GENIUS AND CHARACTER

By

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With me, as you know, the great men come first, and the military heroes last. I call those men great who have distinguished themselves in useful or constructive pursuits; the others, who ravage and subdue provinces, are merely heroes.—VOLTAIRE.

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INTRODUCTION: ON THE WRITING OF HISTORY

THE most modern of all portraitists has been dead now for no less than eighteen hundred years. I refer to Plutarch, who was—paradoxically enough—a Bœotian. But actually, he was an Athenian in culture, a Frenchman in psychological acumen, English in his Puritanism, and in thoroughness a German. At the time of Trajan he explicitly formulated, and exemplified in his own work, those principles of procedure which we, again today, are attempting to utilize.

"I record, not history, but human destiny. The evidences of vice or virtue are not confined to famous accomplishments; often some trivial event, a word, a joke, will serve better than great campaigns and battles as a revelation of character. The painter employs details of feature and expression to procure an external likeness of the inner man—and similarly, I should be allowed to focus my attention upon those subjects which bear directly upon the spirit, selecting such matter as this to give my portrait form and leaving it for others to write of wars and exploits."

In every age there have been great men who loved Plutarch: for here the student of mankind could find the replica of his own impulses, potentialities and failings. Napoleon carried Plutarch with him for twenty years, often reading in his tent, on the eve of a battle, the life of Cæsar. And even his mortal enemy, the Baron vom Stein, writes of how "great men have found in history an incentive to noble action in their youth, prac-

tical advice in riper years, and in old age—on looking back upon the drama of their own lives—a source of encouragement and solace for all that they have suffered."

After a period which attempted to define man in terms of descent and breeding, we enter upon an era totally alien to the Darwinian mentality; once again we turn our attention to the personality *per se,* the personality almost devoid of temporal coördinates, considering the volume, intensity, and resistance of its vital forces, the restless fluid of its emotional configurations, and the balance between its impulse towards action and its repression through precept. Whereas our fathers asked, "How did the individual harmonize with his world?" our first question is, "Does he harmonize with himself?" Questions of success and responsibility have been shifted from the environment back to the individual, so that the analysis which was formerly expended upon the milieu now seeks to penetrate within. Further, the renewed interest in memoirs is biological: and perhaps the portraitist of today, who is first of all a psychologist, is much nearer to the biologist than to the historian.

And he has correspondingly greater freedom in his method of treatment. He can exploit the dramatic form, or the short essay, the detailed, exhaustive life history, or the editorial. He should be at home in all these methods of approach, and should select them in accordance with the subject and purpose of his work—just as his colleague, the speechless portrait-painter, makes use of oil, crayon or charcoal, etching needle or water color.

His problem remains a constant: it is the discovery of a human soul. Of course, the portraitist reworks the material supplied by the purely scientific biographer and

is always indebted to him. With a kind of naïve cynicism, he appropriates the scientist's laboriously collated facts for purposes of his own: an artist who ransacks the flower beds and leaves a pillaged garden behind for the grumbling caretaker, while he himself goes off with a superb bouquet gleaming in his arms.

For if the philologist begins with an investigation and gradually assembles the picture of a man, the portraitist begins with the concept of a character and searches in the archives for what is at bottom the corroboration of an intuition. But woe to him if he is tempted to improvise, to shift his dates ever so little, thereby encroaching upon the novelist!

For the historical novel is always the unhistorical novel—and for this reason it is the bugbear of the genuine portraitist. To take the liberty of fabrication under the ægis of history does not merely entail a transgression against one's subject; also, it is a deliberate choice of inferior materials, since God is expert, is more imaginative than the poet, and has always imbued the course of His creatures' lives with a deeper logic than even the most skilled constructor can invent. If a writer does not stand with *reverence* before the inevitable sequence of all the dates in a human life, he should never attempt the restoration of a character in history. Let him, rather, remain in the realm of undisciplined dreaming!

It is best that the portraitist should confine himself to characters who have died and who are therefore, as expressed in the vernacular, finished. For often the time, the nature and the circumstances of a death determine the interpretation of all preceding events. The portrait of a living figure can only be correct with reservations; and the last picture that is made of a man, the death

mask, will always remain the truest, although not always by any means the most beautiful.

The nature of a man is summarized in his portrait—and the great portrait-painters with pen or brush have all been great physiognomists. So that pictures, these silent betrayals, provide the biographer with material as valuable as letters, memoirs, speeches, conversations—when the scientific investigator has found them authentic—or as handwriting. For this reason, the biographer cannot obtain adequate results unless he has a picture of his subject to work from.

The same applies to the accounts of a man's daily habits. These were formerly inserted like curiosities, little bonbons for the reader's palate. Anecdotes were recorded skeptically, shamefacedly, and as though by a lowering of professional dignity. Yet for us, the most trivial habit will often suggest the interpretation for some major trait of character, and the accredited anecdote becomes an epigram.

Scientific biographies occasionally close with a chapter designed to show us the hero "as a man"—which is put in as a kind of insert, like the diagram of a battle or the facsimile of a page from a note book. But how is the portraitist to represent his subject except as a man? And what else must he do but trace this man's every thought and act, every motive and impulse, back to the indivisible elements of his personality?

For this purpose, he must have more than the knowledge of a period: he must be versed in the study of man, must be a psychologist and an analyst. He must be skilled, through both intuition and training, in interpreting a character by the symptoms of its behavior. Surely, there are great biographers latent in great diplo-

mats; and biographers could be profitably employed in diplomatic service.

Yet a knowledge of genius is demanded also—and herein lies the most formidable difficulty of all. To understand and interpret a poet, one must have the creative gift; to discuss the man of the world, a taste for worldly living is necessary; the biography of a statesman demands political insight; an understanding of women is called into play when an erotic character is analyzed—in a word, when writing of genius one must draw upon resources in himself which are akin to its dominant characteristics. "I take pleasure in the thought," wrote Vauvenargues, "that the man who understands such great deeds would not have been incapable of performing them—and fate seems unfair in confining him to the mere recording of them."

If we conceive of our task in so wide a sense and are determined to make our accounts of a human life serve also as an instance of the nature of genius, if we see in our hero merely a kind of pretext for tracing the outer limits of mankind, then we are immune to all dangers of partisanship: beyond chauvinism and other prejudices, we face our heroes with impartiality, avoiding—like the two creators of human beings, Shakespeare and Balzac—the strictures of any so-called philosophy of life.

But here a new problem arises. Must the biographer be cold, like a judge, or take an impassioned stand, like the attorney? The purely Platonic attitude seems insipid and dull to us; yet it is unreasonable to demand that the author be wholly devoted to his hero.

Here too Plutarch is prototype and master. By his practice of matching a Greek with a Roman, he can

make evaluations totally devoid of prejudice. He invariably recognizes genius, and remains incorruptible in its presence. With the intuition of the poet he penetrates his heroes' motives, tracking down the sources of their passions and their acts. He senses the significance behind the most imperceptible of signs, and is not misled by any event which happens heretofore to have been given undue prominence. And whereas he studies character without regard for genius, when he is finished genius has automatically resulted.

The French are adept at this art. Among the Germans perhaps the only successful attempt has been Goethe's psychography of Winckelmann, which is very close to a dramatic sketch.

Such are the prototypes of the accompanying essays. The reader will find here men of action and contemplation, practical men and organizers, all of them geniuses, all of them raising matters of issue. The aim is to define that unchanging substance of which these qualities are but the varying aspects. Even when the men discussed are active in politics and have a close bearing upon the questions of our day, the attempt is made to view them from a distance. And though these twenty portraits, which span six centuries and nine nations, have only an internal connection with one another, this internal connection is a strong one.

From sketches of this sort human standards can arise. And precisely this is the meaning and purpose of this work. Our educational intent is to show all readers, and especially youth, that great men are not gods, that they have been gripped by the same all-too-human passions, repressions, and encumbrances as afflict every other mortal, and that they have fought through, re-

gardless, to their goals. In this way one is incited to minimize all shortcomings and to exact of himself the fullest utilization of his powers.

There is another method of approach, now current in the universities, which discusses the genius in terms of his work, whereas we resolve the work in the personality. This method, though it affords the reader the advantages of a system which we lack entirely, compensates for this by its inadequacy to serve as a living model. While psychiatry, with all its arrogance and pretense, can never treat of a complete man, but must confine itself to its own restricted province.

Why write of characters at all, unless an example, or perhaps even a warning, can result from the process! This was always the purpose of the drama, and it should also constitute the aim of the portraitist when he turns to biographic forms.

Thus, to be equipped for this work, we must always perceive the rhapsody of our own life as though it were foreign to ourselves. We must feel in our experiences, however unvaried they may appear on the surface, a parallel or an equivalent to lives which have been marked by great vicissitudes. If we are to make copies of men, we must see ourselves mirrored in mankind. It is not until our own life appears to us as symbolic that we are prepared to discern the symbolism behind the lives of others.

For as we sense the logic of our own life, similarly we will observe with awe the logic of other destinies—and will interpret cautiously the past recorded on that complicated tapestry of human characters in which the hand of God is manifest.

FREDERICK THE GREAT

The bullet that strikes me
will come from on high.

MANY characters begin in perfect balance, are later deranged by the trend of their experiences, and end in complete disharmony. Many harbor within themselves from the very start so deep a sense of conflict that even the most fortunate subsequent developments can not relieve them. But there are few who, after early years of unrest, darkness, and inner dissent, gain clarity and certainty in their advance from decade to decade until at the close of their lives they have attained that harmony to which they had been foreordained by nature.

Frederick is to be counted among these few.

Two propensities endangered him: his interest in philosophy and his predilection for the life of the "man of the world."

Two factors matured him: the anger of his father and the consequences of his hunger for fame.

At sixteen Frederick was simply a frail, pretty boy with long hair meticulously curled and too great a liking for the parlor arts. His father was right in berating him for effeminacy, since no Van Dyck prince belonged on the throne of Prussia. He came to the court in Dresden, where he was caught in a swirl of brilliant festivities. Prematurely sensual, languid and feminine as he was, his first step showed preciosity: he fell desperately in love with a bright racy girl older than he, the beautiful

Countess Orzelska, who could hardly be recognized when in men's clothing. Yet when, at a masked ball, another beauty in thin disguise was pointed out to him behind a curtain, he abandoned the Countess forthwith. And from then on he danced passionately.

Returning to Berlin, he became melancholy and wrote his first love poetry. This augured a kind of life totally unworthy of a Prussian prince. By nature he was anything but bold. His father berated him for acting so disgracefully—yet when Frederick was asked to renounce his right to the throne on condition that he might follow his own inclinations in peace, he firmly refused. Then came two attempts at flight, both of them failures. Could it be wished for him that they had been successful? What would have become of this unsteady young man in England? His harmony was reserved for maturer years: in the meantime he must grope blindly and restlessly, and take his punishment.

He swore that he would never yield. Two months later, in his cell at Cüstrin, he promised under oath to do everything his father asked of him, to obey the king like a vassal. Before his window his dear friend, Katte, was executed. He saw it, and trembled for his own life, distrusted the priest who handed him a glass of water to calm his nerves, distrusted his words of encouragement, taking them as a last consolation before death.

More of a man in every way, he returned to freedom and office. This was the beginning of Frederick's reserve, his rationalism. Despite his aversion to the woman selected for him, he readily accepted his betrothal and marriage as a means to greater freedom. Since the thought of progeny never troubled this intellectualistic man, whose nonconformity made him alien even to his

own forefathers, he remained quite contented without children. He neither expressed a wish to have them by his wife, nor did he become a father irregularly. His unrest derives from other sources.

His credo at twenty: "I have been unhappy all my life. Perhaps I would have grown too haughty had a sudden happiness followed after so much discontent. There is still one escape open to me: a pistol shot can liberate me from the sufferings of this life. I feel that when any one hates restraint as much as I, his hot-bloodedness will always drive him to extremes."

The years at Rheinsberg are generally considered to have been Frederick's happiest period. But they were merely his quietest. At twenty-five he was anticipating the kind of life which he was to perfect twenty years later at Sanssouci. A young man, totally untested, very eager for exploits, and in no position to know when he would be called to action, he had Knobelsdorff carve above the entrance of his country-house: "*Frederico tranquillitatem colenti.*" Pleasure boats on the lake; he himself as patron playing the part of Philoctetes and of Mithridates; the founding of make-believe orders of knighthood, reinstating old French styles of chivalry; the immature discussion of intellectual matters at table; de luxe editions of the "Henriade"; importation from Paris of the newest writings by Herr von Voltaire, whom Frederick called "my golden fleece"; the composition of bad verses in the style of the age—and that is all.

Yet there are traces of resignation: for it is resignation to brand oneself a Platonist when the yearning for happiness is denied a practical outlet. "I belong to the category of meditative men—a status more agreeable than

any other." We can sense the masterly reserve. "More agreeable"? Then why does he call poetry and philosophy merely a "solace" for inclement times, mere "blissful drunkenness"? And can we class among the category of meditative men any one who, with the entire range of philosophy to choose from, confines himself to practical ethics, since it offers the most immediate returns in terms of living? He despised metaphysicians, whom he compared to Chinese mystagogues. And on one occasion, when a volume of Wolf's metaphysics was being handed to him, an ape, one of those exotic freaks which he kept about his rooms, reached forward, lifted the work from his hands, and hurled it unbidden into the blazing fireplace.

He completely misunderstood Machiavelli's "Book of the Prince." It was intended purely for the age in which it was written, being an Italian handbook for conditions around 1500, and it should not have turned up again, two hundred years later, in chilly Prussia. Yet as he afterwards confessed to Voltaire, it was not moral fervor, but the inactivity and boredom of a Crown Prince, which prompted him to write his "Anti-Machiavel." Usually people lay too much stress upon his attachment to this pathetic, cynical genius, overestimating its importance as a revelation of his own state of mind. Frederick saw in Voltaire purely the concentration point of an attitude and a method which were shared by any person of intellectual bent who happened to be living around the year 1740.

The prince was shielded from the over-development of his literary interests by his temperament, lurking in ambush.

His credo at twenty-seven: "I finally begin to see the

dawn of a day which does not yet shine full upon me." And elsewhere: "Yet it must be a pleasure to be king all alone in Prussia!"

At seventeen demonic through restraint, at twenty-seven Platonic through restraint. The synthesis of the two was a king.

Now finally, freed of all obstructions, passion found its channel of escape. It could not be converted into the erotic: "I love women, but my love is very unstable, a mere gratification of desire followed by disgust." It turned into ambition, the hunger for fame. This man was seized and carried away by the love of glory.

He had been king but a few months—and he took the first opportunity, the death of Charles VI, to renew old claims against Silesia. All Europe called him mad, and he himself hardly realized what he was doing. "I plan to strike on the eighth of December, thus beginning the boldest, greatest, and most far-reaching enterprise ever undertaken by a prince of my house." To his friend Jordan: "Old man, the intensity of my passion, the hunger for fame, even sheer curiosity (to conceal nothing from you), some mysterious instinct in short, have robbed me of my sweet repose. I have been lured by the thought of seeing my name in the papers and in the archives of history." This was the Frederick who said of himself that he could never devote himself half-heartedly to a cause: "I must go at it headlong."

On the battlefield he was horrified at his presumption. Before his first encounter, at Mollwitz, he had fled, and did not appear again until sixteen hours later, when all was over and won. He was no general. Frederick was never a military hero, never a man like Napoleon, who loved the exhilaration of battle. He hated the hunt, but