

Recent Publications

BOOK REVIEWS

Whittemore, Reed. *Pure Lives*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988. 159p. \$16.95 (ISBN 0-8018-3548-8). LC 87-16822.

We live in an age (though not the first) of bloated biographies, books that seem to have as one of their goals to duplicate the body weight of their subjects. If we stay the course and endure one of them from first page to last, we may learn more about the subjects than friends ever knew who were intimate with them for fifty years. But how much of what we learn will be but the accidents of a life? And how do they adhere to its substance? Is there indeed a substance—some irreducible core—identified by the biographer as the life's informing force? Is it finally the duty of the biographer to give us accidents ("the minute details of private life," in Dr. Johnson's words) or substance—or the two in clarified, or at least clarifying, juxtaposition? The relentlessly accumulative contemporary approach is apt to tell us that the biographee had the habit of cutting his fingernails not from thumb to little finger, or little finger to thumb, on a hand but rather working from the middle finger alternately out to either end—make of that what we will. The concern is not so much to render a life with form and definition and essence as to sow our minds with its millions of seconds and hope that some portion of the scatter will take hold and grow to a shape we can grasp.

In *Pure Lives*, Reed Whittemore reminds us that there was once a more expeditious way to document a life. He ruminates on the history of the genre of biography (a

word he tells us in an early footnote Dryden may have been the first to use), beginning with Plutarch and his comparative lives and moving lightly down the ages to the eighteenth century. Whittemore promises in his first paragraph to focus on five collections of early biography: Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, Aelfric's *Lives of the Saints*, Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, Holinshed's *Chronicles*, and Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. But he is being modest, for, in the essays that follow, the five texts prove but pretext, and his reach and curiosity encompass much more. He instructs us about key figures in the history of the genre and about some (Machiavelli and Shakespeare and Lawrence Sterne) we might never have thought to associate with it. In the process, the book comes to be about character and the shifting criteria for judging the quality of a life.

The figures Whittemore seems most to admire stand at one end (Plutarch) and the other (Lawrence Sterne) of his essays, as ill-matched bookends. Whittemore is an admirably sympathetic reader of Plutarch. He takes comfort in the recurrent structure imposed on most of the lives, which are the prototype of ethical biography. Plutarch measures conduct, not thought, and judges his subjects by the nature of their public acts and achievements—by standards appropriate to public figures and by the extent to which they adhered to or bent from those standards. He belongs to the tradition, notes Whittemore, in which "the shape of a written life was determined by something beyond chronology."

Because Plutarch's subjects are great public figures, whose lives he shapes around the nature of their public achievement, his biographical essays inevitably become enmeshed in history. Plutarch was too conscientious a fellow not to be perplexed and troubled by the attendant questions: How does one separate biography as genre from history as genre? What precisely is biography? How does one work within the conventions it imposes? The questions set Whittemore off on his exploration. What did subsequent practitioners who measured their subjects by public acts and by the standards and character of the groups to which they belonged (kings, saints, artists, etc.) make of their responsibility to the Plutarchian tradition? These biographers did not seek "a self" as explanation or measure, a psychic center as dominant, ordering force. There was no need. Public acts were the externalization of the private self and were the core about which one shaped judgments. Biographers to the time of Boswell and Johnson thought the accomplishments of states-

men, or poets, to be, in effect, displaced egos, the displacement being not a concealment of the true self but rather a normal, healthy action and manifestation of the self.

Whittemore guides us through the work of Aelfric and the hagiographers, of Machiavelli and Cellini and Vasari, of anonymous chroniclers and the famous Holinshed and Shakespeare himself. He runs at last smack up against Boswell and the transformation of the genre that occurs in the eighteenth century, when the private self, with its burden of indiscriminate detail, crowds public man from the stage. Whittemore displays a nice degree of annoyance with Boswell's methods (he notes, for example, that printing the complete contents of a journal or a diary or a castle is neither the only nor perhaps the best way of coming to a knowledge of the self) and is reluctant to concede him the pride of place he is often allowed in the evolution of the modern biographical approach. That Dr. Johnson, whose own biographical writings observed Plutarchian

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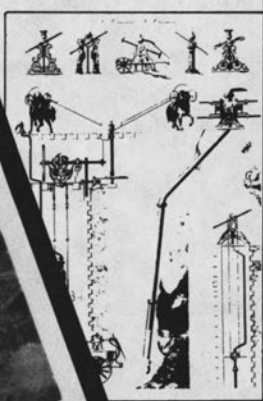


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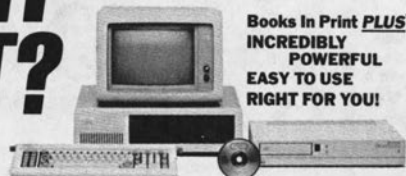
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norms, should have had his life transcribed in blizzards of detail is choice irony.

Before tweaking Boswell, Whittemore admits explicitly what the reader has inferred long since from his text: "There is nothing simple about the history of biography, so I must be conscientious and end by introducing confusion." He locates the confusion in all the literary forms that by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gave authors the opportunity to break the rules and to ignore custom, as early biography surely did not. Three pre-Boswellian works in particular are said to be evidence of the favorable cultural climate for expanding the base of biography: *Pepys' Diary*, *Defoe's Moll Flanders*, and above all, *Sterne's Tristram Shandy*, which is, for Whittemore in a spirit of Shandean exuberance, "of course the finest book ever written." Whittemore's attention to *Sterne* is a surprise—a Shandean move, even. He sees in him "a man who found the life of the self to be suddenly spacious to a degree he had not previously imagined." As such, he was a powerful influence on formal biographical practice and on psychobiography, though he was not himself a biographer—just "a mock-up of what a biographer would be if he did not take on great public figures, and if he looked not at his subjects' performances but at their sentiments."

Whittemore was not going to let pass the opportunity to write about *Sterne*, and the chapter is as provocative as it is unexpected. But then so is much of the book, which accounts for its great charm. It is rather like walking a museum not with a guide constricted on cassette but in the company of a civilized man of forthright opinions and idiosyncratic views who will say the most surprising things to instruct and to provoke, and say them without recourse to the critical fatuities of our age—the anemic prose, its lifeblood deficient, that tortures thought and language and reader in equal measure in the process of twisting about to bite its own tail. Whittemore is of a different school—of the school that once persuaded students to care passionately about literature not because it is pretext for theory but because it is text

from life, and sometimes even for life. Biography indeed. This is a short book but not in the least a slight one. Whittemore promises a sequel carrying the argument from Boswell to the present. Godspeed to his good work—*James M. Morris, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, New York, N.Y.*

Literary Reviewing. Ed. by James O. Hoge. Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1987. 139p. \$24.95 (ISBN 0-8139-1146-X). LC 87-8309.

This slim volume collects essays by such authorities as Richard D. Altick, Stanley Weintraub, Angus Easson, and Derek Pearsall on the techniques of reviewing literary scholarship. Six essays cover genres of scholarly production—theory, history, biography, editions, and bibliography (two on the last)—and three provide more general considerations of the practice of reviewing from the viewpoints of an editor, a publisher, and a producer of literary scholarship. The essays are largely taxonomic and prescriptive and are saved from dullness less by particularly new, or newly stated, insights than by numerous anecdotes of offences against the reviewing principles being recommended. Despite the contributors' occasionally conflicting views of these principles, librarians who are asked advice on reviewing a particular type of academic production can cite with assurance the appropriate essay here.

Librarians themselves will find some of the essays of interest as well. For example, Altick's essay accuses "the library press" of encouraging shoddy bibliographies, questions the reliability of reviews in professional library periodicals, and asserts that librarians seldom keep themselves informed of scholarship outside their own profession and even less frequently permit their professional judgments to be influenced by such scholarship as they do read—all in an essay which calls for increased cooperation between librarians and literary scholars. The two essays by Bruce Macphail and Robert Patten are useful surveys of the place of the review in the scholarly communication matrix. Despite these attractions, *Literary Reviewing* is a confused production. The dust-jacket's