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**From Plutarch to Miḥā'il Nu'ayma.
An attempt to define the development of biography in Western and
Arabic cultures**

Biography (from Greek bios=life + grapho=record) is an extremely popular type of prose of the last century. Its role is to present the account of person's life with its two aspects: humanistic and biological. Biography can be seen as a branch of history, since it depends on a selective ordering and interpretation of materials, written and oral, established through research and personal recollections. It can also be seen as a branch of imaginative literature in that it seeks to convey a sense of the individuality and significance of the subject through creative sympathetic insight. The term of biography in the broadest meaning includes also autobiography, in which the subject recounts his or her own life.¹

This is the way we define biography nowadays. Yet, has biography been understood differently before? How, when and where was it created? What were its origins? Why did it come into existence? How did it develop? What functions did it have? What were the similarities and differences in the development of biographical writing in two different cultures: Western culture and Arabic culture?

In the search of the origins of biography

When we start to look for the answer to the question referring the origins of biography and its first forms we must go back to the distant past. We must go

¹ The New Encyclopaedia Britannica², Chicago etc., 1990, 15th-Edition, s.v. biography; J.T. Shipley, Dictionary of World Literary Terms, s.v. biography; Słownik terminów literackich, Edited by J. Sławiński, Wrocław 1988, 2nd Edition, s.v. biografia; M. Bernacki, M. Pawlus, Słownik gatunków literackich, Bielsko-Biała 1999, s.v. biografia.

back to the times of tombs and pyramids of the ancient Egypt. We find there the first texts containing the germ of biography. They include biographies of the powerful and wealthy (princes, monarchs, generals, ministers, officials and priests). They were written on the walls of their tombs, on their commemorative steles and statues. Some point to funeral speeches as the origins of biography. It was only later that tomb inscriptions praising the life and example of the deceased followed. In China in the 1st century BC. some historian and astrologist wrote a historical work entitled Historical Notes. It gives a vivid picture of the various aspects of Chinese life. The work is divided into five chapters. The last one includes biography of distinguished rulers, statesmen, scholars, writers and artists. Although this work distinguishes truthfulness and objectivity they were written from the historical, political and social point of view. The Four Gospels included in the Holy Scriptures may be in a way regarded as short biographies of Jesus. In the 1st century AD. Roman historian Tacitus wrote a biography of his father-in-law Julius Agricola. His work, entitled Agricola, is not so much a biography since the figure of the character is only sketched, but rather the history of that period. It is slightly enlivened by numerous anecdotes. The insightful description of the difficulties which Agricola had to overcome to extend the Roman rule in Britain can bring us closer to the picture of man.²

Biography in the West

However, the origins of modern biography as a literary genre in the world lie not with eulogy or laudatory accounts of rulers and sages, but with lives of prominent Greeks and Romans written by Plutarch (d.ca.120 AD.). This particular work is regarded as the first collection of biographies and its author is called "the father of biography". Plutarch quoted many stories and events which brilliantly illuminated the whole personality of his subjects. The second important biographer is thought to be Suetonius, Roman historian from the 2nd century. In his work Lives of the Caesars he related the lives of Rome's rulers from Julius Caesar to Domitian. Suetonius did not feel a particular affinity for the Caesars and their lives contained many scandals and gossips, which undoubtedly made his work more involving but less credible.³

² Ibidem; Wielka Literatura Powszechna¹, Edited by S. Lem, Warszawa 1995, p. 40-41, 290.

³ J.T. Shipley, op.cit., s.v. biography; The New Encyclopaedia Britannica², s.v. biography; Wielka Literatura Powszechna¹, p. 796.

The medieval Europe (the 5-15th c.) developed two kinds of biography. One type of biography was devoted to saints and the Fathers of the Church, and it was written by monks who cared more about devotional ideals than about credibility. Obviously, these lives served mainly religious purposes. The most popular collection of both biographical and hagiographical stories was Golden Legend written by J. de Voragine in the 13th century. The collection contains all kinds of lives of saints and biographies indebted not only to the documentary sources but also to legends. Many adventurous and fairylike plots were introduced there. The second type of medieval biographies includes the lives of rulers and people in high positions. They had a historical, almost a chronicle character. Biographers were also interested in kings and leaders because of their historical importance.

The epoch of Renaissance (the 15-17th c.) changed the interests of biographers. Kings and saints were no longer the subjects of their works. Biographers drew their attention to artists, painters, sculptors, writers, musicians and any other sort of individuals. At this period G. Vasari (1511-1574) wrote *The Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Architects, Painters and Sculptors*. The structure of each biography included in this work is described by K. Estreicher, a translator of this work into Polish, in the following way: "Each life consists of the description of the artist's youth, followed by the description of his works and the information where a particular work can be found. In general, Vasari attempts to notice advantages, especially the merit of the picture and of the perspective. The descriptions are enlivened by information and commentaries, anecdotes and memoirs. At the end the biographer mentions disciples, and followers of the master. He notes also his character and habits." Renaissance writers wrote also biographies which reflected their interest in life of an individual man. In England the most example of this phenomena was the life of Thomas Moore by William Roper (1626) and short biographies of writers and other eminent persons written by Izaak Walton, John Aubrey and Thomas Fuller. The development of literature, the growing interest in art and pleasures of life, increase in contemplation outside the Church, easy access to various materials useful for creating biographies such as letters, diaries, memoirs and documents helped to develop a new form of biography, referred to as "intimate biography". Such biographies were written mainly by relatives, close friends, acquaintances and subordinates.⁴

⁴ Okresy literackie, Edited by J. Majda, Warszawa 1990, p. 36-37, 46-47; M. Bernacki, M. Pawlus, op.cit., s.v. biografia, *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*², s.v. biography.

The 18th c. (the Enlightenment followed by Romanticism) witnessed the great development of European biographical writing. Biography became extremely popular among the readers who treated it as a form of enjoyment and relaxation. Under the influence of the interest in politics and economics so-called popular biography came to being. The most popular topics concerned successful people, politicians and.... criminals. The first satiric biographies were also produced. The democratic spirit of the society resulted in the conviction that life of every person is worth of recording since every person is of equal value and importance. During Romanticism the most popular form of biography was psychological biography. Its seed can be traced back to Plutarch. It emphasizes the psychological interpretation of the subject, his internal life, personality and emotionality. The external events, facts, and dates are not sufficient to reflect the figure of the character. Next type of biography was artistic biography. The autonomy of aesthetic theory, the concept of the relativity of truth and the prevalence of varied fictional forms of literature partially account for this new development. In artistic biography the author creates the illusion of the character's life by the means of literary fiction. He introduces true and imaginary characters, soliloquy and dialogues. He also extends conversations and supplies information missing from the source materials. This is done in order to transfer mere facts into the imitation of an actual life, to reveal the character's thoughts, hopes, desires, as well as the shifts of mood and their transformation through the time. This kind of biography is considered to be a typical literary genre, not a branch of history. A representative and an aesthetic function predominates an informative function. The style and structure of the book are close to a novel, a narrative and a drama. Some people claim that an artistic biography developed from these literary forms. This type of biography is a strictly literary genre.⁵ The growing interest in history, the development of historical studies and the research of the encyclopedias gave rise to various dictionaries of biography. At the end of the 18th century biography was enriched by new elements. In *Diaries and Poems of Mr. Gray*, published in 1775, William Mason for the first time in the presentation of the character used the subject's private correspondence. Samuel Johnson in his *Lives of the English Poets*, published 1779-81, presented vivid biographies of 52 English poets together with the careful evaluation of their works. This work is regarded to be a milestone not only in the history of biographical writing but also in the history of English literary criticism. However, the most celebrated biography remains *The Life of*

⁵ J.T. Shipley, *op.cit.*, s.v. biography.

Samuel Johnson by James Boswell, published in 1791. The author combined detailed records of conversations and behavior with a considerable psychological insight. Although Boswell was an inseparable companion of Johnson and had the greatest respect for him, his biography was not just a glorification of Johnson's life. Boswell meticulously noted his friend's failures and weaknesses. Both *Lives of the English Poets* and *The Life of Samuel Johnson* provided the model for exhaustive, monumental 19th-century biographies such as A. P. Stanley's *Life of Arnold* and Lord Morley's *Gladstone*. Carlyle's conviction that history was the history of great men demonstrated the general belief of the time that biographical writing was an important method of understanding society and its institutions. The subsequent rejection of Victorian prudery and the development of psychoanalysis led to the growth of more penetrating and comprehensive model of biography. Leon Edel's *Henry James* is written in this vein. Another great achievement of biographical writing of this period was a group biography dealing with a family or a narrow social circle. One of the most distinguished Western biographers of this period was, Lytton Strachey (1880-1932). This English writer represents both the psychological type of biography and its artistic approach. In comparison with the many-volumed and solemn official biographies of the 19th century, Strachey's works are concise and deliberately stylized. They are also ironic. Strachey is considered to be a master of satiric biography.⁶ In his *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey depicts the characters, who were previously so idealized that they became unrealistic. In a new kind of biography initiated by Strachey characters became more authentic as a matter of a more individualized and more complete presentation. This period produced also biographies which focused solely on human weaknesses. Some authors, under the influence of the methods which analyzed in detail human thinking and motivational processes proposed by S. Freud and other prominent psychiatrists, began to treat biography as psychological studies. This gave rise to psychological biography.

The 20th century witnessed the heyday of biography and developed various forms of this literary genre, comprising the features of historiography, history of literature, history of the arts, scientific approaches and novels freely creating fiction based on documentary data treated only as the inspiration. Transitional forms which do not belong to scientific studies gradually approach literary genres and are generally called literary biography. Some researchers distinguish many detailed types which are

⁶ Ibidem; *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*², s.v. biography.

given distinct names, although the differences between them are vague. The 1920s and 1930s witnessed the growth of literary biography, especially, artistic biography became incredibly popular. Also modern biographers tend to write in the similar vein. An excellent example is a book *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* by Carl Sandburg or *Słowacki* by J. Wołoszynowski.⁷

As it has been mentioned before, autobiography constitutes a specific type of biography. The author of autobiography is the subject himself. This kind of writing provides a lot of information concerning both the author and the subject of the work. It is claimed that autobiography belongs to so-called literature of intimate records (together with a diary, journal and memoirs) which wins more and more recognition in the contemporary literature. Not only self-justification but also self-contempt may provide the autobiographical impulse. This is the case particularly when it is linked with some intellectual, religious or emotional crisis experienced by the author. The revaluation of this type may have led to the creation of St. Augustine's *Confessions* which is regarded as the first European autobiography. *Confessions* provide the focal point of many biographies, notably of J.J. Rousseau (1671-1741). However, they may have the effect of unconsciously distorting antecedent experience. The description of one's life may also be undertaken for partly therapeutic ends, seeking to establish an ironic or authentic distance from painful or chaotic experience (e.g. *Memoirs* by Albert Speer) or to trace patterns of coherence in it.⁸ The last century produced many excellent autobiographies, including also artistic biographies.

Biography in the Arab world

To trace the origins and development of Arabic biography we need to move to a completely different cultural circle. In Arabic language biography is referred to as *sīra* (pl. *siyar*). It is derived from the root s-i-r, which means "way of going", "way of acting", "traveling", "wandering". The original meaning of the word *sīra* was a way. Later, it was also used to refer to a way of life, a style of life, a history of life and finally a biography. At the

⁷ Ibidem; M. Bernacki, M. Pawlus, op.cit., s.v. biografia; M. Jasińska, *Zagadnienia biografii literackiej*, Warszawa 1970, p. 62-63.

⁸ M. Bernacki, M. Pawlus, op.cit., s.v. autobiografia; *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*¹, s.v. autobiography.

beginning it was closely related to the first Arabic biography, namely *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* – a biography of the Prophet written by Ibn Ishāq (d.769), then this word was used in reference to biographies of other people.⁹ Most commonly *sīra* was a longer account of the person's life. Arabic terminology provides also other terms referring to biographical writing. *Tarğama* (pl. *tarāğim*), is a short biographical note, which was usually found in biographical dictionaries. The term *ta'rīf* in the meaning of biography appeared after 12th century in the classical writing. There are also *manāqib* which are laudatory biographical texts. It is a kind of biography which perceives a man in the terms of some virtues which may set a good example for the next generations. Hence, it is also a form of a moral portrait.¹⁰

Some modern scholars have suggested that the roots of the Arabic biography go back to the pre-Islamic tradition, specifically genealogy and/or *Ayyām al-'Arab* (Battle Days)¹¹. What is certain is that it is an indigenous Arabic Islamic genre, and that it has been considered from beginning as a form of historical literature.¹²

Biography of Muḥammad written by Ibn Ishāq played a vital role in Arabic writing. It provided an impulse to the development of biographical writing which reached its apogee with the appearance of biographical dictionaries. It gave also rise to the growth of historiography. The origins, the purpose, the function and the structure of the Prophet will be discussed below.

For the long after the death of the Prophet all the information, which was collected about him, was not written down but passed on orally. After some time, there was a danger of fabricating, distorting or even losing some of the information. A written record of the greatest possible number of the most authentic information became a necessity. The work of Ibn Ishāq did not survive to our times in the original version but it was drawn up later by another writer, Ibn Hišām (d. 834), and also in an extensive work of a great

⁹ In Arabic literature the term *sīra* is used in reference to the later popular chivalrous romance, which belongs to the less serious type of the narrative, frequently interspersed with poetry. These pseudo-historical and pseudo-fantastic stories of famous, legendary figures or historical tribes. They belong to a completely different literary genre and this is why no attention is given to it in this analysis. J. Bielawski, *Klasyczna literatura arabska*, Warszawa 1995, p. 303.

¹⁰ *The Encyclopedia of Islam*⁹, New Edition, Leiden 1997, s.v. *s_ri*.

¹¹ These stories described every-day life of the Arabs in the period of pre-Islamic times, their conflicts, arguments, battles and wars. However, they have a pseudo-legendary character. J. Bielawski, *op.cit.*, p. 86.

¹² *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, Edited by J. Scott Meisami and P. Starkey, Routledge, London and New York, 1988, s.v. *medieval biography*.

Arabian historian, Aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 922). Ibn Hišām revised the text, got rid of some parts, distanced himself to this information, which he considered untrue.¹³ Ibn Ishāq based his biography on four sources concerning Muḥammad. Namely, the Koran, the literature of the Hadiths, Ayyām al-‘Arab (Battle Days)¹⁴ and other stories modeled on them: maḡāzī or notes from the campaigns fought by the Prophet in the period of his coming to power and which constituted the basis for the growing Muslim commune. Sīra was written in a chronological order and divided into three parts: Part I: Kitāb al-mubtada’ (The Book of the Beginning), includes legends concerning the past events and activities of Muḥammad before Islam. Ibn Hišām left out some stories and he did not use any title. Part II: Al-Mab‘aṭ (The Book of the Mission) – concerns the beginnings of the Prophet’s activity. Part III: Al-Maḡāzī (The Book of the Campaigns) depicts activity of the Prophet as a founder of the Muslim commune. Sīra includes: Hadiths, maḡāzī, quotations from the Koran, poetry, legends, anecdotes and documentary materials. They include Hadiths which nowadays are not regarded to be reliable materials. When Ibn Ishāq was writing his biography there was no division into true and untrue Hadiths. Al-Maḡāzī (The Book of the Campaigns) include letters of particular expeditions, presenting their purpose, their date, the names and the number of the participants. The quotations from the Koran are not very frequent. However, thanks to their presence in sīra, we can guess from which period come particular verses (sūras). In the times of Ibn Ishāq the appearance of poetry was a necessity. Arabs were not particularly attached to poetry which always supplemented the prose works. In the biography of Muḥammad we find numerous anecdotes. The author often combines a few famous versions into one story. These are political anecdotes which present some political group and fictional anecdotes – created to provide the justification for the Prophet’s activity. The most important document included in Sīrat Rasūl Allāh is Document of Medina. Apart from this, there are also other items such as letters from the Prophet to the leaders of Arabic tribes, letters with the names of the first emigrants, the speeches of the Prophet. Ibn Hišām in his version of the Prophet’s biography clearly marked what was said by Ibn Ishāq. On the other hand, Ibn Ishāq used the

¹³ Cf. Enzyklopaedie des Islām², Leiden 1927-34, vol. s I-IV, s.v. Ibn Ishāq and Wielka Literatura Powszechna¹, p. 568.

¹⁴ They were useful for establishing the genealogy, the origins of the Prophet. J. Bielawski, *ibidem*.

¹⁵ E.I.⁹, New Edition, s.v. sīra.

¹⁶ Iḡsān ‘Abbās, Fann as-sīra, ‘Ammān 1988, p. 18.

phrases: I have heard or some people claim to introduce some story or quote something.¹⁵

Sīra written by Ibn Ishāq served as a model to many generations of biographers writing biographies of the Prophet and other people.¹⁶ The beginning of the 9th century produced records concerning not only the Prophet, but also people known solely from the spoken tradition. In this way a new form was created. It was called ‘ilm ar-riġāl. The earliest biographical notes concerned the people who had a direct contact with the Prophet. Biographical information was to ensure readability and truthfulness of a given person. They were connected with accumulation of Hadiths. In this way biographical dictionaries came to being. Initially they were connected only with Islam (dictionaries of imams, cadis) and then in the 11th and 12th centuries they related also to the secular world (dictionaries of viziers, poets, grammarians, doctors...). The material in the dictionary was organized according to “classes” called ṭabaqāt. There were no rules specifying to which “class” a particular person should belong. It depended exclusively on the author. At the end of 11th century a new, alphabetical and chronological orders of organizing dictionaries appeared. However, the order of “classes” has never been abandoned. The period from the 10th to 13th century witnessed the appearance of the biggest biographical dictionaries. They may be divided into three main types. The first one includes dictionaries relating to figures from specific disciplines (e.g. viziers, grammarians). The second type was devoted to the general group of prominent people who lived in a particular country or city. The third type comprises general dictionaries. They provided biographies of outstanding people, were created at the latest period and have preserved until present times. Other kinds of dictionaries were also produced, for example so-called century dictionaries or “jubilee” dictionaries. They include biographies of people who died in a specific century of the Hiġra, for example *Ad-Durar al-kāmina fī a’yān al-mi’a aṭ-ṭāmina* (Pearls Hidden in Prominent People from the 8th Century) by Ibn al-‘Asqālānī. The capacity of the dictionaries varied considerably: from 800 to 7000 biographies. The length of the biographical note depended on how widely the person was recognized. The contents of such a note usually consisted of: the date of death (sometimes also the date of birth), the origin, (genealogy), education, literary mentors the person’s moral virtues and intellectual abilities, short descriptions of physical characteristics, the list

¹⁷ The adab literature – provides a kind of instruction, has a didactic character, besides it should entertain; the beginnings of the Adab literature date from the turn of the 8th and the 9th century. J.Bielawski, op.cit., p. 131-142.

of works and achievements. Gradually, the notes were influenced by *adab*¹⁷. The point was not only to provide information but also entertain (numerous anecdotes, quotations). From the beginning of the 13th century literary aspect of biographies was stressed. The earliest dictionary of this kind was *Kitāb ṭabaqāt al-muḥaddiḥīn* (The Book of Tradents' Classes) written by Mu'āfa Ibn 'Imrān al-Mawṣilī (d.ca. 800). Unfortunately, the dictionary have not survive to these days. The oldest existing dictionary is *Kitāb ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣaḥāba* (The Book of Classes of the Prophet's Companions), by Muḥammad Ibn Sa'd aḍ-Ḍuhrī. It is divided into 5 categories. It includes the notes of various lengths (varying from 8 words to 80 pages). The author was interested in the siblings of the people whose biographies he presented. One of the first dictionaries, which focus was no longer on the topic of faith was *Yatīmat ad-dahr fī maḥāsin ahl al-'aṣr fī ṣu'arā'* ahl al-'aṣr (The only Pearl about Virtues of the People of the Age Concerning the Poets among the People of that Age) by Ibn Muḥammad at-Ta'ālībī (d. 1038). This dictionary leaves the rigid frames of a form typical for biographical dictionary. It is a combination of anthology and monograph. It includes anecdotes and other information, which together created an *Adab* background. Within a few centuries a great number of dictionaries was produced. They contain biographies of people of various professions and disciplines. Among the most famous and distinguished collections of Arabic biographies there are *Nuzhat al-alibbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-udabā'* (The Scholars' Walk among the Adibs' Classes) by 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Ibn Muḥammad al-Anbārī (the 12th c). It is a dictionary devoted to grammarians. Another important work of Arabic lexicography is *Mu'ğam aṣ-ṣu'arā'* (Poets' Dictionary) written by Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī ar-Rūmī (d.1229). Apart from biographies of the poets we find there also biographies of grammarians and other distinguished people. The author refers to the sources of his predecessors and tried to cite them. Hence, it is a work of *Adab* character and beside numerous quotations it contains a great number of anecdotes. *Ta'rīḥ al-ḥukamā'* (Philosophers' Stories) is a dictionary written by Ğamāl ad-Dīn Ibn al-Qifī (d.1248). It includes not only biographies of Arabs but also of Greeks (philosophers) and Persians (doctors). *'Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'* (The Sources of Information about the Doctors' Classes) by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a (d.1270) includes biographies of doctors and people connected with this profession. This work refers to *Adab* style. Besides factual information it includes a lot of anecdotes. *Ta'rīḥ Baġdād* (Baghdad's Stories) written by Al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī (d. 1071) is a historical work. However, apart from information about Baghdad it contains biographies of distinguished people from this

city. Some other works written in a similar historical-biographical vein can be enumerated, most notably: *Ta'riḥ Dimašq* (Damascus's Stories) by Ibn 'Asākir (the 12th c.) and *al-Iḥāṭa fī aḥbār Ġarnāṭa* (The Knowledge of Granada's History) by Lisān ad-Dīn Ibn al-Ḥaṭīb (d.1374). *Wafayāt al-a'yān* (The Lives of Famous Personages) by Ibn Ḥallikān (d.1282) is a real breakthrough in the development of dictionaries. In the creation of this dictionary the author took into consideration the fact how famous a particular person was. This dictionary contains 800 biographies of famous people in the alphabetical order. Its characteristic feature is a considerable objectivity. Some geographical dictionaries, such as Yāqūt's *Mu'ğam al-buldān* (The Dictionary of the Countries), also included biographies, placed under the towns with which the subjects were associated. And even some regular lexicons, particularly Al-Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī's *Tāğ al-'arūs* (Bride's Crown), had brief biographical entries for people whose names were peculiar, placing them under the root of the person's name. Travel books and catalogues of teachers often also included biographies. The biographical dictionaries were the most enduring form in which the Arabic Islamic biography survived until the modern age.

Initially, in individual biography very popular form was *manāqib*, stories about a person written from the panegyric point of view. One of the early biographies devoted to a single person was biography of Maḥmūd from Ġazna entitled *Kitāb al-Yamīnī* by Muḥammad Ibn 'Uṭba. *Nawādir as-sultāniyya wa-maḥāsīnuhā* is a biography Salāḥ ad-Dīn written by Yūsuf ar-Rāfi'ī (d.1234). However, at the period of called "the epoch" of the biographical dictionaries, biographies of individual people played a secondary role in and had a panegyric character. Also, autobiography (Arabic—*sīra ḍātiyya*) was not common in the classical Arabic writing. *Kitāb al-i'tibār* (The Book of Edifying Examples) by Usāma Ibn Munkid (d.1188) is regarded as the first classical autobiography in Arabic literature. Earlier, in the 1st century of Islam we find a text which has some autobiographical features. It is a story written by Salmān al-Fārisī (d.656). In his work, the author presented his origins, the figure of his father and his great love for the son as well as the reasons for his renunciation of masdaism, in which he believed, adopting Christianity and finally his conversion to Islam. We come across the autobiographical fragments in *Kitāb al-ağānī* (The Book of Songs) by Abū ʾl-Farağ (d. 1071). His autobiography wrote also Ibn Ḥaldūn (1332-1406) and it is entitled *At-Ta'rīf bi-Ibn Ḥaldūn* (The History of Ibn Ḥaldūn). *Mu'ğam aš-šu'arā'* (Poets' Dictionary) by Yāqūt provides the information what the author did in the described months. This sort of information can be found in the dictionary by Ibn Abī 'Uṣaybi'a

entitled 'Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā' (The Sources of Information of the Doctors' Classes).¹⁸

The period from the 16th to 18th century witnessed the political fall of Arabs. Moreover, it marked the end of classical period of literature, followed by three centuries of the spiritual lethargy of Arabs, who came under the Turkish control. This time can be viewed as a complete decline of original literary writing. Everything produced at that time followed the old, classical models of writing. Arabic literature did not develop considerably at that time. This situation caused also decline in the biographical writing. The revival of Arabic literature began under the influence of European culture of the 19th century. The reign of the French in Egypt was of great importance for the future of Egypt and other Arabian countries. The French introduced in Egypt European technology and initiated creation of new cultural and educational institutions. This period witnessed the development of the press and translation of the textbooks and with time also European literature. In Syria and Lebanon French and American schools were opened by the missionaries. Many young Arabs went to study in Europe. Arabic world got acquainted with European culture and literature. All this, after some time gave rise to new Arabic literature. The way for its development was paved by newspapers and magazines. They popularized narrative prose and modern literature.¹⁹ When Arabs got acquainted with European literature they got to know also Western biography, which served them as an example to follow. The 19th century and at the beginning of 20th century produced memoirs of politicians, reformers, and military men. However, their works cannot be classified as biographies. They had a character of a report and their purpose was to record the historical events, thoughts or emotions, not to give account of a person's life. Among the first Arabic books of autobiographical character worth mentioning are: *Taḥlīṣ al-ibrīz fī talḥīṣ Barīz* (Preservation of Pure Gold in a Concise Description of Paris) (1869) by Rifā'a Rāfi' aṭ-Ṭahtāwī. The examples of first contemporary biographies are: *al-'Abqariyyāt* (The Geniuses) and *Muḥammad 'Alī al-Kabīr* (Great Muḥammad 'Alī) by Muḥammad Ṣafīq Ğurbāl. All of them are closer to a historical report than to a literary biography, often written in a form of an article. In 1929 Tāḥā Ḥusayn wrote his autobiography entitled *Al-Ayyām* (The Days). However, it is also not written in a purely literary convention.

¹⁸ Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature, s.v. medieval biography; Iḥsān 'Abbās, op.cit., p. 111-130.

¹⁹ J. Bielawski, K. Skarżyńska-Bocheńska, J. Jasińska, *Nowa i współczesna literatura arabska 19 i 20 w.*, Warszawa 1978, p. 89- 112.

To a certain extent it is a combination of a report and an attempt to reflect reality.²⁰ This autobiography gave rise to creating a series of autobiographies and biographies. Some of them are based on the model of a short story e.g. 'Awdat ar-rūḥ (The Return of the Spirit) (1933), 'Uṣfūr min aš-Šarq (Bird from the East) (1938) and Siġīn al-'umr (The Prison of Life) by Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, Ibrāhīm al-Kātib (Ibrahim, the Writer) by Ibrāhīm 'Abd al-Qādir al-Māzinī and Sara (Sarah) by 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād. Others were written in a form of a paper or a report. Among the most prominent examples there are: Anā (I) by 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād, Ḥayātī (My life) (1950) by Aḥmad Amīn and Sab'un (Seventy) (1959-60) by Miḥā'il Nu'ayma. It is Ġubrān Ḥalīl Ġubrān (Kahlil Gibran) by Miḥā'il Nu'ayma that is regarded to be the first and the best artistic biography (Arabic—sīra fanniyya). It was published in Beirut in 1934.²¹ It is an artistic biography playing a distinguished role not only in Arabic but also the world literature.²² It was written in the period when the western literature witnessed the heyday of a literary biography. Miḥā'il Nu'ayma was educated in the West, living for a long time in exile, had an excellent knowledge of the world's literature and culture as well as all the new trends prevailing.

An attempt to compare two ways of development of biographical writing in the Western and Arabic cultural circles

Biography, as a literary genre, was first produced in the ancient times, in the Western cultural circle, in Greece. The lives of prominent Greeks and Romans were written. In such parts of the world as the ancient Egypt, China (when we talk about the germ of biography), the ancient Greece and ancient Rome (when we talk about the origins of biography as a literary genre) biographical writing came to being to serve history. Biographies appeared after historical writing with the purpose of supplementing and to enriching a historical record. The first Arabic biography was written about six centuries after the masterpiece produced in the West by Plutarch. It was a result of

²⁰ However, by some Arabic theoreticians and literary critics it is regarded as the first artistic autobiography, cf.: 'Abd al-Karīm al-Ištar, Ta'rif bi-ān-naṭr al-'arabī al-ḥadīṭ, Manšūrāt Ġāmi'at Dimašq 1997, p. 191.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 190-192; Iḥsān 'Abbās, op.cit., p. 53-67 and 130-139.

²² Cf. I.J. Kračkowskij, Ġubrān Ḥalīl Ġubrān. Jego Źiźń i smert, literaturnoje i hudożestwennoje tworčestwo. Sočinjenje M. Nu'ayma, in Izbrannyje sočinienija, Moskva-Leningrad 1956, vol. III, p. 348.

answering the needs of the Arabic countries. It did not derive from or followed the models of foreign writings. The main reason for its creation was the willingness to become familiar with everything which concerned the Prophet and the victory of Islam and the necessity to write down all the information. In this way Arabs became interested in history. Earlier, they did not show a particular interest in associating history with specific time or sequences of cause and effect. Neither did they exhibit any special curiosity in the presence or the past of other nations or religious groups. This kind of "awareness" of history which revealed ancient Egyptians, Chinese, Greeks and Romans did not exist among Arabs.²³ By the time Ibn Ishāq started writing *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, Europe, for the long time, had been producing the lives of saints subordinated to religion and the biographies of rulers serving a historical purpose, supplementing the chronicles, historiography. They held to functions: a moralizing function and a laudatory function. At that time only the lives of some people were regarded as worthy recording. These biographies often were not objective account of reality and we cannot regard them as true and reliable records. The first Arabic and biographical dictionaries were produced at the turn of the 9th and the 10th century. Initially, they were only related to Islam, one hundred years later it was concerned also with a secular aspect of life. More importance was attached to literature, science and art. The rulers were great patrons of the arts. The fact that even the descriptions of the cities historians combined their history with the lives of poets and men of letters proves how important biographies were for Arabs. The medieval Arabic biography was perhaps the most durable genre of literary expression in Islamic civilization, and one which the Muslim most perfected.²⁴ One of the shortcomings of a classical Arabic biography was their small individual-informative value. They reported the information derived from original works of people whose lives they describe but they did not provide any information about family and social background. We cannot find much information about their personal life, neither. The elements of the individual biography in Muslim society were governed by strict rules according to which the description of the personal life stained reputation of both the writer and the subject of the description. In the classical Muslim world there was a strict division into public matters and matters reserved exclusively for an individual person: his personal life, his wife, children, the relatives. Although problems concerning everyday life were the favorite topics of conversations, nobody was courageous enough to

²³ Cf. *Wielka Literatura Powszechna*¹, p. 566-567.

²⁴ *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, s.v. medieval biography.

put it in writing.²⁵ In spite of this rather formal, impersonal nature of most Arabic biographies, they remain extremely important sources for almost all aspects of Islamic history.²⁶ Arabic biographical dictionaries distinguish usually truthfulness and objectivity. The same cannot be told about European, medieval collections of lives. The Arabs developed incredibly their biographical and historical writing within a few centuries. In the West in the long period of “the dark Middle Ages” the same model was copied. Nothing new was introduced to the development of biography. It was only with the arrival of Renaissance and its new perception of man and the world that biography entered the way of growth which it has followed until present times. The 16th century produced the first European collection of the lives of the most famous artists. It is noteworthy that the Arabs were interested in people who were not strictly related to religion and the authorities about five centuries. In Renaissance a great importance was attached to individualism. Biographies resulting from the interest of a particular person were produced. More individual biographies were written. Until then they were not very popular. In the Arabic world the growth of this type of biography was observed as late as the 19th and 20th century. However, in classical examples of such biographies were rare, and these which existed has a panegyric character. Renaissance in Europe produced so-called “intimate biography”. A wide range of materials was used in its creation: letters, documents, diaries, memoirs. The first Arabic biography included such documents as letters of the Prophet to the Arabian tribes, letters with the number of the participants of the expeditions and their names. The 18th century was a “Golden Age” of the development of Western biography (influence of England was of particular importance). At that time biography was widely read. Its reading was a form of relaxation and entertainment. On the other hand, the Arabs had achieved this stage of biographical development a much earlier. They started exploiting the entertaining function of biography in the 13th century. In Romanticism the main issues were feelings, individualism, the interest in history. Many collections of biographies were produced. A completely new form of artistic biography appeared. “The Golden Age” of the development of classical Arabic biographical writing was finished in the 15th century. It resulted from the political fall of the Arabic world. The revival of writing came only in the 19th century. For almost four centuries when the Arabs experienced the period of

²⁵ J. Danecki, *Literatura i kultura w imperium kalifów. Studium twórczości adabowej al-Mubarrada*, Warszawa 1982, p. 49-50.

²⁶ *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, s.v. medieval biography.

lethargy, the art of biography developed in the West. The new forms and types of biography were produced. When the Arabs got acquainted with the Western literature and culture they became familiar also with the Western biography. They started to follow it. The contemporary Arabic biography has nothing to do with classical writing. It exhibits all the features of a report, a diary, memoirs, a short story, a reportage and a novel. It includes a plot, a description, a dialogue and a psychological analysis. In the 20th century the most popular form of biography both in the West and in Arabic countries was autobiography. Pseudo-literary genres developed.

Two thousand years have passed since the appearance of biography. It came into being in different places in the world, in different cultures and in different time. It was a result of an ordinary human craving for leaving the trace of existence in history, especially in reference to people playing an important role in the society. Biography helped to record their achievements in human memory, they paid homage to them. It was created to serve history. It continued or revived the historical events. Biography was a faithful companion and a friend. For people it was a teacher, setting the examples to follow. With time it started to entertain, providing the pleasant experiences. Apart from describing the external features of a person, his achievements and successes, it had some insights into his soul, revealing his greatest secrets. For the centuries it followed the path which provided more or less favorable conditions for its development. It has changed to such an extent that some of its forms are regarded as types of belles-letters. On the basis of presenting and comparing two different pictures of creation and development of biographical writing one can conclude that the crucial factor influencing its development was "the spirit" of a particular epoch: its affinities, love and hate, its views and needs, its perception of the man and political situation at that period. Biographers either drew on the cultural output of their region or were influenced by another culture.