I begin this lecture on life stories with a confession. I had written a perfectly good lecture for this evening -- some engaging quotations, some useful distinctions, a couple of reflective reflections. It was a neat little craft, and it would have got us through the evening perfectly well. But a bit more than a week ago I smashed it up, and now I've made a kind of a raft out of the wreckage. Welcome aboard.

It's still built around the principle on the advertised topic: Virginia Woolf's declaration of the impossibility of biography: 'Biography pretends that a life can be told, when experience teaches us that it cannot. We suppress the knowledge, because we have a need for stories, a need to make sense of lives'. I'll be dealing with each one of those assertions, but now the focus will be on the tension between the two sentences: we really know from our own experience that lives can't be told but we struggle to tell them because we need stories to live by -- and for other reasons too.

The quotation comes from the most electrifying pages by Woolf I've read: her attempt, at the request of her sister Vanessa, dearly loved survivor of the wreckage of the Stephens family, to make a start on her memoirs (she was fifty-eight). So Virginia stole time from the dutiful biography of she was writing (of her friend Roger Fry, at the request of his widow; she was finding it 'a grind') and began, like every creative writing student, to try to capture her first memory in words. Woolf would kill herself four months later, but these seventy-plus
pages about the difficulties of autobiography, and her absolute determination to overcome them, are charged with passionate attentiveness and a kind of exhilarated ruthlessness. You'll find the essay under the title 'Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being*, a collection of Woolf's unpublished autobiographical writings, first published in 1976, republished by Pimlico in 2002.

Why do I doubt a life can be told from the outside?

Well ... why did I smash up my neat little boat? I don't know, but I think it had something to do with something I noticed the last time I read a favorite novel, *Journey to the End of the Night*, written by a delinquent Frenchman called Louis-Ferdinand Céline and published two years before I was born, in 1932. I read it quite often, I don't know why, and this last time I noticed something Céline has his narrator (who is, and is not, himself) say:

'Everything that is interesting happens in the shadows. We know nothing of the real history of mankind'. ['Tout ce qui est intéressante se passe dans l'ombre. On ne sait rien de la véritable histoire des hommes'.] Or, in the translator's racier version [Ralph Mannheil, translator of the New Directions edition of 1983, p. 52]: 'Everything that's important goes on in the darkness. We never know anyone's real inside story'.

As soon as we think about it, surely we know that is true? (As you age, it seems truer and truer.) So why write biographies? You won't be able to find out what matters, except by chance, & then you won't know why it matters. If someone were trying to write my biography, which heaven forbid, they might spot Céline's novel among my books; they might be surprised to find it there. But they would
have no idea what it means to me. And ‘what it means to me’ keeps changing. In earlier readings I hadn’t even noticed that sentence. There might be another sentence lying in ambush, waiting to wreck another lecture. So... if I can’t write my auto-biography, how can you write my biography?

Virginia Woolf completed the Fry biography, dutifully. She wrote the fictional biography of a historical dog, Flush, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's pet spaniel; she wrote a spoof biography, *Orlando*, which was mainly fantasy. Why was she so dismissive of biographies? In part because her reviewing job required her to read so many bad ones, & she loathed their arrogance and artificiality.

Here she is savaging a 'Life' of Christina Rossetti, and lampooning the whole genre:

‘Here is the past and all its inhabitants miraculously sealed as in a magic tank; all we have to do is to look and to listen and to look and soon the little figures -- for they are rather under life-size -- will begin to move and to speak, and as they move we shall arrange them in all sorts of patterns of which they were ignorant, for they thought when they were alive that they could go where they liked; and as they speak we shall read into their sayings all kinds of meanings which never struck them, for they believed when they were alive that they said straight off whatever came into their heads. But once you are in a biography all is different.’

Woolf is being a touch disingenuous here: since when did she think people say ‘straight off whatever comes into their heads’? And good, even great biographies can happen. Hermione Lee’s biography of Woolf is unfailingly respectful of her subject’s mysteriousness and the difficulty of fathoming what she may have thought or meant from what she did or said or wrote. But the objection is telling. Once dead & deprived of the power to answer back, the biographical subject can
be reduced to a puppet made to dance to any tune the puppet-master fancies.

Henry James thought it was death itself which ruined any chance of a lively biography:

‘The hand of death, in passing over [the defunct individual], has smoothed the folds, made it more typical and more general... accidents have dropped away from it and shades have ceased to count; it stands, sharply, for a few estimated and cherished things, rather than nebulously, for a swarm of possibilities.’

A 'swarm of possibilities' in life, transformed by death into a carven monument. Remember that metaphor for the living individual. ‘Swarm’ is wonderful: a buzzing, mobile cloud; a swirling shape in eccentric, unpredictable but visibly willful movement. It’s the best definition I know.

Does death itself still the swarm into a monument? We've all seen the monumentalising tendency at work at funerals, where kin, friends, enemies gather to construct a memorial to the newly-departed. By the time the last drinks go round you can barely recognise what you have to helped create, so smoothed and simplified it is. Which is one reason why I hate funerals so much. It is easy to feel you have been party to a systematic falsification.

That is how a collective memory is constructed. It is a joint labour, so each individual has an interest in maintaining it. Custodians will appear to protect it. But are our private memories like that? When I summon up a lost, loved individual, I don’t see a statue. I see a sidelong glance, the slope of a shoulder, sunlight on a temple; I hear a voice, I breathe the distinctive smell of hair, of skin; I feel their beloved textures under my fingers. I enter an eden of sense
impressions which doesn’t seem to fade with the years.

Does the strength and the sensuous range of my memories have something to do with my aversion to photographs? I don’t take them, I don’t keep them; if they fall into my hands I can’t be trusted not to rip them up. I feel they murder experience at the moment of their taking. Does that mean that people who cherish photographs and (these days) videos actually remember differently from me? Is my experience no guide to yours?

That is the enduring problem with trying to think analytically about the veiled but crucial movements of the imagination -- all those things going on in the shadows. I know what I feel, but I cannot know whether I am idiosyncratic: whether anyone else feels as I do. That is why I must first form these vivid but inchoate impressions into words, which I then offer to a listener, who must then move from the words on the page to the experiences experienced back there in the shadows... Quite a project.

When we move from the personal to the social, the dangers of the biographical enterprise are evident. Think of the rage, the tears, the lawsuits a biography can unloose. The most comprehensive damage-assessment I know is Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. In that book Malcolm, who might well be the most intellectually and morally intrepid woman I’ve come across, investigates the huge and continuing multi-car pile-up brought about when several people, with varying degrees of access to the same sources of information but with different turfs to protect and different axes to grind, decided, more or less simultaneously, to write the biography of the poet Sylvia Plath. Plath was an irresistible subject: a woman who wrote the best poems of
her life and then committed suicide in the handful of months following the break-up of her marriage with the even more famous poet, Ted Hughes. Art, anger, sex, betrayal, death -- what a plot. And it is not over yet. Plath killed herself close to 45 years ago, but the odd car is still ploughing into the wreckage, and we can still hear the occasional cry from the people trapped inside.

Malcolm soberly analyses the biographies, tracks down and interrogates the witnesses, records the cries. She knows that biography, like journalism, is a criminal activity: she maps the entrapments, the misappropriations, the strategic betrayals, the looting of the secret drawers. She has felt the rage of the victim: she was sued by the subject of an earlier biography who made her suffer in ways quite new to her. [See appendix, Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*] She also knows the moral anxiety and the self-dislike which dogs the half-way sensitive biographer.

Yet in the course of assessing those other Plath biographies, she offers one of her own. She also offers her interpretation and evaluation of the conduct of people still living: Ted Hughes, his sister, several other informants. She pops them into the tank for our scrutiny. *The Silent Woman* concludes with an appendix: a long exchange of letters between Malcolm and Hughes where Malcolm tries to rectify an injustice she did him when she failed to decipher a word in a letter, guessed at the meaning, and guessed wrong. Malcolm anguishes over it; does her best to repair it. But does this superbly intelligent woman acknowledge the real insult to Hughes, to be trapped in public view in the magic tank, with Malcolm's second-hand, pieced-together opinions eclipsing his direct experience, and his years of painful reflection? Surely the real injustice was to write about him at all? Yet this intelligent, upright woman goes right on
practising her disreputable trade. She has just published a double-header on that formidable duet Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. I've not read it yet. But I already know there will be tears before bedtime.

Malcolm's own trajectory also interests me. I think her biographical projects are becoming less cool: that they are, increasingly, angled mirrors in which she tries to glimpse her own changing, baffling self. The Stein-Toklas book is apparently a thing of few words -- narrow print, wide margins. Stein-Toklas were famously garrulous, so why so few words? Writing a biography can offer a shadow-biography of the biographer, so what is Malcolm up to? But for tonight the question is: why does she go on writing biographies when she knows how morally and cognitively and legally dangerous the biographical project is?

As for the autobiographical project -- why do so many of the rest of us risk writing and publishing memoirs? Why do we offer up people we know, people we love, for scrutiny and judgement by people we don't know at all? I've done it myself, when I published a kind of accidental memoir called *Tiger's Eye*. I was writing for a private purpose: to hold my self together through the physical and mental deterioration of a severe illness. I was practising a modification of Decartes: 'I can still write, therefore I still am.' I had no thought of publishing any of them. And then I let Michael Heyward at Text take them, sort them, make them into a book. Why? I suppose because I was flattered. Also because, once it was clear I was going to recover, I knew I would have to find some new occupation for this new life I had been given. Also because I thought they would be no risk to the living people close to me because I simply left them out. Of course they minded being left out. It was as if they didn't matter, when in fact they mattered too much and multitudinously to be put into words, or even to be fixed in my mind. They
remained closely-watched, cherished ‘swarms of possibilities’.

I worried about only one thing: the memorials I’d written to my father and my mother. But they were both long dead, and my only surviving sibling gave me permission to write whatever I liked on the excellent grounds that it would be my account, not his, and that his would surely be different. I was lucky. Not many people see so clearly. They want their view to be the only view. So now my limping, inadequate accounts of my parents are public. I feel tranquil enough about my father. It was a child’s-eye view, it was affectionate, and in any case he was a public man. Many people knew him. My mother is different. Like most women of her class and generation, she hid from the wider world in the constricted but safer world of the family house, where she hid from us, too, in a way. Because she was of a reclusive temperament? Because we paid her so little attention? I don’t know. I do know it was only after I had children of my own that I realised how shabbily I had treated her: that, for example, I had left home at seventeen without a backward glance. I wrote about her to make amends for that casual cruelty: to pay her, at last, the respect and the attention she deserved.

And then I found that the people who read what I had written about my unique, irreplaceable mother had knitted her into their own feelings about their own mothers, and that some of them had taken a cold and vicious fictional character who appears elsewhere in the book to be her. I have abandoned my proud, shy mother to strangers. Do I regret that? Of course I do. And yet -- here again the exhausting ambivalence -- I also value, and value deeply, what those readers -- those strangers -- made out of the pages I had written.

As for the social setting, Geelong of more than fifty years ago: I was a child then.
I had no power, no presence. I usually felt myself to be invisible. Therefore my memories must belong only to me. Wrong. Apparently the phones ran hot when *Tiger’s Eye* appeared. I still get letters from people who were implicated in places and events I wrote about. They even remember me. I wasn’t invisible after all.

Conclusion: even our most personal memories are not exclusively our own. They will be plaited deep into the memories of unspecified others. Therefore we cannot accurately assess the consequences of the publication of what we think of as personal matters. We have to acknowledge that both autobiographical and the biographical project can be unpredictably destructive, and for a consequentialist, as I am, that is scary. (If you want to see that destructive capacity in terrifying action, read what Virginia Woolf has to say about her half-brother George, and indeed her father, in ‘Sketch of the Past.’)

And what do we reliably learn from these life-writings anyway? We will never know a once-real-now-dead person, or quite possibly a living person either, as completely as we know Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway, in the tremulous fluctuations of her feelings, the broken rhythms of her perceptions of her world and the people who inhabited it. Woolf takes us into Céline’s shadows of affect and imagination, where the serious action is. We can’t know the fluctuations of our own consciousness nearly so well, because they are not recorded: they flow through and away from us, and they are gone.

There is also the matter of continuity. Who is this vertical personal pronoun, this ‘I’ who speaks? Are you the same person you were ten years ago? Twenty years ago? Forty years ago?

Listen to Christopher Isherwood, from his memoir *Down There on a Visit,*
contemplating his younger self as very young Christopher sets off on his first trip to Europe:

'And now before I slip back into the convention of calling this young man "I," let me consider him as a separate being, a stranger almost... For, of course, he is almost a stranger to me. I have revised his opinions, changed his accent and his mannerisms, unlearnt or exaggerated his prejudices and his habits. We still share the same skeleton, but its outer covering has altered so much that I doubt if he would recognise me on the street.' (Which is a truly chilling thought. What if that little girl in the Geelong of sixty years ago saw me bearing down on her in Malop Street?)

Back to Isherwood as he realises that the 'auto' of the autobiographical project has dropped away with time: that what the present Christopher is writing is and can only be biography:

'The Christopher who sat in that taxi is, practically speaking, dead; he only remains reflected in the fading memories of us who knew him... I can only reconstruct him from his remembered acts and words and from the writings he has left us... In a sense he is my father, and in another sense my son...'

No longer retrieval from the inside -- auto-biography -- but a construction from the outside -- biography. When does our self when young become a stranger to us? That happens deep in the shadows. If it happens. My tentative thought is that perhaps it happens at different stages for different people, and that possibly for some people it might not happen at all. What about those people who sentimentalise their childhoods and who re-enact them tirelessly, shunning any sign of 'maturity'? What about those who recall their youth with a kind of tender intoxication? What is the relationship between memory and creativity there?
Consider Vladimir Nabokov’s pseudo-autobiography, *Speak, Memory*. The lordliness of those imperative thrills me: ‘Speak, Memory!’, as if memory were a long-playing tape only waiting to flipped on to unspool. What actually happens? A magical mist comes floating, wreathing, fabricating sleighs in snow, soft-skinned mothers, impossibly tall fathers, iridescent butterflies, iridescent experience, and we realise that what we are getting is not actuality recorded, nor even the smoke-trails of memory -- the images are too sumptuously articulated for that -- but shards of memory transfigured by the sublime trickery of art. (By the way -- Nabokov insisted his memory was really like that: a long-playing film with sonorous voice-over of minutely recorded sensory experiences. I don’t believe him. I only dare say that because he is dead)

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Both experience and reflection tell us that a life, whether our own or another’s, cannot be told; that the attempt is cognitively precarious, and also morally and socially and possibly legally dangerous. So why do so many of us write biographies & memoirs, and why do even more of us read them? (Autobiographies were Wolf’s favorite reading.) Wolf answers, ‘because we have a need for stories, a need to make sense of lives’. Not a taste, not an inclination. A need. What is the nature of this need?

Collective stories obviously meet social needs. Like those mourners at the funeral, making stories bind people together. We know the power of group stories created within a circumscribed social world -- a family, an Islamist cell, the Collingwood Football Club. We know those stories can generate action in the wider world. As Mr. Howard’s sorry manoeuvres keep reminding us, control over
the concoction of the national story is heavy with potential political advantage. Between nations: Turkey has its own story about what happened between Turks and Armenians in 1915. They call it war. Now the United States Congress has confronted it with a different story: the story called 'genocide'. This conflict over stories about 1915 could have large consequences in 2007.

Group stories are clearly potent. I think stories about individual lives are even more, if obscurely, potent, because they serve more intimate necessities. An idea I want you to accept for tonight because I don’t have time to demonstrate it is that each one of us carries a draft autobiography in our heads, which we adjust from time to time as circumstances require. Psychologists tell us that we probably have more than one: that we will have a preferred story, and also a feared story, about the kind of person we are, the kind of life we are leading, and where we think we’ll fetch up: ‘Am I a wastrel or am I a free spirit?’ (My own suspicion is that we keep in play one or more shadow-stories which will come into brief prominence depending on circumstance and mood.)

The story is always in draft because we have to keep adjusting it to changing circumstances: ‘I thought I was a concert pianist: now I teach piano.’ ‘I married a prince; he turned into a frog. Then he turned into a rat.’ Think about it, and you will discover your current story or stories, tucked away in your head, ready for you to work on when you are lying in bed, alone, in the dark watches of the night.

We don’t invent our stories freely. We belong to particular social groups inside a particular culture, so we will only make sense to ourselves and to others if we select within the repertoire of culturally-shaped lives available to us. It’s not much use me wanting to be a witch-doctor. There are no vacancies for witch-
doctors in Kew.

The drafting process can be tough. Some people have to call in professional help -- psychotherapists, personal trainers. I suspect some other people never manage it, but shuffle and reshuffle their possible stories, incapable of fixing on one. We have to shape and sustain the story we choose in the face of a storm of counter-stories from, for example, other members of the family: ‘but darling, the Forsythe-Smiths have always been doctors’, or a hostile sibling who claims to know your darker nature, and after forty years can still cut you down to size with a glance. We have to juggle the stories we concoct for the games we play in the social world. We have to paddle our individual canoes through a heaving sea of stories.

We not only make stories. We exchange them. Homo sapiens are the only story-telling animal, and she is also the only story-trading animal. I've come to think we are ‘homo sapiens’ only because we are ‘homo narrator’: able to organise individual and group experiences into stories, that most supple, elegant, economical and eminently portable form of communication, and so learn useful things from each other. Think about it. People not only tell stories. They have astonishing skills when it comes to assessing the reliability of the stories being told them. They see straight through confusions and obfuscations, intended or unintended, and they do it in a flash. Does Nell really know what happened in the middle of the football field in the big match? No she doesn't. She was on the fence but she's half-blind. Does Charlie know? Well, he was there, and he would report truthfully, according to his lights. The lights of a one-eyed Collingwood supporter. What if he were reporting on events in Gaza, and his ‘lights’ were those of a practising orthodox Zionist Jew with a confident vision of the deity’s
plan for his Chosen People and, by implication, a lack of plan for the non-chosen? He is honest. He will tell me what he sees. But I for one will not easily believe him.

The dynamic behind our remarkable skills is the human passion (like most qualities, unevenly distributed) to understand, and to be understood by, strangers. It is that passion which fuels our heroic attempts to communicate from and between the shadows. Of course not only by way of words. The aural and the visual arts, ceremonious performances, mime, dance; drums are all vehicles of communication. The attempt to communicate by words somehow strikes me as more heroic, perhaps because failure is so grimly evident. It is certainly more discussable, because we stay within the verbal mode.

I think these talents are survival skills, nurtured throughout the evolutionary process, but of increasing importance now. We have always needed other people’s stories to expand our narrow personal experience. We need them more than ever, now that we live not in small-face-to-face communities where we could watch changing expressions in a shared context, but in a world of never-seen others with whom we must communicate across space.

The identifying human quality is our knack of inhabiting a narrative perspective not our own. There you are, inside your head ... where I can come to visit you, if briefly. To illustrate that, let me tell you a story.

David Malouf’s collection of short stories, Dream Stuff, came out in the same year as Tiger’s Eye, so he was at the Adelaide Festival and so was I. Malouf was scheduled to read in a late afternoon session, and everyone came. It was
hot that day in Adelaide, and blinding hot by five; we waited, wilting, in the heat.
The story he read that afternoon was called ‘Closer’. It’s a first-person story. The voice is that of a girl, a very young girl, barely adolescent, who is willing her adored young uncle to come to where she can see him, even at a distance, even for a moment.

Malouf read without a trace of presentation: just the light, quick voice skimming along the sentences like a swallow. And as the light voice went on I began to feel the tingling chill which is the infallible sign of aesthetic arousal spreading out from the back of my neck through to my fingertips and toes and to the tingling roots of my hair, as I became that young girl, yearning for her uncle with all her adolescent force. 'Dream stuff' indeed. There was silence when the voice stopped. The magic had worked on the rest of the five hundred. Then the applause began.

That is the deep transformative magic of narrative. By admitting us to experiences not our own, it expands and refreshes our lives. In 'real' life we can participate in the inner life of another person only briefly, in moments of love, or grief, or possibly in shared aesthetic delight. In history we do it in pangs -- pangs you live for: 'now, at this moment, I think I see how it was for them.' We pursue it, whether we are reading or writing, in biography and autobiography, hallooing through the thickets. It may only be in art that we can bask in it. The pursuit of the Other, baffled & awkward as it may be, is what makes us human. It might still save us.