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CHAPTER ONE
MODERN BIOGRAPHY

Chapter I

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STANDING in my place last year, Mr E. M. Forster began his lectures by invoking the memory of Clark: first with a prayer that he might dispense his integrity and sound learning to the assembled company; secondly with a petition that he would accord to the speaker a certain measure of inattention: “For,” he said, “I am not keeping quite strictly to the terms laid down—‘Period or periods of English Literature.’ This condition, though it sounds liberal and is liberal enough in spirit, happens verbally not quite to suit our subject.”

For my own part, I should like to begin by invoking Mr Forster and by thanking him for having thus shown me the way and set me the example of indiscipline. Had it not been for him, I should have tried to give you a scholarly, chronological account of the history of biography in England. I should have told you that about 690 Adamnan, the Irish saint and historian, wrote *The Life of Saint Columba*, a highly-praised work which has been described as the most exhaustive piece of biographical writing to be found in European literature not only

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of that early period but of the whole of the Middle Ages. I should then have passed to *The Life of Alfred the Great*, written by Asser, who, so far as I can gather from his commentators, is willing to talk of anything but his hero, thereby establishing himself as ancestor and precursor of most modern biographers. I should have given a disquisition on Walton and on Johnson. Then I should have come to Boswell and should have told you that he was the creator of modern biography—that would have been a mistake, but a mistake transformed into a truism by its antiquity. I should have composed an extravagant eulogy of Boswell, of his acute understanding and his delicate psychology. I should have twitted those who have taken him for a fool and I should have quoted the remark: “A wiser man than Macaulay, James Boswell.” Or perhaps I should, on the contrary, have denied talent to Boswell and have tried to prove that what we have taken for genius is nothing but a prodigious *naïveté* which flatters our conceit by its simplicity. In a discourse on Victorian biography I should have delivered a panegyric of Moore and Lockhart; I should have spoken of Trevelyan’s *Macaulay*, of Forster’s *Dickens*, of Lewes’ *Goethe*; in passing, I should have rehabilitated

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Froude; a final lecture on Mr Strachey, Mr Nicolson and their imitators would have rounded off a bird's-eye view of English biography. I should have taught you nothing, for you know more of these subjects than I; but perhaps I should have won for myself that peace of mind which comes to a man who has obeyed the rules.

Yes, I should have prepared these lectures with all the ease of commonplace if I had not read *Aspects of the Novel*. But having read Mr Forster and, in particular, his fine comparison between true scholarship, which is and always has been the pride of this university, and that pseudo-scholarship which is but a foolish travesty of it, I said to myself that since circumstances had not made me a professional scholar, I must beware of the absurdity of playing the pseudo-scholar. Even so, in January last I almost let myself be tempted. "Yes," I thought, "the whole of Cambridge knows all this, but perhaps I could put fresh life into a well-worn subject by giving it a new form"; and, for want of another means of handling the subject, I was ready to give myself up, like a tired and clumsy swimmer, to the chronological current when towards the end of the month I was saved by Mr Harold Nicolson. Mr Nicolson,

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himself a real scholar, published this year a small book to which he gave the title *The Development of English Biography*. In this book he had done exactly what I was contemplating myself; and he had done it to such perfection that there was not a word left for me to say. So this time I was forced, willy-nilly, to abandon the easy high-road, to give up the lives of St Columba and of Alfred the Great and to find some other means of presenting the subject of biography to you.

Furthermore, what interests you and me is not a recitation of all the works which, “depuis deux mille ans qu’il y a des Anglais et qui écrivent,” have been devoted to the records of human lives; for the problem is not merely a historical one. Looked at all round, it is an ethical problem and an aesthetic problem.

Is there such a thing as modern biography? Is there a literary form different from that of the traditional biography? Are its methods legitimate or ought they to be abandoned? Ought biography to be an art or a science? Can it, like the novel, be a means of expression, a means of escape for the author as well as for the reader? Such are some of the questions which we shall be able to examine

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together; and that we may be loyal to the spirit of this foundation, our examples will be taken from English literature.

First of all, is there a type of biography which we may call 'modern,' having certain specific and permanent characteristics which differentiate it from the biographies of an earlier age? On this question English literary opinion is at present somewhat divided. The word 'modern' is a source of irritation to a large number of worthy and intelligent English people. Literary movements, like political movements, are oscillatory. After a strong reaction against Victorianism, the pendulum has, very naturally, swung back.

In 1918 Mr Lytton Strachey could write:

The art of biography seems to have fallen on evil times in England. . . . Those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead—who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design? They are as familiar as the *cortège* of the undertaker, and wear the same air of slow, funereal barbarism.

This verdict, moreover, was approved in England

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by the majority of those who read it. Would it still be approved in 1928? I do not think so. Your most advanced critics now display a mischievous air of learning in praising the genius, the artless profusion of the great Victorian biographers. They are willing to maintain that, all things considered, their methods were the soundest.

This reaction has no doubt had its value. The Victorians had established certain conventions upon which a stable, and perhaps a happy, society had lived. Out of this very stability and happiness there sprang a doubt of the value of the conventions, and the whole of a later generation became used to regarding them as foolish, and rather ridiculous, survivals. In fact they were, like all human institutions, at once admirable and ridiculous. It was well for admiration to have its turn and then to be merged into humour.

But we may quite sincerely admire the qualities of one type of biography and at the same time admit the existence of another. Read a page of a Victorian biography and then read a page of Mr Strachey. You will see immediately that you have before you two very different types. A book by Trevelyan or by Lockhart, apart from being constructed as per-

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fectly as it can be, is above all things a document; a book by Mr Strachey is above all things a work of art. Undoubtedly Mr Strachey is at the same time an exact historian; but he has the power of presenting his material in a perfect art-form, and it is this form which is for him the first essential.

What is true of the great writers of each of the two periods is true also of those lesser authors, who, in an attempt to exploit a literary success, imagined that they had only to employ the same methods in order to produce a masterpiece.

“The manner of Macaulay,” writes Mr Desmond MacCarthy, “was soon discredited by imitators who had no learning to support it; Mr Lytton Strachey, too, has not been blessed in his literary descendants, the majority of whom ape his methods without understanding his discretion. The form he made fashionable is one which requires the finest literary tact and minute research.”

But, whether Victorian or modern, these imitators, while they display the common characteristic of being detestable writers, group themselves into very distinct classes. A bad Victorian biography is a formless mass of ill-digested matter; a bad modern biography is a book of spurious fame ani-

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mated by a would-be ironic spirit which is merely cruel and shallow. Good or bad, there is such a thing as 'modern biography.'

We may ask when the old biography ceased to exist and modern biography came into being. Virginia Woolf and Harold Nicolson are almost in agreement about the date of the change. Harold Nicolson says 1907. Virginia Woolf feels herself in a position to state that in December 1910, or about that time, human nature suffered a change:

I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910. The first signs of it are recorded in the books of Samuel Butler, in *The Way of All Flesh* in particular; the plays of Bernard Shaw continue to record it. In life one can see the change, if I may use a homely illustration, in the character of one's cook. The Victorian cook lived like a Leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air. . . . Do you ask for more solemn instances of the power of the human race to change? . . . All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants,

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husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910.

It is a passage at once alluring and provocative.

“Don’t you see,” a hundred Englishmen will reply, “that the very exactitude of this paradox proves its absurdity? No, human nature hasn’t changed; it can’t change. Human passions remain the same. The relations of master to servant, of parent to child undergo certain superficial and temporary modifications, but very soon deeper causes restore the right and proper relationships. The change is merely on the face of things and it is just because you magnify these slight variations on the surface and neglect the deep and abiding qualities that you produce fantastic novels and biographies which are cruel, unjust and sterile.”

Personally, I have a great admiration for Virginia Woolf and I freely admit that her attitude in the passage which I have quoted is deliberately paradoxical. But paradox is not always in the wrong. Certainly, human nature changes but slowly; it is none the less true that in the history of the human