

# interpretation

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# interpretation

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## INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY AS A FORM OF THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

ROBERT R. ORR

To write books about other people's books (for this is roughly what intellectual biography amounts to), can it ever be more than an acceptable form of parasitism—at best a retailing of goods from a manufacturer's warehouse, at worst an attempt to sell something which is already available for free?

I propose to address the question: what contribution to our understanding can we reasonably expect from somebody who undertakes to give an account of how some noteworthy writer came to think as he did? The enterprise itself is a recent one. A century ago, when biography and panegyric were barely distinguishable, it was considered scarcely proper to ask how so-and-so developed or changed his ideas. Nowadays there is no lack of books which center their attention upon this specific question. We have Leon Troyat on Tolstoy; G. J. Warnock on Wittgenstein; Peter Munz on Hooker; Peter Brown on St. Augustine; Shirley Letwin (in *The Pursuit of Certainty*) on Hume, Bentham, J. S. Mill, and Beatrice Webb; Gertrude Himmelfarb on Darwin and Acton. Of these, the last-named might, indeed, be called a professional intellectual biographer.

The expression "intellectual biography" suggests the life of a mind, and thereby something less than a complete life; there is abridgement, abstraction, restriction. Less is said about the lively subject than might be said. It is, of course, true that all biography, whether or not it avows a limited range of vision, must be something more than a comprehensive catalogue of events threaded on to a time sequence. An exhaustive compendium of human responses between the margins of birth and death may be conceivable, but if one were ever to be found it would no more be biography than chronicle could ever be history.

If we look at the general, apparently unqualified, biographies, we find they are commonly built around some theme, or some phase represented as the high point of the story; how he became a millionaire, prime minister, or the founder of the Salvation Army. Sometimes there is more than one theme; the career, domestic life, favorite diversions, or the ups and downs of his church membership. Some general biographies might be called an account not of one life but of several, which happen to converge in one lifetime, which is itself a mere physical junction. Michael Holroyd's *Lytton Strachey* composes a literary career, a social saga, a sex life, and some pure natural history. Ivone Kirkpatrick on *Mussolini* is an essay on two simple themes: a political career and a domestic life. Julian Symons gives us in a study of his brother A. J. A. Symons a bibliophile, a social climber, a gastronome, a biographer, and a collector of knick-knacks.

There is, in principle, no limit to the number of themes which might be constructed out of the records of a man's life, especially the public life of a modern man, lived in times when to be civilized probably means little more than the ability to run several concurrent lives in one lifespan. Theme-building will be limited only by the biographer's own interest and by what the documents will permit; you could hardly get a mathematician's career out of Cromwell's letters and speeches, or a sociologist's out of Calvin's *Institutes*.

Turning now from the allegedly general to the avowedly qualified biography, here we have a self-conscious, deliberate attempt to draw the subject into categorically close focus, to fix upon a theme believed to have an identity of its own, owing nothing of a direct nature to other pursuits or interests which the subject may have followed. The prototypes of all qualified biography are the lives of the saints, beginning with *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* and its successors. In the nineteenth century there was a flood of spiritual biographies and autobiographies coinciding with the heyday of British missionary societies. Well does one recall some of the titles on a Nonconformist family bookshelf: *My Call to Tibet*, *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*, *Forty Years with Christ in China*, *Mary Slessor's Life of Service*, *Adventures with the Bible in Brazil*. These were all lives of nineteenth-century Protestant saints. They told, and set out only to tell, a single story, which was that of a pilgrim's progress. How impossible he was in the home, his venereal inclinations or lack of them, his like or dislike of the finer arts, his management of his financial affairs—none of this appeared or needed to appear. The biographer wrote a circumscribed life of the soul; how so-and-so became a moral exemplar, or a globe-trotter for God, how he came to be as he was in a certain special respect.

What about lives of the mind? If we look to the nineteenth century for books portending the modern intellectual biography we find them less in missionary and more in literary biography, under titles like *The Life and Works* or *Life and Times* of somebody, and written sometimes by scribes of the class of Froude, Lockhardt, Macaulay, or Cavendish. In the main they were eulogies of their subjects, but insofar as they attempted a critical assessment of the career, they germinated a biographical idiom of which we now have the mature offspring.

Now, what are we to expect from the qualification "intellectual" before the word biography? A "mind life"; everybody of course has one, but we are looking for a particular one, whether or not a living is earned with it. A reputation, and possibly a livelihood, is acquired by the practice of a mental skill, and it is this skill which is our quarry. The skill of the intellectual, we may say initially, is that of sophisticated utterance. The uttering will not necessarily be done with words; C. R. Leslie's book on John Constable is a biography of a mind which uses visual materials almost exclusively, while Norman del Mar's three-volume study of Richard Strauss is a recent addition to the library of musical biography. But for

the most part, sophisticated utterers will be dealers in words, in short, writers.

We may note in passing that sophisticated utterance, or intellectual work, is more precise than "mental work," but less definite than, for instance, philosophy, mathematics, or political thought. The adjective "intellectual," indeed, holds a place in the scale of conceptual definition comparable to that of "moral." Moral relationships are a specific kind of human relationship, but they are less definite than particular relationships of mutual obligation like those between doctor and patient, landlord and tenant, teacher and pupil.

Sophisticated utterance, then, is more than idle thoughts. It is speech, writing, gesture, all organized into statements which are designed to be mutually reinforcing, that is to say, argumentative. The intellectual, we may say, is one who constantly feels a need to add to what he has already said. He will try to be ready with another statement to buttress the first, and, if asked again, will oblige again, or try to. He is chronically self-conscious, living out his life in the shadow of anticipated supplementary questions, doing his best to answer them before they are asked. His discourse has to be argumentative, and he is liable to find it difficult to put a stop to the process, or, indeed, to speak in any other fashion. Now we know a considerable variety of such writing, but for our purpose it may be helpful to distinguish two types, which I shall call, adapting Aristotle's terminology, the formal and the substantial.

*Formal* arguments are complete in themselves, which never invite query as to their point or their justification. They say all that needs to be said in order to make their sense. Mathematical theorems and philosophical arguments leave nothing unsaid which is needed to make the discourse complete and intelligible. One need never ask the point of a Euclidean proof, or of Aristotle's classification of the ancient *polis* into six exhaustive and mutually exclusive types. The disclosure within the argument is total, and such arguments are self-terminating. They cannot be "settled out of court."

*Substantial* arguments are pieces of reasoning intended to make sense of, to justify, or to bring about a result which is not part of, and cannot be put into, the argument itself. They have an activating occasion and a subsequent outcome in terms of which the reasoning itself becomes comprehensible. If initial occasion and anticipated outcome disappear, so does the argument. Political arguments and legal proceedings are of this kind. They can live only as long as they are not dropped, or settled out of court. In 1971 the Wilberforce tribunal in Britain concerned itself with settling upon a fair rate of pay for electricity employees. The argument was properly confined to questions of differentials, comparable wages in comparable jobs, productivity scales, and the like. What was not mentioned in the proceedings was that the argument was the result of a strike, and took place under the threat of further strike action. These were

the circumstances which gave the argument its beginning and its end, which made it intelligible, but were not themselves a part of it.

Thus intellectual practice is argumentative in these two ways. And the credo of intellectualism is a belief that the boundaries of argument should be extended as far as possible, that it be let loose into the whole tide of life. The besetting sin of the intellectual, the excess, the *folie de grandeur* of which he is always on the brink, is the refusal to recognize any limits at all, to see the whole of life as ideally to be translated into the compass of discourse. He is occupationally vulnerable to the belief that, with sufficient industry and acumen, you can press every human wish, every impulse, onto the discursive field of battle, a field on which final victories are to be won, where victory consists in pre-empting all possible responses. Your vanquished opponents are given a grace-and-favor leasehold on condition that they end all verbal resistance. The refusal to keep this kind of discourse in its place betrays, perhaps, an inability to distinguish between formal arguments, which have a total and self-justifying quality, and substantial ones, whose ultimate justification lies outside themselves. The ideal society of the complete intellectual is one where the talk of this kind never stops and where nothing else ever starts, or, if it starts, it owes its life entirely to the permission of argument.

Now the man we can call an intellectual has this skill, but we need to know more, because it can be turned in different directions. It can set itself onto problems in formal logic or arguments for and against coeducation, or it can engage in the weird casuistry which surrounds peace talks. If a man writes exclusively about one of these matters we usually call him simply a logician, an educational theorist, or an authority in strategic studies. And biographies and autobiographies will reflect such specialism. We shall find books and theses entitled *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, *The Educational Ideas of Cyril Burt*, and *The Political Thought of Henry Kissinger*. If, however, he does not specialize but writes in all three, and perhaps in addition finds writing a novel not beyond him, together with some books on marriage and morals, we may rest content to call him an intellectual, meaning, simply, that his capacity for organized thought is generously employed. He is a general practitioner of the discursive art. The ideal intellectual is a citizen of the whole systematic world. At the end of his biography it seems that he has left no territory unvisited. Such a man may, of course, have one love, one corner of the world which he calls his home, where he is recognized to be resident expert. For Russell this was mathematics. Or he may be nomadic, passing, as Arthur Koestler has done, from sex manuals to capital punishment, to the history of science, to Eastern mysticism, to the Thirty Years War, with no permanent roots in one or the other.

Most intellectuals restrict their travels somewhat. The history of that diverse body of letters called political thought displays a line of such travelers, who have divided their trudging between the flat plains of political and moral recommendation and the high peaks of theology and

philosophy. In recent years some have roamed the lower slopes of economic theory, seeking there a heavenly model for an earthly city.

Such, then, is the activity of the intellectual. How is this mind to be accorded biographical treatment? Biography, if it is a genuinely historical undertaking, turns on the recognition of change and movement. The biographer's task will be to perceive and render intelligible the shifts and alterations in a man's life. As a historian he has an advantage not shared by many of his colleagues; he has chosen, in biography, a field of study whose outer limits are made for him. The termini of the general, unspecified biography are the life and death of the subject. Those of the intellectual biography are the beginning and the end of a working life, from the moment when the subject first puts pen to paper to his last publication, including, if you are lucky enough to find them, some usable unpublished manuscripts which nobody else has noticed.

At any rate you have a body of finished work, and whatever falls outside it belongs to another story, that of posthumous influence or reputation. There are almost as many books on "machievellianism," which fall into this class, as there are on Machiavelli, while Lawrence Bongie's study of Hume's thought has a lengthy tailpiece on what later writers made of Hume. A prologue of writers who allegedly influenced your subject, of course, falls within the biography itself, since it tells entirely of what he made of them. Peter Munz's study of Hooker is in fact constructed entirely in this way, with chapters on the use which Hooker made of Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas, and Marsilius of Padua.

This asset of having limited boundaries within which to work is, however, about the only solid advantage which the intellectual—or any other—biographer may call his own. There is a daunting catalogue of difficulties, and of these the central one, and it is as old as Boswell, is that you, the biographer, are entering inescapably into competition with your chosen subject, a competition in which you are very likely to be worsted. He, the subject, has used words as precise instruments of the imagination. Can you, the recorder of his labors, do less? He has already said plenty about himself, and you are presuming to add, without supererogation, to a formidable corpus. You make yourself as vulnerable as Hesketh Pearson knew himself to be in writing about Wilde and Shaw. Intellectuals are those whose work is in a sense their own intellectual autobiography, and you are trying to improve upon what is already creditable.

Philosophers present the greatest challenge to the biographer, since it is the essence of philosophy to strive for total transparent self-explanation. Philosophers provide their own skepticism and their own commentary, and those who write about their working lives usually have to rest content, like Diogenes Laertius, with an account of the lifetime of the man, an elliptical presentation of his doctrines, and perhaps some potted criticisms. Sometimes, it is true, the biographer may detect and set out to explain an apparent mutation in a philosopher's thinking. G. J. Warnock records the

long-recognized hiatus between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, and tries to set forth an underlying consistency.

Less challenging but still rewarding subjects are political scribblers who employ generalized reasoning to support their causes. Such writers often show changes of mind, or of front, and you may try to plot these alterations of course. The most rewarding subjects of all are those gentlemen of letters who write at different levels of abstraction, whose thinking tends to slip from one level to another, now engaging in formal analysis, now in sharply seasoned polemics and apology. John Locke, whose work has always teased commentators with its supposed incoherences, offered excellent material to Maurice Cranston. Montaigne, Machiavelli, and Pascal, all moralistic writers with a penchant for philosophy, have provided similar opportunity.

Whether one accepts the big challenge of writing about a philosopher or the lesser one of trying to detect intellectual system in a rumbustious political writer, the question one faces is what can be added to an already highly articulate piece of self-declaration? I suggest that biographers' contributions may be classified exhaustively into four types. The types are, of course, abstract, and any actual intellectual biography will often be found to contain elements of more than one. In order of ascending complexity they are phasing the story; detecting themes in it; accounting for change within a single major theme; and trying to relate one theme, or interest, to others.

First, and most modest, you may detect phases in the life's work of your subject, making seams in the hitherto seamless robe of time and thereby giving structure and line to what would otherwise be mere commentary. Geoffrey Faber's book on Benjamin Jowett presents three phases in the story, which he calls "Apprenticeship," "Ascendancy," and "Decline and Fall of a Reputation." This is a simple enough formula, a slightly elaborate version of the even simpler one of beginning, middle, and end. Faber's work, by carrying us past Jowett's death, might be called the story of a career plus posthumous reputation. The focus is upon the Master of Balliol's career rather than upon changes in his ideas, and is thus hardly a "pure" intellectual biography.

Second, you may be a little more ambitious and sort the story out into themes. In Gertrude Himmelfarb's book on Lord Acton, change and movement are virtually restricted to the first and last chapters. The rest of the book is thematically organized under headings like "Conflicts with the Papacy," "Liberal Politics," and "Writings on Liberty." The contribution, which stays close to its sources, is that of classification, or reclassification. Miss Himmelfarb knows that she is not inventing the themes; they are the declared interests of Acton himself. In the preface she admits to giving only a "textual analysis" of a prolific writer, and defends the procedure by pointing to the dangers of "overintellectualizing," that is, of attributing to a writer a level of thought to which he never aspired or which he never attained.

Peter Quennell, writing on Ruskin, likewise shapes the story into themes, denoted by chapters headed "Opinions of an Art Critic," "Influence of a Social Reformer," and "Literary Development." As with Miss Himmelfarb's *Acton*, there is no attempt to locate a master interest or central concern in the subject's work. Quennell claims only to have attempted "a balanced portrait." The book stays close to the sources, but gives shape to them.

This way of writing is not easy. It is beset, like all historical writing, with the bugbear of preserving chronological movement while analyzing the themes. As soon as a theme is explored to any depth, the time sequence suffers disruption. Biographers have employed various techniques to keep the two in some kind of balance. Michael Holroyd, in his *Lytton Strachey*, employs flashbacks and flash-forwards. Ivone Kirkpatrick keeps his *Mussolini* moving steadily forward save for one static chapter which analyzes the character of his subject. Elie Halevy on Bentham (in *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*) and Maurice Cowling on J. S. Mill present critical studies of intellectual positions assumed to be more or less fixed.

The third contribution is to record and account for a change of mind or belief in one of the interests—usually identified as the central one—of the chosen intellectual. He may, of course, have given an account of this himself, but this will rank as only one piece of evidence, and initially suspect evidence at that, to be tested against other evidence. Charles Darwin, in his later years, said that the idea of the mutation of species by natural selection was germinating in his mind while aboard the "Beagle," yet Miss Himmelfarb, going through the "Beagle" diaries and Darwin, in his later years, said that the idea of the mutation of species which apparently remained intact throughout the voyage, followed shortly afterwards by a blinding inspirational period. For the historian of ideas the mature relections of a writer on his own work are never to be taken at face value.

Overt changes of mind like those of Darwin give the biographer something fairly definite to fix upon. Much more elusive to trace are shifts of interests or failing engagement, since your subject may be inarticulate, reticent, or even ignorant of these. Peter Munz, writing on Hooker, was faced with the question of how Hooker, having marshaled all the Thomist arguments about the mutual complementarity of the orders of nature and grace, of the *regnum* and the *sacerdotum*, came, in the last three books of his great work, to fall into a Marsilian strain of argument which stressed the priority of civil peace and therefore of the civil order over the ecclesiastical. Munz accounts for the change from within Hooker, referring to the political commission to defend the Settlement from which the great apologist started. He had begun with the firm conviction that the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity could be represented in Thomist terms, with grace supplementing, not supplanting, nature, and church and civil government harmoniously cooperating under a monarch and Supreme

Governor united in one person. By the time he had reached book VI, however, his growing and painful awareness of the realities of Tudor practice had undermined his ability to use Thomist categories with confidence. He then turned to Marsilius for generalized arguments more appropriate to the situation he saw before him.

Here, then, is an account of a change in a writer's direction drawn not from extraneous sources but from the record itself. The evidence is entirely internal, and relates the collapse of the formal argument to the subject's changed view of the substantial circumstances which first set his pen to paper. Munz points to later passages of Hooker which betoken disillusionment and in fact adduces Hooker's growing uneasiness about the coherence of his work as a hypothesis to explain his failure to finish writing it.

This theme of disillusionment is a frequent motif of intellectual biography and points sharply to a major difficulty of keeping to the "life-of-the-mind" brief. In writing of intellectuals you are examining the doings of super-civilized people whose whole life represents an engagement to self-knowledge. But their passion for consistency often makes them reticent or even determinedly unaware of their changes of mind, and in exploring these the biographer is treading the outer reaches of the mind itself, where the intellectual and the affective life meet and merge. If one follows any account of a writer's change of front, abandonment of an argument, or switch in style of apology, one encounters words like "disappointment" and "disillusionment" and phrases about realizing the incompatibility of something with something else or references to a growing sense of ineffectiveness. The language of sensibility invades the story of an argument. C. R. Leslie, setting out to draw the mind of Constable, observes that in Constable's case the invasion is near-total, since "the affections of the heart were inseparably blended with all that related to painting."

Mrs. Letwin, in *The Pursuit of Certainty*, acknowledges an emotive component in the thinking of Hume and of J. S. Mill. In a chapter entitled "The Philosophical Enthusiasm Renounced" she shows that Hume's increasing feeling for the complexity of everything undermined his energy for philosophy, that his "sentiments" turned him towards history and essay writing as more suitable media for thinking on paper about politics. On Mill, she notes that the friendship with Harriet Taylor was followed by a new interest in "the souls of men" as well as in the machinery of government. Accounting for a change of mind, front, or commitment to a central interest, therefore, is a third way of shaping an intellectual biography. In complexity it outdistances the phasing of a story or its classification into more or less self-contained themes.

The fourth and most intricate contribution the biographer can make is to connect the diverse interests of his subject—to find, if he can, a unifying principle which will bind the whole corpus together. He is challenged by, and must respond to, a many-sided mind. If writing of a philosopher, he will search for an even more comprehensive master idea than his

subject used in order to improve the coherence. J. W. N. Watkins joins Hobbes' conception of the method proper to philosophy with his political thought to demonstrate a total "system of ideas." Arnold Kaufmann, in his book on Nietzsche, reargues the old belief that "the will to power," not atheism, is the centerpiece of Nietzsche's thinking.

This impulse to find consistency is not limited to those who write about philosophers. C. R. Leslie discloses a single mind of Constable, based on the paintings and on letters, some of which refer to the paintings. Leon Troyat takes Tolstoy's novels and matches them with the diaries in order to determine how far the novels are autobiographical. Irene Coltman, in *Private Men and Public Causes*, sets the literary interests and the political commitments of some seventeenth-century Englishmen of moderate Royalist persuasion alongside each other; the point of convergence is a demonstration that these intellectuals were indecisive ditherers in politics. Russell, in his lectures in the 1890s, tried to unify Leibniz's two major interests, theology and metaphysics. He argued that Leibniz's theory that the essence of matter is not extension met a demand for a theory of the Eucharist as well as the requirements of formal logic, citing as evidence the open perturbation suffered by Leibniz on discovering that belief in a vacuum conflicted with the theological principles of continuity and plenitude. Russell repeated this procedure of connecting philosophical with extraphilosophical interests in his *History of Western Philosophy*, which could be styled a history of Western intellectualism.

Whatever subject he chooses, the biographer who follows this fourth manner of writing needs to detect and match up at least two distinct interests of the mind before him, to strive to connect them, without, however, forcing upon his subject a contrived and total consistency. Whichever of the four methods is adopted, the whole argument must take account of change and must contrive to say something which the subject has not already said for himself.

Perhaps the most inviting pitfall in the biographer's track is to write about himself, and there are two ways of doing this. The more obvious way is to use his chosen subject as target practice for his own beliefs and preferences. K. R. Popper's studies of Plato and Hegel and Maurice Cowling's of J. S. Mill tell more of their authors than of their subjects. In both cases there is visible a luminous passion to discredit. The less obvious method is to use the subject as a sympathetic vehicle on which the biographer may load his own preoccupations, worries, even obsessions. Tolstoy, the would-be philosopher who made do as a novelist, the fox who would for preference have been a hedgehog, has inspired at least one writer to translate his own career into an interpretation of Tolstoy's intellectual life. The intellectual biographer, more than any other writer, frequently offers the bargain of two lives for the price of one.