


Reading by the Lamp of Biography: how knowledge of the artist illuminates our understanding of the art

 MOST will agree that whenever we seek valuable information, information that will mean something to us, we consider the origin before we form an opinion. Why do credible newspapers bother to cite the sources they quote? Because the person who chooses to live a productive, a thoughtful, a satisfying life chooses always to go *ad fontes*: to the source. And if considering the source enriches and enlightens our understanding and appreciation for everyday life, does it not afford the same rewards to the student of literature?

There are some who say no. These are mostly exponents of deconstructionist and phenomenological criticism or a host of other schools which assert that authors have no business associating themselves with the text, and readers certainly have no business trying to find them there. Yet many of these same critics and professors study and teach from texts which overflow with biography. If you open an anthology of British literature published by Oxford or Norton, and turn to John Donne, what is the first thing you'll see? Three or four pages describing where Donne was born, where he was educated, what literature influenced his early years, a discourse detailing how his poetry changed after he joined the church, and so on. In other words, a link will be established between the writer and what he has written. In fact, I could find only one major writer in my British literature anthology whose work the editors did not try to elucidate by using biography, because in this single case there was simply no connection to be made. For many puzzled and nervous academics, it is convenient when confronted with questions about this writer to gruffly assert, "it doesn't matter!"

There is a discrepancy, then, between those academics who increasingly insist that the author "doesn't matter," and those textbooks that are required of university students which devote a great deal of space to discussing the author. There must be a reason for those three or four pages of biography that precede Donne's poems!

When asked to assemble a popular collection of his poetry, Herman Hesse offered this as one of the criteria for selecting among his poems: "it should have a special position among my own works because it [gives] an expression of my own essential being." Indeed, how could

a poet, a novelist, a dramatist produce anything that in some way was not, as Hesse wonderfully put it, an expression of [his or her] own essential being? Every creative author approaches the task of writing with an inspiration, an idea, a purpose. There are some who diminish or deny the importance and even the presence of this purpose. Yet to do so is to contradict the physics of creation itself: a person must possess materials before he or she can create. These materials include imagination, skill, discrimination, desire, experience. All these components the author binds in the final creation to get something across to the reader; and with each added ingredient the composition becomes powerfully personal. Before we approach a work, we must recognize this fact: in every creation, the author wishes to communicate something to the audience. By choosing to seek the author, we choose to experience the work in its totality. In many cases, a creation is but half understood if the reader is ignorant of the hand that moved the pen.

We know then that beneath any artist's final product lies a vision. In the hands of a skilled craftsman, or one who is frustratingly abstruse, this vision may be cloudy to the common reader, or a special facet of it may lie undiscovered. It is this vision that the critic attempts to penetrate; not to rationally dissect it, but to see the work of the author in the fullest possible light. Knowledge of biography is a powerful tool in the hands of a skilled critic. Despite theories put forth by some critical schools, most informed readers agree that meaningful critical attempts are those which have as a foundation familiarity with both author and *zeitgeist*. Maurice Beebe, formerly of Purdue University and author of *Literary Symbolism*, warns, "failure to consider the genesis of a work has led to some spectacular blunders in interpretation." While capable critics avoid the so-called genetic fallacy of using authorial biography as the sole basis for interpreting a work, they certainly know its value.

Criticism's job, asserted Matthew Arnold in his historic essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," is to "make the best ideas prevail. Presently," he said, "these new ideas reach society . . . and there is a stir and a growth everywhere." One of criticism's chief goals is to invite and excite readers by making the work as accessible as possible, and any criticism which proceeds without biographical information can only obscure the work and alienate the reader. In his collection of essays *Using Biography*, critic William Empson artfully demonstrates that biographical material can help us "appreciate a writer's methods and intentions," allowing us to effectively explore relationships not explicit in the work itself. Good criticism serves an important purpose: it carefully unfolds the creation, and helps us to get to the heart of what a work — and its author — are trying to say.

Most serious readers, while studying a work, have at some time encountered a skillful, penetrating piece of criticism, and felt as though they had been handed a key which opened

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an exciting new door into the novel or poem. As an undergraduate, I recall studying a work by Victor Hugo, and wondering, along with my freshman classmates, what to make of this Frenchman's apparent preoccupation with a deranged priest and a deformed oaf who scamper about in a fifteenth century French cathedral. Beyond a fine writing style and a gripping, twisting plot, was there anything more? It was only after the professor linked the novel to the tumultuous events of Hugo's time, and disclosed his intent—his vision—that we were able to truly appreciate and understand the novel.

We asked, "Why don't any of the characters develop as characters do in other works we've studied?" The answer: Victor Hugo discovered the Greek word for "fate" carved into an obscure corner of the Notre Dame cathedral. He followed a line of thought which led him to craft each of the novel's characters around an unqualified human trait. When we asked, "What purpose is served by the character and actions of the hideous Quasimodo?" the answer was that Hugo, a French Romantic, felt that God created man in an imperfect image of Himself but that this image is marred by man's corrupt body and soul. However, Hugo felt that man has the freedom to transcend these detriments, shake loose the shackles of superstition, and realize spiritual greatness. In the same vein, the cruel Claude Frollo was intended to personify the impossibility of Man's effort to realize spiritual greatness. Answers to these and other questions invested the book with a new life which, for us, it had not previously possessed. Far from limiting our thoughts, this special insight gave us the freedom to explore constructive avenues of interpretation. The professor was able to answer so candidly and effectively because he was drawing from a knowledge of history and from the record of Hugo's own words.

Indeed, teachers have the good fortune and responsibility to act as Virgil-like guides for young students as they wind their way through the labyrinth of western literature; to shine the light of insight and understanding on their path, and increase their understanding of their culture and themselves. Few have a more important and satisfying task, for as Thoreau said, "How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book?" Teachers by necessity are critics, who inculcate in their students the capacity and desire to evaluate what they read, to use every means available to shed light upon a work and the artist's vision—for the brighter the lamp, the more one can see. The vehicle for this vision—a poem, for example—may be as simple as the red wheelbarrow and white chickens of William Carlos Williams, or as complex as a T. S. Eliot poem to which the poet finds it necessary to add his own copious endnotes, but an intention or desired impression is always present. Many recent critics, often from the groups I mentioned earlier, insist that because we may not be able to access *precisely* what the author had in his or her head upon writing the piece, we should ignore the original vision completely. Yet doesn't our knowledge of an author's life and cir-

cumstances contribute something to our understanding of the work?

While we can never know the full extent of Keats's despondency when he wrote in his sonnet, "When I have fears that I may cease to be . . . I stand alone and think/ Till love and fame to nothingness do sink," the knowledge that at the time he wrote those lines he was burdened with terrible poverty, had watched his brother die and knew himself to be mortally ill, and knew it, lends us a keener appreciation for his words. Certainly, the sonnet brilliantly touches universals that are apparent even without knowledge of who wrote them; but if we take a moment to ask ourselves, not the obvious, "What does this mean to me"? but, "What did it mean to its creator? Why has he chosen to color his reflections on life in this manner? Who is he that he has written this way?"—it is not surprising to find that in answering these questions the poem—its painful longing, its delicate suggestion—becomes deeper, richer. In this example, Keats implicitly asks us to consider an existence darkened by the pall of approaching death; to conjure up the dim face of a fading lover; to mourn with him a bright youth and genius slashed by death's sickle. He was in love with Fanny Brawne, he was dying of tuberculosis, and the brilliance of his "teeming brain" was evident to all who knew him—and to himself. Therefore, to know of Keats is to read his poem and exclaim "Ah, he knew of these things! He felt them truly!"

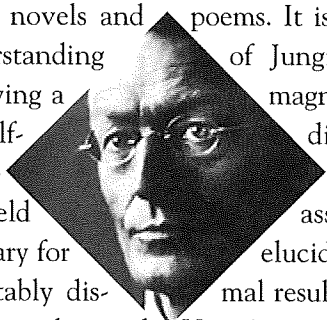
We often read because we desire to be confronted by the unknown, to feel and know the experiences of a sensitive author so that our lives may be richer for the confrontation; we read as well to find our own experiences, which we believed ineffable, to be expressed so eloquently. Thus Oscar Wilde promises us, "let [a poem's] music steal into your brain and colour your thoughts, and you will become for a moment what he was who wrote it." But how difficult it often is to yield to this suggestion if we know nothing of the author or his or her credentials.

For example, can you imagine the 1982 *New York Times*'s best-sellers list announcing the arrival of *The Color Purple*—by Kurt Vonnegut? The story of a black girl from the rural south, who is impregnated twice in her early teens by her own father, is beaten remorselessly by her husband and finally finds true love with another woman, elicits a response in most readers of "Unbelievable!" If this story were written by a white male, the son of Indianapolis architects, who spent his youth earning a degree from the University of Chicago and spent much of his adult life in Manhattan—Kurt Vonnegut's biography—the reader's final response would likely never mature beyond, "Unbelievable!" and the story would be regarded as another of Mr. Vonnegut's flights of fancy. However, if we are familiar with the biography of Alice Walker—the book's real author—we know that the novel is informed by the writer's authentic experiences. The purposes that Alice Walker had in creating her novel—among others, imparting her vision that black women have the capacity to find spiritual health even in the



face of the cruelest male domination—are taken seriously. Like the Keats poem, *The Color Purple* allows its readers to form opinions and feel deeply about issues that pluck a common emotional chord, but which lie outside the reader's field of personal experience.

Let's say, for instance, that Bill Gates were to follow up his recent book on the future of computer technology with a book intended to explore the fear and alienation experienced by impoverished Mexican immigrants. Unless readers could be convinced that because of his personal experience he had a right to speak on the topic, all serious readers would reject it. Not only great literature, but worthwhile books of informative journalism as well are simply not satisfying when writers attempt to write about subjects with which they are not demonstrably familiar. Readers want to know if they are peering into an authentic world, or merely being treated to a work purely of the imagination. Often, a major part of the author's vision may go undetected or become grossly misunderstood if the reader is not familiar with their thought, the climate that informed their work, and often with the author's world view as stated in their own words. I earlier quoted Herman Hesse, who frankly admitted the dramatic effect of his philosophy on his novels and poems. It is no secret that to read much of Hesse's work without an understanding of Jungian psychology and of Hesse's peculiar use of it is akin to viewing a magnificent landscape with one eye closed. Hesse writes in the self-disclosing tradition of Goethe, who said, "all my works are fragments of a great confession." Indeed, Hesse critic G.W. Field asserts, "We must investigate Hesse's life to the extent necessary for elucidation of the works." Absence of this investigation yields predictably dismal results. The first American editor of *Narcissus and Goldmund* so misunderstood Hesse's intention to reveal the relationship between mind and body, personified by the two titled characters, that the editor ridiculously titled the work simply *Goldmund*.



A reader who approached the *Sea of Fertility*, the tetralogy by Japan's greatest modern writer, Yukio Mishima, without knowledge of his life and work, would soon find the story disintegrating into inexplicable chaos. Mishima saw post-WWII Japan moving away from its great heritage, and mourned the deterioration of bushido—the warrior's code of honor—in the increasingly-Westernized Japan. Not knowing his biography, who could understand the plea implicit in this long and complicated work, which was nothing less than the demand that the Japanese people rise up in revolution against their government and restore the proud traditions of their past. How diminished the book appears if severed from the knowledge that he followed this appeal with an actual attempt to overthrow the government of Japan using his own private army.

Mishima's artistic skill is obvious to any who read his work, but without a knowledge of why he is writing, the work is little more than a sea of brilliantly decorated confusion.

Particularly when we come to deal with tropes of illusion such as symbolism, metaphor, and allegory, knowledge of the author ranges from helpful to imperative. Throughout history, such devices have been used to convey meaning. Without knowing something of the author, it is likely that we will be left utterly in the dark, or will arrive at erroneous conclusions. For example, the Elizabethans frequently used metaphor to disguise the authentic purport of their literature (and thus keep their scribbling hands safely attached to their bodies), leaving a body of work that scholars have failed to fully decipher to this day. Indeed, much allegory and symbolism in this century's literature has become so complex and esoteric that one can only approach it with a knowledge of who wrote it.

The English critic Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory* quotes fellow critic Wolfgang Iser as famously saying, "To read at all, we need to be familiar with the literary techniques and conventions which a particular work deploys." Eagleton follows with this example: he was walking through the London underground system, and noticed this sign: "Dogs must be carried on the escalator." He wondered facetiously, Does this mean that the person with tired feet must round up a dog and carry it if he wishes to use the escalator? Or is it merely specifying that dogs, as opposed to sheep, must be carried? No answer to these questions is evident in the words themselves. This is a situation, says Eagleton, in which we need a fairly detailed knowledge of the sign's author and intentions if we wish to avoid mishap. The analogy is a simple one: we risk gross misunderstanding of a work if we don't know something of the author and his or her purpose.

Those who protest that no knowledge of the author is needed and that, in fact, authors do not wish to be known, often point to Oscar Wilde's famous statement in his "Preface" to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that the goal of the artist is to "reveal the art and conceal the artist." Yet we more perfectly appreciate Wilde's own work if we are familiar with the actions and words that supplemented his fiction. The "Preface" is in fact the type of authorial supplement that helps us appreciate and penetrate the author's vision. While Wilde, the cleverest of wordsmiths, may have striven on one level to remove himself from his writings, he actively involved himself on another. Recall his great comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. When once we know of Wilde's private life, the cynical Algernon proves to be a deeper voice that much of the audience could not hear. During the writing of the play Wilde, an active homosexual, was consorting with Lord Alfred Douglas, son of the Marquess of Queensbury. While Wilde turned an upright (or, at least, law-abiding) face to his admiring public, he often escaped to a world where he could safely express his sexuality as he wished. Similarly, when Algernon feels that the immediate trappings of family and society are stifling him, he escapes purportedly to visit his friend "Bunbury" who, we discover, is imaginary. He refers to this periodic escape as "Bunburying," a sly reference to the sort of activities indulged

by Wilde when not in the public eye. This *double entendre* was invisible to most in Wilde's audience, but to that inner circle who knew his other side, the pun heightened their appreciation of the play. Because of what we know of Wilde's private life, we too can appreciate his hidden puns, his ingenious *double entendres*. When we know something of the author's biography, the work becomes richer. There is a connection here between Wilde and Elizabethan Court playwrights, whose work, if performed for common audiences, likely contained much which the general audience didn't catch. However, the inner circles at Court certainly appreciated the subtle pokes, the careful puns, the outright caricatures that the skilled dramatist had planted to delight listeners who were "in the know." The play was accessible to them on all its levels, and was thus a richer experience for them.

This is one reason why it is so vital for us to discover whether it was such a Court playwright who wrote the plays and sonnets of "Shake-speare." If we can tie them to a biography, they will become richer for us, and for the generations to come. Yet there is another, perhaps deeper reason which pushes us to discover Shakespeare's biography: the simple, visceral need to know the source of that which amazes, engages and fascinates us.

As young musicians who grew up dreaming of a career in music, my friends and I worshipped those players whose music we loved. I could name every song that featured Louis Armstrong "scatting"; I could recite interviews with Dave Brubeck verbatim, and could tell you exactly how much John Lennon weighed when the Beatles recorded the White Album. One friend would corner me to explain why Miles Davis continually turned his back on the audience, another would detail (to no one in particular) everything that Jerry Garcia usually ate before a concert. Why did we do this? Each of us has admired a work or a performance so immensely that we felt compelled to know more about the person behind it. Similarly, adopted children who, as adults, seek their biological parents, probably could not explain exactly why they wish to know of their first parents, their source. When something becomes very important to us, becomes a piece of our lives, a part of who we are—whether it is a work of art, a philosophy, a book, a song, a play—it is simply human nature to seek the source of our wonder. Biography satisfies a need that is not favorable to analysis, but which nevertheless demands satisfaction. Where no source can be found, we may be forced to play detective, and investigate the matter for ourselves. Tireless research into the faded pages of the past is necessary, but the literary detective often finds that the greatest clue that an unknown author can leave behind is their work. The critical tool of biography can here be set in reverse: instead of using what we know of the author to better discover the works, we must use what we know of the works to uncover the author. The relationship between author and work is indissoluble, and is a symbiosis ignored at tremendous cost. Biography provides a lamp where there is only darkness. 🦉

