

STUDIES OF A BIOGRAPHER

THE BROWNING LETTERS

THE publication of the Browning correspondence naturally calls attention to a troublesome section in the code of literary morality : the section, that is, which deals with the claims of men of genius to posthumous privacy. The authorised version is often taken to be that we should refrain from making public anything which a man would have jealously guarded from publicity in his lifetime. It is easy to denounce the intrusion of the ‘many-headed beast’ and to speak as though death made no difference in the sanctity of the domestic sphere. Nobody would print his own love-letters while he is alive, and therefore nobody should print them when he has ceased to live. That inference would take us far, and, if it were admitted to be the law, would most certainly have awkward consequences. We may surely be allowed, without offence, to look even into some love-secrets of men and women who can no longer

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be wounded by our (let us hope) respectful and sympathetic interest. If we did not know something, say, of old Johnson's love for his Tetty, we should be imperfectly aware of the sweetest element of his character ; though we should have justified his roughest retort if we had asked impertinent questions in his lifetime. I confess, indeed, that I am rather suspicious of commonplace morality on such matters. It is easy and flattering to one's vanity to perch oneself upon a good round maxim which everybody will approve in theory, and which, as we are also quite aware, nobody will force us to apply in practice. However gravely we may speak, we shall read the next indiscreet revelation, and our enjoyment will only have the keener edge from our affectation of prudery. We can atone for our enjoyment of contraband goods by vigorously abusing the smuggler. And then the suspicion intrudes that in professing to pitch our standard so high, we are not really preaching sound morality. The danger strikes one especially in connection with Browning. One of his favourite themes is the conflict between the conventional code, which is perfectly plausible and perhaps correct in the average case, with the highest law which is recog-

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nised by the superior nature. A priest ought not, as a rule, to help a married woman to run away from her husband ; but the *Ring and the Book* gives the exceptional case in which, by breaking the rule, a man may show the truest nobility of character. And so, perhaps, it may be urged that, even assuming the advantages of reticence in general, there are cases in which it may cover a paltry regard for conventional propriety. When we have a man and a woman of genius, may it not be good for the world to know, even in the fullest detail, how they loved and revealed their love to each other, and how the love ennobled their lives and their work ? The case, it might be added, is too rare to be drawn into a precedent. Nobody will learn much from the flirtations of the ordinary human being, or even of the second rank of ephemeral celebrities. But when we have to do with so unique a case—with a man of undisputed pre-eminence in his art and a woman worthy of him—must it not be good for us to watch every heart-beat, and follow the most minute developments of the great passion of their lives ?

Have we not precedents which show that the system is inevitable, and, moreover, that it has led to some very desirable results ? The best books

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to read, as somebody has remarked upon such an occasion, are the books that ought never to have been written. In Shakespeare's time there was nobody to investigate the Ann Hathaway business, or to ask what was implied by the famous 'second-best bed.' If there had been, we might have been spared some of the wild hypotheses which fill the void of authentic history. The inquisitorial system began, I take it, in England in the days of Queen Anne. Curll, as Arbuthnot told Pope, added a new terror to death. That prototype of piratical booksellers procured and published some of Pope's early letters; and Pope found that the injury had its advantages. He managed to get more of his letters 'stolen' and published by prompting the theft himself; and, while he exhibited his modesty by protesting against the outrage, he had also the pleasure of knowing that 'the nation'—as Johnson puts it—'was filled with the praises of his candour, tenderness, and benevolence, the purity of his purposes, and the fidelity of his friendship.' That is a typical case: the morbidly sensitive poet, induced to connive at (or, in his case, to contrive) the violation of his rights to privacy, and driven to whole series of mean intrigues by the pleasure of

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turning himself inside out for public inspection. Since his time we have had similar exhibitions on a larger scale. Rousseau said that he was making a new experiment, and one which would have no imitators, by exhibiting a man as he really was, and that man himself. The exhibition, it is generally agreed, was not altogether edifying ; but it is also agreed that it was singularly fascinating. It was certainly a step beyond Pope. To call upon mankind to admire your virtues, and even to manufacture sham virtues for the purpose, is an intelligible aim, but it amounted to a discovery when your vices and your meannesses were employed for the same purpose. It is easy enough to preach upon the morality of the criminals ; it would be proper to add in a pulpit that they were not promoting the welfare of their souls by such transactions. But, then, can we honestly say when we are out of the pulpit, that we wish that they had not done it? Pope's contrivances at least added to our literature one of the most interesting collections of correspondence in the language ; a series of letters which puts us face to face with some of the most brilliant of our writers, and enables us to realise as nothing else can do the strength and the weakness, the shrewd-

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ness and the hypocrisy, of the great lights of the time. Granting that Pope should not himself have published, and certainly that he should not have falsified, the documents, can we deny that they are documents of the highest interest? Would we have burnt them if the alternative had been possible? In speaking of Rousseau, the only danger is that of exaggerating the importance of his work. To suppress his writings would have been to suppress the fullest utterance of the contemporary spirit; and, whether that spirit was of heaven or hell, or a strange mixture of both, its revelation to itself and us was surely desirable. Rousseau's prophecy that he would have no followers in his enterprise has hardly been fulfilled, unless in the sense that no one has been quite so reckless in self-exposure. Byron is not the only person who has exhibited to Europe the 'pageant of a bleeding heart,' and it need not be argued that the practice is often injurious to the simplicity and dignity of the performer. Even so, the world may be, on the whole, the gainer. And, if we can get rid of the degrading part of the performance, the complicity of the man exposed in his own exposure, may we not have the benefit without paying such a price? It is a natural, and

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surely an excusable, desire which prompts us to learn something more of the character of the great men who have stirred the thoughts and directed the passions of the race. A great writer, it is said, reveals the best part of himself in his works. But the longing for a more direct vision of the man behind the book, of the struggles by which he won his way to his successes, of the strength and the weaknesses by which he was helped and hindered, facilitates a clear appreciation of the works themselves. Even the greatest literary achievement becomes ‘gilt o’er dusted,’ and the best way of restoring is to watch in imagination the living hand which wrought it. Some appreciation of that truth must be allowed to the generations of Dryasdusts who have sought even from the driest receptacles—of which Carlyle complained so bitterly—to put together, if not a living figure, at least a framework to which we can adapt our more or less fanciful pictures. If the need is felt where the means of supply are so limited, can we blame the same sort of curiosity when it is applied to our near contemporaries? The interviewer, so his victims report, is apt to be a nuisance, impertinent and intrusive. But can we condemn him unreservedly? Is there not some-

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thing legitimate in the demand? Suppose him to speak the truth, what harm can he be really doing? He ought not, it may be suggested, to reveal a great man's infirmities. What is it to us if Coleridge took opium? The drug had, no doubt, some share in producing *Kubla Khan*; but may we not enjoy the product without considering the physiological conditions which were implied? The answer is obvious. A man's infirmities are, after all, part of him; they cannot be put aside like his coat or his shoes; and very often they suggest the only excuse for his shortcomings. To compare the estimate of Coleridge's genius formed by his contemporaries with his actual output of work achieved, to judge of the influence which he exercised in philosophy by his fragmentary attempts at possible prolegomena to a system, is to set oneself an insoluble problem, unless we know the facts. He cannot be fairly judged until we know how his astonishing powers were hampered by a weakness which still left him both lovable and capable of stimulating other intellects. The life, no doubt, may be suppressed altogether; but to take only a bit of it, and such a bit as his friends might think edifying, is to turn the whole story into a hopeless conundrum. The

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demand for such knowledge has been increased by modern scientific tendencies. The man of science is constantly demanding a closer and wider intimacy with facts. No fact can be so small or repulsive that it may not be of use in testing or suggesting theory. The historian follows suit. He finds that in the masses of records which were neglected by an earlier generation there are materials for reconstructing history at large. By elaborate researches into what passed for mere rubbish-heaps, he can discover facts essential to an intelligent appreciation of social and intellectual development. What was once the pursuit of eccentric antiquaries, animated by an unreasoning love of curiosities, becomes worthy of the keenest intellects searching for light in the dark foundations of things. A fact, simply as a fact, becomes sacred in the eyes of such inquirers. It may not be of interest in itself; but no one can tell what part it may not play incidentally in clearing up some general principle. Historians of literature catch the contagion, and employ themselves in worrying out minute dates and infinitesimal bibliographical facts with an industry which, let us hope, will have its reward. Certainly it is not for one who has had anything to do with biographical

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inquiries to throw cold water upon such a spirit, or to deny that it helps an intelligent study of literature.

If so, why may we not apply the same method to contemporaries as soon as we can do so without hurting the feelings of survivors? Undoubtedly there are precautions to be observed. Froude's performance in regard to Carlyle has furnished a leading case. It is, however, necessary to remark the precise nature of the offence. Froude, as I am fully convinced, meant to do honour to his old prophet. He took himself to be following the principle which Boswell avowed when protests were made against his revelations of Johnson's foibles. His lion, he said, should not be made into a cat for anybody. He would not pare the lion's claws or lessen the ferocity of his growl. Froude thought that Carlyle deserved a portrait in the manner of Rembrandt, vivid and full of character, with due depth of shadow to throw out the intensity of the lights. The aim, I take it, was clearly right. That was precisely what a biographer ought to do. It is another question whether the means were justifiable. He is accused of using Carlyle's love-letters without due authority, and, moreover, of misreading them. But