

T H E R O S E B U D E F F E C T

T H E M Y S T E R Y I N B I O G R A P H Y



B R E N D A W I N E A P P L E

Rudyard Kipling called it the “higher cannibalism”; George Eliot said it was a “disease of English literature.” Edmund White dubbed it “the judgment of little people avenging themselves on the great.” Nabokov labeled it “psycho-plagiarism” (I’m not sure what that means, but it sounds bad), and of course Oscar Wilde said that nowadays “every great man has his disciples, and usually it’s Judas who writes the biography.”

Biography: it was considered by Lytton Strachey to be the most humane of all the arts, and yet it’s frequently derided, ignored, and, I’d add, much misunderstood. That’s surprising, really, for biography is an ancient pursuit – consider Suetonius or Plutarch on Julius Caesar, or Tacitus’s biography of his father-in-law. And we’ve been reading biographies for as long as we’ve been commemorating death: consider funeral rites, elegies, elaborate headstones. It’s no surprise, then, that biography often begins in death: the writer Nathanael West lies crumpled over the steering wheel on a California freeway, the horn of his car loudly blowing; Harry Crosby shoots his lover at a studio in the Hôtel des Artistes, then paces for a half an hour, takes off his shoes, lies down, and points a revolver at his right temple. In the first chapter of a Stephen

Crane biography, a young poet named Wallace Stevens, working as a reporter, covers Crane's funeral, which he finds absurd; Crane, he thinks, deserved better. And the first chapter of Richard Holmes's *Dr. Johnson and Mr. Savage*, titled "Death," includes an obituary of Richard Savage that he, Holmes, actually wrote.

By opening a biography with the subject's death, the author might be defending what's to come: I, the biographer, am no Judas, for I'm going to give Stephen Crane the eulogy he truly deserved. And the biographer is creating a certain degree of suspense. How *did* W. E. B. Du Bois become so famous that when his death was announced at the 1963 March on Washington, a quarter of a million people immediately bowed their heads in silence? Or, does my biography of Richard Savage resemble a fictitious obituary – and aren't all biographies, Holmes seems to be asking, in some sense invented?

Often the very fact of the subject's death actually inspires the writing of biography. Claire Tomalin visited the grave of Charles Dickens's forgotten mistress, Ellen "Nelly" Ternan, and saw that the cross at Nelly's grave "had broken off and vanished," she notes at the end of *The Invisible Woman*. "Quite soon, by the look of it, the grave was likely to disappear altogether. It seemed a good moment," she concludes, "to start putting something on paper which might restore Nelly to visibility." And in the prologue of my first book, *Genêt*, a biography of Janet Flanner, the Paris correspondent for *The New Yorker* from 1925 to 1975, I told of my having driven to the Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis early one February morning. Patches of snow covered much of the well-manicured grounds. Notebook in hand, I stood over the grave of Janet Flanner's father, and I panicked: I should have brought flowers, I thought. What was I doing here?, I asked myself. Why had I come?

Although I'd never before considered writing a biography, it seemed to me then, and still does now, that the only way I could do justice to the Flanner papers I'd been reading at the Library of Congress and, more to the point, to the people who wrote them was to write a book that respected their complicated lives and their medleyed voices. I began dissecting every biography I could get my hands on, asking of their authors not *why* they'd chosen their particular subjects, but *how* they wrote their subjects' stories. (I'm

reminded of what Anne Sexton said of suicides: “Like carpenters they want to know which tools. / They never ask why build.”) How *did* biographers find their information? And once they had acquired drawer after file drawer of old letters, old postcards, and old passports, what did they do with them? How did they resurrect their subjects and with them a past long gone?

I studied endnotes and footnotes, for they revealed the whereabouts of archival and other documented sources. And yet I also knew I needed to read more than personal papers, whether of Janet Flanner or, later, of Gertrude Stein or Nathaniel Hawthorne or Emily Dickinson; I needed to locate those of their relatives, friends, enemies, and acquaintances. I needed to find people, places, even things. I needed to hang a looking glass, as Virginia Woolf put it, in odd corners.

As I’ve written before, that’s what motivated my trip to the Princeton University library while I was researching a dual biography of Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo. Gertrude Stein had incorporated into her nine-hundred-page magnum opus, *The Making of Americans*, a short tale called “Fernhurst: The History of Philip Redfern, a Student of the Nature of Women”; it was based on the tumultuous career of Alfred Hodder, the so-called Byron of Bryn Mawr. While teaching there, Hodder had fallen in love with another celebrated teacher, Mamie Gwinn, who happened also to be the lover of the college president, Martha Carey Thomas. Both Hodder’s and Mamie Gwinn’s papers (they eventually married) were at Princeton. I contacted the curator of the library’s manuscripts who told me not to bother. I’d be wasting my time. There were no Stein papers in the collection.

What’s a train ride to Princeton? After all, Hodder, like Stein, had been a student of William James, although by the time he landed the job at Bryn Mawr he had been a lawyer, a widower, a doctoral student in philosophy, *and* the common-law husband of a woman he presumably impregnated. Nothing if not interesting.

For several days one July I boarded a commuter train back and forth from New York, and once in the library’s manuscripts room, I sat at a long wooden table under a green-shaded reading lamp. I took off my bracelet — a private ritual — and waited for the boxes of papers to arrive. The dashing young Hodder had left Bryn Mawr under a cloud after his common-law wife showed up on campus,

and he had settled in Greenwich Village, where, while secretary to the district attorney, at least once a day, in a miniscule hand, he composed love letters to Gwinn. The clandestine pair also wrote to each other about women's rights – Gwinn was a staunch feminist – the Dreyfus affair, municipal politics, and the insolence, as they called it, of things as they are (Stein would later use the phrase as the title of a novel she did not publish). In his spare time, Hodder also wrote a novel about the changing relations between the sexes.

Stein had liked Hodder's book, I knew, but I couldn't explain why she used *Hodder*; specifically, to represent in code a story about one of her own early love affairs, another triangle that involved one of Gwinn's disciples. The dusty boxes came. I rummaged through them, day after day, in that high-domed reading room, wondering if I was wasting my time. One afternoon, I read in Hodder's diary that his attorney – and the only one to whom he entrusted his secrets – was one of Leo's best friends. I read on. And then who should show up at the Café Liberty in Manhattan at a "jolly" dinner (Hodder's word) but Gertrude?

She was in New York having recently, and inexplicably, flunked obstetrics at Johns Hopkins, where she'd been a brilliant fourth-year medical student intending to specialize in the nervous disorders of women. Hodder thought her quite impressive, so much so that he wrote Mamie Gwinn that Stein had liked his novel. I had found the letter. Hodder also said that Stein was skeptical about the so-called "New Woman." While at Radcliffe, Stein told him, who told Gwinn, Stein and her friends had believed in the equality of the sexes as if it were a religion, but medical school had taught her a woman could not succeed without the help, the paternalism in fact, of men. Depressing but true, Stein said. Women were more intelligent; men, more capable. (Mamie Gwinn was furious.)

There were more dinners, more conversations, and in February Stein handed Hodder a typewritten essay, which he sent to Gwinn. An essay? I knew of no such essay. No one did. I wondered if Mamie Gwinn might have saved it. Of course not; who was Stein to her? A throwback, a nonentity. I looked anyway. No essay. I was tired. One more box, I thought. I filled out another call slip. When the box marked "Miscellaneous" arrived, I pulled from an un-

marked folder eight typed sheets, unsigned and seemingly innocuous. On the first page was a title, “Degeneration in American Women.” On other pages, there were corrections in a familiar script. I had seen Stein’s cursive on hundreds of manuscripts and letters. I began to perspire. Nonchalantly, I asked the woman at the front desk if I could have the pages photocopied. As soon as they were ready, I ran out of the library, forgetting my beautiful bracelet on the table. But blessed be those boxes marked “Miscellaneous”: I had discovered a very early, completely unknown Stein manuscript – and a shocking one. The reputedly feminist Stein insisted that women should not join the workforce. Rather, their duty lay in keeping the birthrate high. They should stay home and procreate, a *lot*.

In other words, to research a biography, an author needs to go anywhere and everywhere. For biography, to me, is built on at least one powerful paradox: while I believe that much in life is unknowable and mysterious, while doing research I also have to believe that everything *can* be known. So for the same reason that I went to Princeton – to hang that looking glass in an odd corner – I traveled to Settignano, Italy, and I Tatti, the former home of Bernard Berenson. Again I had been told there were no Stein papers in the Berenson archive. Again I was unconvinced. Berenson and the Steins had for a time been close, and anyway, Leo and his wife, Nina, had eventually settled in Settignano, where they were both buried, and I wanted to visit the graves.

My husband accompanied me, and each day, while I sat shielded from the Tuscan sun among the Berenson diaries, he walked up the Settignano hill to bring back bread and cheese and olives for our picnic lunch and to practice his Italian, although he is fluent and his accent perfect. I had an idea. I wondered if he wouldn’t mind, while in town, looking around for very old people and asking them if they happened to know Leo Stein or Nina, who had died in the late 1940s. He agreed, although when he returned the first day, he said he felt like a stalker. But on the second day he did find someone who knew someone, and soon we were sitting in Cesare Merlino’s living room on the comfortable chairs that his good friend Leo had once owned. We talked about how Leo had died just hours before the rave reviews of his memoir had appeared, a book that had taken him a lifetime to write. And then

Signor Merlino supplied me with an unforgettable image: Nina burying Leo, his memoir gently folded into his hands. My husband and I drove to the pretty Settignano cemetery. On Stein's headstone, cut deep into the marble, was Leo's signature. Below it was the word claimed by his sister, which he had never had: *Scrittore*. Writer. That's where I ended my book.

All biographers dream of the lost arc, the smoking gun, the missing manuscript that will render their subject transparent as glass. Yet no smoking gun, no missing manuscript can solve the riddles of character. And no discovery is final, for biographical excavation is not the same as the unearthing of a city, the shape of which is still intact. So while the biographer diligently pursues the elusive, she or he has to be humble in the face of it.

Consider for a moment Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, which nicely serves as a metaphor for biography and the biographical process. *Citizen Kane* too begins in death, the death of Charles Foster Kane, newspaper magnate. We see, in the opening shot, a "No Trespassing" sign before the camera actually *does* trespass into the colossal house where, in one of the bedrooms, an old man drops a snow globe onto the floor and mutters, "Rosebud." Soon after, we realize we've been watching an obituary on newsreel with a group of shadowy reporters in a dark projection room. We hear the producer's voice. "All we saw on the screen is that Charles Foster Kane is dead," he complains. "I know that. I read the papers. It isn't enough to tell us what a man did. You've got to tell us who he was."

And so the quest begins: the death, the invented obituary, the pursuit not of what Kane *did* but of *who* he was, as if we can separate with ease the precise relation between the two. But the newsreel producer thinks he knows just how to chase Kane down, to find the key to his character, the charm that will unlock his secrets. Naturally, it lies in "Rosebud," Kane's last word. So he sends one of his reporters to bring back, as he says, "Rosebud, dead or alive."

That benighted reporter is the biographer manqué, about whom we know little and care less – we never even see his face during the entire movie – and like the biographer he undertakes his assignment by interviewing four people intimate with Kane, none of whom, by the way, ever heard of "Rosebud." Each of these

four narrators in turn recollects his or her version of Kane until the movie's end, after which we return to the faceless reporter. Asked if he discovered who Kane really was, he says he didn't. And as far as Rosebud goes, he adds, "I don't think any word can explain a man's life."

But we the audience *do* learn the source of "Rosebud" in one of the final shots of the film. As Kane's many possessions are being tossed into a fire, the camera pans to a burning sled on which the word "Rosebud" was once painted. Mystery solved: the rich and famous man, who dies alone, is a sad overgrown boy deprived of love at an early age, when wealth robbed him of his childhood.

"Rosebud" is of course a gimmick; even Welles called it "dollar-book Freud." But no matter. Its use in *Citizen Kane* neatly suggests major biographical fallacies: that, as I said, the mystery of character can ever be finally solved, that a single event or act defines it, and that if we could but find that event or act, we would crack open the person's character and identify the stuff of which it's made. But character is multiple, shifting, various, and confounding. "May not a man have several voices?" Hawthorne asks in one of his stories, "as well as two complexions?" The older I get, the more I realize that I am and have been many people, all related (though I'm often not sure how), all knocking around inside me. So Emily Dickinson is more than an eccentric recluse and Nathaniel Hawthorne more than the creepy guy who wrote about witches. Kane, too: he's a bully, an idealist, a traitor, a friendless man who dies alone – and William Randolph Hearst, the man on whom the movie is loosely based and the subject, by the way, of a superb biography by David Nasaw.

Despite that sled, then, the movie *Citizen Kane* doesn't resolve the question of character so much as raise it. Sure, we've seen the word "Rosebud" on the sled, but we've also watched the unspooling of Kane's life from the vantage point of several narrators whose individual tales mean nothing without Welles's direction, Gregg Toland's cinematography, Bernard Herrmann's score, and of course Herman Mankiewicz and Orson Welles's screenplay. The technical composite which is the movie is so much larger than "Rosebud" that this very word seems to comment ironically on the scope of character, which a single word can never encapsulate.

And that's not just because people can be inconsistent, ambig-

uous, and weird, but because people change, which brings us to another biographical paradox: superficially, biography seems to entomb character as singular, solitary, consistent. But one of the reasons Abraham Lincoln continues to fascinate us is precisely because he could revise, revisit, and reevaluate his views. In the 1850s he supported the resettlement of black people outside of the United States and was willing to stop the spread of slavery but not destroy the institution. (Wendell Phillips called him the slavehound of Illinois.) A decade later, Lincoln wrote and signed the Emancipation Proclamation – and then, because the proclamation did not free all the slaves, or guarantee their freedom, he signed the Thirteenth Amendment, although constitutional amendments do not require presidential signatures. Lincoln’s signature, however, demonstrated in ink his now unswerving commitment to making sure four million former slaves would be forever free.

The biographer, then, must be prepared to admit, as Virginia Woolf also noted, “contradictory versions of the same face.” After World War II, Janet Flanner pivoted away from her cheeky view of French culture. Earlier, as Genêt, *The New Yorker’s* Paris correspondent, she’d been writing clever dispatches on art, boxing, fashion, mushrooms, and gossip: to her, Edith Wharton resembled tufted furniture, and Sergei Diaghilev’s sets, Macy’s windows. In 1936 she had published a profile of Adolf Hitler that so infuriated the critic Malcolm Cowley he called her a fascist; in 1939, she returned to New York – A. J. Liebling said she went on the lam just as the most important story in Europe was breaking.

Flanner didn’t return to Paris until 1944, when she hoped to pick up, in a sense, where she had left off. But you can’t repeat the past. “Nothing is the same in France and in life,” she told her sister and then wrote a friend, “Men & what [they] have done are too terrible.” Still, that December, *The New Yorker* revived the signature “Genêt” for Flanner’s first dispatch.

Yet Genêt was no longer writing with the trademark spangle of the 1920s letters. In 1945, by contrast, she described the first contingent of women prisoners from Ravensbruck who arrived in Paris: “Their faces were gray-green,” she noted, “with reddish brown circles around their eyes, which seemed to see, but not take in. They dressed like scarecrows in what had been given them at the camp, clothes taken from the dead of all nationalities.” They’d

been greeted by a crowd bearing lilacs and other spring flowers. “As the lilacs fell from inert hands,” she continued, “the flowers made a purple carpet on the platform and the perfume of the trampled flowers mixed with the stench of illness and dirt.”

Flanner then determined to publish a four-part *New Yorker* profile of the French statesman Léon Blum and, through him, a short history of socialism. Blum seemed to her the last hero in a political landscape littered with the small, the cruel, the selfish, and the petty. Prime minister during the Third Republic, the first socialist and Jew to be so, and pro-tem chief during the first days of the Fourth, Blum had been inspired to politics during the Dreyfus affair when he clerked for Émile Zola’s attorney. In the 1930s, after the socialist-dominated Popular Front won an electoral majority, Blum became premier. But by the late thirties, with the political climate considerably changed, French fascists began to clamor, “Better Hitler than the Jew Blum.” He was arrested in the early forties, the right charging that Blum had caused France’s military defeat, but Blum’s eloquent self-defense made his accusers look so bad they quickly ended the trial. That, of course, didn’t prevent him from being shipped off to Buchenwald, where somehow he managed to survive the war.

The projected Blum profile was work, Flanner said, “on which I placed [the] highest hopes of my quarter century.” For it symbolized her conversion from insouciance to compassion, both in style and in substance. But her transformation raises a series of questions for the biographer: What prompted it? And can we determine which Flanner, if either, is the more authentic: the vaguely anti-Semitic isolationist who thought the Munich Accord a good idea, or the woman who fought hard to have the piece on Blum published? (She lost, by the way; Blum had the misfortune to die, and Flanner’s editors didn’t want to run the profile of a dead man, never mind a foreigner and a socialist.)

Even though much of her reputation had been based on her earlier work, Flanner now dismissed it as meretricious trash. Hawthorne never told his wife about his first novel, something called *Fanshawe*, whose publication he had paid for and which he later suppressed. Yet for the biographer, Flanner’s disparagement of her early work and Hawthorne’s denial of *Fanshawe* make Flanner and Hawthorne more tantalizing, mysterious, conflicted —

and far more interesting, as well as demanding. Hawthorne created *The Scarlet Letter*'s independent-minded heroine, Hester Prynne, but disparaged most female writers, whom he called a "damned mob of scribbling women."

Or take a more contemporary example. In 2012, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art installed the fine show *The Steins Collect*, it detonated an angry outburst of protest. Why was there no mention of the fact that Gertrude Stein had translated the speeches of Marshal Pétain – that she was, in a sense, a collaborator? Stein had supported Pétain, we were told in the papers. If you followed the news, you were subsequently informed that in the 1930s she had nominated Hitler for the Nobel Peace Prize. Then we heard that she wasn't just a collaborator, she was a Nazi. If the Met doesn't acknowledge Stein's Nazi past, so the protests went, then the Met is whitewashing history. "Visitors have the right to know that this collection exists because Gertrude Stein sold her soul," said one particularly scandalized person, "that she lived in comfort, aiding the Nazi cause while her fellow Jews were being robbed, tortured and murdered."

I am not here to refute such allegations, to condone Stein or condemn her, though I do know she did *not* nominate Hitler for the peace prize. In fact, when that accusation first surfaced in the late 1990s, I assumed that it grew from a misinterpretation of a *New York Times* interview with Stein in 1934. In it, she quipped – even the interviewer had called her "impish" – that Hitler should have the peace prize because he was driving out "all elements of contest and struggle from Germany . . . the Jews and the democratic and Left elements . . . [and] everything that conduces to activity." Clearly, she's being satiric. Stein embraced conflict, competition, democracy, not dullness, humorlessness, or Hitler. (Today, in fact, the Nobel Prize committee website maintains a nomination database which also refutes the claim.)

But *Pétain*? I do know a little something about that too. Gertrude and Leo Stein had lived together for four decades, until 1914; after their falling out they never spoke to each another again. But though I ended my biography of them when their relationship ended, in my book's epilogue, I summarized their remaining years. Stein and Alice B. Toklas were residing in eastern France during the war, where they were apparently protected by friends

of the Vichy regime, and in 1941, it's true, she did begin to translate Pétain's speeches, adding a laudatory preface in which she compared him to George Washington: "First in war first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen." But after 1943 her enthusiasm waned. As I wrote, "Whether the change had to do with the roundup and deportation of some 13,000 French Jews in the summer of 1942 is hard to say, but it seems to have coincided with being advised to flee France lest she and Toklas face the same fate." I did not add, but it's also true, that Stein recounted in *Wars I Have Seen*, which she began in 1943, that she and Toklas had been urged to go to Switzerland "tomorrow if possible otherwise [we] will be put into a concentration camp."

Back in 1941, Stein had sent Bennett Cerf of Random House a draft of the Pétain introduction, which, because of the war, he didn't receive for five years, until 1946. He was mortified. "Pétain stands for the very soul of collaboration," he answered Stein; I found his letter in the Random House files at Columbia. Yet I also saw in that file something cited rarely, and generally in a footnote. On receiving Cerf's letter, Stein immediately cabled, "Keep your shirt on Bennett dear letter about Petain written in 1941 Love Gertrude."

The cable I uncovered years ago still troubles me. Why did she *cable* Cerf and not send him a letter? What was her hurry? "Keep your shirt on Bennett." Does this mean, Don't jump to conclusions: I'm not the naïf you take me for? I didn't know then, in 1941, what I know now, in 1946? That is, had Stein changed her mind about Pétain? If so, why – and how did she feel about having once supported an architect of Vichy? Or was she simply covering her own bases? And anyway, what had it been like to be an elderly American Jewish lesbian in France in 1940 or 1941?

Biography implies imagination and inquiry, not apology – or prosecution. And biography depends on history, is rooted in history; we cannot meaningfully wrench people from their historical context. Biography therefore requires the comprehension which, as Hannah Arendt observed, means "examining and bearing consciously the burden that events have placed upon us – neither denying their existence nor submitting meekly to their weight as though everything that in fact happened could not have happened

otherwise.” We live in the historical present, whose ends we often can’t see, but we prosecute from hindsight.

Biography is also narrative; the biographer tells a story and strives to tell it well. The biographer is, after all, a writer who must find the story within the material she or he amasses. And whether biographers draw on nineteenth-century realist fiction, which they mostly do, or experiment with aesthetic form, as is the case of A. J. A. Symons’s innovative *The Quest for Corvo*, or Jean Stein and George Plimpton’s *Edie*, biographers create a book, shape it, decide how many chapters it might contain (Robert Richardson’s *Emerson* has a hundred), how many volumes, how it will end, and, as I mentioned earlier, where it will begin. As I also said earlier, biographical excavation is not the same as the unearthing of a city, the shape of which is still intact. For, as the biographer Catherine Drinker Bowen remarked, “Life has no shape, artistically speaking, any more than grief has a shape, or jealousy, or love, or any of those large angry things. It is for the writer to find a shape, find boundaries, a circumference within which he may freely move.”

Biography thus requires compositional dexterity, discrimination, and design. (It’s as hard to write a good book, said Strachey, as to live one.) It requires the necessary imposition of tone and style (for instance, Robert Caro’s incantatory sentences) on the perceptions, decisions, second thoughts, and transformations that make up our lives. To quote Arendt again: “The story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings.”

Of course, most biographical narratives hinge on a biological paradigm: birth, growth, maturity, death. (I have been referring to biographies of people who are not alive, which is the kind of book I read and write.) As I’ve already suggested, our subject doesn’t know the outcome of his or her life, and we do. We thus tend to read, and write, backwards, looking for “Rosebud,” and pointing life in the direction of an end we know has already happened. To take an absurd example: had Lincoln not been shot in Ford’s Theatre by John Wilkes Booth but had instead died peacefully in his sleep, wouldn’t we write his biography differently? Even if everything else had happened the same, the splitting of the rails, the stovepipe hats, the debates with Stephen Douglas, the fortify-

ing of Sumter? Certainly one reads any life of Lincoln with a conscious sense of tragedy.

The biographer is then one who tries not to know what she or he knows. For the biographer is after all a storyteller in much the same way as the camera was in *Citizen Kane*. The camera leads us to the rosebud on that sled, which the reporter never sees. And it was the camera, not any one person, that slithered right up to Kane's deathbed so we could overhear Kane's last words. And yet it's the reporter who says a man's life cannot be so easily summarized by a word, no matter what the camera does. So the movie leaves us with two necessary biographers, interdependent and entwined: the reporter, or the humble researcher, learning what Kane did, where he went, sitting on the chairs on which he sat or finding old newspapers and oddball manuscripts; and the camera, or the portraitist, adding shape and interpretation by panning up and down, closing in on a face or straying from it. The one declares we can't know the meaning of what the other, by its choices, its narrative decisions, its humanity, its moral vision, reveals to us.

That brings me to Emily Dickinson and my book *White Heat*. I had always wanted to write about Dickinson but maintained that it was not possible to write her biography; we just don't know enough. (And as she herself said, "Biography first convinces us of the fleeing of the Biographied.") We can't accurately date most of her poems, for Dickinson obsessively – and privately – revised them, and she seldom published. Nor can we determine how she developed as a poet. It's clear what differentiates early from late Yeats, say, and Whitman kept rewriting and republishing *Leaves of Grass* to document his own evolution. Not Dickinson. Her poems in some sense exist outside of time. (Think of lines like "Pain has an element of blank," "Much madness is divinest sense," or "We like March, his shoes are purple.") Shorn of context, place, and reference, these poems tell no tales about who did what to whom. Instead, they seem to whisper their wisdom from deep within ourselves, unsettling us because she wrote of experiences that we, who live in time, can barely name.

To me, such "timelessness" would make her biography difficult, if not impossible. Dickinson does in fact flee from us. And so I approached her mysterious elusiveness as a formal problem to be solved structurally through her relationship to the writer and

editor Thomas Higginson. Long censured for his edition of her poems, Higginson provided me with the horizontal, or linear, axis of my book. Born in 1823 (seven years before Dickinson), Higginson was for a while an abolitionist preacher, but when the pulpit grew too sedate, he ran guns to Kansas, backed John Brown, and then, during the war, commanded the first federal regiment of black soldiers, dangerously based in South Carolina. By then he and Dickinson were corresponding, she having coyly asked him in 1862 if he was too deeply occupied to tell her if her verse was alive. And before her death, she stipulated that he, of all people, speak at her funeral, which he did. He lived on, publishing her poems, protesting imperialism, riding the first subway in New York, and dying in 1911, the year Ronald Reagan was born. Higginson lived in time; he was historical.

As I said in my book's introduction, I did not write a biography of Emily Dickinson, for whom biography gets us nowhere, even though her poems seem to cry out for it; nor did I write a conventional biography of Higginson. Rather, I wanted Dickinson's poetry to speak as it first spoke to Higginson, who is in a sense a stand-in for the reader. "I feel as if we had climbed to a cloud, pulled it away, and revealed a new star behind it," he said after publishing the first edition of her poems.

And I wanted this book to be about the romance of friendship, or of relationships, which in a sense has been the subject of *all* my books. And that leads to yet another biographical paradox: our subjects may appear solitary or singular but do not, cannot, live or act alone. Hawthorne in a very real way depended on the inept and southern-sympathizing President Franklin Pierce, whose campaign biography he wrote. To thank him, Pierce made sure Hawthorne received the plum sinecure of consul in Liverpool so he'd have more time for writing his novels. Then in 1863, during the war, when Hawthorne was back in America, he dedicated his last book to Pierce, who was by then denouncing Lincoln as a demagogue and the war as "fearful, fruitless, fatal." Emerson was so disgusted that he sliced out Hawthorne's dedication in his copy of the book.

And when we mull over the mysteries behind biography, we inevitably consider ourselves in relation to our subjects. And so I return to Frank Flanner's grave at the Crown Hill Cemetery in

Indianapolis. I wished that I had brought flowers because, as I stood over it, I realized with a shiver that a man who once lived was buried there. A man, contradictory, bustling, confounding — a living presence in the world. And one certainly in pain: a mortician, he had died in the chapel of his own mortuary, having swallowed a cupful of prussic acid and strychnine. He had also been beloved. And *very* real. I should have brought flowers.

Because I am not a reporter. I am not a camera. I too live in time, I too love in time, I too lose in time, and I too am bewildered by time. “If we were never bewildered there would never be a story to tell about us,” Henry James said. Bewilderment and time and the mysteries of what it is to change, to fail, to act stupidly or cravenly, to hurt or to destroy: these are the measures of what it is to be human, without which I cannot imagine or feel, which is to say, I cannot write. Biography, in the end, needs, depends on, and deserves our empathy. I really *should* have brought flowers.