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Hermione Lee: Virginia Woolf's Nose

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Chapter 1

Shelley's Heart and Pepys's Lobsters

Biographies are full of verifiable facts, but they are also full of things that aren't there: absences, gaps, missing evidence, knowledge or information that has been passed from person to person, losing credibility or shifting shape on the way. Biographies, like lives, are made up of contested objects—relics, testimonies, versions, correspondences, the unverifiable. What does biography do with the facts that can't be fixed, the things that go missing, the body parts that have been turned into legends and myths?

A few years ago, a popular biographer who had allowed doubts and gaps into the narrative of a historical subject was criticised for sounding dubious. “For ‘I think,’ read ‘I don't know,’” said one of her critics crossly. But more recently, “biographical uncertainty” has become a respectable topic of discussion.¹ Writers on this subject tend to quote Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*:

You can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally, you would say that it is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could, with no great injury to logic, reverse the image and define a net as a jocular lexicographer once did: he called it a collection of holes tied together with string.

You can do the same with a biography. The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that. The biography stands, fat and worthy-burgherish on the shelf, boastful and sedate: a shilling life will give you all the facts, a ten pound one all the hypotheses as well. But think of everything that got away, that fled with the last deathbed exhalation of the biographer.²

We all know stories of what falls through the net of biography. Many of these are bonfire stories. The poet, biographer, and editor Ian Hamilton, who had been severely singed in his attempt to write a biography of J. D. Salinger, enjoyed himself in *Keepers of the Flame* (1992) with stories of widows and executors fighting off predatory biographers, of conflagrations of letters, of evidence being withheld. These stories all read like variants of Henry James's novella *The Aspern Papers* in which the predatory would-be biographer, the "publishing scoundrel," is thwarted in his greedy desire to get hold of the papers of the great American romantic poet Jeffrey Aspern by the two protective, solitary women who have inherited and who guard his legacy. These are stories like Byron's executor, publisher, and friends gathering round the fireplace of John Murray's office in Albemarle Street in 1824 and feeding the pages of Byron's memoir into the flames; or Hardy spending six months of 1919 destroying most of his life's papers while setting up a conspiracy with his second wife that she pretend to author the biography he was actually writing himself; or Cassandra Austen destroying those letters of her sister

which may have contained revealing personal material; or Elizabeth Gaskell reading, but feeling unable to use, Charlotte Brontë's passionate love-letters to M. Heger, in a biography which set out to protect her against accusations of impurity; or Ted Hughes destroying Sylvia Plath's last two journals, and then publishing his own edition of the rest.

Many literary biographers are affected by such bonfires. Writing on Willa Cather, I came up against her directive, in her will of 1943, that none of her letters should ever be quoted (with the result that they are paraphrased, usually to her disadvantage), alongside her command that no adaptations or dramatisations should be made of her work "whether by electronic means now in existence or which may hereafter be discovered."³ One of the significant gaps in the Woolf archive is the apparent lack of any correspondence between her and her brother Adrian, so that this relationship has never come into focus. The friendship between Edith Wharton and Henry James is a challenge to her biographers, because James made a bonfire of nearly all the letters he had from her, which as a result have to be decoded from *his* letters to *her*.

James's destruction of Wharton's letters about her private life, or Elizabeth Gaskell's censoring of Charlotte's love letters, are acts of protection, and are often talked about as illustrations—as in *The Aspern Papers*—of the battle for possession that is always fought over a famous literary life. But such disappearances also raise the question of what biographers do with the things that go missing, or with contested objects. Biographers try to make a coherent narrative out of missing documents as well as

existing ones; a whole figure out of body parts. Some body parts, literally, get into the telling of the stories, in the form of legends, rumours, or contested possessions. Body parts are conducive to myth-making; biographers, in turn, have to sort out the myths from the facts. There is a tremendous fascination with the bodily relics of famous people, and the stories of such relics have their roots in legends and miracles of saints which are the distant ancestors of biography. But they persist in a secular age, rather in the way that urban myths do, and are some of the “things” biographers have to decide how to deal with. These “body-part” stories play into the subject’s posthumous reputation, sometimes with suspicious appositeness. We might expect Joan of Arc’s heart (and, it is sometimes added, her entrails) to have survived the flames and to have been thrown into the Seine. It seems fitting, too, that Sir Thomas More’s head, boiled, and impaled on a pole over London Bridge, is supposed to have been secretly taken by night by his daughter Margaret Roper to Saint Dunstan’s Church in Canterbury, which, after the beatification of More in the nineteenth century, became a pilgrimage shrine. Charlotte Yonge, in *A Book of Golden Deeds*, retells—without much conviction—the old story that, in the boat, “Margaret looked up and said: ‘That head has often lain in my lap; I would that it would now fall into it.’ And at that moment it actually fell, and she received it.” It’s the kind of story probably best ignored by biographers.⁴

There are stranger stories of the fate of relics. Napoleon’s penis is said to have been chopped off by the Abbé who administered the last rites, and since then has been sold, inherited, displayed, and auctioned many

times, last heard of in the possession of an American urologist, but possibly buried all this time in the crypt at the Hôtel des Invalides. Hardy's body was interred in Poets' Corner, but, after an argument between his friends and his family, his heart was buried in the grave of his wife, Emma, at Stinsford Church, near Dorchester, carried in an urn to its resting place with great solemnity by a procession of gentlemen in suits and hats (the church has a photograph of the ceremony). On the tomb, it says: "Here Lies The Heart of Thomas Hardy." Rumour has it that Hardy's housekeeper, after the death and the extraction of the heart, placed it in a biscuit tin on the kitchen table, and that when the undertaker came the next day he found an empty biscuit tin and Hardy's cat, Cobby, looking fat and pleased. The story then divides: in one branch a pig's heart replaces Hardy's in the urn. In the other, Cobby is executed by the undertaker and replaces his master's heart. Either way, this rural myth is probably more useful for a *Life of Cobby* than a *Life of Hardy*.⁵

The story of Einstein's brain is intriguingly grotesque, too. After a pathologist from Kansas, Thomas Harvey, performed Einstein's autopsy in 1955, he made off with the brain, claiming he would investigate and publish his findings on it. He cut the brain into 240 pieces, and, at various times, doled out bits to scientific researchers. In 1978 a reporter tracked down Dr. Harvey in Kansas and was shown the brain, kept in two mason jars in a cardboard box. In *Driving Mr. Albert: A Trip across America with Einstein's Brain*, Michael Paterniti described a journey with Dr. Harvey and his "sacred specimen," in which he meditates on the motives for such "relic freaks."⁶

Uncertainty also surrounds the bones of Yeats. Yeats was buried on 30 January 1939 in an Anglican cemetery in France, at Roquebrune. His wife, George, took out a temporary ten-year lease (she thought) on the grave site. Plans to bring his body home to Sligo in September 1939 were thwarted by world events. In 1947, it was discovered that the concession had run out after five years, not ten, and that Yeats's bones had been removed to the ossuary. Very confused negotiations followed between George, some of Yeats's friends, the municipal and church authorities and the French government. In March 1948 the remains were identified (though leaving some room for uncertainty) and placed in a new coffin; in September 1948 the coffin was taken in state from Roquebrune to Galway. The reinterment ceremony at Drumcliff on 17 September 1948 took place with enormous crowds in attendance, and the poet's verse was, some time later, duly inscribed on the tombstone: "Cast a cold eye, on life, on death; Horseman, pass by!" But rumours persisted that the bones had got mixed up in the ossuary; Louis MacNeice, at the funeral, said they were actually burying "a Frenchman with a club foot." Roy Foster's life of Yeats takes a laconic and brisk line on all this, since in his view posthumous legends about body parts have no meaning for the life. "The legend of a mystery burial, or even an empty coffin," he notes dispassionately, "sustains a kind of mythic life, as with King Arthur, or—more appositely—Charles Stewart Parnell." What interests Foster about Yeats's death is that, in the last days, he showed no interest at all in the systems of occultism and supernaturalism that had so preoccupied him, he made no mention of the afterlife,

but concentrated exclusively on finishing his last poems. His last conscious act was to “revise a contents list for an imagined last volume of poems.”⁷

So, what, if anything, are biographers supposed to do with such mythical body-part stories? They can easily be set aside and ignored. But these compelling relics fit with our deep fascination with deathbed scenes and last words—which I’ll come back to in the last essay in this book. We are all fascinated by the manner of the subject’s death. And if there are legends about the last moments of the subject, or stories about what happened to their bodies after death—most of which fall into the category of unverifiable things or contested objects—it is a rare biographer who risks taking no notice of such stories. They play a part in the meaning of the life. How such matters should be dealt with in the biographical narrative involves tricky questions of tone and judgment, often involving a stand-off between scepticism and superstition, rationalism and sentimentalism. But most biographies concern themselves with afterlives as well as with lives.

One of the most complicated and emotionally charged examples in British biography of the contested use of sources, of rival versions and myth-making, in which a body part comes to symbolise the subject’s afterlife, is the story of the death of Shelley. Shelley’s great biographer Richard Holmes has written several times about this, once in his biography of 1974, once in the chapter called “Exiles,” in *Footsteps* (1985), which movingly retraced his own steps as Shelley’s biographer, and once in a more recent essay on the legends about Shelley that followed his death, in which he notes that “many lives change their

shape as we look back on them.”⁸ In *Footsteps*, he began that process of “looking back” on the writing of Shelley’s life by remembering what he had wanted to do as Shelley’s biographer in the 1970s. When he started work, he said, he was faced with a “received biographical image of Shelley’s adult character.” This “received image” had “three powerful components,” he added, all of which he wanted to “explode.” One was “the ‘angelic’ personality of popular myth, the ‘Ariel’ syndrome, with its strong implication that Shelley was insubstantial, ineffectual, physically incompetent.” The second “concerned his radical politics,” which had always been treated “as essentially juvenile, and incompatible with his mature lyric gift as a writer.” Holmes wanted “to show that Shelley’s poetic and political inspirations were closely identified.” The third was the “prevailing attitude” to “Shelley’s emotional and sexual make-up.” Holmes cited Matthew Arnold reviewing Edward Dowden’s biography of Shelley in 1886, with horror at what it revealed of the poet’s “irregular relations.” Holmes, who described his own experiences and friendships in the 1960s as being rather like those of the Shelley circle, was not shocked or horrified, and wanted to understand how Shelley’s principles of free love and equal partnerships could have led to such chaos and suffering.

Matthew Arnold’s distaste at Shelley’s morals formed part of a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century story of posthumous protection and accusation which Holmes outlined at the start and the end of his Shelley biography. This is how he tells it:

Shelley’s exile, his defection from his class and the disreputability of his beliefs and behaviour, had a tremendous

effect on the carefully partisan handling of his biography by the survivors of his own circle and generation, and even more so by that of his son's. In the first, the generation of his family and friends, fear of the moral and social stigma attached to many incidents in Shelley's career prevented the publication or even the writing of biographical material until those who were in possession of it, like Hogg, Peacock and Trelawny, were respectable Victorians in their sixties, who were fully prepared to forget, to smudge and to conceal. . . . Mary Shelley was actually prevented from writing anything fuller than [a] brief introduction . . . [and] editorial "Notes" . . . partly by the same considerations of propriety as Shelley's friends, but even more by the fact that Shelley's father, Sir Timothy Shelley of Field Place, specifically forbade any such publications until after his own death . . . and made the ban singularly effective by outliving his detested son by twenty-two years. . . . In the second generation, control of the Shelley papers passed to Boscombe Manor and Sir Percy Florence's wife, Lady Jane Shelley, who made it her life work to establish an unimpeachable feminine and Victorian idealization of the poet. . . . The vetting and control which Lady Jane exercised over the chosen scholars who were allowed into the sanctuary, notably Richard Garnett and Edward Dowden, was strict. . . . This crucial period of Shelley studies was crowned by Edward Dowden's two-volume standard *Life* (1886), whose damaging influence is still powerfully at work in popular estimates of Shelley's writing and character.⁹

Towards the end of the biography, Lady Shelley's shrine at Boscombe Manor is described in more detail as "complete with life-size monument of the poet, lockets

of fading hair, glass cases of letters and blue opaque pots containing fragments of bone.” Ian Hamilton, in *Keepers of the Flame*, adds Shelley’s baby-rattle to the list of sacred items and blames the women for the sanctification of Shelley: Mary was “a pious keeper of her husband’s flame.” The Shelley scholar Timothy Webb, describing in 1977 the posthumous forces “which operated to thin the poet’s blood and to idealise his memory,” said that Lady Shelley “kept the poet’s hair, his manuscripts (limited access for true believers only), his books and his heart (or was it liver?) which had been rescued from the flames at Viareggio. Before you could enter the shrine you had to remove your hat.”¹⁰

All three of these writers attributed the romanticising of Shelley to Mary Shelley’s remorseful, grieving idealisation of her husband, and to the testimonies of Shelley’s friends: the egotistical Thomas Jefferson Hogg, the adventurous, self-invented Edward Trelawny, who dined out for years on his Shelley and Byron stories, and the unreliable Leigh Hunt. All of them had their own versions to tell of the end of Shelley’s life.

The Shelley story evolved through tremendous battles over materials and versions. Friends and family did battle over “their” accounts of Shelley, censoring each other (Lady Shelley putting a stop to Hogg’s biography after two volumes, Trelawny taking issue with Mary’s editing of Shelley’s work), and changing their own stories. For over a hundred years, accusations and counteraccusations flew of lies, censorship, and even forgery. A splendidly obstreperous book of 1945 by Roger Smith and others, *The Shelley Legend*, much disliked by the Shelley scholars of the time, puts Lady Shelley at the centre of

the battle for custody: “Lady Shelley, terrified lest the facts of Shelley’s sex-life should become public, made herself the centre of a conspiracy to keep these facts hidden.”¹¹ As Richard Holmes says in his biography, at every point of conflict over the Shelley sources, “where events reveal Shelley in an unpleasant light” (as with his abandonment of Harriet, his first wife, and her subsequent suicide when heavily pregnant) “the original texts and commentaries have attracted suppressions, distortions, and questions of doubtful authenticity, originating from Victorian apologists.” William St Clair sums up the matter in his essay of 2002, “The Biographer as Archaeologist”: “The general intention of the family was to enhance the reputation of Shelley and of Mary Shelley, and to suppress knowledge of matters which contradicted the image, or rather the myth, which they wanted to see projected . . . for example by removing evidence of irreligion, and slurring . . . the reputation of Shelley’s first wife, Harriet.” Long after these attempts at censorship, and now that all the facts of Shelley’s life have been scrupulously explored, there are still competing versions of the life-story; blame and accusation are still in play.¹²

In a case like Shelley’s, the posthumous life of the subject has as much to do with the writing of biography as the life itself. An interesting essay by the critic Andrew Bennett, called “Shelley’s Ghosts,” touches on this. Bennett argues that Shelley had an acute and intense relation to the idea of posterity, and presents himself in his own work as “a ghostly spirit set to haunt or inhabit the minds of readers.” Bennett begins his piece on Shelley as the ghostwriter of his own life by talking about how we treat the dead: “What we do with dead bodies is different

from what we do with live ones.”¹³ This is particularly apt for Shelley, since one of the most important ingredients in the making of the Shelley legend was the story of what happened to Shelley’s dead body.

The famous, tragic story, once more. In April 1822, the Shelleys and their friends moved after a winter in Pisa to the Casa Magni, at Lerici on the Gulf of Spezia. The household consisted of Percy and Mary Shelley and little Percy, Claire Clairmont, and Jane and Edward Williams. Claire’s daughter by Byron, Allegra, died in April. Mary, two of whose children had died, had a miscarriage in July; both women were ill and distressed. Byron and his flamboyant entourage were at the Palazzo Lanfranchi in Pisa. Leigh Hunt and his family were arriving in July; there was a plan that Hunt, Byron, and Shelley should start a magazine. Shelley was writing *The Triumph of Life*, Byron was writing *Don Juan*. Byron and Shelley, with the advice and help of their new friend, the swashbuckling, self-invented Edward Trelawny, and a Captain Roberts, had become addicted to sailing. Byron was having a large schooner built, the *Bolivar*; Shelley’s smaller boat was called the *Don Juan*, though he had wanted to call it *Ariel*. In June, it was refurbished, by some accounts unwisely, with new topmast rigging.

Shelley and Edward Williams and Captain Roberts sailed on the *Don Juan* down the coast to meet Leigh Hunt, newly arrived at Leghorn (Livorno), on 1 July 1822, to help them get settled in Pisa. On 8 July, Shelley, Williams, and the ship-boy, Charles Vivian, set sail from Livorno to return to Lerici, on a stormy day. A squall broke out in the Gulf of Spezia, the *Don Juan* went down

under full sail, and they were all drowned. The women were waiting for them at the Casa Magni. It took another ten days of agonised and confused waiting and searching, in which Trelawny played a leading part, before the bodies were washed up and the news of the deaths was confirmed. The bodies were buried in quicklime on the shore to avoid infection. On 13 August, after getting permission from the authorities, Trelawny, Byron, and Hunt, with soldiers, attendants, and onlookers, dug up Williams's body and burnt it on a pyre; on 14 August they repeated the ceremony for Shelley, on the beach at Viareggio.

The telling of this story formed a central part in the making of the Shelley legend, and it was seized upon with gusto by the main players. Here is part of Trelawny's 1858 version, written thirty-six years after the event. It has been variously described as "a semi-fictionalized account," "one of the great purple passages of romantic literature, and deservedly so," and "a scene which in all its gruesome detail has etched itself onto the Romantic imagination":¹⁴

The first indication of their having found the body, was the appearance of the end of a black silk handkerchief . . . then some shreds of linen were met with, and a boot with the bone of the leg and the foot in it. On the removal of a layer of brushwood all that now remained of my lost friend was exposed—a shapeless mass of bones and flesh. The limbs separated from the trunk on being touched.

"Is that a human body?" exclaimed Byron; "why it's more like the carcase of a sheep, or any other animal, than a man: this is a satire on our pride and folly."

I pointed to the letters E.E.W. on the black silk handkerchief.

Byron, looking on, muttered: “The entrails of a worm hold together longer than the potter’s clay, of which man is made. Hold! Let me see the jaw,” he added, as they were removing the skull, “I can recognize anyone by the teeth, with whom I have talked. I always watch the lips and mouth: they tell what the tongue and eye try to conceal.”

. . . [Williams’s] remains were removed piecemeal into the furnace.

“Don’t repeat this with me,” said Byron, “let my carcase rot where it falls.”

The funeral pyre was now ready; I applied the fire, and the materials being dry and resinous the pine-wood burnt furiously, and drove us back. . . . As soon as the flames became clear, and allowed us to approach, we threw frankincense and salt into the furnace, and poured a flask of wine and oil over the body. The Greek oration was omitted, for we had lost our Hellenic bard. It was now so insufferably hot that the officers and soldiers were all seeking shade.

“Let us try the strength of these waters that drowned our friends,” said Byron, with his usual audacity. “How far out do you think they were when their boat sank?”

“If you don’t wish to be put into the furnace, you had better not try; you are not in condition.”

He stripped, and went into the water, and so did I and my companion. Before we got a mile out Byron was sick, and persuaded to return to the shore.

The lonely and grand scenery that surrounded us so exactly harmonized with Shelley's genius, that I could imagine his spirit soaring over us. . . . As I thought of the delight Shelley felt in such scenes of loneliness and grandeur whilst living, I felt we were no better than a herd of wolves or a pack of wild dogs, in tearing out his battered and naked body from the pure yellow sand that lay so lightly over it, to drag him back to the light of day. . . . Even Byron was silent and thoughtful. We were startled and drawn together by a dull hollow sound that followed the blow of a mattock; the iron had struck a skull, and the body was soon removed. Lime had been strewn on it; this, or decomposition, had the effect of staining it of a dark and ghastly indigo colour. Byron asked me to preserve the skull for him; but remembering that he had formerly used one as a drinking-cup, I was determined Shelley's should not be so profaned. The limbs did not separate from the trunk, as in the case of Williams's body, so that the corpse was removed entire into the furnace. . . . More wine was poured over Shelley's dead body than he had consumed during his life. This with the oil and salt made the yellow flames glisten and quiver. . . . The corpse fell open and the heart was laid bare. The frontal bone of the skull, where it had been struck with the mattock, fell off; and, as the back of the head rested on the red-hot bottom bars of the furnace, the brains literally seethed, bubbled, and boiled as in a cauldron, for a very long time.

Byron could not face this scene, he withdrew to the beach and swam off to the *Bolivar*. Leigh Hunt remained in the carriage. . . . The only portions that were not consumed were some fragments of bones, the jaw, and the

skull, but what surprised us all, was that the heart remained entire. In snatching this relic from the fiery furnace my hand was severely burnt; and had any one seen me do the act I should have been put into quarantine.

After cooling the iron machine in the sea, I collected the human ashes and placed them in a box, which I took on board the *Bolivar*. Byron and Hunt retraced their steps to their home, and the officers and soldiers returned to their quarters.¹⁵

No reader can fail to be struck by Trelawny's highly coloured Hamlet-ising of Byron; the deliberate contrast between Byron's worldliness, appetites, and cynicism, and Shelley's ethereality (which goes all through Trelawny's memoir); the pathetic fallacy which invests the scenery with the spirit of Shelley's genius; the pagan quality of the event (no prayers, Greek libations), and—not least—the emphasis on Trelawny as the main, heroic protagonist and the only true witness (the others either wandering off or averting their faces). It comes as no surprise to hear that Trelawny was given to showing off the scars he got from plunging his hand and arm into the fire.

This was not Trelawny's first, or his last, version of the scene. His latest biographer, David Crane, notes: "In account after account over the next sixty years he would return to this summer of 1822 with ever new details, peddling scraps of history or bones with equal relish."¹⁶ Holmes says that he "obsessively re-wrote his account nearly a dozen times over the next fifty years, accumulating more and more baroque details, like some sinister biographical coral-reef." Each version became less realistic than its predecessor. As the retellings developed, "the

physical details became gradually less gruesome . . . and . . . the romantic setting which had originally been the backdrop to the cremation of Williams, was later transferred to the cremation of the Poet.”¹⁷ In versions written in 1822, he tells us that Williams’s body had “the eyes out” and was “fish-eaten,” and that Shelley’s body “was in a stage of putridity and very offensive. Both the legs were separated at the knee-joint . . . the hands were off and the arm bones protruding—the skull black and no flesh or features of the face remaining. . . . The flesh was of a dingy blue.” The later version that I’ve quoted, the one published in 1858, altered and prettified the story for “his more squeamish Victorian contemporaries.” When Trelawny returned to the story yet again in 1878, he embellished further, with details such as these: “Shelley . . . had a black single-breasted jacket on, with an outside pocket as usual on each side of his jacket. When his body was washed on shore, Aeschylus was in his left pocket, and Keats’s last poems was in his right, doubled back, as thrust away in the exigency of the moment.”¹⁸

Confusion developed over whether he had seen the bodies when they were first washed up; over what happened to the body of Charles Vivian; over whether Byron actually witnessed the burning of Shelley’s body or not; over whether it was a volume of Aeschylus or Sophocles in the left pocket; over which page of Keats’s last poems the book was doubled back at—was it “Lamia,” or “Isabella,” or “The Eve of St Agnes?”—or whether anything survived of the volume except its covers; and, of course, over the size of Shelley’s heart.

But, notoriously unreliable though they were, such firsthand versions made their way irresistibly into the

biographies of Shelley. Trelawny's witness was compounded by that of Leigh Hunt, an even more emotional narrative, with a convincingly ironic coda:

The ceremony of the burning was alike beautiful and distressing. Trelawny . . . [took] the most active part on this last mournful occasion. He and his friend Captain Shenley were first upon the ground, attended by proper assistants. Lord Byron and myself arrived shortly afterwards. His lordship got out of his carriage, but wandered away from the spectacle, and did not see it. I remained inside the carriage, now looking on, now drawing back with feelings that were not to be witnessed.

None of the mourners, however, refused themselves the little comfort of supposing, that lovers of books and antiquity, like Shelley and his companion, Shelley in particular with his Greek enthusiasm, would not have been sorry to foresee this part of their fate. The mortal part of him, too, was saved from corruption; not the least extraordinary part of his history. Among the materials for burning, as many of the gracefuller and more classical articles as could be procured—frankincense, wine, etc—were not forgotten; and to these Keats's volume was added. The beauty of the flame arising from the funeral pile was extraordinary. The weather was beautifully fine. The Mediterranean, now soft and lucid, kissed the shore as if to make peace with it . . . the flame of the fire bore away towards heaven in vigorous amplitude, waving and quivering with a brightness of inconceivable beauty. It seemed as though it contained the glassy essence of vitality. You might have expected a seraphic countenance to look out of it, turning once more before it departed, to thank the friends that had done their duty.

Yet, see how extremes can appear to meet even on occasions the most overwhelming. . . . On returning from one of our visits to the seashore, we dined and drank; I mean, Lord Byron and myself; dined little, and drank too much. . . . I had bordered upon emotions which I have never suffered myself to indulge. . . . The barouche drove rapidly through the forest of Pisa. We sang, we laughed, we shouted. I even felt a gaiety the more shocking, because it was real and a relief.¹⁹

Such “eyewitness” accounts, along with other testimonies from Thomas Love Peacock (written forty years after the event), Byron, and Hogg, powerfully influenced the earliest full biography (written under the sanitising control of Lady Shelley). Edward Dowden, for his part, relied heavily on Trelawny and Hunt, though he censors the inappropriate scene of Hunt and Byron returning to Pisa roaring drunk. He takes from Trelawny’s later version the added detail that Shelley’s heart was “unusually large,” and a conveniently symbolic sea-bird, which in some versions was a curlew, in others a seagull, with (as one of Trelawny’s editors put it) “a ghastly unappeased appetite for roast poet.”²⁰

The furnace being placed and surrounded by wood, the remains were removed from their shallow resting-place. It was Byron’s wish that the skull, which was of unusual beauty, should be preserved; but it almost instantly fell to pieces. Of the volume of Keats’s poems which had been buried with Shelley’s body, only the binding remained, and this was cast upon the pyre. . . . Three hours elapsed before [the body] separated; it then fell open across the breast; the heart, which was unusually large, seemed

impregnable to the fire. Trelawny plunged his hand into the flames and snatched this relic from the burning. The day was one of wide autumnal calm and beauty. . . . During the whole funeral ceremony a solitary sea-bird crossing and recrossing the pile was the only intruder that baffled the vigilance of the guard.

Byron, who could not face the scene, had swum off to his yacht. Leigh Hunt looked on from the carriage. Having cooled the furnace in the sea, Trelawny collected the fragments of bones and the ashes, and deposited them in the oaken box. All was over. Byron and Hunt returned to Pisa in their carriage. Shenley and Trelawny, bearing the oaken coffer, went on board the *Bolivar*. The relics of Shelley's heart, given soon after by Trelawny to Hunt, were, at Mary Shelley's urgent request, supported by the entreaty of Mrs Williams, confided to Mary's hands. After her death, in a copy of the Pisa edition of "Adonais," at the page which tells how death is swallowed up by immortality, was found under a silken covering the embrowned ashes, now shrunk and withered, which she had secretly treasured.²¹

Dowden takes us on to the next stage of the narrative, the quarrel over the possession of Shelley's heart. And what happened to Shelley's heart became, like everything else to do with his death, a source of controversy. There appears to have been an unseemly and passionate tussle over the heart between Trelawny, Hunt, and Mary Shelley. John Gisborne, Maria Gisborne's husband, gave one version of the quarrel in one of the hundreds of documents which form the huge compilation of Shelley materials made by Lady Shelley.

After the funeral rites of Shelley had been performed . . . Trelawny gave the heart, which had remained unconsumed, to Hunt. Mary wrote to Hunt requesting that it might be sent to her. Hunt refused to part with it. . . . Mary was in despair. At length the amiable Mrs Williams . . . wrote to Hunt, and represented to him how grievous and melancholy it was that Shelley's remains should become a source of dissension between his dearest friends.²²

Articles were written with titles like "The Real Truth about Shelley's Heart." Frederick Jones, the first editor of Mary Shelley's letters and journals, summed up the controversy in his edition of the letters in the 1930s:

Much controversy has raged about Shelley's heart. . . . That Trelawny did remove the heart and that it was kept by Mary, there can be no doubt . . . Mary's, Hunt's, and Byron's letters, and other evidence are quite conclusive. After Mary's death Sir Percy and Lady Shelley kept it, and at the death of Sir Percy in 1890 it was placed in his coffin and buried with him in St Peter's Churchyard at Bournemouth.²³

The battle over the possession of Shelley's heart seems to embody the contest over who should "own" Shelley's story. That it was given reluctantly into Mary Shelley's hands by Shelley's male friends points to Mary's position in the posthumous life of her husband. Mary's biographer Miranda Seymour, who set out to defend Mary against what she saw as a concerted effort to sideline and denigrate her by Shelley's friends and biographers (including Holmes, whose picture of Mary Shelley, according to Seymour, is of a "sulky, nagging

wife”), gives a partisan account of Mary’s role in the events:

As his bones shrivelled to ashes on the shore, Mary’s relationship with Shelley was already being judged. No precious relic was brought back for her from the funeral pyre. This was the age in which, without photographs . . . fragments of the dead were invested with the value of talismans. Byron’s choice, the skull, fell to pieces in the flames. Trelawny burned his hands in seizing a fragment of jaw-bone; Hunt took another. The heart, or the part of the remains which seemed most like a heart, had failed to burn, while exuding a viscous liquid. [Seymour’s footnote to this sentence reads: *The heart’s survival in intense heat is hard to explain, even if it had been in an advanced state of calcification. It is possible that the object snatched from the flame was the poet’s liver.*] Trelawny snatched it out; Hunt requested and received [it]. When Mary asked if she might have the heart herself, Hunt refused to surrender it. . . . It took a reproachful letter from Jane Williams to Hunt to compel a surrender. The heart was rediscovered after Mary Shelley’s death. Wrapped in silk between the pages of *Adonais*, it had lain inside her travelling-desk for almost thirty years.

. . . The task of defending and enhancing her husband’s reputation would be her great work for the future, her consolation for the remorse she now felt.²⁴

Clearly, the battle for possession over Shelley’s heart—if it was his heart—has not come to an end.

Mary Shelley’s letters at the time of Shelley’s death to their mutual friend Maria Gisborne immediately began the process of Shelley’s idealisation, on which Holmes

has commented: “The legend of his death transformed his life almost beyond recovery.”²⁵ In this process, Shelley’s elegy for Keats came to be read as his own elegy, and his soul was felt to have an ethereal life beyond his death. For Mary, Shelley’s heart at once took on the mythical resonance it has continued to have since then, as the “unconsumable” immortal part of the poet.

Today—this day—the sun shining in the sky—they are gone to the desolate sea coast to perform the last offices to their earthly remains. Hunt, L[ord] B[yron] & Trelawny. The quarantine laws would not permit us to remove them sooner—& now only on condition that we burn them to ashes. . . . Adonais is not Keats’s it is his own elegy. . . . I have seen the spot where he now lies—the sticks that mark the spot where the sands cover him . . .—They are now about this fearful office—& I live!

I will say nothing of the ceremony since Trelawny has written an account of it. . . . I will only say that all except his heart (which was unconsumable) was burnt, and that two days ago I went to Leghorn and beheld the small box that contained his earthly dross—that form, those smiles—Great God! No he is not there—he is with me, about me—life of my life & soul of my soul—if his divine spirit did not penetrate mine I could not survive to weep thus.²⁶

That spiritualised Shelley would inspire such romantic versions as André Maurois’s *Ariel: A Shelley Romance*, of 1924, translated by Ella d’Arcy, and highly popular in its time, where Shelley’s soul is “clipt in a net woven of dew-dreams,” his blood is always freezing and his heart is forever standing still or pounding in his breast. And

the sacred heart of Mary's, kept in the pages of *Adonais*, is a perfect example of a contested body part whose possession and appropriation can stand in for the whole biographical history of the subject. Writing desolately in her journal for 11 November 1822, after she has been accused (by Leigh Hunt) of coldheartedness, Mary cries out:

A cold heart! have I [a] cold heart? . . . Yes! it would be cold enough if all were as I wished it—cold, or burning in that flame for whose sake I forgive this, and would forgive every other imputation—that flame in which your heart, Beloved one, lay unconsumed! Where are you, Shelley? . . . My heart is very full tonight. . . . I shall write his life.²⁷

That heartfelt quotation seems uncannily to sum up the biographer's question. "*Where are you, Shelley?*" Who do you belong to? Who "owns" your "unconsumed" heart? Mary's possessive lament can be set against another act of posthumous appropriation, carried out by Trelawny in the Protestant Cemetery at Rome. Trelawny's "management" of Shelley's tomb is another gripping story in itself. Joseph Severn, sadly taking care of the plans for his own friend Keats's tombstone, was suddenly confronted with the extraordinary figure of Trelawny, whom he described in a fine letter of April 1823 as this "cockney-corsair," this "pair of Mustachios," "this Lord Byron's Jackal."²⁸ Trelawny completely took over, insisted on moving Shelley's ashes to a site nearer to Keats's grave, with a space for Trelawny right next to Shelley, and chose the wording for the tombstone. At the top, he had the words "Cor Cordium" engraved. (Frederick Jones, Mary Shelley's editor, visiting the grave

in the 1930s, noted that “Roman tourist guides, pointing to ‘Cor Cordium’ on the tombstone, tell travellers that the heart lies under the stone.”) Beneath them were the lines from *The Tempest*:

Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea change
Into something rich and strange.

“Rich and strange” indeed is the posthumous life of Shelley. But Richard Holmes, in his biography, would have none of all this. He calls Mary’s identification of “Adonais” with Shelley, rather than with Keats, a “sentimental half-truth” and he will have no truck with any of the versions of Shelley’s death I have been describing. This is how he tells the story:

The bodies of Shelley, Edward Williams, and Charles Vivian were eventually washed up along the beach between Massa and Viareggio ten days after the storm. The exposed flesh of Shelley’s arms and face had been entirely eaten away, but he was identifiable by the nankeen trousers, the white silk socks beneath the boots and Hunt’s copy of Keats’s poems doubled back in the jacket pocket. To comply with the complicated quarantine laws, Trelawny had the body temporarily buried in the sand with quick lime, and dug up again on 15 August to be placed in a portable iron furnace that had been constructed to his specification at Livorno, and burnt on the beach in the presence of Leigh Hunt, Lord Byron, some Tuscan militia and a few local fishermen. Much later Shelley’s ashes were buried in a tomb, also designed by Trelawny, in the Protestant Cemetery at Rome, after

having remained for several months in a mahogany chest in the British Consul's wine-cellar.

In England, the news of Shelley's death was first published by the *Examiner* on 4 August, and on the following evening by the *Courier* whose article began: "Shelley, the writer of some infidel poetry has been drowned; *now* he knows whether there is a God or no."²⁹

Shelley's heart is a deliberate gap here, a body part that goes missing in the interests of dealing with a particular problem in literary biography, and as a way of getting out of a biographical trap, in which, as Holmes put it many years later, "biography is caught and frozen, so to speak, in the glamorous headlights of Shelley's death."³⁰

To turn from the story of Shelley to the story of Pepys is to make a grotesquely violent jump from tragedy to comedy, from the ethereal to the robust, and from posthumous myth-making to material realities. Pepys's story is simply steaming with body parts and objects of consumption, from the bosoms and bottoms he so loved to fondle, to the Parmesan cheese he made sure to bury in his garden during the Great Fire of London. Pepys's most dramatic "body-part" story is not one of a heart magically unconsumed by the flames, but of a gall stone painfully extracted without anaesthetic. The life of Pepys would seem to raise none of the problems of missing parts and contested legends raised by the death of Shelley. Instead, it provokes a feeling we may have about life-writing which was most brilliantly articulated by the fin-de-siècle French man of letters, Marcel Schwob. In his

Vies Imaginaires of 1896 (well ahead of Lytton Strachey) he argued that short lives (preferably of obscure characters) are more revealing than long lives of great men, and that what is most revealing are the quirks, the eccentricities, and the body parts. History books only ever deal with such body parts if they are thought to have had a determining effect on “general events”:

[History tells us] that Napoleon was in pain on the day of Waterloo . . . that Alexander was drunk when he killed Klitos, and that certain of Louis XIV's shifts of policy may have been caused by his fistula. Pascal speculates about how things might have turned out had Cleopatra's nose been shorter, and about the grain of sand in Cromwell's urethra. All these individual facts are important only because they have influenced events.

But biographies can do more, Schwob argues, with oddities and idiosyncrasies, than “historical science” can:

That such-a-one had a crooked nose, that he had one eye higher than the other, that he had rheumatic nodules in the joints of his arm, that at such-an-hour he customarily ate a *blanc-de-poulet*, that he preferred Malvoisie to Château Margaux—there is something unparalleled in all the world. Thales might just as well have said [Know thyself] as Socrates; but he would not have rubbed his leg in the same way, in prison, before drinking the hemlock.³¹

Claire Tomalin, Pepys's most recent and most praised biographer, rather than trying to deal with unverifiable legends, has the pleasure of plunging into all those kinds of oddities and idiosyncrasies, in a life full to the brim with authentic, factual, bodily, everyday materials. She

makes the most of the body parts: the most brilliant, and appalling, set piece in her book is the detailed account of the excruciating operation for the removal of that bladderstone. Pepys kept his stone, had a special case made for it, and showed it to his friends. (Perhaps it survived him, like Napoleon's penis.) His mother, who had the same condition and "voided" her stone, threw hers on the fire. Tomalin points to this as the crucial difference between the "classifying" and "purposeful" son and his "sluttish," "tough" old mother. She enjoys Pepys's ambition and orderliness, his endless enthusiasm for and curiosity about himself, and his pleasure in ordinary human activity, from hearing fine music to eating a good dinner to designing a new bookcase. And she relishes the openness, curiosity, plain-speaking and dramatic immediacy of the Diary: a diary which might be enough to make any biographer feel redundant.³²

Sex, drink, plague, fire, city life, music, plays, marital conflict, the fall of kings, loyalty and betrayal, ambition, corruption and courage in public life, wars, navies, public executions, incarceration in the Tower: Samuel Pepys's life is full of irresistible material. His famously candid, minute, and inexhaustibly vigorous account of every detail of his daily life filled six leather-bound books written in shorthand. The unpublished nineteenth-century transcription ran to fifty-four volumes; the definitive edition by Robert Latham and William Matthews is in eleven volumes. (The story of the Diary's survival and publication is in itself a remarkable one.) But the Diary, which begins on 1 January 1660 and ends (because of Pepys's eye problems) on 31 May 1669, covers only nine years out of a seventy-year life. The twenty-seven-year

story that precedes it—of Pepys's family, childhood, education, professional advancement, and marriage, in the context of the Civil War—and the thirty-four years that follow it, when the death of his wife and public disgrace were followed by rehabilitation, distinguished years of naval administration, an active retirement after 1688, and a second long relationship, all have to be tracked without the Diary. This silence is filled by a vast mass of materials: thousands of letters, Pepys's work-papers and trial documents, naval histories (including Pepys's own), Admiralty papers, contemporary diaries and memoirs, and many histories and biographies. Yet it also involves, as Tomalin puts it, much "obscurity and guesswork."³³

Claire Tomalin had two challenges to overcome with Pepys. One is that the Diary provides so much material it is sometimes overpowering. The other is that outside the Diary-years, and outside Pepys's own point of view, she has to hypothesise. As in her Lives of Jane Austen and Dickens's mistress Ellen Ternan (*The Invisible Woman*), she often has to proceed by ingenious analogies. Since we don't know how Pepys was brought up, she provides a contemporary manual of manners for children from 1577. Since we don't have first-hand accounts of the sexual activities of young men-about-town in the 1650s, she points us to a book of advice on *The Arts of Wooing and Complementing*, written by Milton's nephew in 1658. In filling the gaps, Tomalin characteristically brings some sympathetic guesswork to the voiceless heroines of Pepys's story—maids, mistresses, patronesses—and especially to his wife, Elizabeth Pepys, the beautiful, penniless, quick-tempered French girl whom Pepys married when she was nearly fifteen. Tomalin makes her the

“muse” of the Diary: Pepys is “inspired” to write it “by the condition of marriage itself.”³⁴

But for all his alluring openness and the mass of evidence he provides, Pepys raises some strategic problems for his biographer. If she paraphrases him, as she must, what goes missing? A few tiny examples of the transition from diary to biography show how the source-material has to be tidied up, little bits of it lopped off here and there, in order to give the life-story a clear narrative shape.

Tomalin describes Pepys inviting Elizabeth to join him on a trip to the residence of his patrons at Huntingdon on 13 September 1663, “with the gallant words”: “Well, shall you and I never travel together again?” “As soon as they arrived at Brampton,” Tomalin continues, “he took her to spend the day with Lady Sandwich. Later they rode into the woods to gather nuts, and he showed her the river.” She calls this an “idyllic . . . afternoon together in the autumn sunshine.” In the Diary, this trip is more of a mess. After his invitation to her, they don’t in fact set out together, but ride out separately, as he has to wait for someone else. They meet up on the way, and Elizabeth is taken ill drinking beer, and is alarmingly sick. When they arrive at Brampton they are extremely tired. Pepys visits Lady Sandwich on his own, not with his wife, and then leaves Elizabeth behind when he returns to town. It isn’t until 19 September, a week later, that they go riding in Brampton woods, eating nuts in the sunshine, and it’s she who shows him the river “behind my father’s house,” not the other way round. Elsewhere in the biography, Tomalin does refer to Pepys’s anxiety at Elizabeth’s sickness while riding

to Brampton, but she doesn't link the two occasions together.³⁵

Wanting to show his mixed feelings about death, Tomalin reports the dream Pepys has after his mother's death. "He dreamt of her again, coming to him and asking for a pair of gloves, and in the dream 'thinking it to be a mistake in our thinking her all this while dead.'" She quotes him again: "This dream troubled me and I waked." But in the Diary, this is followed by further nightmares: of seeing his urine turning into a turd, or of pulling at something, possibly from the end of his penis, that looked like "snot or slime," and this substance turning into "a gray kind of bird . . . [that] run from me to the corner of the door." This is horrifying to him. But Tomalin—though far from squeamish—doesn't quote this, perhaps because she is more concerned at this point to draw an analogy between Pepys's dream of his dead mother and Proust's dream of his dead grandmother. (Tomalin frequently compares Pepys to Proust, and she starts her book with Proust's epigram: "Un livre est le produit d'un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vices." But Pepys's Diary is surely the product of exactly the "moi," the self, which *does* manifest itself in its habits, social life, and vices.)³⁶

Here is one last little example of an oddity that has been tidied up in paraphrase. On 13 June 1666, Pepys was saying grace at dinner. In the middle, he says, "my mind fell upon my lobsters," and he jumps up, exclaiming, "Cud Zookes! What is become of my lobsters!" He had bought two fine ones that day, but had left them in a hackney coach. Tomalin mentions this twice, once to

show how Pepys likes to repeat his own sayings, once to display his extraordinary energy. On the same day he loses the lobsters, he also attends the funeral of Admiral Myngs, goes to a board meeting in Whitehall, visits the Exchequer and the studio of a painter who is doing a portrait of his father, and goes to his mistress in Deptford where he “did what he would with her.” He gets a boat home, drinks a pint of sack, and buys three eels from a fisherman. No wonder he forgot his lobsters! But what Claire Tomalin omits is that he remembers that he forgot them, and bursts out with his exclamation, in the middle of saying grace.³⁷ (And perhaps that’s why he writes it down: he may have been rather ashamed of himself, and wanted to expiate the offence in the Diary.) The story has been slightly flattened, and has lost a little of its idiosyncrasy. But the biographer can’t do everything. Biography has to omit and to choose. In the process, some things go missing—in this case, just the whiskers of a pair of crustaceans that fell through the gaps in the net.