

“HIS LIFE, HIS WORKS”:
SOME OBSERVATIONS
ON LITERARY BIOGRAPHY

For some time it has been fashionable in literary circles to reject what is called scornfully the biographical method. It was inevitable. No mode lasts forever. Sooner or later, there is a change. This method was the law for too long. It had no rival. Under its tutelage the motto for teaching literature was “the man, his work”. It was by its authority that students were taught that La Fontaine was in charge of waterways and forests and master of the hunt before writing his *Fables*, that they had to learn by heart; or that Beaumarchais had been a clockmaker, musician, secret agent and business man before inventing the character of Figaro, proposed for their admiration. There has been a reaction. Our irreverent and contentious age has put an end to that absolute sovereignty. For a good quarter of a century this practice and the assumptions on which it rests has been on trial, in the name of the various and at times even contradictory conceptions and theories about the

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

nature of literature. These have in common, however, the belief in the independence of literature with regard to the human being who was the instrument of its creation, as well as the anathema cast by this fact on what is commonly accepted as “referential illusion”.¹

In spite of the enthusiasm and tenacity of this long assault, in spite of the indisputable and, at times, extreme ingenuity of its attackers, it seems that the biographical method—if there is one and if it is really, properly speaking, biographical—is not doing badly. We could even say that it is doing better all the time. The editions of literary texts called *Petits Classiques* are more richly furnished than ever before with illustrations of the author’s life, and they continue to offer a chronology of that life alongside important contemporary events. The publishers’ catalogues show that the motto used above has lost nothing of its prestige, since a new collection “His life, his work” has just been produced by Editions F. Birr, three fourths of whose first volumes are devoted to writers. At the same time, another publisher has launched the collection *L’homme et son œuvre*. The great literary biographies which in the last few years have followed the splendid *Lives* of André Maurois—three quarters of which were also devoted to writers—are still popular in the bookstores. Without going farther back than 1984, we can mention some titles that are all best-sellers: *Victor Hugo* by Alain Decaux; *Tchecov* by Henri Troyat; *Tourgueniev* by the same author; *Sartre* by Annie Cohen-Solal; *Joseph Kessel* by Yves Courrière; *Amoureuse Colette* by Geneviève Dormann. In 1985 alone, fifty out of the nearly two hundred catalogued biographies are biographies of writers.² It is thus quite evident that the genre has entered a new golden age and that the curiosity of the public for literary biography has victoriously survived the repeated accusation that it can no longer be of help to literary criticism and cannot in any way throw light on the work.

The explanation undoubtedly comes, at least in part, from the fact that this curiosity was not born yesterday, to say nothing of

¹ A convenient résumé of “La Mise en cause de la méthode biographique” will be found in the first pages of the article by Jean-Claude Bonnet, “Le fantasme de l’écrivain”, in *Poétique*, 63 (an issue on “Le Biographique”), Sept. 1985, pp. 259-260.

² See the article by François Taillandier, “Des succès (presque) assurés”, followed by bibliographic lists organized by Claude Combet, making up the dossier “Biographies” in *Livres hebdo* (June 24, 1985) pp. 65-83.

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today; it has its ancient patents of nobility, even if they do not enjoy all the recognition we could wish for them. The earliest practitioners of the art of biography must have presupposed a curiosity among the readers of their time that was analogous to ours, otherwise they would not have devoted themselves to satisfying it so abundantly. It is true that Plutarch, the most famous among the biographers of Antiquity, mainly wrote about the lives of statesmen and military leaders, but we also have his parallel lives of Demosthenes and Cicero. But Plutarch is a late-comer in the Greek literary tradition, since he lived in the first and second centuries of our era. The same is true of the most illustrious of his Latin colleagues, Suetonius, who was only twenty years younger and is chiefly known today for his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* and the scandalous details they furnished on the aberrant sexual tastes of the great Roman families. But Suetonius was also the author of other biographies, less well known, not so much because they would not adapt well to the movie or television screen but because only a few fragments of them have survived. The best-preserved parts of the one known as *De poetis* originally composed of thirty *Lives*, are the biographies of Terence, Horace and Virgil. According to specialists, these texts, although mutilated, are the most important source we have for the history of Latin literature.³ Furthermore, the genre that we would today call literary biography was already well established in Rome when Suetonius wrote his. Although Varro's *De poetis* is among the many works of this author that have disappeared, we know indirectly of its existence. Now, Varro was born in the second century B.C. And it is a fact that the oldest Latin biographer whose work has come down to us, Cornelius Nepos, who lived in the first century B.C., devoted his *Lives* to diverse categories of illustrious men, among which those of generals and kings are found alongside those of historians and poets.⁴ Finally, the presence of the lives of writers is also attested to in the lost work of the earliest of Greek biographers: Aristoxene of Taranto, considered by some—St. Jerome, for example, who was not uninformed—as the true founder not only of literary biography

³ Auguste Rostagni, Introduction to his edition of Suetonius “*De poetis*” e *biografi minori*, Turin, Chiantore, 1944, p. V.

⁴ See Edna Jenkinson, “Nepos—An Introduction to Latin Biography”, in *Latin Biography*, ed. T.A. Dorey, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, p. 2.

but of biography itself.⁵ This disciple of Aristotle, whose career precedes that of Plutarch by almost five centuries, compiled numerous lives of illustrious men, among which, we are told, no political or military leader figured, all his preference going to writers and philosophers: Archytas, Plato, Pythagoras and, along with Xenophon, Socrates.

So we are far off the mark when we consign the origin of the “diffusion of a public image of the man of letters”,⁶ or, if you prefer, the tradition of literary biography, to the 18th century and its academic, necrologous and numerous other compilations linked to the “institutionalization of the literary milieu”. Between the 4th century B.C. of Aristoxene of Taranto and the 18th century of Fontenelle and d’Alembert, in spite of the existence of long interruptions and extensive lacunae, we must at least set aside a place for the 17th century. At that time, the custom of putting biographical notes at the front of posthumous editions of the works of great authors—often too eulogistic, we must admit—gave rise to the first masterpieces of the genre: the *Life of Blaise Pascal* by his older sister Gilberte, or the *Life of Descartes* by Father Adrien Baillet, which, going beyond the accepted norms, filled two volumes when it appeared in 1691. Nor should we forget, toward the middle of the century, that small masterpiece that would not be judged publishable until much later: the *Historiettes* by Tallemant des Réaux, twenty of which have the writers of his day as subjects, Balzac, Chapelain, Malherbe, Ménage, Racan, the Scudéry and Voiture. Finally, we should recall the two monumental folios of *Hommes illustres qui ont paru en France pendant ce siècle*, published by Charles Perrault in 1696 and 1700: one hundred accounts of which twenty are lives of writers: Descartes, Pascal, Corneille, Malherbe, Voiture, Molière, La Fontaine, Racine, Quinault, and others. These two richly-illustrated volumes serve at the same time as a brilliant *clausule* to the century they commemorate and as a prelude to the many academic eulogies that would be one of the marks of the

⁵ See Gerard Walter, Introduction to his edition of *Vies des hommes illustres* of Plutarch, “Pléiade”, 2 vol., 1951, Vol. I, p. XIII; and especially Duane Reed Stuart, *Epochs of Greek and Roman Biography*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1928, pp. 129-154.

⁶ Cf. J.-C. Bonnet, *art. cit.*, pp. 260-262.

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following century.

Do we know many other literary genres that, cultivated in Greece from the 4th century B.C. still have today the success in bookstores that we mentioned above? A vitality so exceptional cannot be due to mere chance. So in the following pages we will look for an explanation for this surprising phenomenon. Might it not be in the nature itself of the object of the literary biography, something that makes the development of the genre somehow inevitable? Might there not exist a natural affinity, an organic rapport between the recounting of a human life (biography) and the privileged choice of that of a writer that allows the comprehension of the triumphant survival of the tradition of the lives of authors, in spite of the vigorous attacks directed toward it, and also in spite of the obvious abuses to which it has sometimes led?

In this regard, and without going so far as to subscribe to the interdicts pronounced by today's critics, who are the most taken with the arbitrary, it would be bad faith on our part not to recognize the existence of these abuses. For example, even an exceptional mind like Taine's may seem to us to have gone a little far when, in the preface to his famous book on *La Fontaine et ses Fables*, he announces his intention to “speak as a naturalist” and compare the creation of a poem to a biochemical phenomenon: “We may consider man as a superior animal who produces philosophies and poems somewhat as silkworms produce their cocoons and bees their hives”. The image seems so absurd, in spite of the “somewhat”, that introduces it, that we are tempted to ask if the author intended to be taken seriously. Because of the context, however, we must set aside the hypothesis of a boring thesis of a student teacher and ask what could have made Taine so blind to the extravagance of his statement. The answer is undoubtedly that it is not on the tradition of literary biography that the responsibility for this aberration should fall but on the ambition to build a scientific method with a universal tendency on its foundation. This method led to the well-known excesses we know and of which the above example gives only a faint idea, because Taine was not the first comer. But the fear of excess is not enough to justify either faintheartedness nor abstinence. The existence of gluttons and drunkards does not necessarily bring with it the

proscription of the pleasures of the table. We must not be too intolerant of moderation and we must recognize in this regard that nothing so rigidly systematic and austere dogmatic as the preface to *La Fontaine et ses Fables* appears either in the practice or the doctrine of the precursor of Taine who is generally held to be the guilty one in this affair: the inventor and author of *Portraits littéraires*.

And so it is time to consider Sainte-Beuve. The subject of these considerations sooner or later leads to him. In his two articles on Chateaubriand in the *Nouveaux lundis*⁷ written only a couple of years after the publication of *La Fontaine et ses fables*, and in which we agree to see the best creed of criticism, Sainte-Beuve explicitly recognizes that Taine's method is related to his own, but he quickly points out the differences. When he judges the literary work inseparable from its author, to the point where he takes as his own the proverb, "You shall judge the tree by its fruit" (p. 15) he adds, indicating that his botanical metaphor should be interpreted with more flexibility than Taine admitted with his zoological metaphor: "We can never treat man exactly as we treat animals or plants; the moral man is more complex; he has what we call *liberty* and which in any case assumes a great mobility of possible combinations" (pp. 16-17). Even if he lets himself imagine afterward that a "science of minds" will perhaps be set up in the future, he does not hesitate to come back to earth: "It would always be an *art*", (p. 17) he recognizes, with good sense and good faith for which we must be grateful to him.

Although Sainte-Beuve is therefore neither the fierce doctrinaire nor the dangerous extremist that he has become in some legends, it is true that the deforming vision of posterity has made him the symbol of a discredited critical method, the one responsible for the worst excesses into which his followers should fall, in short, the idol to knock off its pedestal, the enemy. This mythological metamorphosis is partly the result of the shattering title, *Against Sainte-Beuve*, chosen in 1954 to re-unite important posthumous writings by Marcel Proust. We know that this motto for a crusade

⁷ Originally dated July 21 and 22, 1862 these two articles were collected in *Nouveaux lundis*, Paris, Michel Lévy, Vol. III (1865) pp. 1-33. For quotations taken later from these articles the pagination referring to this volume is indicated between parentheses after the quotation.

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only appears twice from the pen of Proust, once in a personal letter,⁸ and that the book that he had in mind never existed except in his imagination, then as fragments of a work left in the planning stage. But we are no doubt, too, attached to the martial image that tradition offers us of the history of our literature, entirely made up of quarrels and duels, not to prefer the legends to the realities, which do not give us nice pasteboard cut-outs. This is why Proust and Sainte-Beuve were latecomers to the company of those other formidable adversaries, matched up in antagonistic couples whom we all know: Descartes and Pascal, Racine and Corneille, Bossuet and Fenelon, Voltaire and Rousseau, Sartre and Camus, Barthes and Picard. Let us then bow before that other reality, legend, but not forget that the two champions facing each other were in fact much more moderate in their attitudes than in the postures of gladiators that have been lent them and especially that the real extremists who came after them, brandishing their names like so many banners, must have been. Besides, as is often the case in pedagogy, this simplified and therefore falsified view of things has the advantage of convenience on its side. By exaggerating the terms of the problem, it accentuates it, which makes it easier for us now to weigh judicially the pro and con of the two options facing us.

We will begin with the “For Sainte-Beuve” if only for the sake of chronology. First we will consider the two articles of the *Nouveaux Lundis* mentioned above. The author praises the virtues of his method and enumerates the successive procedures and stages. Even though the word *biography* never appears in Sainte-Beuve, it is still the subject in the study of what he calls “literary personages” (p. 13). According to him, only information assembled in the milieu in which the author lived, his native surroundings, his family, his education and his friends, allows a true judgment of his work:

“Chaque ouvrage d’un auteur vu, examiné de la sorte, à son point, après qu’on l’a replacé dans son cadre et entouré de toutes les circonstances qui l’ont vu naître, acquiert tout son sens,—son sens historique, son sens littéraire,—reprend son degré juste d’originalité, de nouveauté ou d’imitation, et l’on ne court pas

⁸ Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, “Pléiade”, 1971, p. 829. The quotations given later from the text of Proust are based on this edition. The pagination is indicated between parentheses after each quotation.

risque, en le jugeant, d'inventer des beautés à faux et d'admirer à côté, comme cela est inévitable quand on s'en tient à la pure rhétorique" (p. 23)

In other words, the knowledge that we gather from the biography of an author lets us know the man better and perhaps understand him better. This knowledge of the man may in its turn lead to a better knowledge, and perhaps a more just appreciation, of his work. This way, voluntarily and excessively prudent and prosaic, of stating the advantages of Sainte-Beuve's method has for effect to show also its hazards. We immediately see the traps into which those who apply it indiscriminately may fall, the shoals on which they may founder. We are on guard in advance against the improper use we may make of it if we do not have all the culture, all the intelligence and all the sensitivity of its founder. We see at the same time the contrast between the meaning of the nuances that often softens the contours of Sainte-Beuve's method and the imperturbable and dogmatic certitude that is sometimes that of Taine, as it is that of the immanentism common to most of his detractors of today. Zoology or biochemistry, indeed Tainian geometry, on the one hand and on the other, linguistic, semiotic or even, to use Sainte-Beuve's term, pure rhetoric. Whether it is a matter of exact or natural science, it is always a question of the same mirage: that of the universal, irresistible, like all mirages, but also, like them, utopian.

If we must admit then that the knowledge we gain from certain situations in the lives of the authors does not really give us the key to open the sanctuaries of their work, it is none the less true that they allow us a better appreciation of some aspects of that work, even if we understand that these circumstances alone are never determinant. For example, to attribute to illness the sadness or melancholy that often marks the work of Rousseau or Larbaud is to forget that illness did not prevent either Molière or Scarron from writing comedies. Once this is understood, a simple list of some of these circumstances giving the names of the authors who were affected by them, will perhaps suffice to establish the other truth that there is a rapport between the circumstances and certain pages of their works, a connection that is certainly variable, as appears in all that separates the two authors whose names follow the

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statement of each circumstance we have chosen. Leaving aside the phenomena of a too-elevated frequency, which would not have a specific recognizable effect (illnesses, disappointments in love, travels, sexual fantasies, etc.) let us use the following list as an example, arbitrarily and alphabetically arranged:

military career - Laclos, Vigny
religious conversion - Pascal, Claudel
delinquency - Villon, Genet
financial difficulties - Marivaux, Balzac
rural childhood - Retif, Colette
medical studies - Rabelais, Celine
theological formation - Prevost, Renan
use of drugs - Baudelaire, Cocteau

Even those readers who do not agree that a work is ever really elucidated by this sort of knowledge will perhaps admit that this information helps to demystify the image that authors often like to give of themselves and modify the devout admiration that, far from bringing the reader closer to the author, actually creates a distance between them. If we are drawn by the account of a famous man's life, it is a direct result of this fame. From which comes the traditional Latin title *De viris illustribus*. We read the biographies of famous men because they are different from us, who are not famous. But this reading often has the effect of taking us beyond these distinctions, of entering their privacy and finally of recognizing ourselves in them. A familiarity—illusory, perhaps—is created and leads to a sympathetic understanding. We look more favorably upon what they have written. The more informed we are, the less we are inclined to censure.

At the very least, this search for biographic details has generally more attraction for us, the public, than that of the historical-social-economic-political factors on which other methods, analogous but different, of the study of literature rest. At times included in the same disdain by the adversaries of all intrusions of the historical on the literary, in reality they rest on quite different conceptions of the literary work, depending on whether this is viewed as a result of causes that are exterior to the writer or, on the contrary, of his very personality which may, itself, be seen as conditioned and indeed determined by those exterior causes. If this

last conception, and therefore the critical approach that corresponds to it, has usually had more favor with the public, it is undoubtedly because the isolated factors in the other conception seem too impersonal to have a true explanatory value, as long as the personality of the writer, which unifies them and makes them operatory,⁹ does not intervene. Many readers of *La Fontaine et ses Fables*, to return to that example, must have posed a troubling question, once the book was closed: the *Fables* being, differently from silkworm cocoons and beehives, a unique poetic phenomenon, must we not conclude that Taine was unaware of the real causes that would explain their creation, since those that he analyzes were common to La Fontaine and some others of his generation in Champagne?

Evidently, we have gradually gone from the “for” to the “against”. And the time has come to take up Proust’s objections to Sainte-Beuve’s method. They are of a lucidity and pertinence that are striking and initially charm us as powerfully as the arguments of Sainte-Beuve mentioned above, which they refute. In fact, it is on the basis of the same articles in the *Nouveaux lundis*, which he explicitly quotes, that Proust denounces the “famous method” of Sainte-Beuve,

“cette méthode qui consiste à ne pas séparer l’homme et l’œuvre, à considérer qu’il n’est pas indifférent pour juger l’auteur d’un livre, si ce livre n’est pas ‘un traité de géométrie pure’, d’avoir d’abord répondu aux questions qui paraissent les plus étrangères à son œuvre (comment se comportait-il...), à s’entourer de tous les renseignements possibles sur un écrivain, à collationner ses correspondances, à interroger les hommes qui l’ont connu, en causant avec eux s’ils vivent encore, en lisant ce qu’ils ont pu écrire sur lui s’ils sont morts, cette méthode méconnaît ce qu’une fréquentation un peu profonde avec nous-même nous apprend: qu’un livre est le produit d’un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vices. Ce moi-là, si nous voulons essayer de le comprendre, c’est au fond de nous-même, en essayant de le recréer en nous, que nous pouvons y parvenir” (p. 221-222).

⁹ See Harold Cherniss, “The Biographical Fashion in Literary Criticism”, *University of California Publications in Classical Philology*, XII (1943), pp. 279-292.

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The argument, admirably expressed here and which is the fundamental conceptual basis of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, is acknowledged by Proust himself and obviously linked to his disillusion with intelligence and philosophy. “Every day I attach less importance to intelligence”, he wrote at the outset of a projected preface for the book to be written on Sainte-Beuve (p. 211). And on the page immediately preceding the long passage quoted above, laying the blame on Taine and his funeral eulogy on Sainte-Beuve, Proust declares of the author of *l’Intelligence*:

“sa conception intellectualiste de la réalité ne laissait de vérité que dans la science” (p. 220). “Or, en art, poursuit-il, il n’y a pas (au moins dans le sens scientifique) d’initiateur, de précurseurs. Tout est dans l’individu [...] Mais les philosophes qui n’ont pas su trouver ce qu’il y a de réel et d’indépendant de toute science dans l’art, ont été obligés de s’imaginer l’art, la critique, etc. comme des sciences où le prédécesseur est forcément moins avancé que celui qui suit” (*ibid.*)

Here we can measure everything that separates Proust’s thought from that of many contemporary theoreticians of literature, who certainly shared his disdain for the author of the *Lundis* though not at all, like him, through distrust of intelligence or especially of philosophy.

But that is not the only sign of the relative moderation, pointed out above, of the fault Proust finds with Sainte-Beuve. After having reproached him in the terms we have seen for believing in the explicative value of biography, Proust himself looks for the explanation of the superficiality he objects to in the idea that Sainte-Beuve had of literature in the accident of the latter’s biography, and specially in “his resignation as administrator of the Mazarin library” (p. 225). It is interesting to see Proust attribute to this event the loss of leisure time necessary for a more profound reflection, as well as the inevitable recourse to journalism, a profession given to temporality, as he knew from experience. It is still more interesting to read this imaginary scene, in which the author of the *Lundis* soon merges with his future colleague, the episodic collaborator on *Figaro* and *Gaulois*:

“Dans sa petite maison de la rue du Mont-Parnasse, le lundi matin, à l’heure où, l’hiver, le jour est encore blême au-dessus des

rideaux fermés, il ouvrait *Le Constitutionnel* et sentait qu'au même moment les mots qu'il avait choisis venaient apporter dans bien des chambres de Paris la nouvelle des pensées brillantes qu'il avait trouvées, et exciter chez beaucoup cette admiration qu'éprouve pour soi-même celui qui a vu naître chez lui une idée meilleure que ce qu'il a jamais lu chez les autres et qui l'a présentée dans toute sa force, avec tous ses détails qu'il n'avait pas lui-même aperçus d'abord, en pleine lumière, avec des ombres aussi qu'il a amoureusement caressées" (p. 226).

All of that was written for a book supposedly intended to shatter Sainte-Beuve. And these pages are not at all exceptional. In a somewhat different order of ideas, here is Proust beginning the development devoted to Sainte-Beuve's errors in judgment on Balzac by quoting two passages from a letter to his sister (p. 263), he who was ironic, as we have seen, on the method of "collating correspondence". As it happens, the recipient of this letter was the same Madame de Surville whose physical resemblance to her brother was pointed out by Sainte-Beuve in one of the two articles we have mentioned in *Nouveaux lundis* (p. 19). But what is more striking than this merely curious coincidence is to see Proust use this letter, thus a document belonging to the private life of the novelist, to explain certain characteristics of Rastignac and Vandenesse, personages in Balzac's work. We wonder how Proust would have been able to reconcile his practice with his theory, if he had carried out his project of a book on Sainte-Beuve. We even wonder if the impossibility of a reconciliation did not perhaps have something to do with the eventual abandonment of the project. It would not be difficult, in fact, to gather from the pages that have come down to us a whole harvest of examples in which Proust appears as a docile disciple of the critic he aims to overthrow. To such a point that—as though the champion of pastiche that he was was not able to escape the trap of involuntary pastiche—many pages of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* recall the master's manner even more than the two pastiches of his that Proust composed at the same time.

The truth then seems to be that the author of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* is no more a prisoner of his own precepts than was he of *Nouveaux lundis* when he italicized *liberté* and *art* in his exposé of a method that would be scientific. If it is true that only

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fools never depart from their own system, once it has been set up, we find there a confirmation (obviously superfluous) of the fact that neither of them belonged to that category. The moral: Let us not systematically reject intelligence to the profit of instinct or intuition; nor in principle should we reject external biography to the exclusive profit of research into the secret self. Let us only reject systems that forbid the one or the other.

Perhaps it would be useful to note again that the texts of Sainte-Beuve and Proust that have been quoted are, in both cases, relatively late and express ideas that were not necessarily those of their authors during earlier periods of their careers. The articles in *Nouveaux lundis* are dated July 21 and 22, 1862. At that time Sainte-Beuve had been a critic for more than thirty years. Besides, he himself emphasizes the essential role played by this long experience in perfecting his method:

“... quoiqu'elle n'ait point préexisté et ne se soit point produite d'abord à l'état de théorie, elle s'est formée chez moi de la pratique même, et une longue suite d'applications n'a fait que la confirmer à mes yeux” (pp. 13-14).

As for Proust, he does not seem to have put his project of a book on Sainte-Beuve into action before 1908 or 1909. He had thus been writing for a good fifteen years and already had, ten years earlier, left in the planning stage the book we call today *Jean Santeuil*.

But there is still more to say concerning what kept Proust from repudiating Sainte-Beuve as radically as he sometimes affirms. Actually, he shared a fundamental credo with him, which is at the base of any biography of an author and which, up until recently, could be held as a truth of mere good sense: that is, a literary text is the work of the writer who produced it. Certainly Proust proposed, as we have seen, a decisive variant of this credo, when he reproached his predecessor for not having “seen the abyss that separates the writer from the man of the world nor understood that the self of the writer is only seen in his books” (p. 225). In other words, not to have known how to distinguish the social self, somewhat external (“the man of the world”) from the “real self” (p. 225) that is “deep within ourselves” (p. 222). There is no doubt that it is a fundamental distinction. But is it not less radical than

the one that separates both Proust and Sainte-Beuve from the prophets who have since proclaimed “the death of the author”? Even if Sainte-Beuve’s method is powerless, according to Proust, to evoke this second self, the only one that counts in literature because it has no power over it, it does not follow that this “real self” be forever condemned to elude the critic who would endeavor to find it in other ways. Actually, the contrary is true because—according to Proust—the critic cannot help going on with this search. Better yet, it is his duty:

“Ce moi-là, si nous voulons essayer de le comprendre, c’est au fond de nous-même, en essayant de le recréer en nous, que nous pouvons y parvenir. Rien ne peut nous dispenser de cet effort de notre cœur. Cette vérité, il nous faut la faire de toutes pièces et...”
(p. 222).

In these unfinished lines, far from rejecting the biography of a writer as a useless exercise, Proust assigns it a higher function, higher (or deeper) than the one he attributed to Sainte-Beuve and his followers but also more delicate; more important but also more difficult.

More difficult but not at all impossible, on the condition however of abandoning the method of Sainte-Beuve and substituting another for it, adequate to this new function. On what basis can we hope to succeed in “recreating in ourselves” this “real self” of the writer, if not beginning with the indices we find, not in his anecdotal biography but in his work, the only echo still present of this self that has disappeared? That is what Proust affirms in the above passage: “the self of the writer is only found in his books” (p. 225). This is not only foreign to Sainte-Beuve’s project but judged by him in advance to be impracticable. He is, in fact, the first to recognize that his method has little value for the writers of Antiquity because of the lack of “sufficient means of observation. To reach the man with his work in hand is impossible in most cases with the true Ancients, with those for whom we have only a half-destroyed statue” (pp. 15-16).

Here the proposition on which is founded the biographical method of Sainte-Beuve is overthrown, since it departs from the knowledge of the man to arrive at a better understanding of his work. According to *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, we must start with the

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understanding of the work if we want to understand the author. But on the one hand this course continues to be held as necessary (“nothing can exempt us from this effort...”) and on the other, the coalition (or alloy?) of the man and the work (or the work and the man) is confirmed and re-enforced. The couple they form is always held to be inseparable. The existence of the long tradition of literary biography is based on this postulate. As long as the belief in the “death of the author” continues to meet with some skepticism biographies of authors will continue to be written.

They will also continue to be read, even though, because of the change in the relationship between the man and the work, the motives stimulating the reader are not always the same as they were. Earlier, we brought up the demystification of the personage of the author that often results from a biography. The *Lélia* of Maurois tells us much more about the amorous adventures of George Sand than her *Histoire de ma vie*. The same is true of *Mon dernier rêve sera pour vous*, by Jean d’Ormesson, compared with *Mémoires d’outre tombe* by Chateaubriand. Strong in the historical research of the biographers, the readers are in the privileged situation of being able to listen at the doors of history, indeed, to look through their keyholes. The personages that the writers have endeavored to make of themselves come out modified, deflated. Their secrets have been revealed. When they have come down from their pedestals their stature seems closer to ours. Contrary to what they had hoped, they have not succeeded in carrying their secrets with them to the grave.

But there are secrets and secrets. There are those a man does not have from his valet or a woman from her maid and those that neither of them have for the confessor or psychiatrist. Or again, to take up Proust’s nomenclature, the knowledge of these secrets may give access to the man or woman of the world, or to the writer. The basic formula for any literary biography depends on the relative doses of the revelations it brings on one or the other. As we have seen with regard to *Contre Sainte-Beuve* it is rare that these cannot be limited to one alone of the two domains. But as we have also seen, the formula varies even more according to the direction of the course the reader is invited to take between the life and the work. An all the more important distinction, since, far from being led astray the reader is immediately sensitive to it; he

recognizes it for having always met it during his reading of novels. Things are much less different from what we might suppose in the world of the novel, where the principal interest may turn on the facts and actions of the characters, which lead to the knowledge—usually summary—that we have of them or it may turn on the mysterious and surprising digressions of their personality which, once unraveled by the magic of the novelist, give us a better understanding of their facts and actions: on the one hand, the Count of Monte Cristo, Tartarin de Tarascon, Arsène Lupin or Zazie; on the other, Fabrice del Dongo, Frederic Moreau, Swann or Lol V. Stein.

If this choice of examples seems to indicate that in the history of the novel the two formulas may quite well coincide at the same epoch it is not quite the same in the history of literary biography. The first great monuments of the genre are all founded on the postulate that the life of the writers leads to his work, as the titles they bear suggest. Written several years before the first lines of Sainte-Beuve (and the first steps of Taine) they date from the Restoration, which seems in retrospect to have been the *belle époque* not only for this genre but for the label under which it is preferred to be presented. Some dates and titles will suffice. In every case it is a matter of a copious work, sometimes of more than one volume:

- 1821: *Histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de J.-J. Rousseau*, by V.-D. Musset-Pathay;
- 1821: *Histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de J. de La Fontaine*, by C.-A. Walckenaer;
- 1825: *Mémoires sur Voltaire et ses ouvrages*, by Longchamp and Wagnière;
- 1825: *Histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de Molière*, by Jules Taschereau;
- 1829: *Histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de P. Corneille*, also by Taschereau.¹⁰

¹⁰ We would be curious to know the prototype of the formula. Would it be due to Louis Racine, author of *Mémoires concernant quelques particularités sur la vie et les ouvrages de Jean Racine* (1747)? The title of *Mémoires* by the two secretaries of Voltaire, Longchamp and Wagnière, was chosen by the two scholars who edited them: L.P. Decroix and A.J.Q. Beuchot.

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On the contrary, if we may judge by some of the great monuments of our day, the *Flaubert* by Sartre; the *Gide* by Delay; the *Proust* by Painter, we have the impression that the mist has been dispersed, that they no longer resemble their predecessors of a century and a half ago except in their dimensions. In short, they would escape with impunity the reproaches Proust addressed to the method of Sainte-Beuve.

This is not detrimental to the continuing success of literary biographies of a more conventionally historical mold, because the distinction we have seen and which is perfectly clear on the abstract level, does not always lead, on the concrete level, to an authentic line of demarcation. Another way of saying perhaps that in the most successful biographies what Proust called the “abyss separating the man of the world from the writer” proves to be less insurmountable than this formula would have us believe. Even then, however, the performance would be a *tour de force*. The secret of success rests on a double exigency: to read within hearts as well as in books, always a very rare combination but which just the same may be found more often in writers who are not only critics. The reason for this is also the one that makes the biographies of writers fundamentally different from all the others: they are the only ones whose personages are authors, like those who write them. With the difference, in effect, of Vasari writing his *Lives of Painters, Sculptors and Architects*; of Stendhal writing his *Life of Rossini*; or Romain Rolland writing his *Life of Beethoven*, the most minor scribbler who undertakes the writing of the life of Germaine de Staël or Paul Valéry, knows he shares with them, aside from belonging to the human race, their vocation, which is to write. He uses the same means as they do: words and a writing instrument, even if the latter is a ballpoint pen or a typewriter. Disciple or rival of the one whose life he has chosen to write, the biographer is conscious of belonging to his species. Whether he feels piety and adoration or jealousy and hate—sentiments that are perverted forms of admiration, as we all know—whether he writes, like Louis Racine, the gilded legend of Jean Racine, or like Sartre, a savage criticism of Flaubert, the resulting work bears the mark of the somehow professional solidarity that links, if we may put it that way, the “biographing” and the “biographed”.

Literary biography thus also owes to this distinctive and

exclusive characteristic not only its antiquity but also the continued vitality it demonstrates. It is a natural genre, inevitable, engaging two authors united by an organic affinity that is its very foundation. That so many writers have resolved to devote their talent and a part of their career to the task of writing the life of other writers is thus a phenomenon that is not only explainable but also normal and predictable. From the *Vie d'Ésope* by La Fontaine to the *Vie de Jean Racine* by Mauriac, from the *Vie de Sénèque* by Diderot to the *Vie de Montaigne* by Jean Prévost, from the *Vie de Corneille* by Fontenelle to the *Vie de Voltaire* by Condorcet, from the *Vie de Ronsard* by Claude Binet to the *Illuminés* by Nerval, to the Sue of J.-L. Bory, to the Casanova of Félicien Marceau, to the Chateaubriand of Jean d'Ormesson or to the Voltaire of Roger Peyrefitte: the entire history of French literature testifies to the frequency of this phenomenon and what it has of natural and the expected.

In all the biographies of writers that have been evoked here pell mell and in all the others of the same type that will come to the mind of the reader, it would be hazardous and perhaps even arbitrary to try to disentangle the exact intentions of the biographers and to specify if it was “the man of the world” or “the writer” who was the objective. The reason for this is that this genre of distinction comes more spontaneously to the thought, analytical by nature, of the reader or critic than to that of the author. It is no doubt inevitable for a writer, once he has pierced the intimacy of another writer, even if it is approached through the circumstances given by Sainte-Beuve (family, education, friends) to concentrate at a certain point his attention on the secret which led the other to become a writer, like himself. Sooner or later it is the mysterious phenomena of literary vocation and creation that will attract his curiosity and incite all his effort, whether he admires what they have done, as is the case of Sartre's Genet or repudiates it, like that of his Baudelaire.

The final reason, at the same time the least apparent at first sight and undoubtedly the most apt to account for the persistent success of the biographies of writers, with those who write them as well as with those who read them, thus comes from the mystery of the literary vocation and creation. The reader is fascinated by it, as he

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is by everything mysterious, and he instinctively feels that the one who has the best opportunity, if not to penetrate it at least to feel it and perhaps clarify it, is the writer who himself has had the direct experience. Moreover, since he is only interested in the life being told him because it was that of the author of books he has read and loved, it follows that anything that allows him to understand better how they had come into being attracts and holds him. We suggested above that the biography of a painter or a composer—more than that of a general or an empress—does not rest on the same givens as that of a writer and is thus not written in the same way; we may now add that it is also not read in the same way. A comparison will show to what point the biography of a writer is different for the reader from that of any other person well enough known that the story of his life might interest the public. Judging by the magazines that specialize in revelations of piquant and new details on the existence of the great ones of this world, it would seem that those whose life style is assumed to have the greatest interest for the public are the members of royalty, movie stars, sports champions, great criminals, artists and perhaps political and business magnates. The columns of these magazines devoted to them most often are used to surprise these "sacred monsters" in their intimacy, behaving like ordinary human beings. The photographs accompanying the text confirm this impression: a royal princess yawning, an ambassador walking his dog, an actress in her bathtub, a member of the Academy in his kitchen. These magazines have something in common with literary biographies: they flatter the less-admitted instincts of their readers who, always somewhat *voyeurs* and fairly vain, like to surprise the powerful in disadvantageous attitudes that reduce them to a normal scale. As we mentioned earlier, a deflating is often one of the effects of writers's biographies. But contrary to the case of the magazines we mentioned above, that is not what first draws the attention of the reader even though, later, he is disposed to relish it. What assures in advance his interest in the personage whose biography he opens are the books that have made him famous. Even if most of the biographies of writers flooding the market today do not claim to be explicative in the sense of Sainte-Beuve's method or even more so that of Taine and his followers, great employers of the formula *Histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de ...*

the intuited rapport between the life and work of a writer has never ceased to be a decisive factor in the attitude of the public and therefore in the success they enjoy with that public. The infatuation of people with biographies in general is often attributed by delighted publishers to their taste for historical reading: "The French public is passionately fond of history," one of them recently affirmed in response to an inquiry on the subject.¹¹ But for reasons we have just seen, it is still more because it is equally fond of literature that it does so well by the biographies of writers, in particular. One would have to not love literature in order not to be happy to have them.

Thus the quarrel that opposes partisans and adversaries to the so-called biographical method in literary studies is a false one. The proscription of which it has been the object and which served as a point of departure for these considerations no doubt rests on a misunderstanding, one that is analogous to that which brought the proscription of the famous cult of personality to the domain of politics. The excesses to which method and cult have led explains the interdiction which has been pronounced against them. The extremism associated with this interdiction ended in both cases with its being lifted, but it was not followed in either case by a simple return to the past. The literary biographies of our day no more resemble those that were so popular under Charles X and Louis-Philippe than contemporary novels resemble those of Balzac or George Sand. Besides, even when it is not "romanticized", in other words when it does not bear a title such as *The Romanesque (or Adventurous) Life of...* or when it does not belong to a collection called *The Romance of Great Lives* or when it does not appear as cartoon strips, even then literary biography rests on a dream similar to the one that nourishes the novel: recourse to the inadequate artifice of the written word so as to recreate the experienced or give the illusion of doing so. An ambition both noble and immoderate, irresistible and unrealizable. But not at all absurd or futile or ridiculous. Differently from Sisyphus who continues to climb the slope of the same mountain pushing the same stone, the biographer and the novelist do not cease to look for new ways of access so as to approach a goal that they know or

¹¹ François Taillandier, *art. cit.*, p. 66.

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suspect is beyond their reach. Particularly flexible and adaptable genres, the literary biography and the novel keep transforming themselves following the changes in taste and evolution of cultures. To survive is to change and to change is also to survive. Neither the *Vie du marquis de Sade* by Gilbert Lely nor the *Jeunesse d'André Gide* by Jean Delay were written on the model of the *Histoire de Fénelon*—like them, in two large volumes—by Cardinal de Bausset, even less on that of the *Vie de M. de Molière* by Grimarest or the *Mémorables* by Xenophon.

The authors who today most brilliantly illustrate the long tradition of the biography of writers are those who do so differently from their predecessors. Not for the vain need to distinguish themselves nor for the ingenuous care for so-called modernity but because the need to match their approach with their culture and that of their readers imposes itself as a natural condition. There is continual effort to renew the genre, to attract a new public to it and to insure its survival. The literary biography is thus no longer menaced by inanition or asphyxiation for lack of authors or readers than the novel is, in spite of the funeral orations that announce every so often their anticipated demise.

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