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LIFE-WRITING AND LITERARY COMPLACENCY

IT IS not merely a thin voice here and there that credits biographers with being hilarious liars. "Certain fashionable biographies of the present day," declares Edmund Gosse, "deserve no other comment than the word 'Lie' printed in bold letters across the title page." Such an unfavorable tradition indeed has gathered about biography-writing in some quarters that a note of sincerity is usually the cause of special comment; and life-stories of high ethical standards are regarded as quite exceptional. The illuminating remark of Benvenuto Cellini, in extricating himself from one of his difficulties, "bethinking me first of my safety and next of my honor," is perhaps as applicable to the biographer whose conception of life-writing is "the story with an appeal" as it is to the character of the Italian memoir-writer. That a biography should be successful appears to be of far greater moment than that it should be truthful.

The intimate-portrait mania, the outstanding biographical vogue at present, is the manifestation of that eager craving for a new sensation so evident in other aspects of literature. The announcement of a forthcoming volume, "The Mirrors of Anything or Anybody," offering a feast of inner-circle news, any sort of revelation of State or stage secrets of a picturesque character, never fails to bring its thrill even to the blase fictionist. If the details are but stark enough it will be pronounced "a life-like picture." But what dull stuff the journals of Amiel and Eugenie de Guerin are to those who have found in these "mirrors" a reflection of life! The memoir-rage of the Na-

poleonic era appears tame in comparison with our mania for intimate revelations.

Although ours is a period of unbounded enthusiasm for biographical writings of all sorts, too frequently indeed current biographies lack both ethics and art. But perhaps nowhere is there a more regrettable haziness concerning biographical standards than in current literary criticism. Notwithstanding a general lack of agreement as to aims, content, and method, and the easy possibility of finding extremes of views as to the merits of individual specimens of biographical writing, there is, however, a note of finality in critical estimates that gives scant recognition to the apologist's assurance, that "there is no philosophy of undressing in public as yet." The unqualified positiveness, for instance, of the *London Times* in declaring Vallery-Radot's *Life of Pastuer* "the greatest biography of our age" confuses an individual's enthusiasm with supposedly recognized criteria. Such apparently authoritative declarations, capable of duplication with only a change of title in almost every issue of a literary journal, assumes either a perfected system of biographical ethics and technique or the validity of a purely impressionistic view. It would be difficult, however, to find any reputable critic willing to put himself in the position of defending either of these assumptions.

Maurois attempts a portrait of Shelley, and immediately *Ariel* is declared the definitive biography of the poet. Were it not that such confident assurances have been made of every effort to depict the colorable life of Shelley, one not familiar with the psychology of such natures, the background against which it was cast, and particularly the unique quality of his work, might be

induced by such blatant claims as have been put forth to accept the Maurois interpretation as other than a Gallic perversion, with its special ironic stressing of the moral short-comings of the poet. Other literary meteors, from Marlowe to Poe, have had similar pictures painted of them, but usually with a franker admission of fictional purposes. It certainly does not have the life-writing sincerity of Barrie's delineation of his old mother in *Margaret Ogilvy*. The point is not one of interest; but, rather, is this Shelley? It is a weak excuse for failure, to take refuge in the notion that Shelley's life, like that of the much bewritten Blake, is in reality *abiographic*; it is doubtless no more so than that of Goldsmith, of whom we have some half dozen adequate biographies. The lover of Shelley's ethereal verse, I am sure, does not feel that the definitive biography of the author of *The Sensitive Plant* has yet appeared; though, despite certain literary traditions, it will, when the relationship of the biographer to his subject is properly understood.

Such book catalogs as Grant Overton's *Cargoes for Crusoes*, like the prevailing circus-poster type of reviews in so many of the literary journals, would lead one to believe that pretty much the whole current deluge of biographical works conforms to acceptable standards of life-writing. Indiscriminate praise, however, even when more or less obviously serving an end, sooner or later defeats its purpose. All biography is doubtless to some readers more or less interesting; hence, criticism must be an intelligently directed effort to make a proper appraisal of the biographical product in matters of ethics and art rather than the intrinsic appeal of its material. The inherent interest of Pasteur's career, for instance, would likely make any sort of story of his life readable; yet the most pleasing material, if improperly handled, would not constitute a biography which reaches the standards of an adequate life-story. Even "that awful Mrs. Peck," as she has been maliciously

called, can give an interesting account of Woodrow Wilson, but the most commercialized reviewer could hardly bring himself to the point of calling it real biography.

A recent review of Steuart's *Robert Louis Stevenson* appeared under the title of "The Real Stevenson at Last." This biography constitutes in effect, both in the opinion of the reviewer and in the aim of the author, a sort of reply to Balfour's *Life of Stevenson*. It resents the amiability of Mr. Balfour, who has been charged with having suppressed "a very unedifying but most attractive Stevenson in favor of the heroic gentleman who wrote Vailima prayers and abounded in lay sermons." As the contribution of Mr. Steuart is the exemplification of a casual remark of Stevenson, that "it can never be safe to suppress what is true," the reviewer takes his cue from the biographer and declares this to be the "real" Stevenson, with the descriptive term having its usual biographical association of "objectionable" or "immoral." As the incidents that support the thesis of the biographer have little to do with Stevenson's character, we are not surprised to find Sir Sidney Colvin, himself a biographer of Stevenson and a life-long friend, resentfully declaring that he can not accept it as an adequate biography of Stevenson, and that as a whole it is very offensive.

Exactly antithetical views are presented of the character of Anne Boleyn in Sergeant's and MacLaurin's stories of the mother of Queen Elizabeth; and the usual positive critical endorsement are given of each with the air of an unchallengeable right to individual opinion. It is obvious that there can be no ending to biographical travesties so long as biographers regard themselves in the light of creators rather than compilers, and their critics feel that they are interpreters wholly free to exercise their function without obligation to any rules of the game. There is some justification for the cynic's view—

"That glory has long made the sages smile;
 'Tis something, nothing, words, illusions,
 wind—
 Depending more upon the historian's style
 Than on the name a person leaves behind."

There is little apparent effort, however, on the part either of biographers or their readers to formulate any standards by which this department of literature may be judged. The utter complacency of the reading public towards what so eminent an authority as Lytton Strachey calls "the most delicate and humane of all the branches of the art of writing" can, in fact, be explained only on the grounds that too few readers have anything more than the ancient conception of a *curriculum vitae* for biography; and, so, when they find it padded a little, even by the rankest journalistic methods, they believe they have a real biography. But this blight of deliberate journalizing, connected with a tendency towards commercialization to a degree scarcely less than that of fiction, raises the question as to how long the present high enthusiasm for this type of reading can be maintained. Despite the indiscriminate blare of trumpets on the part of the critics, *la vie publique*, whether it be that of Melville's *Nell Gwyn* or the *Woodrow Wilson* of David Lawrence, can no more be treated in disregard of the truths of literary art than Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* or Mrs. Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, if biography is to hold its appeal with the discerning.

What authority have we, for instance, for taking one side or the other in any of the great array of questions raised by practically every important biographical contribution? Who has set the limits of compromising in life-writing? To what extent does the biographer have the privilege of omitting certain biographical material? Is the first obligation in biography to the living or to the dead? To what extent, if to any, is the intrusion of the biographer upon the attention of the reader legitimate? But, really, are any of these questions debatable?

The biographer's duty can and should

be formulated in such a way that both the subject's rights and those of the properly interested reader are not subject to confusion. Effective handling of biographical material requires, in the nature of the task, some of the rarest of literary qualities: the biographer, indeed, must not only evince the vision and generalizing power of a superb historian, but he must be especially equipped with a high degree of analytical skill; and, above all, in his function as a critic, he must appreciate to the fullest Mathew Arnold's objective, 'the preservation of the best that has been thought and done' in the life of the individual, if he wishes to leave the all-important impression of justice, impartiality, and truth upon the mind of the reader.

Though, of course, such elements of technique as purpose, scope, arrangement, and style will lay a heavy hand on the biographer and constantly remind him, that, while the supply of subjects is inexhaustible, the number of heaven-born biographers is limited, yet the main business of biography, as Sidney Lee holds, is to transmit *personality*. Here, doubtless, we are dealing with ideas not easily capable of exact definition. Character-values deal with those things that exhibit the individual's purpose and action, and, very naturally, have a large place in any adequate presentation of a life; but the charm of real life-writing, as distinguished from the mere event-story, consists in the subtle something which has more to do with the individual's manner of living and tastes for life, commonly called "personality." Here lies the true province of biography; centered upon temperament, personality, individuality, and character—the four dynamic terms of real biography—the task becomes one not merely of writing the story of a life but rather of *life-writing*.

Life-writing may be accomplished in a rich variety of dress, and may be as subjective as Jerome Cardan's *The Book of My Own Life* or as purely objective as Huddle-

ston's *Poincaré: The Man of the Ruhr*; but we have a right to assume that whenever the intent is faithfully to depict a life, with personality and temperament as outstanding characteristics of the picture, we have biography—and only biography—however wretchedly the work may be done from the points of ethics and art. The failure of biographers to get this fundamental notion of their office accounts, in a large measure, for innumerable bad biographies and the ever-growing list of commonplace biographies which are at present pouring from the press. But, to me, the worst feature of the present literary anomaly is, that, while would-be biographers are almost as multitudinous as short-story writers, not one of them has apparently made the slightest effort to give us even a little share of the "inner view." The public has a right, not only to an honest, richly complete presentation of the character and achievements of the subject of a biography, setting forth the personality and temperament as true to life as human skill can make it, but also should have available a scholarly statement of the principles of biography, with such a consideration of definition, classification and scope of materials, the historical development of this form of expression, and ethical standards, as is regarded as essential in all other departments of literature.

But this would involve a frank espousal of the claims of biography to distinct aims, exclusive material, and other departmental features, as well as independent problems and methods. This is indeed what eventually the consideration of biography must come to. The idea of separate treatment for biographical literature, of course, strikes across old departmental boundaries and threatens to disturb established institutions. The rut-travelers of literature, though they may feel that the disposal of biography under the head of history, even when labeled "personal," or its distribution among the recognized branches of pure literature, is insufficient and unsatisfactory, stagger at

the difficulties of getting any sort of consistent philosophy of the subject. Walking in the trodden paths, however devious the way, is easier than breaking a new trail. But the values of biographical studies are becoming too well recognized to permit of its present indeterminate position among letters to continue much longer.

Notwithstanding that the popular interest in biographical readings of all kinds is not reflected in critical "studies" nor in sympathetic courses offered by our colleges and universities, it is recognized both within and without academic circles that it is in these transcripts of life that we find not only the incentive to a correct approach to the great works of literature, as well as the triumphs of history, art, and science, but the only dependable cue to their full understanding. Indeed, only insofar as we can know an art-product from the creative point of view can we have any real basis for the belief that we have a wholly intelligent appreciation of it, or think that we can correctly estimate its importance. To neglect, therefore, to make use of the biographical element in the interpretation of a masterpiece of art is to lay a foundation for that obliqueness of opinion which constitutes the chief course of modern critical methods. To realize Burns, Carlyle assures us, we must know his relationship to the society about him and the relationship of that society to the poet. That is the essential thing in the estimate of any man or his work.

It is time the interest of the reading public should be capitalized, not by producing innumerable tawdry biographies, but by the formulation of definite standards by which all life-writing can be properly gauged as to permanent values. Only by such deliberate effort can biography be put on its legitimate plane of production and higher enjoyment. The adequacy of a biography, it should be manifest, must be judged by criteria other than those of fiction and history, for the essential technical details and most other standards for life-writing are

different from these governing mere story-writing and the philosophy of events. The present enthusiasm for biographical reading of all kinds could easily be used with a little intelligence to give this department of literature the permanency it deserves; it all depends upon how persistently literary complacency blocks the way.

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TRADE AND COMMERCE IN VIRGINIA

PART ONE

I. *What the Children Did*

- A. They solved the following problems.
1. How early trade in Virginia affected the location of cities:
 - a. Trade with the Indians¹
 - b. Trade among the colonies²
 2. How the following factors influenced the growth of cities:³
 - a. Location on navigable rivers, fall lines, oceans, railroads, and highways
 - b. Accessibility to raw materials, markets, and labor
- B. On hectograph maps of Virginia they located:
1. Cities studied as types:⁴
Harrisonburg, Roanoke, Lynchburg, Danville, Richmond, Norfolk, Newport News, and Hampton
 2. Surface features influencing location and growth of Virginia cities:⁴
 - a. Brocks Gap, Swift Run Gap, Shenandoah Valley, Valley of Virginia, James river, Rappahannock river, York river
 3. The main railroads of Virginia:⁵
 - a. The Southern, the Norfolk and

Western, the Chesapeake Western, the Virginian, the Seaboard Air Line, and the Baltimore and Ohio

Children wrote for folders from each railroad.

4. National Highways crossing Virginia:⁶
 - a. Lee, Jefferson, and Dixie
- C. They collected pictures to illustrate:
1. The surface features studied
 2. The resources studied
 3. The scenes on highways studied
 4. The scenes on rivers studied
 5. The scenes of industries studied
 6. The means of transportation of today and earlier times
- D. They visited a warehouse and a bank
- #### II. *Abilities Selected for Emphasis*
- A. In English I stressed correct form in writing a business letter.
- B. In reports I stressed correct usage in sticking to the point.
- C. In map-making I stressed complete legends, and accurate location of cities, rivers, railroads, and highways.
- #### III. *Information Gained*
- A. They learned why we trade and the relationship of trade and commerce.
1. Trade occurs when we want something others have and they want what we have.
 2. Trade is the giving of one thing for another. Commerce is trade on a large scale.
- B. They learned how highways influence our trade and commerce.
1. Transportation by trucks is cheaper and quicker than by railroads.
 2. Transportation by trucks causes less damage to goods.
 3. Transportation by trucks is more convenient for towns not situated near the railroads.
- C. They learned that the following factors influenced the location of cities:

¹Otis, *Richard of Jamestown*, p. 29-30; 135-138. Smith, *Our Virginia*, p. 3.

²Rocheleau, *Transportation*, pp. 34-40.

³McMurry and Parkins, *Elementary Geography*, pp. 17-26; 119.

⁴Frye-Atwood, *New Geography*, p. 123.

⁵Smith, *Our Virginia*, p. 30.

⁶Rand McNally, *Pocket Map of Virginia*.