

"... THAT THERE MAY BE GREATER MEN"

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NY CONSIDERATION of biography involves three of the most intangible factors of life and literature—men, methods, and motives. But of these three the greatest is the consideration of the motives of the biographer. The choice of subject, the adaptation of a method, the truth, the beauty of any biography all flow from its soul—the author's motive for writing.

However, a passing consideration of the other factors, men and methods, cannot be excluded from a true appraisal of the all-important element, the author's motive for writing. Biography, to be worthy of the name, must choose outstanding men for its material and treat of them in a manner distinctively its own, for every man deserves an obituary, but comparatively few a biography. In every age such heroes—legions of them—have been found by biographers. In fact it was Thomas Carlyle's opinion that "... there are certainly many more men whose history deserves to be recorded than persons able and willing to furnish the record."

Some of these heroes under the moonlight glow of imagination have become the characters of mythology, while others, not quite divinized, have been made to appear of a superior nature to the remainder of mankind passing through life under the blight of mediocrity. These men whose military, civic or literary prowess has won for them the admiration of their fellows and whose memory merits being enshrined or entombed within the covers of a book, deserve both praise and pity: praise for their deeds and pity for their shades, which will find no rest until the library dust lies heavy upon their tombs.

Military leaders, pre-eminently, have seemed to merit personal histories, perhaps because the "swashbuckling" character of their lives and the patent results of their actions may be depicted in bold, broad and often inaccurate strokes. Undoubtedly, too, because of their intimate relation with public affairs and the reader's innate curiosity to know the "inside story" of the rise of dynasties and the fall of empires, civic leaders have enjoyed similar favor with both biographers and the votaries of the genre of literature they produce.

Literary men, of whom so much has been written, however,

would not seem to fit very readily into the class of those who merit biographical attention by the striking character of their lives. It would seem that the reader should appreciate "King Lear" just as much if he did not know of Shakespeare's adventures at the "Globe," and undoubtedly he should enjoy "Lycidas" more if he were unmindful of the interpretation of Milton's life such as was Mr. Masson's contribution. Since, however, any attention or appraisal is in a sense flattering, writers would seem to have built a Parthenon for one another, adding book to book as stone to stone, until they had constructed a gigantic edifice of mutual congratulation. All would be well, to be sure, if the lives of literary men warranted the reader's attention to such a great extent or if the motives and methods of their biographers were the noblest; but, unfortunately, this has been but seldom the case, for "biography has often been allotted to writers who seem very little acquainted with the nature of their task, or very negligent about the performance."¹ Much of the attention which has been devoted to the lives of literary men might be reserved for those who exert a less superficial and more lasting influence upon culture and civilization, among whom might be mentioned religious as well as civic and military leaders.

Religious leaders, even non-Catholic, however, whose "prowess" is as unique as their influence, are more aptly treated not in a discussion of biography, but in one of hagiography. And while much that might be written of biography would certainly apply to this allied art, the specific and distinctive character of hagiography demands for itself separate and more careful attention, as well as some mention in a cursory treatment of biography in general.

All these heroes are at the mercy of the biographer, who could well expect to be run through with a rapier or sent to the block if the biographee had any redress. The "mercy" of the biographer may be administered in many forms, since the method of treatment employed by biographers is far from uniform. A biographer may with stately dignity merely write a narrative, with a touch now and then of grave eulogy or censure; or he may attempt to depict the "life and times" of the biographee with its customs and curiosities and its manifold influences upon his subject. Perhaps, too, he might write an analytic and philosophic criticism of a man's life and work, or again he may indulge in a post-mortem psychological disquisition—to give in glaciated form the stream of his subject's mental life. In any case, he would feel himself within the field of biography, nor indeed can any

¹ Johnson, Dr. Samuel: Rambler, 60.

valid objection be offered to any of these forms, because everything in biography depends upon the judiciousness of the biographer.

Especially dependent upon the sagacity of the biographer, besides the method of treatment, is the method of composition. There seem to be but two of these: the one exhaustive, the other selective. Since "the biographer has this problem set before him: to delineate a likeness of the earthly pilgrimage of a man,"² he may choose either as best befitting the material at hand. If a biographer should choose the former, the exhaustive method, as far too many of them have, he must relate every fact, real or alleged, which is known about his subject. Everything the biographee did, everything he did not do, everything that others did to him, everything that other people would not do to him is grist for the biographer's mill. He offers, as Carlyle put it, a detailed account "of his effect upon the universe, and of the effect of the universe upon him." A biographer who adopts this method is usually in mortal dread that the critics, those very learned people who always know what is not in a book, will accuse him of omitting or merely treating cursorily the important events of "March 18 . . ." or "June 18 . . ." To avoid such criticism he expends prodigious amounts of energy, belabouring his pages with a myriad of trivialities as well as triumphs which are more soporific than intimate and provocative.

On the other hand, a biographer may choose the selective method. He then accepts as his due the many concessions made to a raconteur and a poet, for "there is no life of a man, faithfully recorded, but is a heroic poem of its sort, rhymed or unrhymed."³ He does not attempt to pull the ugly head and feet of misinterpretation into a mottled shell of details when the critics pass by, but since he can record only a hundredth part of a man's life, he selects significant events and actions indicative of the individual's true character. A biographer who chooses this method is more likely to retain the vitality of his subject, and his tense and tenor is less likely to lose contact with the present. For when heroes begin to assume statuesque poses in the reader's imagination, the vitality of the biographer is low, its reverberations in the minds of men beat more slowly and softly—until at last it dies. A terse criterion for biography may be found in George Eliot's description of a memory: "the past that is";⁴ and when a biography fails to fulfill its stringent requirements it should

² Carlyle, Thomas: *Sir Walter Scott* (London and Westminster Review, no. 12, 7838).

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Eliot, George, *Two Lovers*.

be consigned to the lowest pit in literary Hades—oblivion.

Either of these methods of composition, to say nothing of the method of treatment, demands of the biographer what may be called a "revealing perspective." It is a perspective since it is a vantage point from which the biographer either fondly or disdainfully views his subject, comprehending all and exposing all in its true significance. This perspective, however, is "revealing" not only in matters pertaining to the subject, but in those pertaining to the biographer as well. The perspective of the biographer, his watch tower, where like a muezzin he may watch the rise and setting of the sun in the life of his subject, reveals much about the biographer himself and especially about his motive for writing.

Although it is quite difficult to analyze an author's motives for writing, if it is permissible to judge from fruits in this case, three major and very fluid categories of biographers may be distinguished according to their motives: those who have truth to tell, those who have a polemic axe to swing, and those who have an intellectual or sentimental nest to feather.

The last, who attempt to conceal the truth by unhistorical kindness and to whom nosegay is synonymous with paragraph, flourished during the past century and were the bane of the critics at the time. Dr. Johnson had observed that "there are many who think it an act of piety to hide the faults and failings of their friends even when they can no longer suffer by their detection; we, therefore, see whole ranks of characters adorned with uniform panegyric, and not to be distinguished from one another but by extrinsic and casual circumstances."⁵ But later critics were less benign in their judgments, and they brought about the extinction of so rare, if frequently misguided, a creature as one who praises his fellow. The critics were justified, it now seems, because although knowledge and sympathy are necessary, nevertheless, if these are not coupled with detachment and candor, they tend to degenerate into sentiment and adulation. Many times, it is true, biographers had little affection for their subject, but the conventional forms of biography demanded that they produce a salably lush panegyric. "The poor dear dead have been laid out in vain; turned into cash they are laid out again," was Thomas Hood's lacrymose yet mordant thrust at such a practice. However, because of the untiring vigilance of the critics, biographers who overtly feather their nest no longer chirp under the eaves of contemporary literature. They no longer attract our attention, nor do they deserve extensive considera-

⁵ Johnson, Dr. Samuel, pp. *cit.*

tion in a discussion of biography, except as typical of the awkward adolescence of the art. In the present day these biographers who lavish unrestricted praise upon their subjects are as rare as Eiffel Towers, whereas those who have a polemic axe to swing ride roughshod over the sentimentalities of modern readers.

Styling themselves "debunkers," they seem to take diabolical delight in toppling heroes from their pedestals, and they parade about with the glee of a boy who has found a love letter of his sister when they find a document which disproves a popular belief about a hero. Theirs is a vicious and predacious nature, and especially dangerous since "a man's reputation is not in his own keeping, but he is at the mercy of the profligacy of others."⁶ It is because of the mordant criticism and piercing disquisitions of these biographers that criminalism has come to be considered an occupational disease among biographers.

This effect, however, is but one among many serious changes which biographers of this stamp have wrought in the minds of many readers. They have fed their readers so frequently with the mithrade of disillusionment that their unhappy victims remain unmoved by either the most incisive poignard attack or the grossest tirade against their hero, upon whose clay feet the biographer is often unworthy to look. These biographers defend themselves with the assertion that their task is not to transmit a mere *curriculum vitae*, not simply to establish a chronology, but to probe, discover, analyze and interpret ever more about their subject. While all this must in some degree be conceded to them, nevertheless a reader must be wary lest such a biographer throw the reins of restraint to either the blind horse of ignorance or the wild horse of prejudice, for either will hurl his mind into the abyss of disillusionment and disgust. So frequent and so disastrous, likewise, have been the "Humpty Dumpty" falls of heroes' reputation caused by such biographers, that a reader is now hard put to recognize the biographers who deal in truth. Triviality and formalism of a pernicious sort, because unrecognized, all the miseries of the jaundiced eye and the paralyzed heart, mark and mar the works of the biographers of the "debunking school." They no longer write of men in their proper stature; rather, they reduce the Brobdingnagians of a former age to Lilliputians, measuring them according to current narrowness and incapacity. Riding upon doubt, the biographer, like a highwayman, robs his reader of his faith in God and his fellow men. All these distressing effects and unfortunate changes in

⁶ Hazlitt, William, *Characteristics*.

the attitude of readers are but the result of their forgetting the true nature of man and his end. These results are lamentable but inevitable, for when man's god is a golden calf, his heroes cannot be more than beasts.

The cause of the degraded opinion of individual men entertained by many biographers lies deep in their desiccated idea of human nature. Its metaphysical origins would seem to have been, not an open pessimism, but a Rousseauan optimism which has become cynical. A complete revolution has taken place from the idea that man is essentially good. Idealism had removed the Creator to divinize man but found that the subject was unsuited to the task. Abandoning man, then, as completely worthless because not divine, an accidulated idealism left man's carcass as a prey to the carrion biographers who feed upon the faults and shortcomings of men.

However much modern biography is befouled there is still a great deal that is limpid and worthy of attention. There are still those biographers who have truth to tell, still those who value their subject's reputation and honor above the salability of their biography and still those who have a purpose for writing which is ennobling rather than degrading. Among these biographers whose avowed purpose is to tell the truth there are two classes: those who write merely *ad narrandum*, and those whose immediate object is edification. The function of the former is educational and cultural. They assemble documents, and draw word pictures of past times and distant places, they correlate facts, and attempt to explain their significance. They acquaint the reader with the past—reconstructing, it is true, the glory that once was, and winning the reader's admiration—but their work is sterile of any present or future results. At times, with consummate finesse they depict a vivid scene, but they do not place the reader in that or a similar scene so that he may derive fruit from it. They may outline and describe a course of action, but they fail to move their reader to similar action by the force of their ideas and the moving power of their words. Their lack of purposefulness renders their work barren of fruit.

Those biographers, on the other hand, who write for edification have a certain dynamic character to their work whose reverberations—often more forceful than the thunderclap itself—are felt for centuries. Theirs is a sacred duty. While they tell the truth, they must at the same time raise men's minds and draw men's hearts to greater things. Their method of leading men by example is still the most powerful, the most pleasant, and the best adapted to meet all circumstances and dispositions of men. Precepts prod pride to revolt, but

example is a genial master, obtaining without difficulty the desired results. Those who teach by example seem to teach themselves. They do not bring to bear upon the will the battering ram of ponderous discourse. They are within the city before the passion can sound the alarm to man the walls of prejudice and sloth. They have already adorned the citadel with the un hoped-for beauty of virtue before any barrier may be erected. Biographers who adopt this method realize that

*Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
Not light them for themselves: for if our virtues
Did not go forth of us, 'Twere all alike
As if we had them not.*⁷

The appeal of the biography which tells the truth in an attractive and galvanic manner is universal. To the soul in which may be applied the words:

*Virtue she finds too painful an endeavor
Content to dwell in decencies forever.*⁸

as well as to that soul in a thousand which is striving with all its power to better itself, an edifying biography is of incalculable value. If "biography is by nature the most universally profitable, universally pleasant of all things,"⁹ then surely those biographies which lead men to a higher life are a blessing from God. Of other biographies it may be asked why they encumber the ground, but those biographies which tell the truth and move the reader to imitate worthy heroes bear fruit in every century, if they are pruned to meet the changes of the years. To edifying biographies alone goes the palm that does not wither with the season nor disappear with the publication of a new "best-seller" list. They know a "second spring"; in fact, they know season upon season as generation after generation of their readers bear fruit by emulating their heroes and perhaps surpassing them. Among all biographies they are most deserving of the name, since they treat of preeminent characters in a distinctive manner.

It would seem, however, that biographies which edify are quite unwelcome to most modern readers. Scepticism has made the reader's mind squint and sneer rather than open its eyes in full-faced

⁷ Shakespeare, William, *Measure for Measure*, Act II, Scene I.

⁸ Pope, Alexander, *Moral Essays*, Ep. ii, Lines 113-14.

⁹ Carlyle, Thomas, *Sartor Resartus*, Bk. I, Cr. 22.

amazement and admiration. Despising truth as fancies, readers find themselves in the dark, where fancies breed. When they read modern biographies, grotesque shadows of bestiality and baseness brush past their minds, sending tremors of passion through their entire being. To them the darkness of modern biography is fearful, but the light of edifying biography based upon a true notion of man's nature would be intolerable, because it would destroy the world of dreamed realities. Doubt, to which may be applied Carlyle's words: "the dreariest, fatalest faith, believing which, one would literally despair of human things,"¹⁰ has shut out the enlightening and warming rays of admiration and edification, and no way seems left for inculcating sound thought and ennobling aspirations.

A sound philosophy and a true notion of man is presupposed to the appreciation of edifying biography, yet one of the chief instruments in the promulgation of an adequate idea of human nature is just such biography. Edifying biography is not a panacea for immediately elevating man's idea of himself, but a biographer who has a true philosophic notion of man's nature and his end can do far more than palliate the sore distress which afflicts the minds of modern readers.

Philosophers and literary men must work together to solve this problem. Philosophers who have a sound knowledge of human nature must expound their doctrines to more than an esoteric audience, and they must assist literary men as much as they can by placing at their disposal complete yet simple notions of man's nature and end. Literary men who have imbibed a true philosophic idea of man should in ever-increasing numbers turn their attention to biography. By writing edifying biographies, they may use their art to greater advantage than in any other form of writing.

Readers, for their part, should learn to accept and approve biographies which will enoble them and lead them with greater surety to their last end. For the most part readers must be allowed to select for themselves, once they have learned the principles upon which to form their judgment. Guided by the norms of morality and religion, they should of course, if it is possible, avoid any biography which might be degrading, since a degrading biography would be like an evil associate. They likewise should read faithfully any biography which will enlighten their mind or move them to nobler actions.

For all then, philosophers, literary men, and readers, a sound idea of man's true nature is necessary. Partially founding their work

¹⁰ Carlyle, Thomas, *Heroes and Hero Worship, The Hero as Poet*.

upon this basic knowledge and partially attempting to impart it, literary men should produce biographies which shun the Scylla of polemic axe swinging and the Charybdis of sentimental nest-feathering by maintaining the narrow but certain course of telling the truth—in such a way that it will edify. In doing this they will indicate that their motive for writing is the purest and that they realize that the biographies of great men are written "that there may be greater men."¹¹

¹¹ Emerson, R. W., *Representative Men*.