Celebrity Bio Blogs: Hagiography, Pathography, and Perez Hilton

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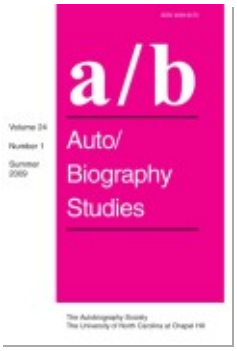

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By Elizabeth Podnieks

Introduction: "Fat Sitting Ducks"

In "The Case Against Biography," Michael Holroyd plays devil's advocate to all those who dismiss, demean, or devalue the genre. "First," he announces, "comes the biographer who writes about the very famous, either the living or the warm dead. This class of biographer keeps company with film stars, murderers and the royal family."[1] "They trade on other people's miseries, dine out on their tragedies, and make the trivial perpetually portentous" (4–5). Originating from the eighteenth century, they remain "the most newsworthy biographers of our own day and perhaps the easiest to attack. Fat sitting ducks" (4–5). Celebrity biographers are indeed everywhere, plying their trade in books, in tabloid newspapers and gossip magazines, on entertainment television shows, and, most recently, online. From the mid-1990s, when the internet began its steady domination of popular culture to the present, websites like *People.com*, *etonline.com* and *biography.com* have proliferated. Devoted to the public and professional as well as the private and personal lives of celebrities, they can now comfortably be referred to as a genre in their own right: online celebrity biography.

There has been a further explosion of blogs focusing on the lives of film and television stars, athletes, musicians, politicians, models, and those increasingly ubiquitous figures who are, in Daniel Boorstin's terms, "*known for [their] well-knownness*" (79). Numbered in the hundreds if not thousands, these blogs constitute their own subgenre: the celebrity bio blog. Examples include sites such as those posted and maintained by media corporations and their in-house bloggers like AOL's *TMZ.com* and Gawker Media's *Gawker.com* and *Defamer.com* as well as by independent bloggers such as *Jezebel.com*, *celebitchy.com*, *jossip.com*, and *Pinkisthenewblog.com*. *Blogger.com* defines a blog as "a personal diary. A daily pulpit. A collaborative space. A political soapbox. A breaking-news outlet. A collection of links. Your own private thoughts. Memos to the world" ("Blog"). Blogs are

"where you write stuff on an ongoing basis. New stuff shows up at the top, so your visitors can read what's new. Then they comment on it or link to it or email you. Or not." Since 1999, when *Blogger.com* was created, "blogs have reshaped the web, impacted politics, shaken up journalism, and enabled millions of people to have a voice and connect with others." Blogs have also "reshaped," "impacted," and "shaken up" the genre of biography, stimulating new areas for critical and theoretical inquiry. One celebrity bio blogger and his eponymous (pseudonymous) website has become synonymous with the genre: *Perezhilton.com*. Hilton, whose real name is Mario Armando Lavandeira, Jr., created what is surely the most infamous, innovative, and lucrative of bio blogs to date. Although dozens of reviews of *Perezhilton.com* and celebrity profiles of Hilton have been circulating in cyberspace and other media over the past few years, none of these commentaries has contextualized Hilton's blog within a tradition of biography or considered him as a member of a specifically biographical profession, as I will do here.

Begun in September 2004, and initially called "PageSixSixSix," Hilton's blog intended, inauspiciously enough, to "comment," according to Hilton, "on pop culture, like you would with your friends" (Lecaro). Now thirty-two years old, Hilton has always been obsessed with celebrity culture, living out his childhood in Miami in front of a TV screen—a position his parents happily indulged—before shifting his attention as a young adult to a computer screen. His rise within the blogosphere is "already the stuff of legend": at eighteen he went to NYU on a full scholarship to study theatre, where he began for the first time to speak openly about being gay. Upon graduation he moved to Los Angeles, tried unsuccessfully to make it as an actor, and took various jobs, including reporting for *Star* magazine but was soon fired. It was at this time that he launched "PageSixSixSix," the blog that became so well-known that it attracted the attention of the *New York Post*, which sued him in March 2005 for infringing on the copyright of its own, original gossip blog "Page Six" (Hedegaard). But as Japhy Grant reports, "the lawsuit only made his site more popular, and employment offers from *Us Weekly* and *InTouch* followed, though he decided it was more lucrative to focus solely on the blog." He was forced, of course, to change its name. According to Francisco Alvarado, "While Lavandeira was visiting his mother in Miami, inspiration for a new name struck during a night of partying on South Beach. He and some friends hit three or four venues, where they were told Paris Hilton would be making appearances." However, "[w]hen the hotel heiress was nowhere to be found, Lavandeira told his friends they were more likely to run into 'Perez Hilton.' And thus

'the trashtastic Cuban cousin of Paris and Nicky,' in Lavandeira's words, was born."

My analysis of *Perezhilton.com* that follows is predicated on the conviction that "trashtastic" though it may be, the blog is certainly worthy of our academic consideration. Holroyd concludes "The Case Against Biography" by promising to investigate how his "fellow biographers would defend themselves" in light of the charges laid against them, "what claims for biography they would make, and in what style they might launch their counter-attack" (9). Launching my own investigation, I want to consider how Hilton slides into place in a historically long line of biographers and can be understood as participating in a tradition dating from the seventeenth century in which the biographical subject has variously been apprehended along a continuum that ranges from hagiography to pathography. Hilton offers us an ongoing group or collective biography of contemporary celebrities and celebrity culture grounded in such a tradition. Further, I want to suggest that Hilton wages a "counter-attack" on Holroyd's imagined "critics" via an agenda that has helped to define and continues to redefine the ways in which the intersections of journalism, gossip, technology, fan culture, and life writing produce a new kind of celebrity biography. His blend of textual, graphic, aural, and oral narratives about and by his celebrity subjects; his engagement with his readers as well as the readers' own participation in his blog; his auto/biographical inscriptions and performances both within and linked to the site; and his use of advertising all signal a new biography that is interactively mediated by biographer, subjects, readers, and the marketplace.

Perezhilton.com testifies in particular to our obsession with celebrities, and whether or not we are interested in or entertained by their comings and goings that we cannot escape their cultural force. Nor can we hold ourselves entirely removed from the practice which drives the blog—gossiping—because as scholars like Patricia Meyer Spacks, Robert F. Goodman, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, John Morreall, and Roger Wilkes have insisted of late, gossiping is an intrinsic feature of what it means to be human in both individual and communal terms. Gossip, which is talk about a subject who is not present, always assumes an air of familiarity and is traditionally a face-to-face exchange between two or three friends but is increasingly understood as a dialogue (oral and or textual) between TV talk shows and their audiences; tabloid magazines and their readers; and, more recently of course, blogs and bloggers. Spacks notes in *Gossip* that gossip can be both good and bad and is, therefore, always ambiguous. However one takes it though, she urges, "the sheer bulk of five centuries' commentary on gossip suggests a phenomenon worth taking seriously"

(26). Most pointedly here, gossip is worth taking seriously because it affords "new ways to read biography" (4),[2] a connection that is especially meaningful given that "Just as gossip inhabits the borderlands of socially sanctioned oral discourse," so "literary species difficult to assess in orthodox critical terms"— like biography— "survive on the edges of what our culture agrees to call 'literature'" (65). A study of a bio blog like *Perezhilton.com* is therefore relevant to understanding and valuing life writing within the new millennial media and within our celebrity-saturated culture.

Spacks theorizes biography through gossip particularly in terms of the art, moral assumptions, and knowledge implicit in and delivered by the text. Working with the premise that gossip is a form of art involving narrative, interpretation, and judgment (13), she shows that the successful biographer, like the good gossiper, is one who has the ability to take the small, seemingly insignificant details of life (the "verbal and visual minutiae" (100)) and weave them into an engrossing tale that gives pleasure by satisfying our human desire to infiltrate the hidden recesses of (especially larger-than-life) people—which is precisely what Hilton does. In a different sense, Spacks positions biography, like gossip, on another "borderland"—between public and private—where the genres evaluate public facts in terms of the private and give public meaning to private information (262). Consequently, the moral ambiguities of gossip parallel those of biography: the material parlayed ranges from the benign to the malicious, though it is typically focused on vice over virtue, and has the potential to threaten or undermine the subject's reputation. Biography and gossip raise ethical questions, such as, How much private information should be revealed in the narratives? and How is our desire for knowledge of the subject measured and justified against the invasion of privacy necessarily taking place?

The biographer and gossiper establish themselves as figures of authority who are responsible for generating meaning out of the material (101–03) and creating an alliance with readers or listeners in the process, who in turn look to find in the biographer or gossiper a reliable guide—gossip is compelling precisely because it is considered, unlike rumor, to be true (119). Ultimately, both genres speak to our relational impulses: biography, "claiming to provide insight into actuality, provides, as does gossip, reassurance about the continuity and the comprehensibility of experience"; people read biography, just as they gossip, "partly to remind ourselves of what we share and to assure ourselves that we can interpret happenings and feelings from other lives" (119). Asserting that gossip is a useful metaphor by which we can interpret biography (118), Spacks emphasizes that biography illuminates "how gossip is good for you, not only by using it as

information and providing the intimate detail gossips delight in, but by inviting the reader into gossiplike relationships, calling attention to the universal hunger for knowledge of facts usually concealed by acquaintances, sometimes even by friends" (261). Such a conclusion validates the study of a bio-blog like Hilton's.

I want to extend the power of gossip as an evaluative tool through a brief look at the relationship between gossip and humor. Just as with biography and gossip, Morreall affirms that humor has in the past two decades become an object of scholarly scrutiny (56), and while biography is not typically associated with joke-telling, I believe that Hilton's blog shows us how humor offsets some of the moral problematics inherent in biography. Morreall's claims about gossip and humor apply just as easily to biography: they are often associated with the frivolous and the mean-spirited; are they "performances" designed to entertain us and move us with delight and shock; allow for the articulation of taboo subjects; and, in appealing to the imagination, offer potentially aesthetic experiences (56–57). Standard devices of humor include sarcasm, as in understatement, exaggeration, and saying the opposite of what one means or intends, and this is exactly the kind of semantic word play practiced by Hilton (62). Gossiping and joking allow practitioners free reign over delivery, affording them a protected space in which they can function, like the earlier court jesters, with impunity. While Morreall admits that gossip can certainly be small-minded and involve gloating over the weakness and foibles of others, he maintains that this gossip is humorless, whereas gossip that is framed by humor "rises above pettiness and viciousness" and is redemptive (63): "In the best humorous gossip about people's folly lies the implicit acknowledgement that folly is part of the human condition." For Morreall, the "most interesting and morally best" kind of humor in gossip is that which is playful, self-reflective, universalizing, and gentle in its judgments (64). Hilton cannot be said to be gentle, but his witty, self-reflexive posturing and jeering in the court of Hollywood allow us to regard his brand of pathography with a chuckle rather than a sneer.

Intersections of Biography, Gossip, Journalism, and Celebrity Culture

Richard Holmes emphasizes that there is a "peculiar magnetism of celebrity" for biography, which "has always been drawn towards the famous, the glamorous, the notorious" ("Biography" 18). Carl Rollyson coined the term Bio-Pop "to describe the legitimacy of popular-culture biography" that concentrates "on popular personalities held in low esteem—chiefly by academics who think they write far more

sophisticated lives of literary, political, and other cultural figures of permanent importance" (*Biography* 243). He goes on to quote Leon Edel, who slags Bio-Pop: "We need not concern ourselves with 'camp' biographies or daubs, the ephemeral figures of movie stars, dope addicts, Boston stranglers; they belong to certain kinds of life histories by journalists in our time." Further, "they are more related to the photographic, the visual moment, the changing world of entertainment or crime, the great and flourishing field of interminable gossip disseminated by the media" (243–44). Celebrity biography is intricately connected to celebrity or tabloid journalism (which is itself a kind of gossip), defined by Colin Sparks as a form devoted to "diversions like sports, scandal, and popular entertainment" and to the private lives of its subjects (9–10). As such, celebrity biography and tabloid journalism occupy the same low rung on the ladder of cultural value.

Edel presciently calls up Hilton's blog with his references to photography and gossip, for Hilton spends his life trolling the web for celebrity images, which he then pilfers from news agencies and other copyrighted sources, uploading them onto his site several times each day, accompanied by his unique form of sarcastic commentary, which I will discuss shortly.[3] Our contemporary conception of celebrity is indebted to the optic. Ellis Cashmore explains that in the first half of the twentieth century, celebrity images were heavily controlled by movie studios, which released celebrity "portraits"—carefully manipulated glossies of stars designed to promote their reputations in a positive, enviable light. However, when in 1962 a zoom lens was used to capture the affair between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, both married to others, the era of the paparazzi was born, making possible publications such as *People* and *US Weekly* (launched in 1974 and 1977, respectively) and leading to the current climate in which stars are "now fair game" (20–21). As Cashmore puts it, "After glimpsing the stars in the raw, so to speak, audiences would never be satisfied with lush, dreamy portraits that had been such staples of show business" (23). Hilton inhabits both the golden age of Hollywood portraiture and the tainted world of tabloid exposé in that he uses his blog to elevate as well as to debase his biographical subjects en masse, illuminating Boorstin's observation that our tendency to worship celebrities is offset by our contradictory desire to "debunk" them through "critical journalistic biographies or by vulgar 'confidential magazines'" that testify to their unworthiness of our attention and admiration (89). These opposing responses are manifested within the field of biography as pathography and hagiography to which I will now turn.

Pathography and Hagiography

Perez Hilton may be the "Cuban cousin of Paris and Nicky," but he is more pointedly a monster child, the bête noire of celebrity biography who greets his visitors accordingly: "Welcome to PerezHilton.com—Hollywood's Most-Hated Web Site!"[4] He announces himself as the "Queen of all media" on his banner but has, appropriately, been renamed by said media the "Queen of Mean" (Hedegaard). Hilton is a bona fide "biografiend," that merciless figure described by James Joyce who hounds the subject to and in death (Rollyson, *A Higher* 6). As such, Hilton plays "bloodsport biography," a game with few rules that produces countless injuries and victims. In "Biography becomes a Blood Sport," Michiko Kakutani argues that the "line between trashy celebrity exposes [sic] and serious biographies of eminent artists, statesmen and thinkers has grown increasingly blurred." In legal terms, Nigel Hamilton directs us to the United States Supreme Court decision of 9 March 1964, which supported the *New York Times* in a defamation suit filed by the government official L.B. Sullivan. A watershed moment for biography, "journalists and biographers became free to examine, record, and interpret the lives of prominent *living* individuals with impunity, so long as there was no reckless or malicious disregard for the truth" (202–03). Note that Hilton attests of his blog, "People come back because I only put stuff up that's true. I like having credibility" (qtd. in Boardman)—a point which describes gossipers in general: they hold power because their information is grounded in fact.

Blood sport biography is a newer strain of pathography, the kind of psychobiography practiced by Freud in his 1910 *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, in which he insisted that the biographer must dethrone the hero from his seat of uncontested worship, a motive characteristic of the gossiper as well. In da Vinci's case, Freud believed the artist's genius could be understood only in terms of his homosexuality, and thus he set about "outing" him, to the shock of Freud's contemporaries (Hamilton 135–41). Freud's text anticipated Lytton Strachey's 1918 *Eminent Victorians*, in which the central figures are knocked off rather than put upon their pedestals by the biographer who, as Strachey describes in his Preface, "will attack his subject in unexpected places" (9). Joyce Carol Oates would later borrow the term *pathography* to signify a biography that privileges "dysfunction and disaster, illnesses and pratfalls, failed marriages and failed careers, alcoholism and breakdowns and outrageous conduct" (qtd. in Rollyson, *Biography* 215). Janet Malcolm contends that the biographer is "like the professional burglar" (8–9), while Rollyson wonders if biography is *A Higher Form of Cannibalism*?

Hilton certainly devours those in his wake. Hedegaard explains: "What he does with his blog mainly is scrawl nasty, snarky comments on pictures of young Hollywood-type celebrities—Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, Nicole Richie—and hand-doodle suspicious-looking little white dots around their noses, mouths and nether regions." Playfully self-aware, Hilton has dubbed himself "P-Nasty" on his blog. Given that his "signature is doodling penises and cocaine boogers on images of celebs," there has sprung up a "Perez Hilton hater brigade" (Alvarado). No wonder: he has a store of words that he scrawls over the photos including Fake, Liar, Mess, Fuck-up, Gross, Hot, Celebretard, and Celebuspawn. He is a name-caller who has produced a moral lexicon to define and interpret the behavior of the (in)famous, as in Unfitney (a bad mother Britney Spears); Wino, Doperty, and Drunkst (substance abusing Amy Winehouse, Pete Doherty, and Kirsten Dunst); A-Roid (steroid user Alex Rodriguez); Sluttyiena (a promiscuous Sienna Miller); and so on.

We can see how he combines graphics with text to deliver a full pounding in the following example. Under the heading "Wino unhinged" he offers a photo of a disheveled Winehouse over which he has scrawled "Feed me crack." His copy below reads: "Wino's craziness came out again last night. In addition to her cracked out appearance, Amy also hit a person. Again!!!! While Amy was out in Camden on Thursday night, a pedestrian touched her arm, apparently concerned for her health. The individual was a middle-aged woman. And the fact that she grabbed Amy's arm, sent the singer off. Amy gave the woman a hard SLAP and began to scream, 'Let fucking go of me, dickhead.' And as the lady began to walk away, Amy continued to shout at her, calling her a 'fucking bitch' and other pleasantries. She's such a class act, that Wino! She needs to seriously go to rehab and maybe attend some anger management classes too" ("Wino"). Hilton's closing line is typical of his posts in which he offers "critical" commentary on the material presented, using his blogger's pulpit not only to hound celebrities in blood sport but also to sermonize, critique, and judge them.

The blog is composed of a number of regular features that have become, like the doodles and monikers, Hilton trademarks. As biographer, gossiper, and jester, he delights in shattering taboos by uncovering or revealing the worst that can be thought, said, or seen in celebrity life. After posting a picture of actor Javier Bardem picking his nose, Hilton affirms: "We LOVE these kinds of pics! If a celeb is photographed eating, puking, pissing, smoking weed or flashing their bits, we're interested!" ("Dig"). Cashmore asserts that a major reason we are so fascinated with deglamorized celebrities is that in such a "wretched" condition they remind us of ourselves

and so become more interesting to us (22–23), a point echoing John Dryden's 1683 description of biography in which "[t]he pageantry of life is taken away; you see the poor reasonable animal, as naked as ever Nature made him; are made acquainted with his passions and his follies, and find the demy-God a man" (qtd. in Holmes, "Proper" 10). In like manner, Spacks asserts that in biography (as in gossip) we seek to understand "not how human beings might or should be but how they *are*" (119).

Both pathography and celebrity biography have their origins in the earliest forms of modern literary biography like James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791). Boswell's text adheres to Johnson's own call that the biographer should take a warts-and-all approach to the life, representing both the subject's vices and virtues as a means to painting a complex portrait. Acknowledging that Boswell's *Life* is worthy of comparison with Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Holmes concedes that "the tradition of gossip, of aristocratic scandal, of piquant anecdote, also runs deep in the form and arguably goes back to John Aubrey's *Brief Lives*. It is useless to pretend it does not exist" ("Biography" 16).

Aubrey's (1626–97) collection of 462 biographical snippets about the famous people of his day—chaotic observations that were first collated and published in 1813—render Aubrey "the greatest gossip columnist of the seventeenth century: a hanger-on among the rich and famous" ("Editorial"). He is a Perez of the past, like Edmund Curll (1683–1747), the English publisher and bookseller associated with Grub Street in London, the hub where the so-called hack writers of all ilk gathered to pen their lowbrow texts. Curll gained infamy for commissioning scandalous, often inaccurate, and usually libelous biographies of the newly deceased. John Arbuthnot would later comment that due to Curll, biography had become "one of the new terrors of death" (qtd. in Rollyson, *A Higher* 5)—just as Hilton is "one of the new terrors" of new media.

Though not as frightening, Boswell is described by Hamilton as a "libertine author" who employed a "journalistic, gossipy" style to deliver personal details about Johnson (94), and not surprisingly Spacks uses Boswell to illustrate her reading of the genre through gossip (95–104). Johnson, too, reveals a taste for gossip and scandal in his *Lives of the Poets* (1779–81), a collection of fifty-two mini bio-critical essays about poets from the seventeenth century to his present. Of special note is his chapter on the murderer, debtor, and minor poet Richard Savage, which had previously been published independently as *Life of Richard Savage* (1744). For Holmes, this text is "the first great literary biography in English," which "takes scandalous materials—an adultery case among the aristocracy, a birthright

claim, a blackmail campaign, a murder trial, an obscenity charge, a backstreet nightlife existence, and a prison death—and turns them into a meditation on virtue" ("Biography" 21). I am not suggesting that celebrity bio bloggers approach their material with Johnson's philosophical bent, but I want to underscore that the fascination with the scandalous and the (in)famous informs the agenda of many kinds of biographers.

The biography I have been discussing so far is the antithesis of hagiography. Referring to the lives of Christian saints, hagiography dominated the biography genre from the Middle Ages on (Hamilton 52). Hagiography elevates and worships its subjects, revealing only their virtues in excessive, exaggerated tones, and is precisely the sort of narrative which Johnson and Boswell reacted against. Hagiography made an impressive come-back in the Victorian period, which saw its practitioners suppress or ignore material that in any way would have cast the heroic subject in a negative, sensational, or sexual light; hagiography was what Freud challenged when he tackled da Vinci as a "neurotic" genius (Hamilton 136). Called by Ian Hamilton the "keepers of the flame" (qtd. in Rollyson, *Biography* 61), nineteenth-century hagiographers would in turn have their luminous candles snuffed out by a new generation of pathographers, as evidenced by Strachey and the biografiends who followed.

Though a committed pathographer, Hilton is in some ways a hagiographer who acknowledges his dual role in language that echoes the "keeper of the flame" metaphor, above: "I think what I do is noble. . . . I shine the light on celebrities behaving badly, and I also shine the light on those that get it right. And those that get it right, I applaud" (Chang). There are some celebrities who have not merely escaped his pungent wrath but have earned a special place in his pantheon of greats or favorites, such as his namesake Paris Hilton, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, Christina Aguilera, Anne Hathaway, Madonna, and Oprah, to name a few. For instance, he calls Madonna "the greatest icon and biggest hitmaker of our time" ("In Celebration"), thanking her "for enriching our life and making the world a much better place too! Xoxo" ("Today's"). And under the tag "inspiration," he writes: "Brad Pitt is going green and helping even more people. Poppa Pitt has teamed up with skin care company Kiehl's to provide 'green' grooming products. But, he's not gonna whore out his name or image to do so." Hilton continues, "His goal is to raise money for charity. The sale of the cleanser is expected to raise at least $1 million, or more. Could Pitt get any better?" ("Take").

The Auto/Biography of Perez: "A One-Man Media Conglomerate"

Perezhilton.com can be further understood in terms of how a biographer's own life and self is embedded or reflected in his or her text, points which scholars now generally acknowledge lead biography away from claims to being an objective, disinterested genre, and thus making its connection to gossip more explicit.[5] Hilton states in one interview that, "Celebrities are just so crazy. They live in these bubbles and surround themselves with enablers" (Hedegaard). His job is to burst these bubbles and cut pop culture heroes down to size, ala Strachey and others. His agenda is informed by humor rather than hatred, though, as he elaborates: "I'm entertaining and informing, satirizing yet celebrating. It's how I express myself. If I couldn't do it, it'd be like my tongue was ripped out" (Hedegaard). His autobiographical motive thus intersects with his biographical one.

Hilton goes on to contend, "I think I'm making the world a better place. I think what I do is good. I think what I do is noble" (Hedegaard). One of his most controversial acts of nobility is his "moral crusade," as he puts it, to out gay celebrities such as he has done with Lance Bass from the former band N'Sync and Neil Patrick Harris from the TV show "Doogie Howser." Himself gay, Hilton is motivated by autobiographical interests: "In my own way, subserviently, I am trying to make the world a better place. . . . I also believe the only way we're gonna have change is with visibility. And if I have to drag some people screaming out of the closet, then I will" (Grant). Hilton is by no means the first biographer to delve into hidden sexualities—recall Freud's "outing" of da Vinci. In addition, Hilton follows in the footsteps of one of the most respected practitioners of the genre: Michael Holroyd, who outed Strachey. Although Hilton lacks the scholarly apparatus of a Holroyd, to be sure, Hilton's insistence that his subversive tactics are beneficial echoes with Hamilton's conclusion that Holroyd's text won "effusions of praise, not only from homosexuals identifying with Strachey as their outed hero, but from fellow biographers who were pleased to see the dismantling of a sort of literary Berlin Wall" (254).

In addressing "the complicated and subtle question of empathy," Holmes wonders, "[w]hy is a biographer drawn to particular subjects" and "what element of suppressed autobiography is involved"? ("Biography" 19). Noble causes aside, Hilton's motive as a celebrity bio blogger is ego-driven, a function of his own unsuppressed hunger for fame. He turned to his blog only after unsuccessful attempts to become an actor, but his theatrical bent led him to his most unexpected and profitable lead role, that of Queen of all media. He began his site

at the moment when blogging hitched a ride on the celebrity wagon, and he has now become as well-known as the people he blurbs.

The auto/biographical strain goes back, perhaps not surprisingly, to Aubrey, who wrote about the people he knew or personally observed, a subjective perspective informing the work of Boswell and Johnson as well. Hilton's blog is likewise in part a diary about Hilton himself. It offers, for instance, links to "PerezTV" and "Personally Perez," sections of the blog that include, among other things, video clips made by Hilton in which he talks to his fans about topics ranging from his birthday party plans to his dog, and announcements and press releases indicating where and how Hilton has been referenced in the media. He casts autobiography as advertising in that he provides links to and blogs about the extraordinary successes he has achieved as a spin-off from his blogging persona, including his VH1 TV show "What Perez Sez," the clothing line "Perez Hilton For Hot Topic," a record label with Warner Brothers Records, the radio show "Radio Perez," the book *Red Carpet Suicide*, and movie deals in the works. In short, just as the blog has led him to become "a one-man media conglomerate" (Alvarado), so he uses the blog to perpetuate himself as such.

Hilton is aware that his online identity is a construct, replying to one interviewer: "So what if some people hate Perez. I don't care. . . . For one thing, I'm a character. Perez is the one to tear people down. For another, at first I thought it was really lame to go out and call myself Perez. Now, I embrace it. Perez has brought me opportunity . . . Perez has made my life better" (Hedegaard). His blog thus exemplifies the kind of contemporary auto/biography described by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson: "We make icons of ourselves through identification with consumer lines that constitute ready-made, wholesale identities" (3). Martin Danahay situates the autobiography by former TV talk-show host Kathie Lee Gifford within this context, showing how, in her text as on her program, she performs "the commodification of her own life" (117) such that for her identity itself "is a business" (123). Gifford's autobiography "attests to the power of television in American culture to prepackage identity" (128) just as Hilton's blog attests to the similar power of the Internet; for Hilton, there is no separation between life and blog (or self and business), illuminating the commodified status of life writing today.

Hilton has become a brand so profitable that he has entered into a symbiotic relationship with marketers who are eager to associate their products with his name. Alvarado reports that advertisers pay between "$9,000 a week for one spot and $45,000 for the most expensive package" and that Hilton earns about $250,000 a year

from the blog. Cashmore posits that "The cast of characters that make up today's generation of celebrities couldn't be more saleable if they had barcodes" (2), and the same could be said of Hilton and his blog. He encourages advertisers to contact him and encourages his readers to "Please support our advertisers!" In his role of devil's advocate, Holroyd writes that "What people hate about" celebrity biographers "is that they make a lot of money. For surely they make it in a highly dubious way?" (4). Such a perception is hardly new: Holroyd leads us back to the early eighteenth century when Joseph Addison warned his contemporaries to beware of the "Grub Street Biographers" who "watch for the death of a great man, like so many undertakers, on purpose to make a penny of him" (5). And yet, in defense, biography and the rise of the professional biographer have been made possible only because of the marketplace which has encouraged and sustained the genre and its practitioners from the eighteenth century on (Rollyson, *Essays* 8).

According to Cashmore, fans are "knowing and savvy participants in the celebrity production process" such that, as Joshua Gamson tells us, "The position audiences embrace includes the roles of simultaneous voyeurs of and performers in commercial culture" (qtd. in Cashmore 4–5). Holroyd suggests the biographer works in collaboration with the posthumous subject to produce "one more work" (19), while Malcolm believes that readers collude with biographers "in an excitingly forbidden undertaking: tiptoeing down the corridor together, to stand in front of the bedroom door and try to peep through the keyhole." This collusion is the "transgressive nature of biography" which "is rarely acknowledged, but it is the only explanation for biography's status as a popular genre" (9). Spacks similarly connects gossip—and specifically the variety disseminated in tabloids—to feelings of pleasure and power derived from the gossiper having, and the listeners obtaining, supposedly "insider" information about a celebrity (67–69).

These points lead us to reading *Perezhilton.com* as a collaboration between Hilton and his readers, who are fans of celebrities, fans of Hilton, or both, and who co-produce the blog in significant ways. For instance, on the blog's side-bar Hilton asks us to "Send Tips!" to his email address, immediately announcing that the blog is in part dependant on the contributions of his readers. The material, too, is presented in such a way as to demand participation by the readers who, like the recipients of gossip, find satisfaction in belonging to a group. For instance, after telling us that "[w]ord on the street is that Miley Cyrus is going out with *Step Up 2*'s Adam Sevani," Hilton asks us, "What do you guys think about this pairing?" He received 301 replies to this question ("Miley's"). His "Not So Blind Item" segment

is a regular feature in which Hilton asks a question such as, "What teenage daughter of a superstar couple is living life as a transgender boy???? Now going by the name Stephen, the teen's parents pulled him out of the prestigious Buckley School in Los Angeles and are having him home-schooled to keep him out of the public eye" ("Not"). His readers then engage in a lengthy guessing game, offering up their suggestions to each other (Hilton stays out of it) and trying to prove that their answer is correct. Further, in the interactive "Fill in the Blank" activity, readers are asked to respond to a photo by completing Hilton's text, as in "**Katie Holmes** is trying to send us a message with this outfit. She's saying '_____'" ("Fill"). In such cases Hilton hands over the gossip reins to his readers, who go on to produce a narrative of biographical speculation grounded in multiple perspectives, perhaps with an unintentional nod to the postmodern notion that biography is a quest to find answers and solve riddles and that the subject can never fully be pinned down.

In the recurring section "If You Are Easily Offended . . . .Then do not **CLICK HERE**!" Hilton lures readers into becoming biografiends, for in "clicking here" (which they surely do) they are transgressively "tiptoeing down the corridor," to borrow Malcolm's words (9). Clicking in one case reveals the headline, "The gorgeous **Rachel Zoe**, looking hungry, Sunday in Malibu," and over the image of the fashion stylist Hilton has scrawled in irony, "Do I look Fat?" illustrating his claims that she has an eating disorder ("If "). In a related sense, Hilton often posts photos in a mock-censored manner. For instance, to a photo of former child TV star Danny Bonaduce, Hilton has whited out his crotch, titillating us: "**Danny Bonaduce** was a guest at the Erotic Ball in San Francisco this past weekend and by the look of things, he had a ball (literally). The Vh1 [sic] reality star and radio host went commando and showed off his impressively small penis. . . . If you think you can handle it, **CLICK HERE** to check out the uncensored Bonaduce" ("Who"). Those who take the bait and click on the white spot collude with Hilton in the peeping.

Just as Hilton offers us a bio blog about celebrities, so his readers offer us a bio blog about Hilton himself as a celebrity. Some send in photographs of themselves wearing t-shirts with slogans like "I Love Perez" and "Team Perez," which Hilton uses to decorate the blog, while others attack him the way he attacks the celebrities. For example, after an entry criticizing Britney Spears for dangerous driving, he received contemptuous feedback: "HEY FAT ASSSSS FREAK LEAVE BRITNEY ALONE AND WORRY ABOUT YOUR WEIGHT CUZ FOOL YOU ARE GETTING BIGGER AND BIGGER AND I BELIEVE NO MAN WOULD WANT YOU LOOKING LIKE LIKE THAT . . ." (James). For his part, Hilton does not censor material

about himself: "If I can dish it, I have to be able to take it" (Lecaro). He frequently posts unflattering pictures of his face and laughs that he resembles seedy porn king Ron Jeremy, or TV's frankenstinian Herman Munster, for instance. His blog is thus the playful, self-referential, and universalizing text associated with humorous gossip, and calls to mind the "new" biography practiced by Harold Nicholson who is, according to Virginia Woolf, "as much the subject of his own irony and observation as" his biographical subjects; Nicolson "lies in wait for his own absurdities as artfully as for theirs" (475).

Celebrities themselves collaborate with Hilton when they pose with him for photographs they know will be displayed on his website, or when they allow themselves to be interviewed on his TV show "What Perez Sez"—material that is then incorporated into the blog. Some celebrities go so far as to "pitch" stories to him about themselves (Langewis). Stars gain their desired exposure, and Hilton gains credibility for having access to the subject. This form of interaction can be understood in terms of an authorized biography and also reminds us of the golden days of Hollywood when stars had a hand in controlling their images. In a different sense, Hilton habitually quotes interviews of the stars from other news sources, using their first person voice to authenticate his portraits, while his recurring feature "when celebrities blog" opens up an ongoing dialogue between the blogs and between himself and the stars. The first-person materials cited serve as the new media equivalent of letters and diaries used by more traditional biographers, further legitimizing his biographical project. In addition, he links to YouTube and musical recordings ("Perez cast") whenever possible so that the biographical subject's voice and or performance is literally seen and/or heard.

Conclusion: Collective Celebrity Culture

Hilton's bio blog is ultimately a collective or group one. Traditional examples include the aforementioned *Brief Lives* by Aubrey and *Lives of the Poets* by Johnson while new media variations can be found in websites like *Facebook.com* and *Myspace.com*. According to Margot Peters, group biography involves "the interweaving of a number of lives by one writer to show how they interact with each other" (41). Hilton posts observations about the lives of countless stars in terms of how they are linked by a multiplicity of relationships, experiences, practices, behaviors, and reputations. He counts hundreds of celebrities on his roster, and in shifting focus each day, he testifies to the fact that "implicit in group biography will be the notion that the individual is less than the whole, that the sum is greater than any of its parts" (Peters 41). Note too that the genre's breadth allows for the

representation of both major and minor figures (43), a characteristic intrinsic to Hilton's blog which reports on stars who have established solid careers as much as on those who burn out after their first fifteen minutes. Bloomsbury Group biographer Leon Edel refers to uncovering a "network of human relations" with the form (qtd. in Parke 112), a description that applies to Hilton's eclectic coverage as well as to the World Wide Web as a network that makes Hilton's brand of group biography possible. Edel also calls his portraits a "string of beads" (qtd. in Peters 51), a metaphor that reflects the frame-by-frame structure of Hilton's blog, strung together as it is by paparazzi photos and Hilton's commentary.

In his group biography *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, Henry James emphasizes that in this genre, "The subject is the *period*—it is the period that holds the elements together, rounds them off, makes them right" (qtd. in Parke 112). It is precisely the period of twenty-first-century celebrity culture that holds Hilton's blog together and that is, in fact, its central subject. Surveying the state of biography at the start of this new millennium, Hamilton quotes Paula Backsheider: "Any art that becomes mass culture, as biography has done with television, magazines and numbers of new book series, carries heavy cultural weight" (283). For Hamilton, part of biography's service to culture involves reworking or rethinking the myths a nation builds around its famous personages. Biographers "are aware that they are part of a wave of insistent attempts, highbrow *and* lowbrow, to reinterpret past and present lives on behalf of the current generation" (283).

Hilton is certainly one of the loudest, most forceful mouthpieces for his generation. His blog is visited about 10–12 million times a day and by some "three million unique visitors per month" (Julia Boorstin). He has been ranked #1 (2006), #2 (2007), and #1 (2008) on *Forbes.com*'s Web Celeb 25, "a list of the biggest, brightest and most influential people on the Internet" (Ewalt), and was one of MSN's "11 most influential men of 2007." Tim Stack tells us that in 2007 not only did mainstream media dramatically turn to celebrity blogs for sourcing news stories but also that said media, in its focus on Hilton, contributed to turning him into a mainstream celebrity. Hilton's increased tolerance by and even respectability within the mainstream is illuminated by his announcement that he was invited to the White House Correspondent's Dinner on 26 April 2008 ("Perez").

Authorized to carry some cultural weight, then, *Perezhilton.com* is a study in the life and times of a group of disparate people gathered together under the rubric of fame. As the *New York Times* put it, Hilton has "made photoshopping squiggly boogers and drool marks

on hapless celebrity heads into a cultural touchstone" (Greenblatt). In challenging the myth of celebrity greatness (i.e., that celebrities are the most beautiful, privileged, gifted people in the world deserving of our adoration), he appeals to his readers precisely because he democratizes human folly. At the same time, lapping up his own successes, he proves that today fame is there for the taking, to be manufactured in self-reflexive, hagiographic glory. He has stated that what he does is "noble," but he is also a self-proclaimed "'media whore' for hire" (Grant) who in the zeitgeist of the Internet commodifies all things private within the public realm. Subversive, his blogging breaks taboos; it is grounded in gossip and humor, both of which articulate "values often otherwise unspoken" (12) and allow for the permissibility of the impermissible (Spacks 12, 49–51). His cultural force and relevance is summed up by the performer Lady Gaga: "Perez Hilton is brilliant to me. Because he's taken something that people don't think is valid, don't think is important, and he's made them obsessed with it. People are obsessed with him. They're obsessed with his site, they're obsessed with what he does. They love him. They all love him" ("Quote").

Referring to both traditional and new media forms of the genre, Hamilton concludes that "the myriad biographical depictions we are producing today—artistic and inartistic, noble and tacky—will form the record we leave of ourselves to posterity" (291). Hilton scours the web for his information, feeding off the reporting of others, but he is a savvy web designer who uses innovative graffiti and acerbic commentary to make ironic the tabloidization of our culture. Peters believes that group biography has "great experimental potential both in content and pattern, and its practice promises to expand the scope of biography considerably" (51). *PerezHilton.com* represents just such an experiment. Graphic, aural, oral, auto/biographical, collaborative, and collective, it is a postmodern celebration of and desecration of the life and times of fame today. Hilton's blog supports Spacks's conclusion that "*gossip will not be suppressed*" and that biography, as a form of literature "transforming gossip's preoccupations and dramatizing its operations, testifies to [gossip's] powerful forms of survival" (263). To be sure, "artistic and inartistic, noble and tacky," Hilton has bioblogged himself, and our celebrified culture, to posterity.

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Notes

1. The other two kinds are the historical and the literary or artistic.

2. Spacks uses gossip to read not only biography but also letters and realist fiction. See, Love, too, for how gossip informs seventeenth- and eighteenth-century biography.

3. Hilton has been sued by a number of celebrity photo agencies for copyright infringements in cases which remain before the courts. See "Perez" for a comprehensive summary of the lawsuits.

4. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from http://www.Perezhilton.com will be cited in the text according to date and time of posting. Note, too, that all Internet quotations were (re)accessed on 10 February 2009.

5. See, for example, Tridgell and Yalom

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