

## CHAPTER VII

### *Literature and Biography*

The most obvious cause of a work of art is its creator, the author; and hence an explanation in terms of the personality and the life of the writer has been one of the oldest and best-established methods of literary study.

Biography can be judged in relation to the light it throws on the actual production of poetry; but we can, of course, defend it and justify it as a study of the man of genius, of his moral, intellectual, and emotional development, which has its own intrinsic interest; and finally, we can think of biography as affording materials for a systematic study of the psychology of the poet and of the poetic process.

These three points of view should be carefully distinguished. For our conception of "literary scholarship" only the first thesis, that biography explains and illuminates the actual product of poetry, is directly relevant. The second point of view, which advocates the intrinsic interest of biography, shifts the center of attention to human personality. The third considers biography as material for a science or future science, the psychology of artistic creation.

Biography is an ancient literary genre. First of all—chronologically and logically—it is a part of historiography. Biography makes no methodological distinction between a statesman, a general, an architect, a lawyer, and a man who plays no public role. And Coleridge's view that any life, however insignificant, would, if truthfully told, be of interest is sound enough.<sup>1</sup> In the view of a biographer, the poet is simply another man whose moral and intellectual development, external career and emotional life, can be reconstructed and can be evaluated by reference to standards, usually drawn from some ethical system or code of manners. His writings may appear as mere facts of publications, as events like those in the life of any active man. So viewed, the

problems of a biographer are simply those of a historian. He has to interpret his documents, letters, accounts by eye-witnesses, reminiscences, autobiographical statements, and to decide questions of genuineness, trustworthiness of witnesses, and the like. In the actual writing of biography he encounters problems of chronological presentation, of selection, of discretion or frankness. The rather extensive work which has been done on biography as a genre deals with such questions, questions in no way specifically literary.<sup>2</sup> A historical sketch of the lives of English poets may suggest the different types of biography and the chief problems of the biographers.<sup>3</sup>

At least in England, biography has been one of the earliest and certainly one of the most persistent forms of literary study. Leland and Bale compiled biographical and bibliographical catalogues of authors in the sixteenth century, and a collection of lives was the standard form of English literary history long before Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* and down to Morley's *English Men of Letters*. In the seventeenth century, Walton wrote the lives of Donne and Herbert, treating these poets as Anglican saints. In the eighteenth century, diverse types of literary biography became established. Boswell's *Johnson* is the most famous example of a literary portraiture which tries, by an accumulation of anecdotes, to recreate a moral and intellectual personality. A different type of biography is best represented by Edmond Malone's *Life of Dryden* (1800), the scholarly accumulation, verification, and examination of documents which yield a series of external facts. It was not till the nineteenth century that attempts were first made to write the biography of an author against his social and literary background. William Godwin's much padded *Life of Chaucer* (1803), Scott's *Dryden* (1808—factually derived from Malone), and Nathan Drake's *Shakespeare* (1817) are early examples. The type doubtless culminates in Masson's *Life of Milton* (1859-80), a work which manages to include almost the whole of the political and social history of the time; but many a Victorian *Life and Times* is similar in intent even though it may not equal Masson's performance in bulk or extravagance.

A new type arises only when conscious attempts are made to trace the ethical evolution and integration of a writer. Dowden's

*Life of Shakespeare* (1875) is one early attempt out of a score, of which Dowden's own *Shelley* (1886) and Froude's *Carlyle* seem much more successful examples. The ethical biography easily passes into the psychological or even psychiatric and psychoanalytical study of the personality of the poet. Such a transition occurred when Victorian standards of ethics seemed to become inadequate and when attention began to turn to the results of medical psychology. Since the success of Lytton Strachey's brilliant biographies, this "analysis" has been done frequently in a debunking spirit; but it can be done, of course, in a compassionate tone of apology or from an attitude of simple scientific detachment. Carpenter's book on Shelley, Krutch's biography of Poe, and Van Wyck Brooks' *Ordeal of Mark Twain* are examples of an approach whose validity can scarcely be denied, however doubtful we may feel about the individual books, which indulge too frequently in the reduction of the complex to the simple.

However, in our context two questions of literary biography are crucial. How far is the biographer justified in using the evidence of the works themselves for his purposes? How far are the results of literary biography relevant and important for an understanding of the works themselves? An affirmative answer to both questions is usually given. To the first question it is assumed by practically all biographers who are specifically attracted to poets, for poets appear to offer abundant evidence usable in the writing of a biography, evidence which will be absent, or almost absent, in the case of many far more influential historical personages. But is this optimism justified?

We must distinguish two ages of man, two possible solutions. For most early literature we have no private documents on which a biographer can draw. We have only a series of public documents, birth registers, marriage certificates, lawsuits, and the like, and then the evidence of the works. We can, for example, trace Shakespeare's movements very roughly, and we know something of his finances; but we have absolutely nothing in the form of letters, diaries, reminiscences, except a few anecdotes of doubtful authenticity. The vast effort which has been expended upon the study of Shakespeare's life has yielded only few results of literary profit. They are chiefly facts of

chronology and illustrations of the social status and the associations of Shakespeare. Hence those who have tried to construct an actual biography of Shakespeare, of his ethical and emotional development, have either arrived, if they went about it in a scientific spirit, as Miss Spurgeon attempted in her study of Shakespeare's imagery, at a mere list of trivialities, or if they used the plays and sonnets recklessly, have constructed biographical romances like those of Georg Brandes or Frank Harris.<sup>4</sup> The whole assumption behind these attempts (which began, probably, with a few hints in Hazlitt and Schlegel, elaborated first, rather cautiously, by Dowden) is quite mistaken. One cannot, from fictional statements, especially those made in plays, draw any valid inference as to the biography of a writer. One may gravely doubt even the usual view that Shakespeare passed through a period of depression, in which he wrote his tragedies and his bitter comedies, to achieve some serenity of resolution in *The Tempest*. It is not self-evident that a writer needs to be in a tragic mood to write tragedies or that he writes comedies when he feels pleased with life. There is simply no proof for the sorrows of Shakespeare.<sup>5</sup> He cannot be made responsible for the views of Timon or Macbeth on life, just as he cannot be considered to hold the views of Doll Tearsheet or Iago. There is no reason to believe that Prospero speaks like Shakespeare: authors cannot be assigned the ideas, feelings, views, virtues, and vices of their heroes. And this is true not only of dramatic characters or characters in a novel but also of the *I* of the lyrical poem. The relation between the private life and the work is not a simple relation of cause and effect.

Proponents of the biographical method will, however, object to these contentions. Conditions, they will say, have changed since the time of Shakespeare. Biographical evidence has, for many poets, become abundant, because the poets have become self-conscious, have thought of themselves as living in the eyes of posterity (like Milton, Pope, Goethe, Wordsworth, or Byron), and have left many autobiographical statements as well as attracted much contemporary attention. The biographical approach now seems easy, for we can check life and work against each other. Indeed, the approach is even invited and demanded by the poet, especially the Romantic poet, who



writes about himself and his innermost feelings or even, like Byron, carries the "pageant of his bleeding heart" around Europe. These poets spoke of themselves not only in private letters, diaries, and autobiographies, but also in their most formal pronouncements. Wordsworth's *Prelude* is an autobiography declaredly. It seems difficult not to take these pronouncements, sometimes not different in content or even in tone from their private correspondence, at their face value without interpreting poetry in the terms of the poet, who saw it himself, in Goethe's well-known phrase, as "fragments of a great confession."

We should certainly distinguish two types of poets, the objective and the subjective: those who, like Keats and T. S. Eliot, stress the poet's "negative capability," his openness to the world, the obliteration of his concrete personality, and the opposite type of the poet, who aims at displaying his personality, wants to draw a self-portrait, to confess, to express himself.<sup>6</sup> For long stretches of history we know only the first type: the works in which the element of personal expression is very weak, even though the aesthetic value may be great. The Italian *novelle*, chivalric romances, the sonnets of the Renaissance, Elizabethan drama, naturalistic novels, most folk poetry, may serve as literary examples.

But, even with the objective poet, the distinction between a personal statement of an autobiographical nature and the use of the very same motif in a work of art should not and cannot be withdrawn. A work of art forms a unity on a quite different plane, with a quite different relation to reality, than a book of memoirs, a diary, or a letter. Only by a perversion of the biographical method could the most intimate and frequently the most casual documents of an author's life become the central study while the actual poems were interpreted in the light of the documents and arranged according to a scale entirely separate from or even contradictory to that provided by any critical judgment of the poems. Thus Brandes slights *Macbeth* as uninteresting because it is least related to what he conceives to be Shakespeare's personality; thus, Kingsmill complains of Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum*.<sup>7</sup>

Even when a work of art contains elements which can be surely identified as biographical, these elements will be so re-

arranged and transformed in a work that they lose all their specifically personal meaning and become simply concrete human material, integral elements of a work. Ramon Fernandez has argued this very convincingly in connection with Stendhal. G. W. Meyer has shown how much the professedly autobiographical *Prelude* differs from Wordsworth's actual life during the process the poem purports to describe.<sup>8</sup>

The whole view that art is self-expression pure and simple, the transcript of personal feelings and experiences, is demonstrably false. Even when there is a close relationship between the work of art and the life of an author, this must never be construed as meaning that the work of art is a mere copy of life. The biographical approach forgets that a work of art is not simply the embodiment of experience but always the latest work of art in a series of such works; it is drama, a novel, a poem "determined," so far as it is determined at all, by literary tradition and convention. The biographical approach actually obscures a proper comprehension of the literary process, since it breaks up the order of literary tradition to substitute the life cycle of an individual. The biographical approach ignores also quite simple psychological facts. A work of art may rather embody the "dream" of an author than his actual life, or it may be the "mask," the "anti-self" behind which his real person is hiding, or it may be a picture of the life from which the author wants to escape. Furthermore, we must not forget that the artist may "experience" life differently in terms of his art: actual experiences are seen with a view to their use in literature and come to him already partially shaped by artistic traditions and preconceptions.<sup>9</sup>

We must conclude that the biographical interpretation and use of every work of art needs careful scrutiny and examination in each case, since the work of art is not a document for biography. We must seriously question Miss Wade's *Life of Traherne*, which takes every statement of his poems as literal biographical truth, or the many books about the lives of the Brontës which simply lift whole passages from *Jane Eyre* or *Villette*. There is *The Life and Eager Death of Emily Brontë* by Virginia Moore, who thinks that Emily must have experienced the passions of Heathcliff; and there are others who have argued

that a woman could not have written *Wuthering Heights* and that the brother, Patrick, must have been the real author.<sup>10</sup> This is the type of argument which has led people to argue that Shakespeare must have visited Italy, must have been a lawyer, a soldier, a teacher, a farmer. Ellen Terry gave the crushing reply to all this when she argued that, by the same criteria, Shakespeare must have been a woman.

But, it will be said, such instances of pretentious folly do not dispose of the problem of personality in literature. We read Dante or Goethe or Tolstoy and know that there is a person behind the work. There is an indubitable physiognomical similarity between the writings of one author. The question might be asked, however, whether it would not be better to distinguish sharply between the empirical person and the work, which can be called "personal" only in a metaphorical sense. There is a quality which we may call "Miltonic" or "Keatsian" in the work of their authors. But this quality can be determined on the basis of the works themselves, while it may not be ascertainable upon purely biographical evidence. We know what is "Virgilian" or "Shakespearian" without having any really definite biographical knowledge of the two great poets.

Still, there are connecting links, parallelisms, oblique resemblances, topsy-turvy mirrors. The poet's work may be a mask, a dramatized conventionalization, but it is frequently a conventionalization of his own experiences, his own life. If used with a sense of these distinctions, there is use in biographical study. First, no doubt, it has exegetical value: it may explain a great many allusions or even words in an author's work. The biographical framework will also help us in studying the most obvious of all strictly developmental problems in the history of literature—the growth, maturing, and possible decline of an author's art. Biography also accumulates the materials for other questions of literary history such as the reading of the poet, his personal associations with literary men, his travels, the landscape and cities he saw and lived in: all of them questions which may throw light on literary history, i.e., the tradition in which the poet was placed, the influences by which he was shaped, the materials on which he drew.

Whatever the importance of biography in these respects, how-

ever, it seems dangerous to ascribe to it any real critical importance. No biographical evidence can change or influence critical evaluation. The frequently adduced criterion of "sincerity" is thoroughly false if it judges literature in terms of biographical truthfulness, correspondence to the author's experience or feelings as they are attested by outside evidence. Byron's "Fare Thee Well . . ." is neither a worse nor a better poem because it dramatizes the poet's actual relations with his wife, nor "is it a pity," as Paul Elmer More thinks, that the MS shows no traces of the tears which, according to Thomas Moore's *Memoranda*, fell on it.<sup>11</sup> The poem exists; the tears shed or unshed, the personal emotions, are gone and cannot be reconstructed, nor need they be.