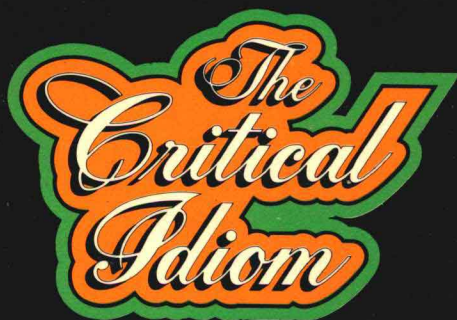


Biography

Alan Shelston



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General Editor's Preface

The volumes composing the Critical Idiom deal with a wide variety of key terms in our critical vocabulary. The purpose of the series differs from that served by the standard glossaries of literary terms. Many terms are adequately defined for the needs of students by the brief entries in these glossaries, and such terms do not call for attention in the present series. But there are other terms which cannot be made familiar by means of compact definitions. Students need to grow accustomed to them through simple and straightforward but reasonably full discussions. The purpose of this series is to provide such discussions.

Many critics have borrowed methods and criteria from currently influential bodies of knowledge or belief that have developed without particular reference to literature. In our own century, some of them have drawn on art-history, psychology, or sociology. Others, strong in a comprehensive faith, have looked at literature from a Marxist or a Christian or some other sharply defined point of view. The result has been the importation into literary criticism of terms from the vocabularies of these sciences and creeds. Discussions of such bodies of knowledge and belief in their bearing upon literature and literary criticism form a natural extension of the initial aim of the Critical Idiom.

Because of their diversity of subject-matter, the studies in the series vary considerably in structure. But all the authors have tried to give as full illustrative quotation as possible, to make reference whenever appropriate to more than one literature, and to write in such a way as to guide readers towards the short bibliographies in which they have made suggestions for further reading.

John D. Jump

University of Manchester

Prefatory note

Where possible I have given page references to readily available editions of major works. Where these do not exist I have tried to give references of a kind which will enable the reader to trace the passages concerned with the minimum of inconvenience.

I would like to acknowledge the help given to me by the late Professor John D. Jump in the preparation of this volume: the interest which he showed went far beyond the call of a General Editor's duty.

A.J.S.

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I

Some problems of the form

Writing, in his *Prefaces*, of the origin of one of his stories, Henry James makes what for him is the crucial distinction between the novelist – or ‘dramatist’ as he calls himself on this occasion – and the biographer:

The subject of ‘The Coxon Fund’, published in ‘The Yellow Book’ in 1894, had long been with me, but was, beyond doubt, to have found its interest clinched by my perusal, shortly before that date, of Mr J. Dyke Campbell’s admirable monograph on S. T. Coleridge. The wondrous figure of that genius had long haunted me, and circumstances into which I needn’t here enter had within a few years contributed much to making it vivid. Yet it’s none the less true that the Frank Saltram of ‘The Coxon Fund’ pretends to be of his great suggester no more than a dim reflection and above all a free arrangement. More interesting still than the man – for the dramatist at any rate – is the S. T. Coleridge *type*; so what I was to do was merely to recognise the type, to borrow it, to re-embody and freshly place it; an ideal under the law of which I could cultivate a free hand.

(*The Art of the Novel*, ed. R. P. Blackmur,
New York, rpt. 1962, pp. 229–30)

Here James, at the end of his career, reverts to that emphasis on the ‘freedom’ of the novelist which he insists on in all his theoretical writings: the biographer, by implication, is not free, but inhibited by the demands of accuracy and attention to detail which, paradoxically, militate against the achievement of a higher form of truth.

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D. H. Lawrence, in his essay, 'Why the Novel Matters', makes a similar claim for his chosen literary form:

And being a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive, but never get the whole hog.

The novel is the one bright book of life.

(*Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. R. Beal, London, 1956, rept. 1961, p. 195)

The biographer is not included in Lawrence's list of those to whom he considers himself superior, but then biographers, while some of them might claim affinities with scientists, philosophers and poets, have rarely aspired to sainthood.

James and Lawrence wrote at a time when the novel might be said to have achieved its highest status as a literary form: it is perhaps understandable that they should have felt free to forget the historical context that might have reminded them that their earliest predecessors had often found it necessary to present their novels as pseudo-biographies. Their priorities, however, have remained by and large unchallenged, for in our study of literature we are, I suspect, still embarrassed by a form which is 'non-literary', if indeed we acknowledge it at all. Lytton Strachey, in his Preface to *Eminent Victorians*, complained that 'The art of biography seems to have fallen on evil times in England ... we have never had, like the French, a great biographical tradition' (Penguin edn., p. 10). Strachey's method of fulfilling that need was, in the fullest sense, partial, but his comment is a valid one. Compared with all the volumes of criticism that the established literary forms have attracted, biography has suffered virtual neglect. The list of genuinely critical studies of the form is short: the examination of individual examples has been the province of the literary historian rather than the literary critic.

And yet if literature has looked askance at biography, biography itself has continued to flourish. The attraction of an insight into

not only the high points, but also the details of lived human lives – what Plutarch, in North's translation, referred to as 'men's natural disposition and manners' – can be evidenced by the statistics of publishers and librarians: the 'common reader' may not now be exactly what Johnson had in mind when he coined the phrase, but if his judgement is to be relied upon, the preferences of the novelist for a form in which he can create his own kind of truth can come to seem like special pleading.

The immediate attraction of biography for the reader is two-fold: it appeals to our curiosity about human personality, and it appeals to our interest in factual knowledge, in finding out 'what exactly happened'. The two aspects are, of course, scarcely separable, but they cover a wide and complicated moral spectrum. Mr Valiant-for-Truth and Peeping Tom are not as easy to distinguish as they might appear: to revert to another Jamesian instance one might ask in which of those roles we are asked to see the narrator in *The Aspern Papers*, that record both of the frustrations of the biographic researcher and of his devastating effect upon those with whom he is involved. Not all biography has praised famous men, and if awareness of the human instinct of curiosity has motivated a great deal of biographical writing our suspicion of that instinct can equally make us suspicious of the form itself. John Aubrey was fully aware of this issue, when he wrote, as his editor tells us, of his own *Brief Lives*, 'these arcana are not fit to lett flie abroad, till about thirty years hence ... for the author and the Persons (like Medlars) ought to be rotten first' (Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver Lawson Dick, Penguin edn., pp. 161–2). It might be reasonably conjectured that as much biography has been written in response to the less noble aspects of human curiosity as in response to a desire for truth of scientific impeccability. One thinks, in this respect, of the range of reminiscential biography inspired by the Romantic poets, for example works like Edward Trelawny's *Records of Shelley, Byron and the Author*, with the unselfconscious give-away in the closing words of its title. Sir Harold Nicolson referred to Trelawny as 'a liar and a cad' and his most recent editor,

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David Wright, points out delightfully that the reference to him in the index of Doris Langley Moore's magisterial biography of Byron begins: 'Trelawny, Edward John, lies and inaccuracies of.' None of this however reduces our pleasure in the memoir itself and Wright's own description of Trelawny as 'an imaginative manipulator of reality' could, as we shall see, apply to biographers with more respectable credentials.

There is ample evidence to suggest that even the most properly-motivated of biographers have always been aware of the stimulus of natural curiosity, whatever their stated purpose may have been. At a time when the Romantic emphasis on the importance of individual experience must have had a more than coincident relationship with a proliferation of biographies, memoirs and reminiscences, Coleridge saw fit to warn his contemporaries against indulging their baser motives.

An inquisitiveness into the minutest circumstances and casual sayings of eminent contemporaries, is indeed quite natural; but so indeed are all our follies, and the more rational they are, the more caution should we exert in guarding against them,

he wrote *The Friend* in 1810, and whatever nobler motives biographers may have produced to justify their activities they tend to refer to the fascination of intimacy of detail about private lives, with a regularity that might qualify the more moralistic elements of their self-justification. Thus Dryden, in his own *Life of Plutarch*, prefixed to an edition of Plutarch's *Lives* published in 1683-6:

... there is withal a descent into minute circumstances and trivial passages of life, which are natural to this way of writing, at which the dignity of the other two (i.e. 'Commentaries or annals' and 'History properly so called') will not admit. There you are conducted only into the rooms of state; here you are led in the private lodgings of the hero: you see him in his undress and are made familiar with his most private actions and conversations.

Dryden justifies this aspect of the form by its humanising effect: it cuts the hero down to size, 'as naked as ever nature made him ... (we) ... find the Demy-God a man', but the capacity to find a moral justification for the activity seems to have been instinctive in such cases. Johnson, one of the greatest of biography's practitioners as well as its greatest subject, expressed the belief that it could be a positive duty to examine the day-to-day activities of the biographical subject:

... the business of the biographer is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents, which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestic privacies, and display the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue.

(*The Rambler*, No. 60)

and it would be difficult to find a more accurate account of the methods of Boswell himself. Johnson, of course, can hardly be held responsible for the glut of 'minute details of daily life' that seem scarcely to have satisfied the curiosity of the later readers of his own century, or for the voracity of the twentieth-century academic biographer with his card-indexes, but his sense of the fascination of total immersion in the life of the subject has been echoed, if without its moralistic justification by, for example, Michael Holroyd in the preface to the revised edition of his massive biography of Lytton Strachey:

My work held something of the excitement of an archaeological discovery. The vast *terra incognita* represented by the Strachey papers seemed like a miniature Pompeii, a whole way of life, that was gradually emerging into the light.

(Penguin edn., p. 17)

Early, however questionable its propriety and however scurrilous in some instances, its effects, elementary curiosity has always acted as a primary motivation for the practitioner of biography and a primary source of interest for its readers.

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Curiosity, however, has rarely been felt to be justification enough. Biographers, like other literary practitioners, have always felt the need for a moral justification for their activities, and like them they have invariably fallen back on the Horatian formula of pleasure and instruction. 'No part of history is more instructive and delighting than the lives of great and worthy men' wrote Bishop Burnet in 1682 (cit. J. L. Clifford, *Biography as an Art*, London, 1962, p. 13), a sentiment echoed by Dryden, in the passage already referred to, where he assures us that, by comparison with 'history and annals', in pleasure and instruction 'it (i.e. biography) equals, or even excels both of them'. The simplest form of instruction comes, of course, when the subjects of the biographies are themselves figures of blameless credentials: hence Izaak Walton's choice in his *Lives* (1670) of Donne, Wotton, Hooker and Herbert as examples for 'the next age'. The use of biography as a source of moral instruction persisted from the earliest medieval lives of the saints to those tomes of filial piety which Strachey with his famous, if scarcely original analogy, abuses so roundly in his *Eminent Victorians* preface:

They are as familiar as the cortege of the undertaker and wear the same air of slow funereal barbarism. One is tempted to suppose, of some of them, that they were composed by that functionary, as the final item of his job.

(Penguin edn., p. 10)

Hagiography is an issue to which we shall return: suffice it to say at this point that, in spite of Strachey's strictures, it remains, if hidden under the cloak of scholarly research, as an element to be contended with in the biography of the current century. What are more likely to have changed are the qualifications for canonization.

Independently of the hagiographic instinct, however, the biographer has always felt able to claim that he is concerned with the 'truth': not truth as a philosophical aesthetic concept, as James and Lawrence would have it, but truth in terms of demonstrable fact.

I have already referred to the fact that the earliest novelists were prone to by-pass the charge that their efforts consisted of the creation of falsehood by presenting the careers of their heroes and heroines as if they had actually existed. Defoe may have had his tongue firmly in his cheek when he opened his preface to *Moll Flanders* with a dismissal of the form in which it was written:

The world is so taken up of late with novels and romances that it will be hard for a private history to be taken for genuine, where the names and other circumstances of the person are concealed,

but the persistence of such devices in less audacious hands, and of the epistolary form in fiction, shows that that the tradition died hard. A little over a hundred years later, in his review of Croker's edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* Carlyle took up the distinction between the novel and biography with a vengeance. Fiction, *sui generis*, he argued, 'partakes, more than we suspect of the nature of *lying*' but, by contrast,

How inexpressibly comfortable to know our fellow-creature, to see into him, understand his goings-forth, decipher the whole heart of his mystery ... Biography is almost the one thing needful.

What was history, for Carlyle, but 'the essence of innumerable biographies'? Carlyle, of course, was acting under the influence of his own self-immersion in Germanic transcendentalism, with its emphasis on the significance of the self: the kind of truth that he was to obtain from studying the lives of real men was scarcely that arrived at by most modern biographers. It is interesting that when Carlyle came to write his own spiritual autobiography in *Sartor Resartus*, he presented it in the form of a fictional manuscript which a mysterious editor claimed to have discovered. The great rhetorician of truth found himself on this occasion using, if in parodic form, a traditional device of the novel genre which he abominated. But whatever metaphysical ramifications may surround Carlyle's emphasis, the appeal to 'truth' rather than

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'fiction' as the basis of a narrative structure has always been one of the heaviest shots in the biographer's locker. Leon Edel, one of the most distinguished of modern biographers, discussing the relationship between biography and psycho-analysis, refers to 'that fine sense of objective inquiry, which both the biographer and the psycho-analyst should – but do not always – cultivate' (cit. Clifford, op. cit., p. 239).

Johnson's 'display' of 'the minutest details of daily life', combined with Edel's 'fine sense of objective inquiry', might seem to provide an ideal formula for the biographer, and certainly, on the face of it, it is a formula that the biographic masterpieces of our own day would seem to have followed. Edel's own five-volume biography of Henry James, Richard Ellman's *James Joyce*, Robert Blake's *Disraeli*, George Painter's *Proust*, Holroyd's *Lytton Strachey* for example, all seem to stand as testimony to such an ideal, in their monumental organisation of the details of their subject's life into a vast total pattern achieved by the detached narrative standpoint. But even here, one is forced to wonder at the degree of detachment. Each of the works cited involved years of patient research bringing author and subject into a relationship of unparalleled intimacy: is it possible, under such circumstances, that the author can stand back as he assembles his material and look at what amounts to a marriage with his subject unaffected by the closeness of the relationship? Edel's phrase a 'fine sense of objective inquiry' has, of itself, a strongly Jamesian ring: in that his work was published over a period of some twenty years it would be surprising indeed if this were not so, but again one is forced to wonder whether, under such circumstances, the scientific method can be sustained unimpaired by the counter-claims of a more complicated attachment to the object of enquiry. And even if we allow the formula as an ideal we should remember that comprehensiveness and objectivity were not always regarded as the touchstones of the biographer's art, and that even when they are, they are not readily attainable. The question that biographers have had to ask themselves in the past has as often been 'how much can the

biographer tell?' as 'how much can the biographer know?' The hagiographic as well as the scientific spirit has its problems and it also has produced its masterpieces.

Set against a historical perspective the hagiographic method can be seen at work predominantly in the Renaissance and in Victorian England, and hagiography is an art which creates as many, if not more, problems for its practitioner than scientific investigation. It was North himself who inserted the words 'the Noble' in the title of his translation of Plutarch – *The Lives of The Noble Greeks and Romans*: the *Lives* are in fact moral examples rather than hagiography. If we are given Alexander and Julius Caesar as examples of a particular virtue we also have Alcibiades and Coriolanus to warn us against inherent flaws of personality. Dealing with classical figures, North was on safe ground, but for the Elizabethans biography was often identifiably interwoven with history and the propagandist biographer would have to move cautiously when approaching more contemporary figures. For his Victorian equivalent the problem was rather different: here the danger was not so much political as domestic. 'Truth' was a Victorian ideal, but so too was discretion and the prolific output of Victorian biography reveals all too readily the strain between these conflicting virtues. In this respect certain aspects of human personality, most notably those relating to sexual behaviour, were obviously forbidden ground. The problem was intensified by the fact that the biographer was often commissioned by the family, if he was not indeed a member of it, and it was not unusual for him to act as literary executor as well. The roles could often conflict: we know for example that Ruskin's literary executors destroyed much of his more interesting correspondence in order to avert the danger of biographical exposure. How could a man like Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, Thomas Arnold's own prize pupil, detach himself in any way from his subject when he had been commissioned to write the official life by the Doctor's widow while in attendance on the family mourning, or Mrs Kingsley compile a life of her husband, the novelist and reformer, without performing extensive acts of

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editorial surgery? But the partiality imposed by such circumstances did not necessarily lead to disaster. Stanley's *Arnold*, despite dismissals by unsympathetic critics, is by no means an unreadable account of a great man's life, while Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, commissioned under more testing circumstances, but still on the grounds of the author's closeness to its subject, has always been acknowledged as a masterpiece of the genre. No one can have felt more intensely the predicament of the commemorative biographer than Mrs Gaskell but she was guided throughout by her determination to make her appeal 'to that larger and more solemn public, who know how to admire generously extraordinary genius, and how to reverence with warm, full hearts all noble virtue' (*The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Penguin edn., ed. Alan Shelston, p. 526). The statement of priorities is unashamedly that of the advocate rather than the judge, and it is not difficult for the modern scholar to demonstrate the selectivity of Mrs Gaskell's method and the partiality of her commentary, but the greatness of the work itself remains to remind us that objectivity is not the only standard by which the success of a biographer may be measured, and that closeness between author and subject – 'my dear friend Charlotte Brontë' – as Mrs Gaskell called her at the outset – can have its positive advantages, not the least of which is a familiarity of personal knowledge and understanding which no amount of academic research can replace.

The modern biographer may feel free of the question of how much he should tell (although Holroyd himself is obliged to quote Strachey's 'Discretion is not the better part of biography' in his own preface as justification for his own activities). How much the biographer can know is more likely to be his major concern. The sources on which he must call need to be searched for: always there will be the hope, possibly the fear, that further material will be unearthed to extend the comprehensiveness of his account or to disturb his developing pattern. Furthermore the biographer cannot always expect the complicity of his chosen subject. Ernest Jones, in his *Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, quotes a letter which reveals