

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

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THE PERSIAN TALE

"O firm, sound earth," mused Hafiz in the waste,  
 "Strong refuge from all treachery of the sky!"  
 A dull, blunt head the heaving rocks displaced,  
 "Nay," breathed a voice, "But Ruin—here am I!"

### Talks on Criticism

#### II

It is the dominating interest of the writer that has always determined the nature of his criticism. He can no more escape from his age than the preacher, the soldier, or the philosopher. That passionate excitement over the classics which now seems a little absurd to us in the books of the Renaissance, was inevitable in a civilization remaking a world that had not been urbane and sophisticated since the decline of Rome. Horace and Aristotle were more than names, they were symbols. Moral philosophy, which was the great subject of the eighteenth century, controls and directs the literary criticism of the age from Addison to Dr. Johnson. Even profligates and atheists pick up their books by the moral ear and are not content until they have reduced them to moral values.

We eclectic moderns are not so eclectic as we seem. The serious critic, who forswears journalism, scorns to play up to the immediate interests of the reader, and searches only for Truth, is not so free as he thinks. He may escape from the tyranny of the mass mind if he is content to write for the few, but he cannot escape the subtle influences of his period, except by sticking his head in the sands of an earlier century. Like our architects, he must work with steel and industrialism, or produce *pastiches*, lovely and erudite perhaps, but neither vital nor significant.

The serious criticism of the twentieth century is dominated by experimental science. This does not mean that our criticism has to be scientific in the laboratory sense in order to be right; it means that where criticism is alive and vigorous in our day, it is as inevitably attracted toward scientific thinking as the copper brush toward the electro-magnet.

The science that obsesses the literary man has

varied from decade to decade. In the 'seventies it was biology, and from about that date flowed into criticism all those ideas of evolutionary processes in literary forms which now are so familiar that we speak of the *growth* of the short story or the *development* of the drama with no idea that other ages never associated growth in its biological sense with the expressions of art. In the early twentieth century, psychology displaced biology as the literary magnet; and when in our day psychology began to concern itself with the nature of the personality and the causes of human behavior, the new psychology drove out the old in literary circles even while the scientists themselves were still in drawn battle. It is, indeed, the strength and appositeness of a scientific theory, not necessarily its truth, that gives it attractiveness for criticism. The critic is looking for help in his problems of analysis and synthesis. Give him a tool that is useful and he will not inquire too curiously as to how it is made. And he is usually right. Both novelists and critics accepted far too readily a theory of the universality of the evolutionary principle as Herbert Spencer explained it. The biology of their books was often unsound. But the new viewpoint enabled them to learn new things about literature. Overemphasis had the effect of a magnifying glass. They were wrong when, like Zola, they thought they were writing science, but they profited in insight. The same is true of the contemporary popularity of complexes, fixations, and the like. Knotty human nature, approached with these formidable instruments, has yielded fresh fruit. Behaviorism, which as a scientific theory is still dubious, and likely to become more so, as a scientific technique, a method of experiment, has already given most interesting information as to the actions and motives of the mind. In criticism also it is revealing. One does not have to accept the behaviorist philosophy in order to re-study "Tom Jones" in the light of what has been learned of the springs of human action from the behaviorists' experiments.

It is not therefore the accuracy of scientific theory in literary criticism but its dominance in our period which we discuss here. Let the question of truth wait while we point out a fact. It will be found that every constructive critic of seminal influence in our day, whether de Gourmont or Paul Valéry, Croce, I. A. Richards, or the late Stuart P. Sherman, has related himself in vital fashion to modern science—has advocated a psychological, or social, or anthropological, or ethnological, or biological, or economic view of literature, which amounts to reconsidering literature from new angles. This is the reason why pure esthetic criticism—the study and pursuit of the beautiful—has languished. Esthetics is but just coming under scientific scrutiny. It has been left till now a study in absolutes not involved in the new questions of man's senses and their real nature. We have been investigating races, classes, economic influences, primitive inheritances, neuroses, and the flux of matter—not the beautiful; and our criticism has followed the scientists because our critics, being their fellow men, have had the same interests.

The dangers of this pursuit of science—caught often by one leg only—and sometimes, like the lizard, by a tail from which the life blood has already departed, will be discussed later. But before

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### Biography as an Art

By JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS

It is possible that the simple naturalness of the biographic art, originating in personal narration or casual gossip, has prevented it from being considered as esthetically artificial and idiosyncratic as the epic, lyric, drama, novel, or essay. At any rate, with all the pother about other forms, almost nothing has been written about biography as an art. James C. Johnston in his volume\* just issued has made the first elaborate effort to establish it as a separate one worthy of critical analysis and study. In his whole review of the literature in three languages dealing with biography as a form he is, however, able to list only fifteen essays, several of which are merely short articles of a few pages each and others of which deal with autobiography rather than biography proper. In no other field of literary endeavor are we so in need of careful and sanely critical analysis of all the problems involved.

But if biography as a literary form has never attracted the serious attention of the literary critic, it would nevertheless be a mistake to think that any of its manifestations are new. Literary currents ebb and flow, and partly because of the multitudinous changes in the mere mechanics of living and partly because of the substitution of science and the modern languages for history and the classics in education, our new collegians are too apt to measure by decades rather than by ages. If there is any word which more than another is coming to send a shiver down the susceptible spine of a man who has an historical background, it is the word "new," so sweated in literary shops,—the "new history," the "new freedom," the "new biography." There is

\*Biography: The Literature of Personality. By James C. Johnston. New York: The Century Co. 1927. \$2.50.

### This Week



Drawing. By *W. A. Dwiggin*.  
 Quatrain. By *William Rose Benét*.  
 "The Cambridge Platonists." Reviewed by *Paul Elmer More*.  
 "Escape." Reviewed by *Oliver M. Saylor*.  
 "The New Reformation." Reviewed by *Henry A. Perkins*.  
 "Our Times." Reviewed by *Allan Nevins*.  
 "The Counterfeiters." Reviewed by *Theodore Purdy, Jr.*  
 The Palette Knife. By *Christopher Morley*.

### Next Week, or Later

The Younger Generation. By *Frank Swinnerton*.



nothing fundamentally new in any form of biography written at the present time.

It is true that the school which has practised biography for what a recent reviewer has called "monumental or exemplary purposes" has been the most prolific in all periods. Plutarch in his "Life of Pericles" wrote that "our intellectual vision must be applied to such objects as, by their very charm, invite it onward to its own proper good. Such objects are to be found in virtuous deeds; these implant in those who search them out a great and zealous eagerness which leads to imitation;" and for that reason he decided to persevere in his writing of biographies. On the other hand, one must be ignorant of or merely ignore a vast amount of writing in the past to say, as does Robert Morss Lovett, that "only under the influence of modern realism has the biographer been permitted to approach his public on the side of its strongest interest—that in human experience—and to make use of the most exciting part of his hero's experience—that in which he departed from the accepted *mores*."

Such a sentence makes one both question and wonder. Has Mr. Lovett never read the "Lives of the Caesars" by Suetonius? Certainly no "new biographies" have been franker in revealing the most secret sins of their subjects. Or has he forgotten the autobiography of St. Augustine in which he recounts, among other things, his abnormal sexual longings and practices with an openness that only a hardened "new biographer" would compete with? As compared with a few decades ago, we have adopted new methods of selection and emphasis in writing lives, but that is the mere ebb and flow of style as measured by a generation or two, not by the history of the art. Both Woodward and Parson Weems, in their lives of Washington, were heirs of long lines of different methods in the practice of the art. One line of traditional method produced most examples a generation ago; the other produces more today. That is all. The real question comes back, in its only critical sense, to the validity of the two methods and a question of standards.

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Is biography, by presenting a noble life in its noblest aspects, to serve, teaching by example, to incite readers to emulate such lives, or is its chief purpose to be, as Sir Sidney Lee said, to "transmit a personality"? A good deal more may be said, perhaps, for the first view, that of Plutarch and his school, than our present iconoclastic and cynical age may be willing to admit, but as few people at the moment do admit it, we may pass to an analysis of the second biographical goal.

"To transmit a personality." Here we have the crux of the whole problem of biographical writing as most practised today. What is a personality?

In spite of the deliquescence of so many of our old ideas and standards, people are still more or less agreed as to what is noble and fine, or at least as to what was noble and fine before 1914. The Plutarchian biographer thus has his selection of data fairly sharply defined, but the Suetonian of the twentieth century is completely at sea, as is shown by dozens of biographies published in the last five years. Many of these have been announced as "the true" so and so or as showing us "the real man." The writer of this school does not have to decide merely what is a noble deed but the far more complex problem of what is a man. In addition he has the two technical problems of what facts to select among the mass he finds relative to his subject and how to present them.

I have read and reviewed a very considerable proportion of the biographies of recent years and I am convinced that scarcely one of the writers—there are exceptions—has posed and answered to himself the fundamental question what is a man, that is, what are the human qualities which may be considered of the highest intrinsic worth or which serve best to etch in the outlines of a personality? We will, therefore, in part leave aside this question and consider it only obliquely by examining the technical methods employed of late. In the case of practically every modern biographical subject there is a wealth of material relating to the sitter, from among which a selection has to be made by the biographer. It would seem philosophically impossible to make such a selection in order to portray the "true" or "real" man without having settled first the problem of what "a man" is. Nevertheless, the publishers assure us that the trick is constantly turned. On what basis do I find the selection usually to be made? Exactly on that predi-

cated by the reviewer already quoted, namely, that the most exciting part of a hero's career is that in which he departs from the accepted *mores*. But could there possibly be a cheaper or more absurd standard by which to value a man's life? The "accepted *mores*" change from time to time. The complex of *mores* was one thing in the reign of Charles the Second; it was another in the reign of Queen Victoria; it is a different thing, again, in the reign of Calvin Coolidge. Is the serious biographer, whose aim is to transmit to posterity "a personality" or to present for us today a "personality" of the past, to be governed in his selection of facts by counting as most "exciting" or important those which illustrate the points in which his hero departs from the accepted *mores* of his moment? In point of actual practice, what many current biographers are doing is to distort the picture even more by dwelling on the points in which their heroes of the past departed from the *mores* of today. In a sample of this so-called "modern" biography, (which in fact is often simply unphilosophical, unpsychological, and technically poor biography), which I reviewed last year, Russell's "Benjamin Franklin," I found that five pages were devoted to Franklin's hoaxing skit on the trial of Polly Baker for bastardy whereas less than one page was given to his plan for the union of the American colonies; that some of his most important writings were ignored in order to give space to his "Advice to Young Men on the Choice of a Mistress;" and so on in similar proportions throughout his career.

Do I claim that such matters have no place and that the subjects of biography should be draped in togas and not depicted in every day clothes? By no means. I have myself dwelt in my writing on episodes which many people would suppress, and have praised highly certain biographies which have probed deeply into the hidden and unpleasant parts of men's hearts and lives. Where then are we to draw the line? It seems to me that there are two distinct and clear cut standards of inclusion of what we might call damning facts. One of these has to do not so much with the subject himself as it has with the biographies of his contemporaries in the case of a historical character. For example, if the biographers of John Hancock should paint him as a saint, they will make it appear that such of his distinguished contemporaries as distrusted him must have been animated by jealousy or some other ignoble motive. The fact is that Hancock was not a great character, that, among other things, it was contemporaneously well-known that he embezzled the funds of Harvard University while treasurer, and that, for various other reasons, the leading men of the time had a right to distrust him. To whitewash Hancock, is, *ipso facto*, to besmirch his distrusting contemporaries. In the same way, if one paints all Washington's generals and subordinates as faithful and efficient officers and patriots, their biographers rob Washington of the glory of having worked and won with many inefficient and unworthy instruments. It is obviously unfair to take away deserved glory from the deserving in order to give undeserved glory to the undeserving.

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Where such a problem does not exist and it is merely a question of what to include in a private life, I would say that the test to be employed is whether the facts in question had any real and lasting influence on the man himself, his career and personality. The main object of biography is not to serve as an exhibit in a medical clinic. The physicians should gather and tabulate their own cases. What the biographer has to do is to present a personality. Take, for example, the question of sex, which seems to be all-absorbing at present. Suppose our subject had had a single episode with a girl of the streets when nineteen, that shortly after that he married and lived happily with his wife ever after. Suppose, on the other hand, that in another case in a man's later career he had a *liaison* lasting for years which profoundly affected his whole life and work. In the one case, the facts may be of the deepest significance; in the other of no significance whatever. The sole test should be, not the pornographic or even emotional interest of the episode in itself but the importance of it as one of the items selected by which the biographer is trying to build up a picture of an idiosyncratic personality. It is this love of the episode for the episode's sake that damns so many current biographies and distorts the subject into no resemblance to the original. In the earlier lives of Franklin, one gains the im-

pression of a grave philosopher; in the latest, of a somewhat ribald and obscene minded old roisterer. Both are wrong but I am inclined to believe the older distortion comes nearer to the truth than the later. It is right to paint Cromwell with all his warts but to give the warts an ounce more of weight than is called for by their influence on the man's career or personality is to paint the warts and not the man, and the business of a biographer is to paint the man.

Of course, we are always led back to the fundamental question, *what is a man?* A biographer who aims to be anything more than a quick-selling journalist must face and solve this problem. Many current biographers do it implicitly by assuming that "intimacy" and "human interest" consist in watching the man perform his lowest physical or mental acts. This is in itself a phase of that profound disillusionment which came from the discovery that the earth was not the center of the universe and, some centuries later, that man was not created but evolved. Having accepted the as yet by no means proved theory that man is of no lasting or cosmic importance, the tendency is to consider that there is no difference in value between the operation of the bowels and those of the brain. If there is not, then why bother about either, except for the fact that the biographer must use the one to fill the other—an obvious explanation of much current biographical writing? It is clear that the competent biographer has got to think out a philosophy of man and nature before he can select his facts.

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Once selected, how is he to treat them? For one thing, as we have pointed out, the subject should not be considered as a medical case. In R. V. Harlow's life of Samuel Adams the facts that his voice occasionally rose to falsetto and that his hands trembled were used to explain the whole of his career, and no small part of the American Revolution, as due to the mental states of a neurotic, according to the then current but already somewhat discredited psychology. In an elaborate life, not yet published, of one of our greatest statesmen the author wrote two chapters to prove his subject was at times insane. He then asked the opinion of one of the country's best known psychiatrists on the subject. The psychiatrist told me he informed the author that it would be a delicate matter to decide even if the living patient were before him for examination; in the case of this dead man it was utterly impossible of proof. Each new fad finds its way into biography, and the subconscious, for example, has been made to play its part. To that sort of thing there is no end. If we are to write biographies in terms of unconscious complexes and the subconscious, why not in terms of biology, of chemistry, or even in terms of the aggregate dance of atoms which constitute the "physical" John Smith? Any man may be considered scientifically from many standpoints, but I contest that to consider him from that of the unconscious, of biological functions, of chemical reactions, or of atomic structure is not biography. Once we leave the realm of self-conscious life and of observable and recorded acts, we become lost in a descending scale of possible scientific approaches, and have abandoned the clearly defined field of biographical treatment.

Again, are we to give up the old-fashioned idea of recording the ascertainable facts of a man's life and substitute a biographer's appreciation of his character? This method of presentation, the old "character" under modern names, is no newer than any other form of biography, in spite of the acclaim of certain practitioners today. The difficulty with it lies largely in the practitioner. It is obvious that the mere "facts" may not give us the whole man, the essence of his character, but there is just as much danger, if not more, that the "appreciation" may give us the man, not as he was, but as distorted or refracted through the mind of his biographer, just as a portrait gives us his physical features with the psychological traits imagined by the artist; in other words a composite portrait of sitter and painter. In the case of a superb master of his craft we may gain a deeper and more veracious insight into the soul of the sitter from a portrait than from a photograph but in the case of a poor painter we may gain far less, and there is always the question of how much of what we see is the sitter and how much the painter. A superb biographer may play the artist; an ordinary craftsman had better play the photographer of the obvious. In such a recent work, for example, as Howden Smith's life of Vanderbilt, it