

R O Z P R A W Y

A. OWEN ALDRIDGE
Urbana

BIOGRAPHY AND REALISM

The subject of the realistic elements in biography has seldom, if ever, been specifically treated in literary criticism. The reason for this neglect perhaps is that biography is ordinarily associated with history — and the assumption is made that excellence in either genre depends upon the highest degree of objectivity, an assumption which has indeed a great deal to recommend it.

At the same time it is obvious that some biographies are more realistic than others, for example, Albert Bielschowsky's German life of Goethe more than that of George Henry Lewes in England¹. Yet few readers or even scholars who might consider one biography more realistic than another could readily analyze the elements of these biographies to account for the differences in their apparent truth to nature.

If we take René Wellek's generally-acceptable definition of realism, the "objective representation of contemporary social reality" — we see immediately that it does not fit biography². If the social reality portrayed by the novel is contemporary that which is the province of the biography is historical. Biography is nearly always concerned with the past. Even if we take the broader definition of Engels, — "the presentation of typical characters in typical situations in accordance with reality" — it is true that here we allow for the portrayal of contemporaries as well as figures of the past, but we are forced by the emphasis on types to reject the biographical method³. Engels' definition suggests

¹ G. M. Lewes, *Life and Works of Goethe* (London 1855). In the preface to his first volume Bielschowsky took as his motto Goethe's words to Heinrich Meyer (February 8, 1796): "Alle pragmatische biographische Charakteristik muss sich vor dem naiven Detail eines bedeutenden Lebens verkriechen". *Goethe. Sein Leben und seine Werke* (München 1912), I, p. V.

² R. Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven 1963), p. 240.

³ The definition of Engels is cited by A. Demaitre, *The Great Debate on Socialist Realism*, "Modern Language Journal", L (May, 1966), p. 268.

one or more Theophrastan type characters in a setting of thematic prototypes. One does not need to be a Carlyle or insist upon the notion of heroes or supermen in order to affirm against Engels that biography is concerned with individuals, not types. We need a workable definition of realism which will include biography as well as fiction. I suggest simply, the objective representation of social reality.

In biography there exist two completely separate kinds of realism: the realism of fact and the realism of art. In the novel there is merely the latter kind. The reality of fact is that which derives from historical exactitude and from all devices which create an impression of historical truth. The chief ingredient is documentation, the citing of exact dates and records, the printing of letters and diaries. The impression of truth which is created has nothing to do with artistic effect, but depends entirely upon the credibility of the evidence. The materials represent the objective proof of an actual happening or condition of things. In reacting to the reality of fact, the reader passively absorbs external data. Closely associated with factual documentation is the portrayal of a background of social, political or economic history. A separate genre has even developed from works emphasizing this ingredient — the Life and Times biography.

The reality of art depends, on the other hand, on the manner of presentation or the choice of materials. It is, to borrow the words of Lord Shaftesbury from another context: "the probability of seeming truth (which is the real truth of art)"⁴. The biographer enables his readers to live vicariously as they would in reacting to a novel or a drama. They identify with the hero and through imagination participate in the action. The biographer manipulates or disguises his historical evidence to create a dramatic effect. Some of the techniques used for this effect are: 1) varying the obtrusiveness and inobtrusiveness of the author; 2) manipulating chronology through such effects as psychological time; 3) piling up circumstantial detail for verisimilitude; and 4) focusing upon "minute particulars" to reveal character.

To illustrate the application of these techniques of realism I shall discuss four biographers, each representing a different literary period: Plutarch, Boswell, Stendhal and André Maurois. Each of these authors is typical of his times and each specifically discusses the theory behind his biographical method. There is even a further reason for considering Stendhal since he is also generally considered to be the first influential practitioner of the realistic novel.

⁴ B. Rand, ed., *Second Characters* (Cambridge, Eng., 1914), p. 32.

Any one who has read Plutarch at all realizes that factual or scientific realism in his work is practically non-existent. He not only supplies no dates whatsoever, but may travel in time in the same paragraph from the age of myth and "the first inhabitants of Attica" to the age of Aristotle. He identifies the historical period of a particular life merely by indicating the reigning governing body or emperor. This same lack of precision exists even in regard to events in the lifetime of a single protagonist. In the life of Cicero, for example, the chronology shifts back and forth from before and after the death of Caesar.

Plutarch cites his authorities, but not always by name. He constantly uses such interpolations as "they say" "it is related", "it does not appear", and "we can only conjecture". The closest that Plutarch comes to creating the illusion of historical accuracy is occasionally to subject his authorities to scrutiny. He will remark, for example, "but this seems to be correct". Or he will cite a series of conflicting authorities. When he does this in relating the death of Demosthenes, however, he first tells the story dramatically and then afterwards adds other versions contradictory of his own narrative. His concern for dramatic effect is primary; that for the illusion of historical truth is quite secondary.

Plutarch is sometimes considered as a historian, but the type of history he recounts is only to a slight degree political and military, but overwhelmingly personal. In his own words, he deliberately leaves "more weighty matters and great battles to be treated of by others". In Plutarch there is virtually no economic, political or social background. Like the ancient epic, his work is composed almost entirely of story and character with miscellaneous digressions.

Many of these digressions represent an obtrusion of the author into the narrative and interfere, therefore, with the realism of art. Discussions of why it is not necessary to be born in a famous city to achieve greatness or why Plutarch himself failed to achieve a mastery of the Latin language may be very entertaining or interesting in themselves, but they certainly hinder a reader who seeks vicarious experience. Although Plutarch is famous for his use of detail, he does not actually pile up details to create verisimilitude. His carefully selected details are designed to illustrate character rather than to promote credibility. As he says in his well known introduction to the life of Alexander, he chose "rather to epitomise the most celebrated parts" of each story "than to insist at large on every particular circumstance". Great exploits, he believed, do not give us the clearest insight into the characters of men; "sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest,

informs us better of their characters and inclinations, than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments, or the bloodiest battles whatsoever". Among the best examples of remarkable sayings are Cicero's opinions of Greek thinkers: "Of Aristotle, he said that he was a river of flowing gold; and of Plato's dialogues, that if Juppiter were to speak he would speak as he did. ...And being asked which of Demosthenes's orations he thought the best, he answered, 'the longest' ". Plutarch also interpreted some extraordinary circumstances as harbingers of the future, for example, a dolefully croaking crow, which shortly before Cicero's murder, alighted on his bed and "attempted with its beak to draw off the clothes with which he had covered his face". Like most of Plutarch's techniques, this is more dramatic than realistic.

Indeed the outstanding characteristics of Plutarch's style are decidedly unrealistic. His interminable ethical appraisals of specific episodes and his general reflections, although almost uniformly praised by generations of biographers from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, undeniably keep the reader conscious that he is reacting to a literary work rather than to life itself. Plutarch's famous comparisons or parallels between Greeks and Romans have exactly the same effect. As a further element of artificiality, they present a similar barrier to the reader's illusion that he is engaged with real life. Finally, the miscellaneous composite of narrative and moral reflection undermines the dramatic intentions of the narrative part, which depends for its effectiveness upon directness and unity.

A French critic in the period of the Enlightenment has called Plutarch "the Montaigne of the Greeks, but without his bold and picturesque manner of portraying ideas and his vivid imagination to which even few poets may aspire"⁵. For this critic, the quality of realism in Plutarch consists in his ability to portray life as it takes place. "He paints in action. One has the illusion of seeing all these men moving and speaking; all his figures are true and have the exact proportions of nature". For the eighteenth century, no higher praise could be possible.

II

Indeed many contemporaries of a famous British figure of the eighteenth century, James Boswell, refused to concede as much to his *Life of Samuel Johnson*, which is often considered to be the first modern biography. Boswell himself, however, felt that he was carrying on in

⁵ *Oeuvres complètes de Thomas* (Paris 1822), I, p. 95.

the tradition of Plutarch, whom he termed "the prince of biographers". As one critic has expressed it, the *Life of Johnson* bears "the same resemblance to the dicta of Plutarch that a full-blown rose bears to the bud"⁶. Yet the great contribution of Boswell was not actually in the aspects of biography which he drew from Plutarch, but in factual realism, the element which makes his work truly modern.

Boswell was not, however, the first biographer to buttress his work with extensive documentation or quotation. Indeed he gave as examples of a nauseous method against which he was rebelling, the "dull, heavy succession of long quotations of disinteresting passages" found in the life of Milton by John Toland and that of Boileau by Desmaiseaux [this quotation is from Warburton]. Boswell's method was to interweave what Johnson "privately wrote, and said, and thought" into his own chronological narrative of the most important events in Johnson's life. So far as I know, no critic has commented on Boswell's claim to have introduced what Johnson "thought" apart from what he "wrote, and said", and as a matter of fact Boswell actually made little attempt to reveal Johnson's inner thoughts. But the claim itself puts us in mind of the practice of many twentieth century biographers.

Boswell, instead of relying primarily on his own third person narrative, transcribed whenever in his power "Johnson's own minutes, letters or conversation". And Boswell had in his possession a tremendous mass of documents, which he used to good effect. The difference between his method and that of Toland and Desmaiseaux was in the choice and ordering of his materials. He arranged and introduced them in such a manner that his style remained readable. But it is not only comprehensive documentation and orderly presentation which produced Boswell's realism — he also sought and attained authentic precision. He was, as he said, "extremely careful as to the exactness" of quotations, observing a respect due to the public, which he felt, "should oblige every Author ... never to presume to introduce them [quotations] with, — 'I think I have read'; or 'If I remember right'; — when the originals may be examined". [Advertisement to First Edition.]

In regard to the second element of factual realism, the citing of exact dates, Boswell not only furnished the year, but also the day of the month, of virtually every event which he discussed. Indeed Boswell seems to have made popular the device of printing at the top of each page of a biography both the calendar year and the age of the subject

⁶ W. H. Dunn, *English Biography* (London 1916), p. 244.

at the particular stage in the narrative⁷. This device was adopted by a number of recorders of table talk in the nineteenth century. This method, of course, requires a strictly chronological perspective and does not allow for variations in time sequence, which might possibly contribute to the realism of art.

Boswell's biography is also crammed with so many references to the literary life of the times that it is almost an encyclopaedia of letters for the period. Even though Boswell makes no attempt to assimilate the miscellaneous information which he included because it touches on Dr. Johnson at one point or another, this information belongs in a general sense to the category of social and historical background and as such may be completely justified. Boswell seldom bothered to explain the relevance of his references to things and events of the times. He introduced names, titles and historical events with the assumption that his readers were already fully acquainted with them. This supra-narrative material is so extensive that Boswell's work is a portrait of the age as well as of Dr. Johnson. The literary genre of table-talk gives almost as much flavor of the period in which it is written as it does of the personality of the man who is on exhibit. And Boswell considered his own work as an example of table talk.

Both Boswell and Johnson himself are linked in their theories of biography with Plutarch's concept of distinguishing character through registering actions of sayings of small note. Boswell even quoted Plutarch's passage expressing the theory. Johnson himself considered it the business of the biographer "to lead the thoughts into domestic privacies, and display the minute details of daily life". And Boswell considered that he was following both Plutarch and Johnson by preserving table talk, conversation and anecdotes. For Boswell, the best source of those minute particulars which reveal character is private conversation, but he included the other circumstantial details with which his work is filled not as part of his artistic effort to secure verisimilitude, but as part of his scientific effort to be precise and complete.

Boswell further reduced artistic realism by adhering to a self-imposed rigid chronological order, which made any kind of dramatic structure

⁷ The device of printing dates in the margin seems to have been first adopted by H. de Catt in his *Friedrich dem Grossen: Memoiren von Heinrich de Catt, 1758—1760* [not published until 1884]. Later the same method was followed by E. Las Cases, *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène* (Paris 1823—1824), and J. P. Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Leipzig 1836). Professor Frederick W. Hilles has communicated to me the following historical works which indicate the date on each page: G. Vancouver, *A Voyage of Discovery* (London 1798); W. Coxe, *Memoirs of Horatio, Lord Walpole* (London 1802); Th. Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* (London 1845).

virtually impossible. Also he frequently introduced himself into the narrative as a witness to some of Johnson's exploits or as a participant in his conversation. In almost the same degree that the passages in the first person gain the realism of fact they lose that of art.

Despite the recognition of literary critics of all nations that Boswell's work is the outstanding monument of English biography, it has had virtually no influence whatsoever upon any other literature⁸. Indeed it has never been completely translated into any other language. Partial translations consist merely of a German abridgement of the first part in 1797; extensive quotations in a Russian essay on Johnson and Boswell in 1851; and a Swedish translation of most of the work in 1926—1930. This lack of appeal to other literatures is not the fault of Boswell's art, but of his subject. For once the realistic method prevailed against popular success on an international scale. Readers outside of the northern countries are repelled by Johnson's provincial outlook, his limited acquaintance with the world, and the Anglo-Saxon flavor of his literary production. Boswell's much less important *Memoirs of Pascal Paoli* had within two years of its publication a German translation (Leipzig 1768), which went through several editions and an abridgement; a Dutch translation (Amsterdam 1769); two French translations, the first in two editions (both Londres 1769), and the second in one (La Haye 1769); and an Italian translation (Londre 1769).

Because of the similarity of the Goethe-Eckermann relationship with that of Johnson-Boswell, it might seem that Eckermann's *Gespräche mit Goethe* should be classed as a close parallel to Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. In actuality, although there is certainly an affinity between the two works, Boswell had absolutely no influence upon Eckermann, and there is no evidence that the German ever read the Scot. The English biography which did influence Eckermann—and moreover to an important degree—was a minor work by a minor author, in a highly realistic genre, Thomas Medwin's *Journal of the Conversations of Lord Byron Noted During a Residence with His Lordship at Pisa in the Years 1821 & 1822*. This is a rather convincing indication that literary merit and influence are by no means necessarily linked.

III

There is no evidence that Stendhal ever read the *Life of Samuel Johnson*, but he followed a method very similar to Boswell's in writing his

⁸ A. O. Aldridge, *Biography as a Literary Genre*, [in:] *Proceedings of the IVth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, ed. Francois Jost (Paris 1966), II, p. 978.

Mémoires sur Napoléon. Recent criticism has once again begun to notice the autobiographical elements in Stendhal's novels — and it is therefore appropriate to consider the parallels between his fiction and his formal biographies. In addition to his life of Napoleon, he wrote successful biographies of musicians: Haydn, Mozart, and Rossini.

Nothing could be further from the truth than to suggest that Stendhal engaged in writing biographies for material reasons. Self-expression — not profit was his dominant motive. Music was never just an amusement for Stendhal, but one of the strongest, most constant and most profound of his passions. He sought through his biographies to express his opinions on musical subjects and to show to France the Italian mode of appreciation. And in his two lives of Napoleon, he was motivated by an intense admiration for the military leader, an admiration also revealed in Julien Sorel's attitude in *Le rouge et le noir* and by the circumstance of Stendhal's dedicating his *Histoire de la peinture* to Napoleon.

Stendhal's inspiration for his biographies of musicians came from his residence in Italy. In keeping with his esthetic principle of the importance of milieu, he attempted to portray the simple, but passionate social life of the country. Strangely enough, his immediate stimulus for writing the life of Napoleon came from England, where William Warden's *Letters from St. Helena* had been reviewed in the December 1816 issue of the "Edinburgh Review". In May of the following year, Stendhal read this review which criticized Warden for failing to give sufficient attention to Napoleon's life and which proceeded to supply the lack. Stendhal translated the article in two days and considered publishing it under the title *Vie de Napoléon Bonapart traduite de l'«Edinburg Review»*. Finding it inadequate, however, he went on adding materials from four other printed sources, but dropped the project to work on a second edition of his book on Italian travels.

In 1818, however, he again took up his biography of Napoleon, spurred on by the posthumous publication of Mme. de Stael's *Considérations sur les principaux événements de la révolution française*. He opened his most recent version with the declaration: "I write the history of Napoleon in order to reply to a libel". At that historical period some of the views Stendhal was presenting were politically dangerous — and he adopted the ruse of labelling them as "faithfully translated" from English sources. This device was too transparent, however, and Stendhal once again decided to abandon the project. He left all his papers in the care of a friend in Milan, where they remained until after his death.

He started once more to write the life of Napoleon at the end of 1836, when the climate of opinion had changed, "and seeing the Napoleonic

vogue which had taken place in arts and letters; he ... dreamed once more of writing the life of the modern Caesar". Taking up an entirely fresh set of reference works, he began an entirely new biography, having no connection with his earlier attempts. In essence, his work consists of two elements: first, direct quotations from Napoleon's own *Mémoires* concerning the principal events in his career; second, a composite *récit raisonnable* in Stendhal's own words of the same events. But this apparently independent narrative was itself drawn from extracts from histories and other printed sources, revised for greater clarity and simplicity of style and adorned with personal observations and reflections in the manner of Plutarch. All of this is set in a framework in which Stendhal speaks in his own person and adds wherever appropriate his individual feelings and experiences.

Superficially this is factual realism. As Boswell allowed Johnson to speak through his own "minutes, letters, or conversation", Stendhal allowed Napoleon to speak through his memoirs. Stendhal even added an explanatory word to the effect that Napoleon was a credible witness to his own deeds. "I have an almost instinctive belief", Stendhal wrote, "that every man of power lies when he speaks — and with even greater reason when he writes. Napoleon, however, in enthusiasm for *le beau idéal militaire* has often spoken the truth in the small number of accounts of battles which he has left us"⁹. Like Boswell, Stendhal consistently cited dates and quoted letters. But unlike Boswell he was so careless with his dates, numbers and titles that his editor was on the verge of attributing to him "the genius of inexactitude"¹⁰. It is estimated that half of his names and dates are inaccurate¹¹. In tracing social background, Stendhal was equally erratic: for example, in describing the women of Milan in 1796, he used his personal recollections of 1800, naming married women who may still have been single at the time of his narrative; also he "impertinently intermingled with the great ladies of the aristocracy the petites bourgeoises, his mistresses"¹². This freedom is a little disconcerting for an author "who aspired to introduce into literature a rigor analogous to that of the exact sciences"¹³. The realism of science in biography, therefore, is no guarantee of accuracy. The author may achieve his realism by a parade of dates and documents even though the dates may be incorrect and the documents inaccurately transcribed.

⁹ L. Royer ed., [Stendhal], *Vie de Napoléon* (Paris 1929), II, p. 13—14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Préface par A. Pingaud, I, p. XII.

¹¹ H. Levin, *The Gates of Horn* (New York 1966), p. 109.

¹² *Vie de Napoléon*, II, p. 362.

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, p. XIII.

No less an authority than Erich Auerbach has established the view that in the novel "historic realism, fully conscious of socio-political-economic circumstance, is a strictly modern phenomenon beginning with Stendhal" ¹⁴. One cannot quite make the same claim of priority in realistic biography for Stendhal since he himself cited four Italian predecessors for praise and admiration precisely because they had incorporated social background in their works. These four are Goldoni, Casanova, Carlo Gozzi [whom Stendhal true to form misnamed Pietro] and the author of the *Vie de Fra Paolo Sarpi*, a work which Stendhal called "admirable and worthy of Plutarch" ¹⁵. French readers could understand the customs of other peoples, according to Stendhal, if they would read mémoires such as those of Gozzi, which fully described "the manner of tracking down happiness in everyday life in Venice of 1760" ¹⁶. In his *Mémoires*, Stendhal made his own contribution to the understanding of the customs of another nation. In the midst of a technical description of Napoleon's military campaign in Italy, Stendhal inserted, for example, a "highly-colored tableau of Milanese life during the occupation of the French army" ¹⁷. As part of this social background, Stendhal described the carriage promenades of pretty girls in the corso, the custom of the cavalier servant, and the benevolent influence of the administrative reforms of Beccaria ¹⁸. And when he undertook the writing of his autobiography, Stendhal planned a "beau contraste" between the military campaigns of Napoleon and the development of his own love affairs ¹⁹. He gave to his autobiography the title *Vie de Henri Brulard*, but nevertheless retained the perspective of the first person. In his original manuscript, he revealed the close connection which he felt exists between the realistic novel and the autobiography, describing his

¹⁴ Quotation from Levin, *op. cit.*, p. 73. See *Mimesis* (Bern 1946), pp. 405 ff.

¹⁵ *Vie de Napoléon*, II, p. 176. The work which Stendhal refers to without mentioning an author is A. Bianchi-Giovini, *Biografia di Frà Paolo Sarpi* [...], seconda edizione [...], Zurigo [...] 1846 (first edition 1836). Stendhal cited also *Les Vies de Beccaria, de Custodi, de Frisi, dans les Vies de cent Italiens illustres de M. Betoni* [II, p. 154 f.] as well as the article *Alexandre Berthier* in the *Biographie universelle*, tome 58 (II, p. 155 f.). See also the comment in his Préface: "Comment écrire la vie de Napoléon sans toucher, malgré soi, à quelqu'une de ces quatre ou cinq grandes vérités: les droits de la naissance, le droit divin des rois, etc., etc." [II, p. 16]. See also W. Godwin, who declared in the Preface to his *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (London 1804, 2nd ed.), p. VII: "the biography of Chaucer will be the picture of a certain portion of the literary, political and domestic history of our country".

¹⁶ *Vie de Napoléon*, II, p. 176 f.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, I, p. XI.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 161, 163—165, 153—154.

¹⁹ H. Debraye ed., *Vie de Henri Brulard* (Paris 1913), I, p. XIX.

work as a "Roman à détails, imité du *Vicaire de Wakefield*", Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield*. In his life of Napoleon, Stendhal felt that there was no incompatibility between the extensive social background which he included and his specific declaration that he had no pretension of writing the history of France between 1800 and 1815, his aim being rather that of revealing an extraordinary man²⁰.

His method of carrying out his aim concerns art rather than science. He specifically repudiated the theory of biography, which he attributed to Sallust and A. C. Thibaudeau, of seeking to maintain an attitude of impartiality. Stendhal argued that the reader cannot be left to come to his own conclusions as to whether his protagonist is a rascal or an honest man. According to his reasoning, the author has a more intimate acquaintance than the reader and consequently a more refined understanding of the just and unjust. He has not only the right, but the obligation to make moral judgments. From this perspective, therefore, Stendhal considered the biography less realistic than the novel, for his method in fiction certainly steered clear of moral judgments. In theory, therefore, Stendhal is less objective than Boswell, who professed to write not the panegyric of his subject, but his life, which "must not be supposed to be entirely perfect".

In his opening paragraph, Stendhal wrote that he experienced a kind of religious feeling in writing the life of Napoleon. "It is concerned", he wrote, "with the greatest man who has appeared in the world since Caesar. And even if the reader has given himself the trouble of studying the life of Caesar in Suetonius, Cicero, Plutarch and the *Commentaries*, I still say that we are going to explore together the life of the most astonishing man who has appeared since Alexander". Stendhal openly professed that he would obtrude as author into the narrative.

In practice, Stendhal does indeed interject his own personality, but more through commentary on literary style than through moral judgment. His presence is felt through remarks such as "in order not to omit any details, I shall add..."²¹, or "as I have infinite respect for eye-witnesses..."²², or "I believe that the greatest difficulty in writing consists in having a clear idea"²³.

Although Stendhal had accompanied Napoleon on some of his campaigns, as an author he does not participate in the narrative of the general's military career as Boswell enters the *Life of Johnson* as one of the lexicographer's friends and traveling companions. As Mérimée

²⁰ *Vie de Napoléon*, II, p. 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 92.

²² *Ibid.*, II, p. 92.

²³ *Ibid.*, II, p. 68.

remarked to Stendhal after reading his preface, it was a little ridiculous for him to have boasted of the advantage of a personal contact with Napoleon when he revealed a few pages later that "this acquaintance is reduced to having seen him four times, and of these four times he spoke to you only three times and of these three times he once made only stupid remarks"²⁴. Despite Boswell's profession of impartiality and Stendhal's admission of adulation, there is a more apparent strain of hero worship in the life of Johnson than in that of Napoleon. Boswell interjects his own personality in his work to a greater degree than does Stendhal even though the theoretical remarks of each writer would indicate just the opposite.

In organization, Stendhal not only follows a chronological rather than a dramatic order, but fails to give unity to the heterogeneous elements of his narrative. In most of his writings Stendhal is discursive — and in biography this tendency detracts from his realism. The chief source of artistic realism in Stendhal's biography of Napoleon as in his novels is his selection of details. In quoting from his sources, Stendhal followed the same Plutarchan principle which Johnson and Boswell had observed. He explained in his preface: "I take from four or five different authors four or five particular facts; instead of summarizing them by a general phrase in which I could include some misleading nuances, I recount these particular facts, using as much as possible the words of the original authors". In other words, generalities may lie, but specific details portray the truth. Also Stendhal remarked that for him "no true detail would ever seem childish"²⁵.

In summary, Stendhal's life of Napoleon derives its greatest realism not from either documentation or artistic arrangement, but from its portrayal of social background, revealing how "under the First Empire there developed a new force in society — this need for success which we today call arrivism"²⁶. And even though Stendhal may actually interject less of his personality in his writing than Boswell does, his work is considerably less objective than Boswell's. Recent critics, nevertheless, have given him credit for inventing a new historical method, an "experimental process, from which Taine later derived great profit, consisting in deriving general laws from significant but minor facts, chosen with care and minutely noted"²⁷.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, II, p. 334.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, II, p. 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, I, p. XX.

²⁷ H. Martineau, *L'Oeuvre de Stendhal*, p. 198.

IV

In approaching André Maurois as a representative of the "new" biography of the twentieth century, we find that the principles of factual realism are taken for granted, but kept in the background or subordinated to artistic realism. Maurois keeps precise dates constantly before the reader and cites letters and other documents at length. He even gives a good deal of historical background. He accepts without question the principle that sound scholarship — represented by precise facts and documents — must provide the material of biography, but he is more concerned with the manner of presentation or artistic realism. Also he has reservations on whether biography can actually furnish the truth about a man. The most we can do he says is "try to fix those changing lights and shades, ... try to produce the sound of that individual and authentic note, but it is a truth of a kind totally different from that which is pursued by the chemist or the physicist"²⁸. Like Plutarch, therefore, Maurois includes some apocryphal incidents, reports conflicting testimonies, and acknowledges the inclusion of some elements known to be untrue²⁹. Or he asks the rhetorical question, "What exactly was the truth of the matter?"³⁰

Maurois' method consists of a running narrative alternating with the presentation of documents. He includes anecdotes, historical background, and tremendous amounts of dialogue. The latter is by no means an innovation. There is some dialogue even in Plutarch, a good deal more in Roper's life of Thomas More, and extended passages in Boswell.

As we read the critical principles of André Maurois, we sense that he feels, unlike Stendhal, that biography is closer to actual life or nature than is fiction. This is contrary also to the view associated with Aristotle that the portrayal of universal situations brings us closer to nature than does the portrayal of an individual life. As we all know, Aristotle maintained that "poetry is something more philosophical and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars"³¹. In the eighteenth century, Diderot applied the principle to the novels of Richardson, exclaiming: "... the truest history is full of lies, and your novel is full of truth. History portrays some individuals; you portray the

²⁸ *Aspects of Biography* (New York 1923), p. 103. I am consistently citing Maurois in English since I have found English versions of his works more generally available than French.

²⁹ See, for example, *The Titans [Les trois Dumas]* (New York 1957), p. 153.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

³¹ See p. 9—7. Ingram Bywater translation.

human species. History attributes to some individuals that which they have neither said nor done; everything which you attribute to man, he has said and done" ³².

Perhaps the most important consideration in realism, however, is not which portrayal is closer to actual nature, but which seems to be so to the reader. Stendhal, we remember, had insisted on the duty of a biographer to engage in moral judgments. Maurois merely observes that biography constantly demands that the reader make moral judgments for himself. In other words, the reader erects a moral barrier between himself and reality when reading biography, but does not do so when reading fiction. "We feel no need of judging Anna Karenina or Becky Sharp, because the people who were made to suffer by them are themselves characters in a novel. But if we read a life of Byron, we feel that there really was an actual Lady Byron, an actual Lady Caroline Lamb, and our moral impulses are stirred at the expense of our esthetic emotions" ³³. In other words, in reading a biography we become engaged in the sense of taking a stand, but not in the sense of suspending our realization that we are viewing a life other than our own.

Maurois insists, on the other hand, that the author of a biography must try to remain aloof from moral judgment and must admit no preconceptions about his hero. He must depend upon the observation of facts and nothing else. All the documents must be used "if they throw light upon a new aspect of the subject; neither fear, nor admiration, nor hostility must lead the biographer to neglect or to pass over a single one of them in silence" ³⁴. The spirit of free inquiry must even banish moral restraint. This detached attitude contrasts sharply with Stendhal's avowed religious feeling in writing about Napoleon and Boswell's equivalent reverence toward Johnson.

Every biographer, Maurois affirms, should write on the first page of his manuscript, "Thou shall not judge" ³⁵. "A great life well told", he believes, "always carries a suggestion of a philosophy of life, but it gains nothing by an expression of that philosophy" ³⁶. In practice, however, Maurois makes side remarks in the manner of Plutarch, which may not reflect on the behaviour of his protagonist, but have something to do with universal morality. In his life of Dumas père and fils, for example, he remarks, "Such is ever the way of important perso-

³² *Eloge de Richardson*, A's s é z a t ed., *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris 1875), V, p. 221.

³³ *Aspects of Biography*, p. 45.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

nages, who by means of small favours, rid themselves of a sense of guilt for great injustices" ³⁷. And "There is nothing more dangerous for the virtue of young dressmakers than a grotto" ³⁸. Some of his other attempts at embroidering the narrative represent his own social judgments, for example: "In France, if a man does not carry his head like the Blessed Sacrament, he may be regarded as an amusing character, but he is not respected. Bores enjoy priority" ³⁹.

Maurois expressed admiration for his English predecessor Lytton-Strachey in never allowing the personality of the author to appear ⁴⁰, but in his own work the author occasionally intrudes, if only by such expressions as, "At this point it is important that the reader should know something of the character which had been formed by heredity and upbringing" ⁴¹.

It is generally recognized that the chief characteristic of the new biography is its deliberate resemblance to the novel. It blends dialogue and anecdote into the basic structure to produce the effect of a continuing narrative, an effect which earlier biographers had not sought to attain. As part of the attempt to achieve verisimilitude, biographers who use the technique of fiction sometimes introduce incidents which may or may not have actually occurred, but of which the author could at any rate have no direct knowledge. Maurois, for example, after reporting a conversation of Napoleon, described as naked in bed with Josephine, added: "With these words he gave a friendly smack to the well-fleshed back-side under the sheet" ⁴². This realistic detail can certainly not be found in the biographies of Stendhal or others who knew Napoleon personally.

Another modern technique is to adopt the omniscience of the novelist and penetrate into the thoughts of the characters. Maurois, for example, after describing the dying Dumas père trundled to the sea-shore in a wheel-chair, adds a long paragraph devoted to listing what were perhaps his thoughts and recollections ⁴³. Elsewhere Maurois does not bother with the perhaps, but places the meditation within quotation marks and specifies: "thought the vainglorious Dumas" ⁴⁴. In line with this psychological probing, Maurois prefers to see and de-

³⁷ *The Titans*, p. 36.

³⁸ *The Titans*, p. 59.

³⁹ *The Titans*, p. 160.

⁴⁰ *Aspects of Biography*, p. 20.

⁴¹ *The Titans*, p. 47.

⁴² *The Titans*, p. 27.

⁴³ *The Titans*, p. 363.

⁴⁴ *The Titans*, p. 43.

scribe everything through the hero's eyes although he occasionally takes up a "position at an infinite distance"⁴⁵.

In structure as well, the new biography borrows from the novel. When historical information is lacking concerning an important era in a protagonist's life — usually his childhood and youth, which are nearly always important to the novel — the biographer fills in with miscellaneous materials, frequently imaginary. In the early pages of the life of the two Dumas, for example, Maurois describes social gatherings during the youth of Dumas père. "Hands were clasped, couples paired off, lips offered"⁴⁶. These agreeable interludes really tell us nothing about the protagonist, but advance the action and give the illusion of equal treatment of periods — even those about which there is little concrete information available.

The relation between biography and fiction has long been apparent. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the novel was first coming into being, it openly borrowed its aura of realism from the biography. The most common titles represented some form of "The Memoirs of —" or "The History of —". And prefaces or introductions generally attempted to persuade the reader that the narrative was a true life story. The connection between biography and novel was so close that an English version of Machiavelli's *Life of Castruccio Castracani* was even published in 1729 in *A Select Collection of Novels*⁴⁷. Genuine and semi-genuine biographies and memoirs in the seventeenth century gave way to pseudo-biography and fiction in the eighteenth⁴⁸. In the twentieth century, however, the tendency in a sense reversed when authentic biography took over the technique of the realistic novel.

One of the most apparent differences between the realistic novel and the impressionistic novel of the twentieth century is in the use of time. The practitioners of the realistic novel follow a strictly chronological sequence, whereas such experimenters as Proust, Joyce and Durrél use the techniques of flash-back and stream of consciousness in which time is fluid rather than consecutive. The classical biographers also violated chronology sometimes — but did so by anticipating or looking ahead rather than by looking backwards. For example, the childhood of a future general would be described with constant reference to the campaigns of his maturity. André Maurois, however, argues for a strict chronological

⁴⁵ *Aspects of Biography*, p. 60.

⁴⁶ *The Titans*, p. 45.

⁴⁷ In *Six Volumes* [...]. By several Eminent Hands (London, S. Croxall, 1722). *Castruccio Castracani* is in volume VI.

⁴⁸ Ch. E. Morgan, *The Rise of the Novel of Manners* (New York 1911, reissue 1963), pp. 60—61.

sequence of events with no reference whatsoever to achievement or exploits of the protagonist which come later. As he puts it, a baby is born as a baby, not a future novelist or general. As an artifice, the reader and author must pretend to forget all they know of his future career⁴⁹. In this way, the suspense or romantic interest of a novel is preserved. It has been objected to this theory that successful fiction has been written on exactly the plan which Maurois rejects for biography. A good example is Jean-Paul Sartre's well-known *L'Enfance d'un chef, The Childhood of a Leader*, the story of the development from infancy to young-manhood of a protagonist who realizes almost from the beginning of his mental existence that he is expected by his family to become a master of other men⁵⁰. The difference between this story and a biography however is that the reader is never sure whether Sartre's protagonist will actually develop into a leader — whereas he already knows the outcome of a biography.

Another argument which Maurois advances for chronological development is that it displays the "evolution of the individual spirit", a more realistic phenomenon than a hero always consistent with himself at every moment in his life⁶¹. In recent years some biographers have experimented with time in the fashion of the impressionistic novel (notably Leon Edel in his life of Henry James), but André Maurois has adhered to the realistic technique.

Some critics have advanced the theory that the quality of biography in the late nineteenth century slumped because of the prevalence of deterministic philosophies in science and literature. The single example of Stendhal should be enough to disprove the theory. A precursor of Taine's environmentalism, he was at the same time an enthusiastic, almost rapturous, biographer. Realism has always been important in the history of biography, but there is no substantial relationship that can be demonstrated between the art of biography and the special nineteenth-century development in the novel known as realism.

BIOGRAFIA I REALIZM

STRESZCZENIE

Definicje realizmu sformułowane przez Fryderyka Engelsa (przedstawienie typowych charakterów w typowych sytuacjach w zgodzie z rzeczywistością) oraz przez René Welleka (obiektywne przedstawienie współczesnej rzeczywistości spo-

⁴⁹ *Aspects of Biography*, p. 58.

⁵⁰ *Le Mur* (Paris 1939), pp. 135—122.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 58—59.

lecznej) zdają się wykluczać biografię. Pierwsza, ponieważ w biografii mogą występować nietypowe postacie i sytuacje, druga zaś dlatego, że nie dotyczy przeszłości. Realizm w biografii może być rozpatrywany jako jedna z form obiektywnego przedstawienia rzeczywistości.

Autor biografii dąży do stworzenia w swym dziele wrażenia prawdy przez zastosowanie dwu środków: wprowadzenie konkretnych faktów i użycie odpowiednich środków artystycznych. Głównym składnikiem owych materiałów faktograficznych jest stosowanie dokumentacji, cytowanie autentycznych danych i zapisów dokumentalnych, dalej przedrukowywanie listów i dzienników osobistych. To wszystko bywa uzupełniane składnikami dalszego planu, mianowicie aktualną historią społeczną, polityczną i gospodarczą. Wszelkie zabiegi artystyczne obliczone są na ukształtowanie odpowiedniego napięcia dramatycznego za pomocą specjalnego potraktowania zgromadzonego w biografii materiału. Autor posługuje się bardzo zróżnicowaną techniką, wprowadzając elementy mniej lub więcej zaskakujące czytelnika, wyróżniki ściśle chronologiczne, kreuje czas psychologiczny, układa różnorodne szczegóły towarzyszące i w odpowiednich miejscach lokalizuje pewne treści szczegółowe, ogniskujące w sobie zasadniczy sens dzieła.

Czterech biografów z różnych epok literackich, mianowicie Plutarch, Boswell, Stendhal i André Maurois wprowadzili do tego gatunku literackiego w różnorodnej proporcji zasady realizmu faktów i realizmu środków artystycznych.

Znamienną cechą stylu Plutarcha jest wyraźna nierealistyczność oraz łączenie iluzji zawartych w biografii z treściami mocno tkwiącymi w realiach życia. Inaczej postępował Boswell; ten pisarz z ogromną skrupulatnością gromadzi elementy „realizmu faktograficznego” w postaci konkretnych danych uporządkowanych w układzie chronologicznym, czemu stale towarzyszy wyraźny realizm środków artystycznych. Stendhal wyposaża swe biografie w duży zasób konkretnych danych i materiałów autorytatywnych, jednakże przynajmniej połowa tych danych nie jest traktowana zbyt ściśle i dokładnie. André Maurois, w przeciwieństwie do Stendhala, w swych biografiach stosuje zasadę kształtowania obrazu życia w wyższym stopniu, niż to ma miejsce w powieści. Akceptuje on założenia „realizmu faktograficznego”, przy czym za pomocą odpowiednich ukształtowań stylu osiąga silne elementy realistyczne.

Takie oto są niesubstancjalne pokrewieństwa między biografią a powieścią realistyczną.

Przełożył Jan Trzynadłowski