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In the reaction against biographical and historical criticism, critics have dogmatically emphasized pure textual explication and have thus distorted or restricted responses to literature and art. To correct this improper emphasis, teachers, in addition to stressing the integrity of the art work, should treat individual creations as "different worlds, or structures of experience," which the students can enter. Similarly, the critic, in writing a comprehensive study of an author, and usually in examining single works, must refer to details of biography in order to elucidate a work and "respond to it in its totality." While the critic's attention should continue to rest primarily on the work itself, biographical information should be used in introductory, supportive, or parenthetical positions to help the reader see the unique quality of a particular writer. (JS)

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The Uses of Biography in Criticism

JOHN A. MEIXNER

PERHAPS THE WAY TO BEGIN, perhaps the wiser, always more pertinent way to begin, is not with the "uses" but the "abuses" of biography in criticism. Every critic of experience knows, too well, the tyranny of the over-emphasized, over-vivid biographical fact, which by its chance of survival often wrenches our judgments away from a clear perception of what lies on the literary page itself. Still worse is our subversion by facts which on inspection are not properly facts at all—but interpretation from too meager or too carefully selected information, by a critic or scholar driven to buttress a shaky thesis with external sources. Biography, either when the facts are sparse and chiefly conjectural, as with Shakespeare or Donne or Spenser, or when they exist in great quantities as with most nineteenth and twentieth century figures, can be made to prove almost anything. We all are familiar as well with that hybrid monstrosity, the critical biography, the ideal form beloved of publishers. Pure critical studies, alas, do not sell. And straight biographies of literary men would appear a shirking of duties, a confession by the biographer of critical incompetence. But how rarely are the interpretations in such works more than passes at criticism. Most often, they are simply smuggled, not infrequently pernicious, procedures for presenting the life. When the biographical and the critical principles of organization come into conflict, both are likely to be diverted from clear method. It is the

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critical, however, that is sure to suffer. The sovereignty of the factual over the critical is built into such a form.

In reaction against the muddle of biographical intrusion and falsification, the more recent development in criticism has been to pull away from biography altogether. To concentrate on the objective artistic product, on the text itself. On the whole, this has been, of course, a healthy movement—for it puts the emphasis where it belongs. The value of literature is not that we may learn about the lives of its creators or the history of its epoch, but rather is directly in itself: in the experience, order, and energy that the work embodies. The life of that great writer, X, is almost surely of interest. But it rarely repays repeated study, continually quickening and renewing and deepening us, the way his *Hamlet* or his *Divine Comedy* or his *Portrait of the Artist* or his *Jude the Obscure* do. But this scarcely requires underlining. The work's the right place for the lover of literature; one simply doesn't know where....

Yet in this reaction against the biographical and the historical, there has been a tendency, at least in some quarters, to press the case for the pure explication of the text too puritanically and too dogmatically. The argument here is that the concern of the critic should be strictly formal, without reference to the author of the art work, to an actual world it may be reflecting, or to its effect on its reader or audience: to see the artistic product as self-completed, self-sustaining structure. And it is here that one senses, in practice, certain profound distortions and oppressive restrictions on our responses to literature and art.

In the classroom, for example, I know that I myself came fairly early to see that the formal, internally coherent approach to an art work was insufficient, and oddly artificial. That the close concern for structure and texture, conflict and resolution, symbol and tone and mood and point of view, all of this possibly graphed, though undeniably relevant, still left some vital energy within the students (and in myself) unused, indeed by policy rigorously repressed. And that energy, I recognized, was the very instinct that had excited me about serious literature in the first place—its opening up of the world, its presentation of different persons and milieus and responses to experience. Worlds, my imagination had told me, that not inconceivably, though with inevitable transposition, were waiting for me, out there, ahead, in new relationships, other groups, different regions or countries, and in the ways of being at all stages of one's life. I realized all over again, indoctrinated or, if you will, brain-washed for the time as I had been, that our responses as young readers turned very much on the question so central to *Lord Jim*—"How to Be." I remember even devising a course, which I never gave, called "Ways of Being"—its principle of selection the diversity of human possibilities.

And as a teacher I have for some time now ceased to examine literary works strictly in terms of form. Instead I have taken to approaching individual creations—let us say novels—as different worlds, or structures of experience, which I ask the students to enter into and to seek, by way of a self-stretching, imaginative act, to come to full awareness of. This approach does not exclude or, within the limits of time, neglect the formal. It retains the concern for the integrity of the art work but adds to it as well the personality, or persona, of the author and the spirit and conditions, as rendered through him, of his times. It is an approach, I think, that avoids the error of reducing the world that has been created to problems of technique and craft, rather than of opening technique and craft outward to the world that is created. That is, to that which the author wished to say and has been deeply

involved in, and which at bottom propelled him to write. The world of a first-rate author is always distinctive and unique to him (it is one of the signs of his first-rateness). And, in point of fact, it is the experience of this distinct world which draws us all to it. Is it immaterial, is it unnoticeable, that this poem is by Yeats, this painting by Rembrandt, that that long awaited novel was by Hemingway or Fitzgerald or is by Mailer or Saul Bellow or Ralph Ellison or John Hawkes? To claim otherwise is to deny far too much that makes us actual, to erect preposterously careful distinctions which at every turn we will, in practice, neglect to apply.

But it may be countered that this development away from the austerely formal is prompted by the special case of appealing to the young, the pedagogical necessity of catching and drawing them from the many trivial distractions which surround them. Or that for older persons the interest in the biographical, in the personality and conditions of the author, is the stuff merely of relaxed conversation, say at the later stages of a dinner party, or at the faculty club. (Maturity having apparently long since settled what it is, as well as all other human questions.) The argument would run that as critics, writing for an audience of one's peers, for the cognoscenti, or for our own best literary self, we respond rather differently, more exactingly, and more seriously. More exactingly and more seriously one would hope. But differently I am doubtful of. And in explaining my doubts here I shall draw, as I believe I'm expected to draw, on my own experience as a critic.

In the course of writing my critical study of the novels of Ford Madox Ford, I found after not too long a time that a number of my initial assumptions were not working out. According to the theory, I should approach each of Ford's thirty-one novels as a discrete and separate artistic problem. My critical analysis should try to capture the essential quality of each book, defining the components and dynamics of its success or lack of success, without coloring or prejudice from any other. Biography would appear, of course, in the opening chapter, but mainly to satisfy the old-fashioned, a dull full professor, a dull editor, who was bound to insist upon it. What I discovered after a time was that this method was, for the reader—who was myself after all—a deadly bore. And what was worse, for all the mind, all the exhausting analysis that I put into my formulations, such a procedure was in fact *mindless*. The more I worked the more I found that I was forced, for reasons of economy of exposition above all, but in the long run for still deeper reasons, to refer these separate books to a real author, who had his personal and artistic development, which were not after all unrelated, his triumphs and his traumas, and a great many different exits and entrances and changes of scene. The author, in brief, insisted upon himself. And if my book was to have unity, inner logic, significance, and scale, and to offer a balanced evaluation, I had to refer the novels to a single center. They were not nominally the novels of Ford Madox Ford, a convenient fiction, but Ford Madox Ford's novels actually. And I found that the lesser books, which certainly did not deserve extended treatment, though I sought briefly to etch in their essential qualities, were becoming valuable occasions by which I might explore and define different facets of Ford the Novelist: his hostile attitude towards most of the manifestations of modern life—the profit motive, dishonest business and financial practices, the sensational popular press, ugly parliamentary politics, the industrialized megalopolitan city, the tendency towards mediocre leveling, atheism, social climbing, socialism, Fabianism, in particular, but also a self-deceptive Brooks Farm-ian kind, à la William Morris. Successively,

one had to come to terms with Ford's view of history, of England, of Roman Catholicism, of America, of Toryism, of the Jews, of Henry VIII and Katharine Howard, of votes for women, of various Protestant heresies, of love, of the official intelligentsia, of France, of the first world war, of the moral changes of the twenties, of the impact of the depression —and, more and more, in his later years, of the ideal conditions for a society that would be fit for "a proper man." Now all of these are, clearly, not matters of autonomous art, but of biography, of period, and of life. Yet they are absolutely necessary if we are to comprehend the thrust and range of the work and to respond to it in its totality.

More recently I have been engaged in writing another critical study, this time on Elizabeth Bowen. And in this case the conditions of my work have been markedly different. For one thing, Miss Bowen is alive, I have had a good many interviews with her, I have visited in Ireland her ancestral house (by chance in the course of its being torn down) and her haunts there, have acquainted myself with the English scene, which she mostly writes of, and I am working with her private manuscripts. Coming from reserved Anglo-Irish gentry stock, Miss Bowen is reticent about her personal life, and it is her wish, which I fully respect, that I do not deal with her biographically. I have no intention certainly of going beyond what has appeared in print. And yet I know—and all the more from having experienced Ireland and England and Miss Bowen herself—that it would be impossible to write an adequate, a discerning book on her fiction without establishing the kind of curiously eighteen-century formal world, English and yet not English, that she came out of, with three hundred years of decisive family and social history behind it. Nor if I left unmentioned that Miss Bowen became in effect an orphan when she was twelve, was passed among various English aunts, and was schooled in Kent. And that at twenty-four she married an Englishman and thereafter lived chiefly in England, mostly in Oxford and London. (These among many other facts.) And in the end I know that I shall have to confront the question of the level of her achievement as a writer—of what her work adds up to, and the reasons why, with such astonishing gifts of intelligence, perception, power of feeling, and of language, this level of accomplishment is still not higher than it is. Part of my answer, I already know, will be biographical, in certain decisive choices—or life-choices, as it is sometimes phrased—which she has made as a person. It is such facts as these I've named, and others I haven't the space for, with their various implicit tensions, which make, in short, the work of Miss Bowen her work and not that of Virginia Woolf or Doris Lessing or Eudora Welty or Katherine Anne Porter. Or Susan B. Anthony, Simone de Beauvoir, or Lady Astor. Not to mention Jane Austen or George Eliot. In brief, biographical facts condition, and therefore they define. They help sort out and clarify. And they also awaken our sympathies—since all of us are particular persons in particular places and times, and it is in fact this very particularity of our conditioned personalities in conditioning places and times that makes life more interesting, more valuable, more dignified, more horrible (often), and more good, more complete than it would be otherwise.

In short, I have discovered from experience that it simply goes without saying, is inescapable, that in creating a study of a writer's work, or a period of his work, the critic will have to refer this work to a specific, locatable, evolving author. Some biography is not only desirable, it is mandatory. Even if we have not a single biographical fact and have nothing more than the dating of individual works, the critic will have

to posit an author if he is going to trace development and causality. He is inevitably concerned with treating the history of a developing art process, which means, since a person is involved, some sort of biography. It is plain, in such a case, that all relevant details, by inference and at first hand, will have to be explored, held in solution in the critic's brain, and where appropriate, where genuinely illuminating of the steps of this literary development, set in their due place.

But still—what of the single work examined by itself? Isn't this a quite different circumstance, to which the preceding argument no longer applies? One's answer to this cannot be clear-cut. But certainly any absolute or decisive difference is only apparent. The situation will depend entirely on the specific purpose of the critic. In the history of critical commentary on any individual work there is usually some essay, in a book or by itself, which has sought to interpret the work as an entity, and which is valuable for the precision and rightness of its formulations and for its telling and perceptive choice of detail. Most critical essays, however, are nowhere as ambitious, nor—the good general essay or essays having been written—do they need to be. The overwhelming majority of such pieces, if we examine the bibliography on an author over the years, or work our way through the convenient critical editions and casebooks, are fairly specific. They address themselves to a significant episode or pattern of imagery. They reinterpret a character or a relationship. They demonstrate how certain effects are achieved stylistically. They establish, with varying degrees of plausibility, their author's apparent moral or religious or political attitude. They interpret his work in the light of Jung or Freud or Kierkegaard or Northrop Frye or Swedenborg or Aristotle or, (any day now), John Cage and Charles Olson. They trace sources and draw connections with significant predecessors. They do much else besides. Much of what they do is helpful, often invaluable, though a fair proportion of such essays are preposterous, wasting the energies of everyone concerned, and obscuring the value of such precise and sensitive discriminations as do exist. Good criticism and scholarship or poor, however, the writer of these essays in most cases will want, and will need, to support his thesis by points and details drawn from biography and from whatever other history is appropriate. Except in cases of purely formal technical studies, his frames of discourse will require it.

And thus we are led to recognize that the critical-scholarly community, when we examine the situation, is always involved in writing one massive study of an author that, however discontinuous, fragmented, and badly focused it is destined to be, is not unlike the full-scale inquiry by an individual critic discussed earlier. This is what gets done —and it gets done because as a general, if not always as a particular, procedure it makes sense, in adding to our knowledge and understanding.

The meaningful question before us, therefore, is not the use of biography. In one way or another, the life of an author is going to be drawn on. The issue rather is how it should be used, and with what priority. And a few observations here may be useful. The foreground of the critic's attention should always be, one needn't say, on the art work itself. His analysis ought to be so written that it can stand if necessary on its own, apart from biography. Biographical information should be introductory, to set a work in personal or historical perspective; or where it concerns the text itself it should be supportive or parenthetical. It also ought to be used sparingly, confined to points of interpretation that are equivocal, obscure, or controversial. One of the func-

tions of biography, in short, is as a kind of "control"—a possible, always delicately or tentatively used, negative check on the soundness of our interpretations.

Finally, and in a larger sense, biography has its most important value, that is, if we are to have criticism at all, in helping us to see what makes a particular writer unique, what helps to give him his individual voice and at the same time his representative quality. From biography we understand more sharply, more graphically, both what a writer was, and could be, and what he was not, and could never be.

That a writer turns out to have been conditioned seems, to me at least, not a loss but a gain. Is Shakespeare, we may ask, better seen by Coleridge, who makes him a divinity outside of any place or time, or by the reader who loves Shakespeare and who from the documentation, even if much of it is by inference, knows he was a human being as ourselves, beset as we have been and are—the person whose name is registered, with enormous actuality, in the baptismal book, in the church at Stratford. Which view dignifies our lives and our own potentialities more? If literature is meaningful it is because it is not apart from life—something gloriously going on in a test tube, in a laboratory we enter from time to time—but *of* life, experience distilled to essence. And, of course, the triumph of the writer, forming his chaotic materials into meaningful shapes, is the triumph of our best natures: of ourselves as constructive artists, in the several ways that come to hand—in the classroom, in the rearing of a child, in a friendship, in a dinner, in our listening, really listening, to Mozart, in the composing of a poem for ourselves in our room, very early on a Monday morning.

The view that sees the art work as having an objective existence is, I think, completely sound. And philosophically and methodologically the distinction is surely needed. My objection comes when such a view seeks to impose itself on our consciousnesses and to close off all others —that of art as mirroring, that of art as affecting and changing the audience, that of art as the expression, however distanced, of an individual. Each of these approaches has its claims upon our humanities. Each provides an alternate, humanly partial route into the same unitary subject. We should, in sum, steer firmly by our distinctions, but we should never let slip from our mind the wholeness of our response to literature, and to art in general.