Biography is traditionally seen as a sub-field of history - or, more properly, historiography -- so it stands to reason that those topics seen as having recognized, "valid" histories would also have intellectually-acceptable biographies connected with them - that is, biographies of people with life-stories that can be recognized as biographically valid. If your personal history - your life - happens to significantly coincide with (or better yet, exemplify in some way) a subject that has a "valid" history, then your life too is biographically valid. Thus Casanova (history of sexuality) makes the cut, but Joseph Pujol (history of farting?) doesn't. (Remember, the jury's still out on Rickles.)

But wait a minute. There is something wrong here. Isn't the success of a biography really all in the writing? Does someone even need to be biographically valid -

connected to history in some acknowledgable way - if the writing itself is good enough? By "writing", I include more than just the author's skill and style; I include also the story she has chosen to tell. There is an element of the writing - perhaps the most important element - that goes beyond the writing itself. Part of being a good writer is knowing which story to tell, as well as how to tell it. My point is just that there is no "objective story" that is separable from the skill of the writer into whose hands that story falls.

Here an analogy with autobiography may be useful. If everyone has a story to tell - and in these days of the renaissance, the "golden age", of the memoir, that certainly seems to be the case - then couldn't it also be true that everyone has a story for someone else to tell? Maybe. However, autobiographical validity - the idea that the life-story deserves, for whatever reasons, to be told by its subject -- isn't the same thing as biographical validity, which is the general consensus (reached on the part of publishers, editors, scholars, historians - and, most importantly, the eventual readers of the biography: the public) that a subject is deserving of having her story told by a qualified other. Biography is necessarily a part of history, but autobiography isn't. Autobiography is part

of literature. Of course, if the subject of the autobiography is of historical importance, then the autobiography is also part of history. (But that's another discussion.)

The appeal and even the "validity" of someone's narrative of their own life-story may be all in the telling; however, this isn't the case with biography. Biography also needs to have some form of "valid history" behind it. (I define "valid history" as any field of inquiry under the purview of a historian.)

So does that mean that anyone who is in some way involved in "valid history" gets to have a biographer? This seems absurd on the face of it. I mean, let's say I have a neighbor who works for Google. And let's say that she (or more likely he - sexist tech industry!) is an executive in one of the most important companies in the world. He is therefore, in a sense (a rather loose sense, I admit), a part of history. Does he, or can he be said to, have "work" (in addition to work)? Does he get to have a biographer? No, you say? Just being an important person at Google isn't enough, in and of itself, to give him a biographer? OK, but then does he get to have an autobiographer? In other words, if he decided, as an executive at Google, to write his life story, or even just

part of it - including his rise to (and/or within) Google - wouldn't that story at least stand a chance of attracting a publisher's interest? Maybe, depending on how compelling that story is. So then, if he gets to have an autobiography, why not a biography? Isn't it all in the writing, and isn't the story part of the writing?

Well, no. The writing is part of the story - not the other way round. OK. But if the story is good enough for an autobiography, isn't it good enough for a biography?

I think the answer is no again, because biography and autobiography are different genres, and they have different relationships to history. As I mentioned above, biography is a part of history - historiography - whereas autobiography is part of literature. Yes, it can also be part of history, if its subject (meaning the autobiographer) is; but most autobiographers aren't. At least not in the narrower sense of history comprised by the term "historiography" - history that gets written about, and that deserves (and even needs, in some sense) to get written about. "Valid history", I called it before. (I know that sounds bad - really elitist and snobby, as though some people are better, or at least more "historically validated", than others. But just hold on.)

In the larger sense, of course, everybody's life is part of history; but that is stretching the meaning of history too broad. In the narrower sense of history, including the life histories of people who are significantly implicated in public events, the subjects of biography - its protagonists, if you will - form a considerably more limited pool. By that token, then, my notional neighbor, the Google executive, could only merit a biography - could only be biographically valid - if he were somehow implicated in historical events, either inside or outside Google. A biographical subject must be a person of some consequence; he must have "heft", and some kind of gravitas -- some kind of impact on the world. This criterion doesn't necessarily obtain for autobiography or memoir.

V

"Democratic Biography"

But I'm really not liking the way any of this is sounding, or the exclusionary direction it is headed in. Part of me - the democratic part, which I guess is a larger part than I thought before - thinks that Joe Sixpack should get a biography, too (and therefore a biographer). I think anyone, if they want, should get a biographer. Of course

not everyone will want one, so that automatically limits the "biographical pool" at the outset. But we still have to recognize that although surely not everyone will want a biographer, some people will. And those people will probably tend to be readers of serious biography. Serious readers of serious biography. (Seriously egomaniacal, self-absorbed, grandiosely delusional readers of serious biography -- like myself!) And at least some of these readers must occasionally entertain the fantasy of themselves as the subjects of a biography. (I can't be the only person who does this, can I?)

So how many readers like this are we talking about? And let's also say, just for the sake of argument, that we're limiting our biographical pool of possible subjects even further, to just American readers of serious biography. Are we talking about millions of people here? Surely not. Let's be super-conservative and say we're only talking about thousands of people. Surely there are at least thousands of people - or at least, most conservatively speaking, a thousand readers of biography -- who have fantasized about, and would get a kick out of, having themselves be the subjects of a biography? I think it is reasonable to assume that there are at least a thousand other pretty crazy, self-fantasizing readers of

serious biography like me in this country. Granted, I'm a weird guy - but I don't think I'm that weird. There have got to be at least some readers of biography out there, candidates for the "biographical pool", who are at least as weird as me, if not weirder, and have entertained such biographical fantasies. So that means there could be at least a thousand new possible biographical subjects out there. People with otherwise unexceptional lives, whose stories aren't being told because they are - well, unexceptional, and therefore not thought of as being biographically valid.

On that note, I have to agree with the Wallace Shawn character in "My Dinner with André", who said that if you truly knew everything that went on in the cigar shop at the corner, it would probably blow your mind. I believe that. Because, if you go deep enough, there is no such thing as an unexceptional story; everyone's life, if looked at closely and deeply enough by the right person, can be seen as exceptional. (This sort of sounds like Garrison Keillor's trademark joke about all the children of Lake Wobegon being above average. And of course that joke is funny precisely because, in one sense, it's so true. We all at least want our children to be above average.) But even if we grant, according to the "Lake Wobegon and 'My

Dinner with André' Cigar-Shop Theory of Biography", that there are at least a thousand people out there whose unexceptional stories could get told, and even deserve to get told (because in a sense, all corner cigar shops really are awesome and could blow your mind if you truly knew what went on in there, and all our children, at least in their own parents' eyes, really are above average) - even then, are there any readers for those notional biographies out there (other than the subjects themselves)? Is there any potential market for these books? How many readers -- that is, buyers -- do there have to be for a book to break even? Depends on a lot of things, I know. The advance on the book, the production costs, the distribution and promotion costs. It all adds up. I guess you could do a calculus and come up with a figure for how many buyers of a book you would need to break even. Granted, publishers don't want to just break even, they want to make money. As much money as possible. And they won't publish a book, any book, unless they think there's a good chance it will make money. (Take it from me; I've been striking out with book publishers for ten years now. I can't seem to buy a publisher - or even an agent. I guess they just don't want to know from crazy, self-fantasizing essayists.)

But the biggest problem here, it seems to me, is whether there would be any readers at all for these biographies - I'll call them "neo-biographies", since they are substantially different from traditional biographies -- of people who are essentially nonentities - these biographical subjects without any biographical validity. (Of course I'm including myself among them.) I know that sounds harsh, but in order to make my argument as good as possible, I have to be as conservative as possible. So I'm assuming the neo-biographical subjects are people that no one, prima facie, would want to read about. So the market for these biographies might very well be zero.

Though not necessarily. Because remember -- it's all in the writing. Every person's life is like the children of Lake Wobegon, or Wallace Shawn's corner cigar shop. If you truly knew, via a serious biographer, everything that went on in the corner cigar shop of somebody's life, it would totally blow your mind. Because people, all people, are just so fundamentally interesting. Every person has a story to tell - or be told. This is an important point. In this golden age of memoir, it seems to be the case that everyone, at least potentially, has a story to tell. And if everyone has a story to tell, then it seems to me, despite (or in contradiction to) what I said before about

autobiography and biography being different genres ("Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes" - Whitman. Talk about a crazy, self-fantasizing egomaniac!) - it seems to me that everyone also has a story to be told. It all depends on how the biographer tells it. Not just the style and technique of the writing, but also the events selected and themes extrapolated. The vision of the life, so to speak - - the vision that the biographer has of the life she is telling. If the biographer deeply feels that the life she is writing about is important - if she "loves" that life (recalling here what Goethe said about love and understanding: that you can't really understand something unless you love it), and has the ability to convey it in such a way that it becomes important to, and maybe even in a sense loved by, the reader as well - well then, that biographer will have succeeded in writing the biography of a person who may only on the surface appear to be a nonentity. In Gidding's biographical version of Wallace Shawn's and Garrison Keillor's worlds, there is no such thing as a biographical subject who is a nonentity; and it's just a poor biographer who blames her subject.

VI

The Education of a Democratic Biographer

So where does all of this leave us so far? We have, on the one hand, subjects: people whose lives are being regarded with enough depth, care, attention and love that those lives are seen to be valid objects of biographical inquiry. In other words, the biographical validity of nonentities has been reclaimed - or, more properly, claimed for the first time. And, on the other hand, because those "nonentititous" lives have been claimed - no, more than claimed: represented - as biographically valid, there is now a readership for those lives. (Depending, of course, on how those lives are written about - how compelling and important and relevant they are made to appear in the telling.) So we have new biographical subjects, and we have new readers of their biographies.

But there is still an important factor missing here that needs to be considered: the neo-biographer. We haven't talked about the neo-biographer yet. There may be subjects whose lives should be told but aren't getting told, and there may also be readers to read those lives if they are told well enough. But who is going to tell them

well enough? Where are these biographers, and who are they?

Who else, but other nonentities? Nonentities who, having been shown the light on the road to Damascus (which is the road to biographical validity), have now been converted into biographers. But how does this conversion happen? By revelation? By alchemy? Or by some other, yet-to-be-determined form of magic?

No, by no magic at all. By training. By education and training. I mean, if children and teenagers, all children and teenagers, are going to be taught the fundamentals of computer programming as part of their basic education in the digital/information age, then surely they could also be taught the fundamentals of biography?

Big jump there, I know. We live in the digital/information age; we don't live in the biographical age. The biographical age is just a figment of my imagination. True enough. But isn't it also true that, to repeat an old saw, everything man-made that exists was once only imagined? And if that is true, isn't it also the case that if we could bring ourselves to the point of imagining the possibility of a biographical age, there is at least the potential of bringing it about, just as we have done with the digital/information age?

But why on earth would we want to do that? Why would we want to imagine a biographical age? What could that possibly do for us? After all, computers can already do countless useful and important and indeed now totally essential things for us. They have opened up entire new fields of science, business, education, research, art, entertainment, etc. Computers help us run our world. Some fear that they will soon take over our world, and that humans will become their tools. I myself do not believe this will happen - but what do I know? I'm only an essayist, and essayists, almost by definition, don't know very much. They know some things, but not very much; in fact they write in order to find out what they know and don't know. I am thinking here of Montaigne (traditionally considered the "father" of the essay) and his famous question: "Que sais-je?" -- "What do I know?" And one of the things I know is that there is no practical reason - no incentive - to think about the inauguration of a biographical age. There is no reason to think we need any more biographical activity - subjects, writers or readers - than we already have.

But it's really not a question of practicality; it's a question of imagination. An attempt, on an educational level, to stimulate the imagination. To imagine, if you

will, the man-made things that may someday exist. My attempt here (my "essay" - the English is a loan-word from the French, meaning "effort" or "attempt") is to think about, to imagine, a new way of looking at our lives - at the lives of all of us, not just the historical, or famous, or distinguished. In this new way of looking at our lives, we all become, potentially (can one "potentially become" something? Hmmm... Well, I'm an essayist, not a philosopher!), the subjects of a possible biography. We all become important, biographically; we all become "biographically valid". We all live in that cigar shop on the corner. We are all the children of Lake Wobegon. Our lives are reclaimed from biographical oblivion. We see each other in a different light - as biographical subjects. Or at least as potential biographical subjects.

Such a change, though - a change in perspective, in our way of seeing each other, and each other's lives - does not happen overnight. It is something we have to learn - starting in primary school. If we can do it - if we can begin to do it -- with computer programming, we can begin to do it with biography. Not for practical reasons - there are few practical reasons to learn about biography - but for humanistic ones. For the same reasons that we are introduced to art, and music, and creative writing in

primary school, and continue studying those subjects in secondary school. Because to study those subjects enhances our general education - not to mention our humanity.

There is also a loosely vocational angle to all of this. If the art of biography were taught to children and adolescents, then it is at least possible that some people would want to become biographers who wouldn't otherwise have wanted to. And those new biographers -- some of them, anyway - might begin to change the way biography is thought about, and written. They might begin to do this by thinking about it differently themselves. Perhaps they might begin to enlarge the "biographical pool" of subjects in the way I have imagined here. They might look at people's lives differently - more attentively, more thoughtfully, more understandingly -- more lovingly, even. (Because remember what Goethe said: You can't truly understand something unless you love it.) Our future neo-biographers would begin to conceive of "regular" people's lives differently. And they would also begin to widen our understanding of what constitutes "work". They would begin to see "work" where only work was seen before.

Keats may be instructive here - Keats, who himself was ambivalent on the subject of his own biographical validity. On the one hand, he felt sure that after his death, he

would be "among the English poets". On the other hand, the legend he wrote for his headstone in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome declares: "Here Lies One Whose Name Was Writ in Water". Keats wrote to his brother and sister-in-law in 1819:

The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is 'a vale of tears' from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven-What a little circumscribed straightened notion! Call the world if you Please "The vale of Soul-making". Then you will find out the use of the world...I say 'Soul making' Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence-There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions-but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself....How then are Souls to be made? ...How, but by the medium of a world like this? ... I will call the world a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read-I will call the human heart the horn Book used in that School-and I will call the Child able to -read, the Soul made from that School and its hornbook. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!

In the poetic spirit of Keats, we might call a biography - the "new" kind of biography we have been talking about here ("Democratic Biography") - the story of the making of a soul. There is a protagonist in this story - the biographical subject - and there are many supporting characters as well. Those characters are the makers of the

story - they "created" the subject; and so, of course - but in a different sense -- is the biographer. She sees, and conveys, how it all fits together. If the subject is ungraced by history - by "valid history" - that is no matter, or no fatal matter, to our biographer. Her job is not to follow history - that is what the "old" kind of biographers do, by writing only about people with a more traditional kind of biographical validity. Her job is rather to make a new kind of history by making a new kind of biography: Democratic Biography: the story of what we could call the "post-historical" subject, whose life is, or was, lived outside the historian's purview.

Part II

VII

Excursus on Paul

That's all very well and fine, you may say (or very bad, and worse), but until someone actually writes such a biography - until someone actually does it, and thereby demonstrates how it can be done - all this business about "democratic" and "neo-" biography, and "post-historical subjects", remains the merest speculation. Ah yes, dubious reader - but mere speculation is the province of the essay,

and one of the reasons that, as a form, it is so dear to me. In the essay, one can spin one's wheels - as long as those wheels are interesting (and delightful, and instructive - because remember what Horace said: "The aim of poetry is to delight and instruct."). But I don't wish to be coy, so I will give you an example, from my own life, of what such a neo-biography might entail. Neo-biographers are allowed - no, encouraged -- to draw from their own lives, because one is apt to be more understanding, appreciative, and loving of a subject if that subject is connected to one's own life.

Therefore, I choose Paul.

Paul Kirschner was born in Solingen, Germany in ... I actually don't know the exact date of his birth. Probably sometime around 1900. (That's bad. I admit I don't even know his birthday. He knew mine - he never forgot it, as you will see - but I don't remember his, if I ever even knew it.) He came to America by 1918 (it would have to have been before the end of World War I; see below), worked for the silent and "talkies" film actor Jack Holt (1888-1951) -- and later us -- and was also the manager of an apartment building somewhere in Los Angeles, most likely in West LA. He returned to Germany in 1965 to live with his

girlfriend Maria (I don't know her last name), and died of cancer sometime around 1970.

Really bad. I know. Unacceptable. I haven't done the research. I haven't even begun to do the research. True, I never claimed to be a neo-biographer; I'm just an essayist who's trying out an idea. Still, I know I have to do better than this. I have to explain at least two things: 1. Why Paul is important, and 2. Why he should be the subject of a neo-biography.

The brief answer to both of these questions is the same: because I loved him. And -- recalling what Paul's compatriot Goethe said: "You cannot really understand something unless you love it" -- that goes for the subjects of biography, too. The question is, Why should anyone else want to understand (let alone love) Paul Kirschner? Who cares? Would I be the only reader of his neo-biography? Probably. Though you never know. Depending on how well it is done -- envisioned, researched and written -- Paul's biography could make an interesting true story. It would be the story of a German immigrant who came to America in the early twentieth century to avoid being conscripted into Kaiser Wilhelm's Imperial German Army (so Paul was a World War I draft-dodger; good for him!), worked as a Man Friday for a fairly well-known American film actor, then for a

successful but not that well-known screenwriter, my father (Nelson Gidding, 1919-2004), had a huge impact on my life, and then died. He also had a daughter, Gundel, a few years older than me, who I once went to Disneyland with (ca. 1961), when she was over from Germany visiting her father.

The point is, I loved Paul, and I don't want him to be totally forgotten when I die. (I don't know about Jack Holt's descendants, and I hope it isn't churlish of me to assume that they probably aren't up to the job of biographizing Paul; but they probably aren't.) And I know what I just said about Paul getting totally forgotten when I die sounds pretty egocentric, because it's not like the whole question of Paul's legacy depends on me. Gundel, if she's still alive, of course remembers him. Gundel's mother, too - though she probably is dead. But if Gundel had kids, they have at least heard about Paul, and maybe they got to spend some time with him when he went back to Germany, before he died. I hope, if they exist, they got to know him a little. Though come to think of it, Gundel was only a few years older than me, and so when Paul died around 1970, Gundel would have been maybe only 19 or 20. At the oldest. So it's very possible, even likely, that she didn't have any kids when her father died. And that makes me sad.

In any case, if Paul did have grandchildren, either before or after he died (though obviously if he had them after he died, he didn't really "have" them at all, as far as either he or they were concerned), then when they die, he will probably fall into total oblivion, because as far as great-grandchildren go - I mean, from their point of view -- their great-grandparents tend to get kind of sketchy, and sort of way off there in the distance. They usually don't even look anything remotely like us. (At least judging from photos I've seen of my own great-grandparents.) And certainly, by the time of Paul's great-great grandchildren ... well, you get my drift. So having a biography of him get written and published would be a good way not to have him be totally forgotten. I figure I owe him at least that much. He changed my wet bedsheets for five years (ca. 1960-5; I continued to wet the bed until 1967, when I was 13; pathetic, I know), and gave me water-and-mineral-oil enemas when I was constipated. That part wasn't so great, I admit, but he meant well. He cared.

But as far as Paul's biography goes -- I know, the world doesn't work that way. You don't get biographies written of you just because somebody loved you. Though really, why not? I mean, if people write love poems, couldn't they at least in theory -- some of them at least -

- write love biographies? Or couldn't they at least try?
Call me naive, I guess. (You wouldn't be the first.)
Because I know that when you die, the people you loved and
cared about, who aren't part of your family, and who are
already dead, tend to get totally forgotten, and the same
happens to you with other people not in your family after
you die, and then they die, etc. Everybody gets forgotten
eventually - and even pretty soon, in the larger scheme of
things. Unless you leave you mark, one way or another.
Unless you have "work" that outlives you.

Well, that doesn't seem fair. In fact, I think it
sucks. I know it's the way of the world, but that doesn't
mean we have to like it. And I figure that if we can get
the world to think of "work" differently, then more people
would have it - "work" -- in the sense of being able to
claim it. And if more people had it, then there would be
more people to write neo-biographies about, and so more
people would escape oblivion. At least for a while. And
one of the ways we could get people to think of "work"
differently - broaden the concept of what it means to have
"work" - is to have more (or at least some) neo-biographies
get written and published in the US. Then the subjects of
those neo-biographies would live on. Because they say that
a copy of every book published in the US gets put in the

Library of Congress. (But is this actually true? No, it turns out it isn't. A quick search on Google tells me it's not really true at all, but just a popular myth - not every publication in the US gets sent to the Library of Congress.) Still, if a neo-biography gets published by a major trade, academic or even independent US publisher, it seems there's a very good chance a copy will get into the Library of Congress, which is the largest print library in the world (160 million items, and growing every second, practically). And so if those kinds of publishers I just mentioned started publishing neo-biographies, maybe more everyday people would not get completely forgotten within three or so generations after they died. (I'm assuming here that the forgetting really begins with the great-grandchildren, and by the time your great-great-grandchildren come along, it's pretty much all over for you in terms of being remembered at all.)

But I realize that in focusing only on print biographies, I'm ignoring another and all-important repository of immortality: the internet. You don't have to be written about just in print anymore to achieve a species of immortality; you can achieve this nowadays by just being written about on the web. So if I put up a blog and put a neo-biography of Paul on it, it wouldn't have to be

published in book form, and Paul would still not be totally forgotten. So why don't I do that? And why won't I ever do it?

Because I am lazy. I would rather write about the possibility of neo-biography than do it myself. I mean, if I devoted the next five years to researching and writing a neo-biography of Paul, and then put it on the web, it would be preserved forever. Or at least there would be a chance it would be preserved forever, especially now that we have The Cloud. And I would have done the mitzvah for Paul that I believe he deserves. (Even though he wasn't Jewish. At least I don't think he was Jewish. I always assumed he wasn't, and nobody ever said he was. But if he was, that would be sort of weird, and completely change the way I think of him. I mean, it shouldn't - but it would. I know it would. Paul, Jewish? I can't deal with that right now.) But I am too lazy to do this. Which I guess is another way of saying I lack the passion to do it. The passion, the will, and the discipline. Not to mention the practical incentive. Because nobody is exactly beating down the door to publish or read a neo-biography of Paul Kirschner, are they? There isn't even such a thing as "neo-biography". I made it up, just so I could feel better about nonentituous people like Paul and me.

But this essay wasn't supposed to be about what a loser I am. It was supposed to be about what constitutes "work", and also what can be done, in the way of "work", by and for the people we love. So let me tell you a little bit more about Paul, and the work he did, and why I loved him, and why I still do.

Paul first came to work for us when I was around three or so. Maybe earlier. My dad met him when he (my dad) had a flat tire on Tigertail Road, off of Sunset in Brentwood, and Paul stopped to help him. Does that mean my dad couldn't change a flat by himself? Probably. My dad, like me, wasn't that handy. Not helpless, but not that handy. Or maybe it was something else that was wrong with his car, which wouldn't have been unusual. (His car at the time would have been the old Studebaker convertible, which there was a lot wrong with, as I know from hearing about it in later years.) Anyway, Paul must have demonstrated his handiness then, and my dad was opportunistic enough to get his number, and that led to other gigs for Paul, including babysitting for me, and eventually moving in with us when I was six or so. For around five years (1960-5) Paul slept in my room, in the other bed across the room, on the other side of the long Eames desk. He was our Man Friday. He helped raise me, and I came to love him. We all did.

And, I believe, vice versa. He once told me my dad was a "prince" (which I guess had to do with my dad giving him a job when he needed one, and being generous to him in terms of salary). He also said the Jewish religion was the oldest and best. (That last statement, by the way, isn't true. Hinduism and Judaism are roughly the same age, having originated around the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1500 BCE); and if you ask me, Buddhism is better than Judaism - and you're hearing that from a Jew.) But again, Paul meant well. And if he was actually Jewish, and I just never knew it, that would change his remark about Judaism completely, because it would be coming from a Jew, and so would be sort of bragging, rather than being a nice thing for a Gentile to say.

Also, I think he said it partly out of German guilt - which obviously he wouldn't have felt if he was a Jew, which is another indication that he wasn't. Come to think of it, between Paul and my dad there was enough guilt to go around on both sides. I say this because Paul was German, and my dad, a Jew, had been a prisoner of war with the Italians and then the Germans for 18 months during World War II. After the war, my dad held a grudge against Germans, for obvious reasons. And I think Paul was his example of a "good German" (to make up for his grudge),

who'd emigrated before the end of World War I, because - as the story in our family went, anyway - he hadn't wanted to serve in the Kaiser's army. But there was probably a lot more to it than that. Paul didn't talk a lot about his family, or at least I don't remember him saying much about them, but I have the feeling now that maybe he didn't get along so great with his father, and that was one of the reasons why he left Solingen. Anyway, I guess his credentials as a German were pretty good, as far as my dad was concerned. And my dad probably felt bad, when he met Paul, about his anti-German feelings, and this was his chance to make up for them. He could prove that he wasn't really an anti-German bigot by hiring Paul. Or something like that.

Paul's credentials as an American weren't too bad, either. He was a naturalized citizen, and he loved professional wrestling, Laurence Welk, My Three Sons, Gunsmoke, and Bonanza. (In Bonanza, Hoss was his man. In Gunsmoke, Chester (the deputy with the limp) was his favorite - for reasons that will soon become clear.) He remembered when the San Fernando Valley was "all bean fields". And he knew his way around LA very well. One of the things I liked doing with Paul was "getting lost". When he'd take me in the car to Pasadena to visit his

friends the Shittelhoffers (of course I loved the name), he would pretend to get lost on the way back. (At least I like to think now he was pretending. Maybe he wasn't.) But then, lo and behold, we'd turn the corner, and there we were, on Chautauqua Blvd., just up the street from our house. Home sweet home. Magic. I loved him for that.

I also loved him for how he took care of me when my parents went away on trips. I mean, I didn't really think about it at the time, but now that I do, I realize it brought the two of us a lot closer, which made me love him without really being aware of it. (Which is basically the way you love people when you're a kid.)

I didn't love everything about him, of course. Like I said, the enemas weren't so great, in fact they were pretty bad, and I also once got a very bad case of poison oak when my parents were away. (Of course, every case of poison oak for me was a bad case; I was very allergic.) And Paul got the idea of giving me a bath to wash off the poison-oak juice, or whatever it was, but all it did was it spread the juice over the whole rest of my body, including my dick and balls, which was definitely no picnic. When I say that Paul meant well there too - well, that still doesn't make up for him being kind of dumb about that bath. Though I guess ignorant is probably the better word - he just wasn't

that well-informed about the treatment of poison oak. But he sure tried to make up for it by piling on the calamine lotion. Which wasn't too fun either. Especially the way the calamine lotion would make your skin really dry and tight when you moved, and even tried to smile. I hated that part.

And then there was the leg. Paul had a plastic - sorry, you're supposed to say "prosthetic" - leg, that creaked when he walked. Now was it the left leg or the right leg? I don't even know. That's really bad too, that I don't know. I should know. I mean, he lived with us and slept in my bedroom (our bedroom, I guess I should say) for five years - how could I not know which leg it was? I guess I just kind of put it out of my mind, the way kids do - and not just kids, either. I think probably my parents put it out of their minds, too. They never, ever talked about it to me. Which I realize doesn't really prove anything, and maybe even proves the opposite - that they were actually thinking about the leg a lot, in the way that you do when you don't say something, but it is still on your mind, and maybe even more than if you were to talk about it. The point is, I secretly knew about the leg, and that made me feel sorry for him, and I think the feeling sorry for him made me love him even more, though as I say I

didn't know it at the time. They say that pity is not the same thing as love, and I know that. But I also think they are connected somehow. In fact, I'm sure of it.

I don't know how much more personal background I should give about Paul. I mean, there's a lot more to say - I could write a book (ha ha); but unless you love him like I do - and how could you? - you probably have already had enough. I mean, what is some dead German guy with a plastic I mean prosthetic leg to you? Though that very question shows that I have already totally failed as a neo-biographer, because the point of neo-biography (according to me) is supposed to be to make you care about, if not love, people who you normally wouldn't give two shakes about. But of course, as I say, this isn't a neo-biography. It's nowhere close to being a neo-biography. It's just a sketch of the kind of person you might write a neo-biography about. Somebody who wouldn't normally get written about, but just totally forgotten by the time of their great-great grandchildren, if they even had any.

I mentioned before that maybe part of what brought Paul into our family for five years was my father's guilt about being prejudiced against Germans because of the war. But my father wasn't the only one who felt guilty. I felt guilty too, and still do, and always will, and here's why.

One year on my birthday, after Paul had moved back to Germany - let's call it 1970; June 3, 1970; but it could have been 1969, or even 1968; I should know this for sure, but I don't, and everybody else who would know is dead, so I guess I never will - I got a birthday card and present from Paul. The card came in a package with the present. I opened the present first. (Nice move.) Now what was the present, anyway? I seem to remember it was something kind of strange, like maybe an embroidered vest, with a wide belt and fancy buckle that went along with the vest. Something that I instantly knew I would never, ever wear the second I saw it. And that made me feel bad and guilty, too. But not nearly as bad and guilty as the card, when I read it. Out loud.

That was a big mistake, to read it out loud. A big mistake, or just bad luck. But in either case it turned out badly for all concerned. Especially for Paul, but basically for everybody. As I recall, I had a few friends over for my birthday dinner, and I guess I was feeling in high spirits, and reading Paul's letter out loud was something I thought I could do that would be - what? I don't know. Entertaining? That reading his letter out loud would get me some laughs, because of the way he

talked, which wasn't exactly perfect English, to say the least.

You see, Paul had certain trademark sayings, so to speak, that Mom used to repeat because we both thought they were funny. Not that she was really making fun of Paul or anything - she wasn't; she loved him too. But just the way you will repeat certain things people say because you like the way they sound, and repeating them the way they say them makes you think of them in a good way. That's the way it was with Paul's sayings. Like he would say his own version of "It's funny how the bee makes honey". But he wouldn't say it that way; he would say, "It's funny, funny, funny, how the bee he makin' that honey." Another thing he would do is he would put the word "once" where you wouldn't expect it. For example, when he was trying to fix something, which he was very good at doing, he would say, "Let's see once what's wrong here, Gozhua." (He called me "Gozhua" because for some reason he couldn't pronounce "Joshua". But I didn't even notice it because I was so used to it, and if he had ever said "Joshua" that would have been weird.) Or he would even say, instead of that, but meaning the same thing, "Let's see once here what we talkin' now, Gozhua." And then he would go ahead and fix whatever it was he was fixing. So sometimes Mom would say

these things too, in affectionate imitation of him - but of course never in front of him.

So anyway, the point is, maybe I read his letter out loud because I thought it might have some funny trademark phrases that would get some laughs. I don't remember exactly who was over that night besides my parents, and a few of my friends, and our housekeeper Aline Jackson (Paul's replacement, sort of; though it sounds sort of bad and disrespectful to both of them to put it that way); but one of my friends who was there might have been Tracy Hudson, who was literally the girl next door - or had been, until she moved away. Tracy knew Paul too and had basically grown up with him, at least for those years when he was living with us. So maybe I was trying to impress Tracy, and make her laugh. Which of course was mean of me, because it would have been at Paul's expense. But really, who knows what was in my mind? Not much, apparently. I wasn't thinking, I was just showing off, which made it even worse.

I don't remember the letter word for word, but I remember the basics, so I'll just give you those. Lucky this isn't a real neo-biography, because that letter is long gone. Mom probably took it and put it somewhere for safekeeping -- knowing her, that's exactly what she would

have done, out of respect for Paul. But I never knew where she put it, and of course, now that she is dead too, and so is my dad, and the old house is sold and transformed, I'll never know. And that letter's disappearance is yet another proof that I would never make a good neo-biographer, because in a real neo-biography, you would have to have that letter as a document, and quote from it. What follows, then, is just a reconstruction, from memory, of the most important parts. The gist of it.

"Dear Gozhua", he wrote. (He would have written my name right - Joshua -- just not have pronounced it right. And which way did I pronounce it when I read it? Probably "Gozhua", to get the laughs. That's where my mind was at.) "I hope this letter finds you well, and that you are having a very happy birthday. I hope that your dear parents are well, too. I hope that you like this present that I am sending you now. It was chosen special for a big shot like you are getting to be. I hope that when you wear it you will think of your old Paul. I miss all of you.

"As for myself, well I am not doing so good right now. I have a tumor between my liver and my stomach and the doctors they cannot operate it because it is in a bad place for an operation..."

I stopped reading it out loud at that point, because I was so shocked, and because I realized that I never should have been reading it out loud in the first place. And then I think I did a horrible thing. Actually, "think" is not right - I know I did a horrible thing. I laughed. Not because I thought it was funny at all, but because I thought it was so horrible, and I didn't know what else to do. I couldn't believe it, I was shocked, and I guess my answer to that was just to laugh. So I laughed. Not a lot, just a short burst of laughter, a sort of confused and disbelieving laugh. My mother immediately burst into tears, and grabbed the letter from me, and ran into the other room to read it alone.

Happy Birthday, Gozhua. You really nailed it.
Congratulations, pal.

And that was basically that. Paul died not too long after that. I guess Maria would have written Mom a letter telling her Paul had died. And that letter would have gone into permanent safekeeping, right there with Paul's birthday letter about the tumor, in the old oblong metal strongbox at the top of Mom's bedroom closet, where she kept all of her most valuable papers. The old metal strongbox that would have gotten packed up and put somewhere when the house got sold. I still have some of

that stuff in boxes in the garage of the house where I now live in Seattle, and I'd like to think the strongbox, with Paul's and Maria's letters, put there by Mom, is still in there somewhere among those old things. I sure hope it didn't get thrown out. I should go look for it, but I probably won't. The Lazy Gozhua Syndrome, you could call it. Though it's not so much because I'm lazy - though I am; some neo-biographer I am - but more because I am scared that if I went looking for it, I might not find it. And that would be even worse than not looking for it in the first place. Maybe I'll just leave it up to Zack to unexpectedly find when I'm gone. He knows about Paul - at least some of it - so if he found those letters, they would mean something to him. But to his children, my grandchildren (if they ever end up even existing), probably not much at all. And to their children - my great-grandchildren - well, you can forget about it.

VIII

Attention Must Be Paid

The foregoing account is not an example of neo-biography; it's just my own very partial (in both senses) memoir of Paul - a selective presentation of some of my memories of

him. The reason I include it here is just to give you an example of the kind of person who might be the subject of a neo-biography. Paul Kirschner was not a distinguished person, in any way. I suppose his only claim to fame - and that is stretching the term considerably -- was his having worked for Jack Holt for some years (and I don't even know how many). Was Paul therefore, in some sense, a part of Hollywood history? That would be stretching it even further. I suppose he might conceivably have been a source, one minor source, in someone's biography of Jack Holt; but there don't appear to be any published biographies of Jack Holt - just a Wikipedia entry. (Which reveals, quite awesomely actually, that the actor was the "visual inspiration" for two cartoon characters: Chester Gould's Dick Tracy and Al Capp's Fearless Fosdick.) But Paul's obscurity - or even his nonentity, historically speaking - is precisely the point: he is just the sort of person - like nearly all of us - who would never get a biography written about them. He is "biographically invalid" -- and therefore neo-biographically valid. To put it rather melodramatically, it's the orphans of history who are the subjects of neo-biography. And that means, statistically speaking, just about everyone. That's what makes neo-biography "democratic".

I hope it's not too sentimental or egocentric of me to assert that Paul lives - like my parents, and my first wife, and now a growing number of friends - because I remember him, and the things he handily fixed and built, and the things he said, and the TV shows he loved, and the Brylcreem hair tonic he used, and the Old Spice aftershave he wore, and the Sen-Sen breath mints he sucked, and the plas- prosthetic leg he removed every night, in the dark of our room. The quiddities of Paul will not be forgotten by me, as long as I live. (And if my great-grandchildren, or his, should someday uncover this essay in a strongbox in a closet somewhere - all the better for both of us!)

And what about Paul's work in the world, such as it was - not his quiddities, but his work? Well, to recall my unknown friend at Holy Cross - I am familiar with that, too; some of it, anyway; those works that touched my life, in whatever ways they did. I am familiar with Paul's work, and want you to be, too. So I am passing it along, for whatever it's worth.

Recently I re-watched a movie I think is pertinent here: "Mr. Holland's Opus". It's about a high-school music teacher (played by Richard Dreyfus), who spends about 30 years - the period covered by the events in the movie -- composing his magnum opus, working on it on and off, in the

interstices of his life at school and home. His son is born and raised deaf; Mr. Holland struggles to make ends meet on a teacher's salary; he gets a serious crush on one of his students; his marriage is strained, but survives, because he and his wife love and understand one other. It all sounds rather corny and clichéd in my potted synopsis - but it isn't. It is moving, and it resonates. The historical background - 60s, 70s, 80s, and on into the 90s, when the film came out - is handled very well. At the end, Mr. Holland's opus gets performed by the school orchestra, all of whom were his students at one time or another. But this symphonic composition isn't really the opus the title refers to. Mr. Holland's true "opus", his "work", is his life, and all the people in it that he touched. The film is a kind of fictional neo-biography, you might even say. Someone who could have not mattered - who maybe saw themselves as not mattering -- ends up mattering after all, in ways they never (or only) dreamed of. Someone biographically invalid is reclaimed from oblivion.

There is a crucial difference, though, between the two lives. Mr. Holland is a fictional creation; Paul Kirschner was an actual person. A made-up character exists through the imaginative will of the author - in this case, the collaborative efforts of the screenwriter, director and

actor. The subject of a biography exists, or existed, independently of his biographer. True, it's up to the biographer - as it is to the cinematic collaborators - to make their characters "come alive" for the audience. But biographer and filmmakers are working under very different sets of constraints. The constraints of the filmmakers are fictive - matters of structure, verisimilitude, dramatic interpretation; those of the biographer are mostly historical -- matters of documented events. The narrative choices of the biographer - and there are many - are circumscribed by the established facts of history, both large and small. In fiction, one is free to invent one's material (though the invention carries with it certain artistic constraints, as noted); in biography, there can be no such invention (though of course there is also narrative artistry involved). The narrative structure of a biography, while up to the choice of the biographer, does not permit the creation of any new material.

Why not then present the material of neo-biography in fictional form? Why not present Paul's story in a novel? This is tempting, and would be easier in many ways; and there is no denying that I am a great fan of the biographical novels of Thomas Mann (Doctor Faustus) and Hermann Hesse (The Glass Bead Game) - both of which also

happen to be German. (Which fits nicely with what seems to be my German obsession. I wonder if that, too, goes back to Paul?)

But the truth-value of fiction is not what I'm after here. The idea of neo-biography I have in mind is not an offshoot of fiction, but of history - personal history. But if I'm not willing to write a neo-biography myself, how can I advocate this idea for others? Where do I get off touting a club that would never have me as a member? For which I would never qualify? And doesn't that make me some sort of hypocrite?

Call me, instead, an idealist -- a "democratic idealist". I'm imagining a form of biography - a more inclusive, less professionalized kind of third-person life-writing - that doesn't quite exist yet. I'm certainly no expert on biographical matters - but that's sort of the point of democratic biography, isn't it? Opening up the field to non-experts. Giving the people a voice, both as subjects and writers. They say that everybody has a book in them somewhere. Well, why couldn't that book be a biography of someone they love? Because I think that's really what I'm talking about here. That's finally what's at the root of neo-biography: love. The wish to reclaim someone we love from oblivion - or eventual oblivion. I

recognize that there are lots of ways to express our love - but why not make biography one of them? And a novel, or a poem, or a painting, or a piece of music, won't quite do it - at least not in the biographical sense I have in mind. It's the facts of a person's life - the work they did, the people they knew and loved, the things they actually said and did; the Brylcreem and Old Spice and Sen-Sens of their days, if you will -- that need to be honored -- that need to be recorded, acknowledged, respected, and honored. Events, dates, places and people - all of them real, factual, documented - are all part of the record, the mark of who they were in the world. Fiction is great, but it doesn't do the same thing. It's not the same kind of work, and it doesn't pay the same kind of attention. And, as Willy Loman's devoted (and cuckolded) wife Linda said, "Attention must be paid." The facts must be laid out, however the biographer thinks best, for the reader to consider, contemplate, reflect on, and appraise.

OK -- but what reader? Who's going to read these true stories about people they never even heard about? Who's going to give a shit about the story of Paul Kirschner's life? Why should they care?

I can't answer those questions, and I'm not sure that anyone can. It's more an act of faith than anything else.

If you build it, they will come. If you write it, they will read. You've got to believe that, or you'll never risk anything. Forget about the publishers, editors, agents, and even the potential audience. You're not doing this for a living; you're not a professional; you're an amateur. You're like an essayist, actually: you're making an effort; you're trying out something new. You're Montaigne. You're Wordsworth, at the end of his autobiographical poem The Prelude, speaking to his friend and fellow-poet Coleridge, who encouraged him to write his poem in the first place. Wordsworth wrote: "What we have loved, others will love,/And we will teach them how." Everybody's story is different, yes; and we're basically all the same. We are truth-seeking creatures, made to love, and running on hope. We want to know, as Heidegger put it, "how it is with each other". Because knowing that helps us to know ourselves, as Socrates exhorted us to do.