

as curate at Herstmonceux before illness forced his resignation. He spent the last years of his life seeking a climate that would retard his consumption, earnestly studying contemporary German theology and writing indefatigably for Blackwood's Magazine.²

It was during these years that Sterling became one of Carlyle's most intimate friends. When they met in February 1835, he was already an admirer of the author of Sartor Resartus, which had ended its eight-part run in Fraser's Magazine only a few months earlier. Despite long periods of separation during Sterling's subsequent absence from London for the sake of his health, their friendship deepened steadily. As Carlyle's letters to the younger man show, they constantly exchanged opinions about contemporary literature, frankly criticized each other's work, and at one point even considered jointly founding a new periodical.³ By 1842 Sterling wrote to his father that with the exception of Wordsworth, Carlyle was "the only truly and completely great man I know of in our present literature."⁴ His death two years later came as a severe shock to Carlyle, who had long failed to recognize the seriousness of his friend's illness. "I have had a great loss," he wrote in his journal on 1 October 1844. ". . . He was a noble character, full of brilliancy, of rapid light-flashes in every kind; and loved me heartily well. Ah me! . . . I shall never see John Sterling more, then; my noble Sterling!"⁵

Not Sterling's death, however, but the publication of his biography by Archdeacon Julius Hare early in 1848 prompted Carlyle to consider undertaking a life of Sterling himself. Though Sterling had named the two men his joint literary executors, Carlyle's work on Cromwell forced him to relinquish to Hare the task of arranging their friend's writings for publication. Included as the lengthy introduction to Hare's two-volume edition of Sterling's Essays and Tales was the biography that dismayed Carlyle. Along with his friend's family, he objected to Hare's emphasis on Sterling's brief clerical career and his implicit apology for Sterling's later alienation from orthodox Christianity. To his mother he wrote on 12 February 1848 that Hare's work "by no means" contented him. "Probably one of my first tasks," he continued, "will be something in reference to this work of poor Sterling's; for he left it in charge to me too. . . . I am bound by very sacred considerations to keep a sharp eye over it, and will consider what can now be done."⁶ Emerson, Sterling's (and Carlyle's) closest American friend, was equally dissatisfied and agreed that a corrective biography was needed. Still, it was not until the early months of 1851 that Carlyle, having published the last of his Latter-Day Pamphlets, began his biography of Sterling. By the end of March the manuscript was nearly completed, and Carlyle was expressing characteristic dissatisfaction with the finished work. His wife, though,

offered her usual encouragement: "Jane, reading it yesterday, warmly votes for immediate printing," he wrote to his brother; "so that probably will be its fate. . . . I was bound to do it; and it has not been very ill to do."⁷ Publication was delayed, however, until after the close of the Great Exhibition, and the Life of John Sterling appeared on 10 October 1851.⁸

The author of the Life of Friedrich Schiller, Cromwell's Letters and Speeches, and a variety of biographic periodical essays was no stranger to the craft of biography, and indeed had firm ideas about the way biography should be written. As early as 1828, in his review of Lockhart's life of Burns, Carlyle stated the fundamental criterion according to which biographies should be evaluated: above all, he believed, a biography should present not only a complete but an organically unified account of its subject.⁹ The biographer who collected masses of material but failed to shape it into a coherent and striking portrait of his subject had simply failed in his task.¹⁰ For the art of biography, in Carlyle's view, was essentially interpretive rather than mechanical in nature, and the work of the biographer accordingly was not merely to collect the facts of a man's existence but rather, as he wrote in 1830, to "look beyond the surface and economical form of a man's life, into its substance and spirit."¹¹

The Life of John Sterling demonstrates how faithful Carlyle was to his belief in the importance of organic unity and "spiritual" insight in biography. In addition, because of its special conception as a biography intended to correct Hare's view of Sterling, Carlyle's Life also shows how the materials of biography may be shaped at the same time into a brilliant argument. For Carlyle, the climax of Sterling's life was not his brief career in the Church, but his discovery, after years of aimless pursuits in politics and religion, that genuine fulfillment was to be found in literature. In the Life of Sterling, accordingly, Carlyle seeks in a variety of ways to win the reader's assent to the coherence and validity of this interpretation. In Carlyle's hands the pattern of Sterling's life becomes, moreover, the basis for an analysis of the meaning of personal nobility in a world that thwarts the individual's growth and development. The enduring interest of the Life of John Sterling thus lies in Carlyle's ability to balance biographical and rhetorical strategies in a work whose concerns remain vital today, when few would recognize its subject's name.

Carlyle's double concerns are evident in the opening chapter of the Life, which explains the genesis of the book and describes what might be called its theme. Here Carlyle seeks to establish his objectivity as biographer while he attempts to identify with the reader and interest

him personally in John Sterling. Instead of directly pointing out the inadequacies of Hare's biography, he creates a fictional "correspondent" to explain the problem to the reader and himself, who thus seem to share a need for enlightenment. Attacking as the "sin" of Hare's biography its narrow scope and lack of proportion, the correspondent makes some predictable Carlylean observations on the nature of biography. A proper biography of Sterling, first of all, should present a comprehensive picture of the man and his "ever-flowing wealth of ideas, fancies, imaginations," not merely the "pale sickly shadow in torn surplice" that Hare's life depicts.¹² More important than Sterling's career in the Church, says the correspondent, was his "relation to the Universe" (3), his struggle, the writer suggests, with the forces familiar to all men. "Let a man be honestly forgotten when his life ends," he urges; "but let him not be misremembered in this way" (3).

The fictitious correspondent's letter enables Carlyle to discredit Hare's book effectively without appearing to involve himself in the quarrel. Indeed, the correspondent's vehemence gives Carlyle as narrator the opportunity to assert his own apparently reasonable and impartial stance. Like the frequently skeptical and puzzled "editor" of the seven paper sacks containing the papers of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, he dissociates himself from the correspondent by characterizing his letter as "rather passionate" and by

admitting only to a "painful feeling" that it contained some elements of truth (4). And he goes on, in fact, to praise the intelligence of Hare's biography. "Censure of it, from me especially," he writes, modestly suggesting his respect for Hare's accomplishment, "is not the thing due; from me a far other thing is due!--" (4).

By placing his own arguments in the mouth of his correspondent, then, Carlyle establishes the terms of the dispute at hand but suggests that he himself is involved only as an unbiased mediator, whose view of Sterling the reader may expect to balance these extreme positions. The device of the fictional correspondent thus helps Carlyle gain the reader's confidence at the very start of the biography. In addition, the letter itself raises two issues that Carlyle proceeds to develop in order to suggest his thorough understanding of the life he is about to write and to engage the reader's interest in it. First is the intriguing paradox that Sterling, whose accomplishments Carlyle willingly acknowledges were "not of a kind to demand an express Biography" (4), is actually to have his life written not once, but twice. Again, though, Carlyle is careful not to make his book appear to be a deliberate rebuttal to Hare's, but describes it instead as a personal testimony to Sterling that has its roots in friendship rather than contention--a spontaneous and casual recollection that he has decided to "fling down on paper" in a

leisure moment (5). More important is the suggestion that Sterling's life, though undistinguished, has a universal significance which bears consideration. What links Sterling, Carlyle, and the reader is the fact that "all men are to an unspeakable degree brothers, each man's life a strange emblem of every man's" (7). But the reader and Carlyle share an additional special bond because of their continuing endurance in a world of chaos and uncertainty that Sterling has already passed through. The challenges he confronted, observes Carlyle, were part of the "battle appointed for us all" (6), and his life attracts our interest, therefore, not simply as the life of another human being, but as a symbolic existence, a "Pilgrimage through our poor Nineteenth Century" (7). Arm in arm with the reader, Carlyle proposes to retrace the path of that symbolic journey.

As Carlyle's introduction suggests, anyone who approaches this biography expecting to encounter Sterling making his way through a world described in familiar terms--expecting, in other words, a conventional biographical narrative--is certain to be disappointed. "A pilgrimage," notes one reader, "is not described through a recitation of dates and deeds."¹³ The chronology of the book is indeed startlingly vague. The places in which Sterling lived and worked are rarely described at all. The people he knew remain for the most part undefined shadows--even Susan Barton, his wife, Carlyle describes only as "full of

gay softness, of indolent sense and enthusiasm," a woman "about Sterling's own age, if not a little older" (63). Not physiognomy, geography, and chronology, it is clear from the outset, but the "scene of pilgrimage through life" (7) is the focus of Carlyle's attention in this unusual biography.

Accordingly, Sterling himself appears primarily as a metaphorical rather than an historical figure.¹⁴ To describe his friend and define the nature of his struggle, Carlyle evolves a complex pattern of imagery based on themes of energy and vitality that extend throughout the work.¹⁵ In a single paragraph of the introduction he describes Sterling as inclined toward "too hasty and headlong belief," possessed by "sleepless intellectual vivacity," characterized by "faculties [that] were of the active, not of the passive or contemplative sort"--a man "rapid in thought, in word and in act; everywhere the promptest and least hesitating of men" (6). Here even the rapid piling up of descriptive phrases helps to suggest the breathless pace of Sterling's life as Carlyle saw it. Later in the work, Carlyle combines a sudden shift to the present tense with short parallel syntactic units to reflect Sterling's incessant activity in London's literary circles:

Besides his Athenaeum work, and evenings in Regent Street and elsewhere, he makes visits to country-houses, the Bullers' and others; converses with established gentlemen, with

honourable women not a few; is gay and welcome with the young men of his own age; knows also religious, witty, and other distinguished ladies, and is admirably known by them. On the whole, he is already locomotive; visits hither and thither in a very rapid flying manner (47).

Of his first meeting with Sterling in 1834, Carlyle writes that he was struck by his "restless swift-glancing eyes," his appearance of "animation rather than strength," his "velocity and alacrity" (105-7). Elsewhere Sterling appears as one "radiant with arrowy vitalities, vivacities and ingenuities" (123), as a "swift dashing meteor" (118), and a "swift, light-limbed . . . Arab courser . . . [roaming] at full gallop" (40).

In two ways, Carlyle links such images of energetic activity with a second key image describing his friend, the pervasive image of Sterling as a pilgrim. In a purely physical sense, Sterling's life is a "sadly nomadic" one (183) of movement from place to place for the sake of his health. Carlyle well knew that his friend was consumptive from an early age, but until Sterling's last illness he clung to the belief that it was not any specific disease but his excessive energy which had damaged his health and repeatedly forced his escape from the English climate. "His disease, as I have from old construed it," Carlyle wrote to Emerson in August 1844, "is a burning of him up by his own fire. The restless vehemence of the man, struggling in all ways these many years to find a legitimate outlet, and

finding except for transitory unsatisfactory corruscations none, has undermined its Clay Prison in the weakest point."¹⁶ In the Life, similarly, the energy that animates Sterling is gradually seen to be at least in part a destructive force. "Less than any man he gave you the idea of ill-health. . . ," writes Carlyle as Sterling nears the peak of his activity in life. "Ill-health? Nay, you found at last it was the very excess of life in him that brought on disease" (123). And with illness came a life of constant travels. "Four voyages abroad, three of them without his family, in flight from death; and at home, for a like reason, five complete shiftings of abode: in such wandering manner, and not otherwise, had Sterling to continue his pilgrimage till it ended" (157). The association between energy and illness, and illness and flight, persists until Carlyle, in a remarkable passage, reflects on the inaccuracy of his diagnosis and uses that reflection to evoke the full pathos of Sterling's death:

Somehow one could never rightly fancy that he was diseased; that those fatal ever-recurring down-breaks were not almost rather the penalties paid for the exuberance of health, and of faculty for living and working; criminal forfeitures, incurred by excess of self-exertion and such irrepressible over-rapidity of movement: and the vague hope was habitual with us, that increase of years, as it deadened this over-energy, would first make the man secure of life, and a sober prosperous worker among his fellows. It was always as if with a kind of blame that one heard of his being ill again! Poor Sterling;--no man knows another's burden: these things were not, and were not to be, in the way we had fancied them! (201)

It is a somber statement of Carlyle's own sense of guilt. Sterling's lot, as he admits, was not only to suffer, but to suffer alone, without the sympathy of his closest friends.

The boundless energy that makes necessary Sterling's life of constant wandering is more than a destructive force, however; it is also the power that enables him to reject the world around him and persist in a spiritual pilgrimage in quest of truth and self-fulfillment. From the earliest pages of the book, Sterling is repeatedly associated with light and truth. For Carlyle he is "as sunshine in the gray weather" (189) or, more significantly, "a welcome illumination in the dim whirl of things" (127). "A son of light," he calls Sterling in a typical passage, "if I have ever seen one; recognising the truth, if truth there were" (193). Indeed, Sterling's life as Carlyle views it is a history of his struggle to seek fulfillment by making vigorous and energetic truth prevail against the stagnant falseness that he finds about him. The professions of religion, law, and medicine--"with legs swollen into such enormous elephantiasis and no go at all in them" (41)--are unacceptable alternatives for the young Sterling because they cannot accommodate his dynamism. "Professions, built so strongly on speciosity instead of performance; clogged, in this bad epoch, and defaced under such suspicions of fatal imposture, were hateful not lovable to the young

radical soul" (40). In the political radicalism discovered during his university days, however, Sterling found his first opportunity to oppose falseness with energetic truth. With his "usual alacrity and impetuous daring," he looked

with hope and joy into a world which was infinitely beautiful to him, though overhung with falsities and foul cobwebs as world never was before; overloaded, overclouded, to the zenith and the nadir of it, by incredible uncredited traditions, solemnly sordid hypocrisies, and beggarly deliriums old and new; which latter class of objects it was clearly the part of every noble heart to expend all its lightnings and energies in burning-up without delay, and sweeping into their native Chaos out of such a Cosmos as this (37).

Ultimately, though, Sterling was not to find truth in radical causes, in efforts for reform in the West Indies, or in his curacy at Herstmonceux. To some extent, as Carlyle explains, his spiritual wanderings were dictated by the conditions of his time. "No fixed highway more," he writes in describing the confusion of the age; "the old spiritual highways and recognised paths to the Eternal, now all torn-up and flung in heaps, submerged in unutterable boiling mud-oceans of Hypocrisy and Unbelievability" (96). Only when Sterling abandons German theology in favor of literary work is he again close to truth. "Nature's blue skies, and awful eternal verities," Carlyle tells us, "were once more around one" (139). Of course, Sterling's pilgrimage to fulfillment in literature was not to be completed at once. "Unluckily in this too the road for him was now far

away, after so many years of aberration; true road not to be found all at once" (140). But though Sterling's literary accomplishments in the little time he had left were small, they are remarkable in Carlyle's view for their fidelity to truth. "Here actually is a real seer-gance, of some compass, into the world of our day; blessed glance, once more, of an eye that is human; truer than one of a thousand" (156).

From Sterling's complex life, then, Carlyle abstracts these essential elements--energy, pilgrimage, illness, truth--and recombines them in a symbolic portrait of remarkable unity, one in which each characteristic instantly recalls the others to the reader's mind. When he approaches the "crowning error" (98) of his friend's life, Carlyle puts this figurative pattern to rhetorical use. In the middle of his discussion of Sterling's youthful radical fervor, he introduces his famous description of Coleridge, which is built on images that conflict with those characterizing Sterling and which thus suggests the fundamental incompatibility between Sterling's nature and the religious life he later adopted under the influence of Coleridge's thinking. The abrupt opening of this chapter, with its tableau-like quality, contrasts with the preceding description of Sterling's frantic engagement in radical political action and indicates immediately the extent to which Coleridge is outside the world of cosmic challenge that

Carlyle has shown to be Sterling's environment: "Coleridge sat on the brow of Highgate Hill, in those years, looking down on London and its smoke-tumult, like a sage escaped from the inanity of life's battle; attracting towards him the thoughts of innumerable brave souls still engaged there" (52-53). In contrast with Sterling's frenzied existence, Coleridge's life at Dr. Gilman's is a static, sedentary one of abstract philosophy conducted either in the quiet setting of a pleasant garden or in his room with its significant "rearward view" (53). In his physical appearance, too, Coleridge contrasts with Sterling's "velocity of stroke" (42) and gives instead the impression of indecisiveness:

The whole figure and air, good and amiable otherwise, might be called flabby and irresolute; expressive of weakness under possibility of strength. He hung loosely on his limbs, with knees bent, and stooping attitude; in walking, he rather shuffled than decisively stepped; and a lady once remarked, he never could fix which side of the garden walk would suit him best, but continually shifted, in corkscrew fashion, and kept trying both (54).¹⁷

As Albert LaValley has rightly observed, Coleridge's physical attributes in this chapter appear as emblematic of his philosophy.¹⁸ His talk, though it inspires Sterling and others with its "almost religious and prophetic" character (58), not only fails to offer his listeners direction but actually threatens them with stagnation: "it was not talk flowing anywhither like a river, but spreading

everywhither in inextricable currents and regurgitations like a lake or sea. . . . So that, most times, you felt logically lost; swamped near to drowning in this tide of ingenious vocables, spreading out boundless as if to submerge the world" (55). What Carlyle suggests with such images is the danger Coleridge posed to those like Sterling whose pilgrimages in search of truth had just begun. In Coleridge they could not hope to find a leader, for his own pilgrimage had come to an inconclusive halt. "He had not had the courage," Carlyle writes, "in defiance of pain and terror, to press resolutely across said deserts [of Infidelity] to the new firm lands of Faith beyond; he preferred to create logical fatamorganas for himself on this hither side, and laboriously solace himself with these" (60).

As Carlyle presents it, the pathetic emptiness of Coleridge's withdrawal from the challenges of "London and its smoke-tumult" serves to heighten the reader's admiration for Sterling's active search for truth. Carlyle does concede the powerful influence that Coleridge had on his friend, however, and observes that when Sterling's radical fervor cooled it was the "moonshine" cast "by [a] morbidly radiating Coleridge into the chaos of a fermenting life" (96) that led him into the Church in 1833. In fact, it is part of Carlyle's strategy in the Life that Sterling's decision to take orders should appear to result not from

intense personal commitment, but from his brief association with Coleridge. Thus the figurative contrasts between the dynamic, truth-seeking Sterling and the placid, irresolute, incomprehensible Coleridge do more than illustrate differences of personality and character. Because the aging poet was one of the era's most prominent defenders of the Anglican Church,¹⁹ they also imply a latent antipathy for the Church deeply rooted in Sterling's nature. Carlyle reserves his own comments until the final paragraphs of Part I, where he writes that "there will at present be many opinions" on the matter of Sterling's taking orders, though "mine must be recorded here in flat reproof of it" (97). But among readers who have accepted his insistent portraits of Sterling and Coleridge, only one opinion is actually possible. The conflicting patterns of imagery surrounding the two men urge us to see the error of Sterling's action while they anticipate the narrator's judgment on it.

The narrator's credibility, indeed, is crucial throughout this work, which offers the reader little objective evidence on which to base an evaluation of Sterling. It is partly to maintain his position of authority that Carlyle constantly reminds the reader of his special role as Sterling's friend and associate, a "brother soul" with intimate knowledge of his companion. Similarly, to win the reader's assent to his own belief that literature was the

only proper career for Sterling, Carlyle attempts to discredit his friend's earlier endeavors by making them appear to result from confusion rather than serious commitment. One way in which he accomplishes this is to have Sterling express his aspirations in absurd dialogue. After ironically comparing Lieutenant Robert Boyd and his decrepit ship to Jason and the Argo, for example, Carlyle has Sterling make the same exaggerated comparison as he attempts to persuade Boyd to take up the cause of General Torrijos and the Spanish exiles in England. "Sterling naturally said, 'If you want an adventure of the Sea-king sort, and propose to lay your money and your life into such a game, here is Torrijos and Spain at his back; here is a golden fleece to conquer, worth twenty Eastern Archipelagos'" (70). The result of such a statement, presented in the context Carlyle has established, is that the Torrijos venture--and Sterling himself--appears rash and slightly ridiculous; and that effect is heightened when the plot in fact comes to total ruin, as the narrator early implied it would. Similarly, to make Sterling's entry into the Church look like an irrational and foolish act, Carlyle sends him into a verbal rapture over "Coleridgean moonshine" just before taking orders:

"If the bottled moonshine be actually substance?
 Ah, could one but believe in a Church while
 finding it incredible! What is faith; what is
 conviction, credibility, insight? Can a thing

be at once known for true, and known for false? 'Reason,' 'understanding': is there, then, such an internecine war between these two? It was so Coleridge imagined it, the wisest of existing men!" (91)

Even if Coleridge and his moonshine had not already been thoroughly discredited, the absurdity of Sterling's rambling monologue would alone make his decision to take orders appear to rest on a distorted and inadequate perception of reality. Later, almost like a puppet, Sterling is also made to renounce the move in ridiculously melodramatic terms (104).

In contrast with such a confused and questioning figure, the narrator of the Life of Sterling stands out as the only trustworthy guide for the reader. Carlyle reinforces that impression by repeatedly describing Sterling as a child and thereby suggesting his immature perspective on himself. As a young curate at Herstmonceux, for example, Sterling had "a noticeable, almost childlike faculty of self-deception" (103) that prevented him from recognizing, as the narrator does, his unsuitability for the religious life. In public, we are told, his face shone with "a kind of childlike half-embarrassed shimmer of expression" that reflected his "beautiful childlike soul" (127). And during the long, intense conversations they shared while walking or riding through London Carlyle tells us that he saw in Sterling "at once a child and a gifted man" (191).

Even when he does not reduce Sterling to the level of a child, Carlyle frequently speaks of him with a quiet compassion that suggests Sterling's incomplete understanding of the world and his place in it. After quoting Hare's description of the young curate's enthusiasm for his work, for example, Carlyle calls up earlier images of his friend's boundless energy and observes, "How beautiful would Sterling be in all this; rushing forward like a host towards victory; playing and pulsing like sunshine or soft lightning; busy at all hours to perform his part in abundant and super-abundant measure!" (100). With such a comment Carlyle subtly undermines the vision of Sterling as a devoted curate that Hare labors to create and suggests instead the sadness of energy blindly expended on a hopeless task. The same sense of wasted energy pervades Carlyle's description of Sterling preaching in a church near Cheapside:

[T]here, in my wearied mood, the chief subject of reflection was the almost total vacancy of the place, and how an eloquent soul was preaching to mere lamps and prayer-books; and of the sermon I retain no image. It came up in the way of banter, if he ever urged the duty of "Church extension," which already he very seldom did and at length never, what a specimen we once had of bright lamps, gilt prayer-books, baize-lined pews, Wren-built architecture; and how, in almost all directions, you might have fired a musket through the church, and hit no Christian life (119-20).

Behind the banter, clearly, is Carlyle's more complete understanding that Sterling, with his ceaseless liveliness and love of truth, is suited for far different work.

Carlyle's prominence in his biography has led one reader to observe that "the most extraordinary aspect of the Life of John Sterling is that, in concluding it, one thinks not of the biographee but of the biographer."²⁰ Contemporary readers had a similar reaction. Shortly after it was published George Eliot wrote that she was "reading Carlyle's life of Sterling with great pleasure--not for its presentation of Sterling but of Carlyle."²¹ The Athenaeum reviewer noted in the same vein that "all the merely mortal lineaments are wanting" in this depiction of Sterling, which constantly returns instead to "Mr. Carlyle's commentary on men and things."²² Writing in the Prospective Review, Francis Newman observed that Sterling appears in the work as a weaker personality than Carlyle, who seems to claim him as a "young disciple." "Altogether," he continued, "we fear the impression is given to the reader, that Sterling was a rather feminine character,--impulsive but unsteady; quick, but superficial; susceptible, ardent, but incapable of permanently resisting in anything the great masculine mind of Thomas Carlyle."²³ The disapproving reviewer in the Christian Observer and Advocate agreed, and saw in Carlyle's presentation of Sterling "the most egregious vanity." "Mr. Carlyle is so vain of his own opinions," he wrote, "that he spares no opportunity of exhibiting them. And rather than the world should call them in question, he is contented to take hold of the character of a friend, and,

as we cannot hesitate to say, to blacken and traduce it, so as to prove him to be his own adherent and disciple."²⁴

In the context provided by the whole of Carlyle's career, his role as the ever-present interpreter of Sterling's life has led twentieth-century readers to view the work less as an attempt to force discipleship on Sterling than as a species of autobiography. Albert LaValley sees Carlyle trying to come to terms with his own sense of futility by analyzing the life of his friend, another figure who passed through doubt and found (in Carlyle's not entirely accurate estimation) fulfillment in art. "The result," he writes, "is a new autobiography, another Sartor Resartus."²⁵ Others, too, have noted the similarities between Sterling's trials and Teufelsdröckh's. "The Life is Sterling's Sartor," says William Blackburn. "Like Teufelsdröckh, Sterling is on 'Pilgrimage through our poor Nineteenth Century,' and like him he is to find his rest in literary activity."²⁶ Karl Gwiasda has pursued this point further. Observing that in Carlyle's biography Sterling's life "is being recounted within a framework like that of Sartor Resartus," he has gone on to trace in detail the similarities of the two works, including their tripartite structure and parallel development. Because Carlyle's biography is "a study of Sterling's conversion to Carlylean thought," he concludes, the Life of John Sterling is "not simply constructed in like fashion to Sartor; it is as well steeped in the 'message' of the earlier work."²⁷

Where are we to look for the focus of such a work in which the biographer and his subject compete for the reader's attention? More important to the biography than John Sterling, its ostensible subject, or Carlyle, its prominent narrator, is the challenge presented by the chaotic world in which the drama of Sterling's existence is played out. As it appears here, Sterling's story, like the autobiography of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh and the collapse of the Ancien Régime as Carlyle explained it, hinges on the conflict between transcendental falseness and spiritual truth. Like the settings of Sartor Resartus and The French Revolution, Sterling's era is one of "cobwebs, worn-out symbolisms, reminiscences and simulacra!" (92). Politically, "old hidebound Toryism . . . now at last obliged to recognise its very self, for an overgrown Imposture" (51), is breaking up as the call for reform grows more insistent. The Church has become merely one of many "obsolete spiritualisms" among the "obsolete thrones and big-wigged temporalities" of the day (51). The professions, too, offer no means to a life of truth. "In a better time there will be . . . professions, if possible, that are true, and do not require you at the threshold to constitute yourself an imposter" (40). It is a "waste-weltering epoch" of darkness and confusion, a world

all rocking and plunging, like that old Roman one when the measure of its iniquities was full; the abysses, and subterranean and supernal

deluges, plainly broken loose; in the wild dim-lighted chaos all stars of Heaven gone out. No star of Heaven visible, hardly now to any man; the pestiferous fogs, and foul exhalations grown continual, have, except on the highest mountain-tops, blotted-out all stars: will-o'-wisps, of various course and colour, take the place of stars. Over the wild-surgings chaos, in the leaden air, are only sudden glares of revolutionary lightning; then mere darkness, with philanthropic phosphorescences, empty meteoric lights; here and there an ecclesiastical luminary still hovering, hanging on to its old quaking fixtures, pretending still to be a Moon or Sun,--though visibly it is but a Chinese Lantern made of paper mainly, with candle-end foully dying in the heart of it. Surely as mad a world as you could wish!
(39)

"Who," asks Carlyle, "can tell the struggles of poor Sterling, and his pathless wanderings through these things!" (92). No wonder that his efforts were often misdirected, ineffectual. In such a chaotic world, Sterling could hardly have done otherwise than he did, exploring every avenue of activity open to him until, as Carlyle asserts, he found a source of potential fulfillment in literature. The tragic irony of Sterling's existence, of course, is that his discovery of the means to self-fulfillment came too late, as his life was rushing to a close. "Not till after trying all manner of sublimely illuminated places, and finding that the basis of them was putridity, artificial gas and quaking bog, did he, when his strength was all done, discover his true sacred hill, and passionately climb thither while life was fast ebbing!" (266). But for Carlyle, the meagerness of Sterling's success is irrelevant. What

his biography proclaims instead is that the nobility of a human life depends not on its accomplishments, but rather on its goals. Sterling's struggle was determined by his sensitive soul, which refused to tolerate the "poor outer, transitory grindings and discords" of the era and impelled him instead, with a creed of "hope and action" (28), on a search for "some diviner home" (90). In this sense, rather than a religious one, is Sterling a "victorious believer" (6) in Carlyle's estimation; in a time of doubt, uncertainty, and clamorous confusion, Sterling's was a life of "silent resolution" (250) that commands our attention.

What gives the story of this life importance is Carlyle's insistence throughout the book that the corruption Sterling faced continues to challenge every individual. When Carlyle looks beyond chronological barriers to link Sterling, himself, and the reader in the continuing dilemma of human existence, the significance of his friend's life becomes strikingly clear:

If you want to make sudden fortunes in [the world], and achieve the temporary hallelujah of flunkies for yourself, renouncing the perennial esteem of wise men; if you can believe that the chief end of man is to collect about him a bigger heap of gold than ever before, you will find it a most handy and everyway furthersome, blessed and felicitous world. But for any other human aim, I think you will find it not furthersome. If you in any way ask practically, How a noble life is to be led in it? you will be luckier than Sterling or I if you get any credible answer, or find any made road whatever (39).

In Sterling's unsuccessful attempts at fulfillment Carlyle reveals to each reader the tragedy of his own existence. "Poor Sterling; poor sons of Adam in general, in this sad age" (92). For his battle, "universal in our sad epoch" (104), is the one repeated by all sensitive men and women tuned to the "Eternal Melodies" (90). Despite his meager worldly successes, Carlyle sees in Sterling and others like him a radiant heroism that can sustain the rest of us. "Nay, courage!" he urges. "These also, so far as there was any heroism in them, have bequeathed their life as a contribution to us, have valiantly laid their bodies in the chasm for us: of these also there is no ray of heroism lost,--and, on the whole, what else of them could or should be 'saved' at any time? Courage, and ever Forward!" (97).

Carlyle himself has saved only as much of Sterling in this biography as he needed to illustrate his familiar theme of the challenge presented by transcendental awareness. The striking depiction of Coleridge serves, indeed, as an indication of the vividness with which Sterling might have been described had Carlyle's purposes in this work been different. The Life is a unified, coherent, compelling rejoinder to Hare's presentation of Sterling, but it remains less a biography than an exhortation to the reader to find direction for his own life in Carlyle's interpretation of Sterling's quest for truth. "Many a

high-striving, too-hasty soul, seeking guidance toward eternal excellence," Carlyle asserts in his final pages, ". . . will recognise his own history in this image of a fellow-pilgrim's" (266). As a work with such symbolic dimensions, Carlyle's biography realizes his early hope to compose "some picture of a gifted soul" with a lasting message for mankind. Sterling's gifts, as Carlyle perceives them, were not those recognized by the world, but they are precisely the ones that the world stands in need of. Thus, as he notes in closing, it was not simply a bond of human friendship that inspired the Life of Sterling, but "the dictate of Nature herself" (268).

NOTES

1

Quoted in James Anthony Froude, Thomas Carlyle: A History of his Life in London 1834-1881 (London: Longmans, 1884), I, 423.

2

The fullest modern analysis of Sterling's life is provided by Anne Kimball Tuell, John Sterling: A Representative Victorian (New York: Macmillan, 1941).

3

Until the Duke-Edinburgh edition of Carlyle's correspondence is complete through 1844, the best collection of his letters to Sterling is Letters of Thomas Carlyle to John Stuart Mill, John Sterling and Robert Browning, ed. Alexander Carlyle (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1923).

4

Quoted in Tuell, p. 311.

5

Reminiscences, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (London: Dent, 1972), p. 89n.

6

Quoted in Froude, I, 418-19.

7

New Letters of Thomas Carlyle, ed. Alexander Carlyle (London and New York: John Lane, 1904), II, 107-8.

8

The Letters of Thomas Carlyle to His Brother Alexander, ed. Edwin W. Marrs, Jr. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 685.

9

Unlike Burns's earlier biographers, Lockhart, he felt, came closer to this ideal in his work. "He has avoided the method of separate generalities," wrote Carlyle, "and rather sought for characteristic incidents, habits, actions, sayings; in a word, for aspects which exhibit the whole man, as he looked and lived among his fellows" ("Burns," in The Works of Thomas Carlyle, ed.

H. D. Traill, Centenary Edition [London: Chapman and Hall, 1896-99], XXVI, 260; cited hereafter as Works). Boswell produced the same effect, albeit accidentally, in his life of Johnson, a "picture by one of Nature's own Artists," as Carlyle wrote in 1832. "The babbling Bozzy, inspired only by love, and the recognition and vision which love can lend . . . unconsciously works together for us a whole Johnsoniad; a more free, perfect, sunlit and spirit-speaking likeness than for many centuries had been drawn by man of man!" ("Boswell's Life of Johnson," in Works, XXVIII, 75).

10

In 1827 Carlyle criticized Döring for such an incomplete effort in his unintelligible life of Richter, a mere accumulation of facts and dates:

Stone is laid on the top of stone, just as it comes to hand; a trowel or two of biographic mortar, if perfectly convenient, being spread in here and there, by way of cement; and so the strangest pile suddenly arises; amorphous, pointing every way but to the zenith, here a block of granite, there a mass of pipeclay; till the whole finishes, when the materials are finished;--and you leave it standing to posterity, like some miniature Stonehenge, a perfect architectural enigma ("Jean Paul Friedrich Richter [1827]," in Works, XXVI, 3).

Naigeon failed just as miserably in his life of Diderot, wrote Carlyle in 1833. Instead of a unified picture of "the bodily man," he offered only a "dull, sulky, snuffling, droning, interminable lecture on Atheistic Philosophy" in which Diderot appeared "not as Man, but merely as Philosophic-Atheistic Logic-Mill" ("Diderot," in Works, XXVIII, 183-84). Montigny's eight-volume biography of Mirabeau Carlyle considered equally unsatisfactory, a "mound of shot-rubbish, in eight strata." "The fatal circumstance," he complained, "is, that M. Lucas Montigny has not written a book at all; but has merely clipped and cut-out, and cast together the materials for a book" ("Mirabeau," in Works, XXVIII, 416). In 1838, as we have seen, Carlyle found that even Lockhart, in his life of Scott, had violated the "plan which . . . should preside over every biography" and produced "not so much a composition, as what we may call a compilation well done," a work containing only "the scattered members of Scott's life" ("Sir Walter Scott," in Works, XXIX, 26, 28, 29).

11

"Jean Paul Friedrich Richter (1830)," in Works, XXVII, 101. Ideally, in fact, a biography should actually enable us to view the external world as its subject did. "How inexpressibly comfortable . . . not only to see into him," wrote Carlyle in his essay "Biography," "but even to see out of him, to view the world altogether as he views it" (Works, XXVIII, 44). It is this quality that Croker's notes to Boswell lack, for despite the information they offer, they do not help us to "put ourselves in Johnson's place; and so, in the full sense of the term, understand him, his sayings and his doings" ("Boswell's Life of Johnson," p. 64).

In Carlyle's view, the biographer who failed to exercise a shaping force in his work created not a meaningless piece of writing, but something worse: a biography open to a variety of interpretations. In his early reviews Carlyle repeatedly criticized contemporary biographers for such abdication of responsibility. Of Hitzig's life of Werner he wrote in 1828 that "the features of the man are nowhere united into a portrait, but left for the reader to unite as he may" ("Life and Writings of Werner," in Works, XXVI, 89). Two years later he voiced a similar complaint, claiming that among modern biographies "the most are mere Indexes of a Biography, which each reader is to write out for himself, as he peruses them" ("Jean Paul Friedrich Richter [1830]," p. 101). Lockhart's life of Scott, too, offered only a tangled, "uncomposed" biography of the man which could "at any time be composed, if necessary, by whosoever has a call to that" ("Sir Walter Scott," p. 28).

12

The Life of John Sterling, ed. H. D. Traill, Edinburgh Edition of the Works of Thomas Carlyle (New York: Scribner's, 1903), pp. 2-3. Subsequent citations in the text are to this edition.

13

Karl Eric Gwiasda, "The Boswell Biographers: A Study of 'Life and Letters' Writing in the Victorian Period," Diss. Northwestern 1969, p. 104.

14

Only in the letters Carlyle quotes do we have any direct contact with Sterling, but the role of correspondence is probably less important here than in any other nineteenth-century biography. In Gwiasda's words, "Carlyle was not . . . much in tune with the Victorian public's passion for letters" (p. 102). One indication of Carlyle's perfunctory

attitude toward the publication of Sterling's letters in his biography is the casual direction to the printer found among his copy: "Divide it into paragraphs yourself" (Tuell, p. 19).

15

As his letters to Emerson during the 1830's and early 1840's indicate, Carlyle actually did regard his friend as a man of extreme, indeed excessive, activity. "I cannot teach him the great art of sitting still," he wrote in 1838, for example, and confessed a year later that Sterling's "perpetual-mobility wears me out at times." See The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle, ed. Joseph Slater (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 195, 249, et passim.

16

Ibid., pp. 362-63.

17

For a discussion of Carlyle's own encounters with Coleridge and his attitudes toward the aged poet, see Charles Richard Sanders, "The Background of Carlyle's Portrait of Coleridge in The Life of John Sterling," Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library, 55 (1973), 434-58, rpt. in his Carlyle's Friendships and Other Studies (Durham: Duke University Press, 1977), pp. 36-60.

18

Albert LaValley, Carlyle and the Idea of the Modern: Studies in Carlyle's Prophetic Literature and Its Relation to Blake, Nietzsche, Marx, and Others (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 311.

19

For a full discussion of Coleridge's position in contemporary theological disputes, see Charles Richard Sanders, Coleridge and the Broad Church Movement (Durham: Duke University Press, 1942).

20

Stanley T. Williams, "Carlyle's 'Life of John Sterling,'" in his Studies in Victorian Literature (New York: Dutton, 1923), p. 15.

21

The George Eliot Letters, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), I, 370.

22

"The Life of John Sterling. By Thomas Carlyle," The Athenaeum, 18 October 1851, p. 1090.

23

[Francis Newman], "John Sterling," The Prospective Review, 8 (1852), 14.

24

Reprinted in Thomas Carlyle: The Critical Heritage, ed. Jules Paul Seigel (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), pp. 407-8.

25

LaValley, p. 304.

26

William Blackburn, "Carlyle and the Composition of The Life of John Sterling," Studies in Philology, 44 (1947), 686.

27

Gwiasda, pp. 101-24.

CHAPTER III

THE WOMAN AS ARTIST IN MRS. GASKELL'S LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Unlike Carlyle, who looked on the Life of John Sterling with mild distaste as a task he was obligated to complete, Elizabeth Gaskell was intrigued by the idea of writing a biography of Charlotte Brontë long before the project officially became hers. When she first met Charlotte in 1850 at the home of Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, she was profoundly moved by the story of her new friend's life that she heard from their hostess. But even more striking, she discovered, was Charlotte's unusual personality, which she came to know well during the five years of their friendship. "I never heard or read of anyone," she wrote later, "who was for an instant, or in any respect, to be compared to her. And everything she did . . . bore the impress of this remarkable character."¹ When in 1855, just two months after Charlotte's death, Mrs. Gaskell wrote to George Smith to request a daguerreotype of Richmond's portrait of her, she added a remark that well reflected the impact her friend had made on her. "Sometime," she wrote, "it may be years hence--but if I live long enough . . . I will publish what I know of her, and make the world . . . honour the woman as much as they have admired the writer."²

The task was to be hers sooner than she expected. Within three weeks she had received Patrick Brontë's unexpected invitation to undertake the official biography of his daughter, and by the end of July, 1855 she had visited Haworth Parsonage to discuss the project with him and with Charlotte's husband, Arthur Nicholls.³ "No quailing Mrs. Gaskell! no drawing back!" were the words of Charlotte's father that followed her home to Manchester.⁴ "I told Mr. Brontë how much I felt the difficulty of the task I had undertaken," she wrote to Charlotte's closest friend, Ellen Nussey, "yet how much I wished to do it well, and make his daughter's most unusual character (as taken separately from her genius,) known to those who from their deep interest and admiration of her writings would naturally, if her life was to be written, expect to be informed as to the circumstances which made her what she was."⁵

But even as she wrote this, Mrs. Gaskell knew that not all her readers would share her admiration for her friend. Charlotte Brontë's novels were widely admired, of course, but along with the works of her sisters they were also the object of a protracted and often violent critical attack. In Tom Winnifrith's view, it was the publication of Anne Brontë's The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848)--variously denounced as "brutal," "coarse," "revolting," and "perverted"--that irreparably damaged the reputation of the other Brontë novels. Few reviewers failed to note similarity in the works of Acton, Currer, and Ellis Bell, and more than one

actually considered them all the product of the same pen. The shock of Wildfell Hall, therefore, not only occasioned a severe re-examination of Jane Eyre, but adversely affected the reception of Charlotte's later novels as well.⁶

Like Carlyle, who undertook his Life of John Sterling as a response to Archdeacon Hare's depiction of his friend, Mrs. Gaskell clearly saw as one of the functions of her biography the rehabilitation of Charlotte's image. Yet unlike Carlyle's biography, the Life of Charlotte Brontë never becomes a mere vehicle for Mrs. Gaskell's own opinions; its focus remains intently on Charlotte Brontë. But neither is it simply an "intentional piece of hagiography," as one reader has claimed.⁷ For a more complete understanding of Mrs. Gaskell's purpose we should look back to her early comments on the project to George Smith and Ellen Nussey. In both cases what she expresses is a double vision of Charlotte Brontë as both author and woman. It is, in fact, this double vision, running through the work, that provides its artistic structure. A rich and sympathetically drawn biography, the Life of Charlotte Brontë thus also offers an important comment about the woman as artist in nineteenth-century England.

That this aspect of Charlotte's life should have arrested Mrs. Gaskell's attention is not surprising, for the difficulty of reconciling domestic and public duties plagued her throughout her own life. In her recent study

of the emergence of women as novelists in the nineteenth century, Elaine Showalter has described the uneasiness with which the earliest women writers characteristically regarded their work and the "deep-seated guilt about authorship" that many had to cope with. As members of the century's first generation of feminine novelists, she observes, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell were both involved in "breaking new ground and creating new possibilities" for women.⁸ It was not an easy task for Mrs. Gaskell. Passionately devoted to her family, she also shared the philanthropic interests of her husband, a Unitarian minister, and like him immersed herself in the cause of the Manchester working class from the early days of their marriage. From this experience sprang her most topical novels, with their focus on the struggles of the urban poor. And it was her writing, rather than her humanitarian efforts, that Mrs. Gaskell found most difficult to justify. As late as 1850, when she had become an established author, she remained uncertain about the propriety of a woman's conducting a literary career. "One thing is pretty clear," she wrote to her friend Eliza Fox, "Women, must give up living an artist's life, if home duties are to be paramount. It is different with men, whose home duties are so small a part of their life." There is no question in her mind that a woman's interest in art is healthy, for it provides a release from the

"daily small Lilliputian arrows of peddling cares; it keeps [women] from being morbid . . . and soothes them with its peace." But such indulgence must be blended with home duties, and for Mrs. Gaskell the difficulty lay in determining "where and when to make one set of duties subserve and give place to the other."⁹

That difficulty is of central importance in her biography of Charlotte Brontë, because Mrs. Gaskell perceived in her friend's life opposing claims of duty and genius that were unusually great. From her first meeting with Charlotte in August 1850, she was deeply disturbed by the hardships and responsibilities that the younger woman had experienced. "Such a life as Miss B's I never heard of before," she wrote to Catherine Winkworth immediately afterwards, describing in agitation the trials of Charlotte's life as Lady Kay-Shuttleworth had related them.¹⁰ Her faults, she wrote next to Charlotte Froude, anticipating a major theme of the biography she would compose six years later, "are the faults of the very peculiar circumstances in which she has been placed. . . . Indeed I never heard of so hard, and dreary a life."¹¹ To Eliza Fox a few days later she tried to explain Charlotte's unusual somberness in company. "Poor thing she can hardly smile she has led such a hard cruel (if one may dare to say so,) life. . . . the wonder to me is how she can have kept heart and power alive in her life of desolation."¹²

Mrs. Gaskell's fascination with that question is the basis for the unusual emphasis in her biography on Charlotte's surroundings. In the opening chapter it produces a noteworthy departure from convention as she withholds mention of her own relationship with Charlotte Brontë and, adopting a strikingly novelistic technique, devotes the first pages of the book to a powerful description of Haworth and its environs. On the road from Keighley to Haworth, Mrs. Gaskell reports, one is struck by the "grey and neutral tint of every object" (54)¹³ and the factory smoke that fills the "dim and lightless" air (55). Ascending to the "dun and purple moors" that undulate in every direction, the traveller finds only scruffy vegetation and fields of "pale, hungry-looking grey-green oats" (55).

All round the horizon there is this same line of sinuous wave-like hills; the scoops into which they fall only revealing other hills beyond, of similar colour and shape, crowned with wild, bleak moors--grand, from the ideas of solitude and loneliness which they suggest, or oppressive from the feeling which they give of being pent-up by some monotonous and illimitable barrier, according to the mood of mind in which the spectator may be (55).

With its suggestions of monotony, desolation, and gloom, this opening description sets the tone of the work even before its heroine is introduced.

The impression of deadening monotony is intensified in the succeeding paragraphs as Mrs. Gaskell closes in on Haworth Parsonage to emphasize its age and changelessness.

The century-old house is illuminated by "small old-fashioned window-panes" that glitter above flower beds "carefully tended in days of yore" (56). Nearby is the chapel, which "claims greater antiquity than any other in that part of the kingdom." The eastern windows "remain unmodernized" and give evidence of the building's age, while inside "the character of the pillars shows that they were constructed before the reign of Henry VII" (56). Inside, too, is a reminder of the Brontë family's sufferings, the family vault with the graves of Mrs. Brontë, Maria, Elizabeth, Branwell, Emily, and finally Charlotte. At the top of the tablet that commemorates them, Mrs. Gaskell points out, the inscriptions are neatly spaced, but "as one dead member of the household follows another fast to the grave, the lines are pressed together, and the letters become small and cramped" (58-9).

The importance of these suggestions of isolation, monotony, and unchecked suffering and death is affirmed in the chapters that follow, which look forward to the mature Charlotte's neurotic reaction to her life of continued loneliness and inactivity. Insisting without explanation that a full understanding of Charlotte Brontë must be based on familiarity with her surroundings, Mrs. Gaskell goes on to describe the aloof and independent residents of the area, a people as rough and wild as the land they inhabit. Before Charlotte Brontë enters the biography, then, the

important correlation between her environment and the development of her personality has been firmly suggested.

The surroundings provided by the parsonage itself, as Mrs. Gaskell presents it, are equally unappealing. Ignored by their father, whose time was occupied with concern for his parishioners and his invalid wife, and shunned by their mother, who was unnecessarily agitated by seeing them, the children, she writes, "clung quietly together . . . they took their meals alone; sat reading, or whispering low . . . or wandered out on the hill-side, hand in hand" (87). The disagreeable picture was completed by the erroneous reports of Patrick Brontë's conduct that she gullibly accepted, no doubt because they seemed to agree with her own later impressions of his strange demeanor. His fits of temper, she writes in the biography, led him on occasion to toss the children's colorful shoes into the fire, slash his wife's silk gown to shreds, and saw the furniture of the house to pieces. "His strong, passionate, Irish nature was, in general, compressed down with resolute stoicism; but it was there notwithstanding all his philosophic calm and dignity of demeanour. He did not speak when he was annoyed or displeased, but worked off his volcanic wrath by firing pistols out of the back-door in rapid succession. Mrs. Brontë, lying in bed up-stairs, would hear the quick explosions, and know that something had gone wrong" (89).¹⁴ In the isolation and violence that

characterize it, Haworth Parsonage emerges in Mrs. Gaskell's narrative as a microcosm of West Riding society.

But none of the unusual circumstances of Charlotte's life appears more important to the shaping of her personality in these early chapters than the responsibility she had to assume following the death of her two older sisters. After 1825, Mrs. Gaskell observes, Charlotte could never again be considered a "bright" child, for the duty of caring for her younger brother and sisters that descended on her with Maria's death "made her feel considerably older than she really was" (108, 111). To these early duties Mrs. Gaskell later attributes Charlotte's characteristic somberness as an adult. "The grave serious composure, which, when I knew her, gave her face the dignity of an old Venetian portrait, was no acquisition of later years, but dated from that early age when she found herself in the position of an elder sister to motherless children" (124-5). It was these duties, too, Mrs. Gaskell concludes, that were largely responsible for Charlotte's "absence of hope"--a quality that she returns to throughout the biography:

In after-life, I was painfully impressed with the fact, that Miss Brontë never dared to allow herself to look forward with hope; that she had no confidence in the future; and I thought, when I heard of the sorrowful years she had passed through, that it had been this pressure of grief which had crushed all buoyancy of expectation out of her. But it appears from the letters,

that it must have been, so to speak, constitutional; or, perhaps, the deep pang of losing her two elder sisters combined with a permanent state of bodily weakness in producing her hopelessness (143).

A somber child burdened by inordinate responsibility, she grew into a young woman who, as her school friend Mary Taylor writes to Mrs. Gaskell, "seemed to have no interest or pleasure beyond the feeling of duty" (160).

At the same time, the opening chapters of the biography balance this grim image of Charlotte Brontë by describing the private imaginative life she shared with Branwell and her sisters. Concealed beneath the "enforced propriety and regularity of demeanour and expression," writes Mrs. Gaskell at one point, were "wild, strong hearts, and powerful minds" (108). At home, as Patrick Brontë reports, the children wrote and performed small plays, usually with political or historical themes. "Generally, in the management of these concerns," he writes in retrospect, "I frequently thought that I discovered signs of rising talent, which I had seldom or never before seen in any of their age" (94). Back in Haworth after their years of schooling, they eagerly took to drawing lessons, "evidently," Mrs. Gaskell concludes, "from an instinctive desire to express their powerful imaginations in visible forms" (144). When their household duties were fulfilled, they gladly walked the four miles down from the moors to the

circulating library in Keighley and back, "burdened with some new book, into which they peeped as they hurried home" (146).

The most important evidence in these chapters for the intensity of the creative imagination burning beneath the reserved demeanor of all the children, and Charlotte especially, is the Brontë" juvenilia. Modern readers have frequently lamented that Mrs. Gaskell did not devote more energy to the study of these papers, including the literature of Angria, but there can be no doubt that the value of the documents was clear to her.¹⁵ Reporting to George Smith on the fruits of a visit to Haworth in July 1856, Mrs. Gaskell described with excitement the "most extraordinary" packet she had discovered, "full of paper books of different sizes . . . but all in this indescribably fine writing." "[T]hey are the wildest & most incoherent things, as far as we have examined them," she continued. ". . . They give one the idea of creative power carried to the verge of insanity."¹⁶ Whether or not she read all of the Brontës' early work, her comments to Smith show that she was perfectly aware of its significance and suggest in addition that she had already decided on its place in the design of her biography.

Looking ahead to Charlotte's career as an author, Mrs. Gaskell calls a "catalogue" of her writing to 1830 "curious proof how early the rage for literary composition

had seized upon her" (112). It is indeed a formidable list of accomplishments for a fourteen-year-old girl--including as it does biographical sketches, a drama in two volumes, a book of rhymes, a collection of poems, and more than four volumes of "tales"--and Mrs. Gaskell's respect for its importance is reflected in her decision to print it whole. More than its quantity impresses her, however. To illustrate what she calls the "singular merit" of the collection's quality, she offers an extract by Charlotte that describes the scene in the parsonage kitchen on a snowy December night in 1827 as the children formulated plans for their Tales of the Islanders. Concerned that the reader should appreciate the accomplishment of this piece, Mrs. Gaskell then goes on to point out the "graphic vividness" of its description and the intense interest in contemporary celebrities reflected in the children's choices of men to populate their islands (116). The same desperate interest in the world outside Haworth is evident to Mrs. Gaskell in Charlotte's "list of painters whose works I wish to see" (117). "Here is this little girl," she writes in clear amazement and admiration, "in a remote Yorkshire parsonage, who has probably never seen anything worthy the name of a painting in her life, studying the names and characteristics of the great old Italian and Flemish masters, whose works she longs to see sometime, in the dim future that lies before her!" (118). With such a comment Mrs. Gaskell

evokes from Charlotte's simple list the pathos of innocent longing that is never to be fulfilled. "Again I cry," she will write of Charlotte later, "'If she had but lived!'" (496).

The opening chapters of the Life of Charlotte Brontë are of crucial importance, then, not simply because they set the tone of the work, but because they define its major theme, the competing demands of domestic responsibility and imaginative self-expression. Here as elsewhere in the biography, Mrs. Gaskell was convinced that she had accurately presented the circumstances of Charlotte's life,¹⁷ but the strict accuracy of her narrative is less important than the pattern her perception of Charlotte Brontë imposed on the material she had available. For it is that pattern, rather than the raw information itself, which governs the reader's conception of her life. In these chapters Mrs. Gaskell invites us to see a girl, and then a young woman, who leads what appears to be a complex double life. On the one hand, Charlotte's imagination constantly responds to her surroundings, so that "the impressions made upon [her] by the world without . . . are . . . magnified . . . into things so deeply significant as to be almost supernatural" (120). But the grimmer world of reality, on the other hand, also demands her response. "To counterbalance this [imaginative] tendency in Charlotte," Mrs. Gaskell reminds us,

was the strong common sense natural to her, and daily called into exercise by the requirements of her practical life. Her duties were not merely to learn her lessons, to read a certain quantity, to gain certain ideas: she had, besides, to brush rooms, to run errands, to help in the simpler forms of cooking, to be by turns playfellow and mistress to her younger sisters and brother, to make and to mend, and to study economy under her careful aunt. Thus we see that, while her imagination received powerful impressions, her excellent understanding had full power to rectify them before her fancies became realities (121).

Accurate or not, it is for Mrs. Gaskell a true picture of Charlotte's early years.

It is worth noting that Mrs. Gaskell here presents the two strains of Charlotte's life in terms of balance rather than conflict. That idea surfaces again shortly when the Brontë sisters decide to request an evaluation of their poetry from Robert Southey. The poet laureate's response is one of the pivotal documents in the Life of Charlotte Brontë and deserves to be quoted at length:

I, who have made literature my profession, and devoted my life to it, and have never for a moment repented of the deliberate choice, think myself, nevertheless, bound in duty to caution every young man who applies as an aspirant to me for encouragement and advice, against taking so perilous a course. You will say that a woman has no need of such a caution; there can be no peril in it for her. In a certain sense this is true; but there is a danger of which I would, with all kindness and all earnestness, warn you. The day dreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind; and in proportion as all the ordinary uses of the world seem to you flat and unprofitable, you will

be unfitted for them without becoming fitted for anything else. Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity. You will not seek in imagination for excitement, of which the vicissitudes of this life, and the anxieties from which you must not hope to be exempted, be your state what it may, will bring with them but too much (172-3).

Whatever Mrs. Gaskell's feelings about the substance of this argument may have been, it is clear that her earlier conclusions about the relationship between literature and life in Charlotte's case are intended to anticipate the shallow implications of Southey's letter. By acting as a check on her imagination, Charlotte's duties, we have been shown, prevented the sort of "distempered state of mind" that Southey warns of. In the light of the sufferings Mrs. Gaskell has described, moreover, the poet's final pious comment appears not only irrelevant, but ridiculous.

We are prepared, then, for Charlotte's more sensible reply. "I am not altogether the idle dreaming being [my first letter] would seem to denote. . . ," she writes, humbly but firmly.

In the evenings, I confess, I do think, but I never trouble any one else with my thoughts. I carefully avoid any appearance of pre-occupation and eccentricity, which might lead those I live amongst to suspect the nature of my pursuits.

Following my father's advice--who from my childhood has counselled me just in the wise and friendly tone of your letter--I have endeavoured not only attentively to observe all the duties a woman ought to fulfil, but to feel deeply interested in them. I don't always succeed, for sometimes when I'm teaching or sewing I would rather be reading or writing; but I try to deny myself; and my father's approbation amply rewarded me for the privation (174-5).

While it affirms her devotion to duty, Charlotte's letter also suggests that the claims of the imagination have an urgency that cannot wholly be denied. Mrs. Gaskell will not allow the point to pass without comment. "She bent her whole energy towards the fulfilment of the duties in hand," she writes to conclude the incident; "but her occupation was not sufficient food for her great forces of intellect, and they cried out perpetually, 'Give, give'" (176).

The importance of the claims of the imagination recurs, at least obliquely, elsewhere in the first volume as well. By 1840, Mrs. Gaskell writes, with everyone except Anne living at home, the household at Haworth was a "fermentation of unoccupied talent" (198)--an image that suggests the danger of denying an outlet to the irrepressible power of imaginative genius. And then, in one of the haunting images of the book, Mrs. Gaskell describes the activity in the parsonage when the household was asleep and the sisters were "free to pace up and down (like restless wild animals) in the parlour, talking over plans and projects, and thoughts of what was to be their future life" (199).

But it is only after Jane Eyre has been published that Mrs. Gaskell returns to this central issue directly. Her comments are important and revealing:

Henceforward Charlotte Brontë's existence becomes divided into two parallel currents--her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman. There were separate duties belonging to each character--not opposing each other; not impossible, but difficult to be reconciled. When a man becomes an author, it is probably merely a change of employment to him. He takes a portion of that time which has hitherto been devoted to some other study or pursuit; he gives up something of the legal or medical profession, in which he has hitherto endeavoured to serve others, or relinquishes part of the trade or business by which he has been striving to gain a livelihood; and another merchant or lawyer, or doctor, steps into his vacant place, and probably does as well as he. But no other can take up the quiet, regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the mother, as well as she whom God has appointed to fill that particular place: a woman's principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice; nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed. And yet she must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents. She must not hide her gift in a napkin; it was meant for the use and service of others. In a humble and faithful spirit must she labour to do what is not impossible, or God would not have set her to do it.

I put into words what Charlotte Brontë put into actions (334).

As in her letter of 1850 to Eliza Fox, Mrs. Gaskell here admits the difficulty that confronts women who attempt to reconcile "home duties" and artistic endeavor. But the significance of this passage is that it makes clear what

has only been suggested above--that by 1856 Mrs. Gaskell had come to a new recognition of the legitimacy of the claims of the creative impulse. Art can be more than therapy in a woman's life, more than a release from daily cares and "morbid" spirits, as she had written to Eliza Fox. Indeed, it must be more than that when a woman possesses the kind of genius that Mrs. Gaskell perceived in Charlotte Brontë. In such cases the claims of art rival those of women's ordained work, for talent too is a divine charge that no one dare ignore.

Clearly it was Mrs. Gaskell's association with Charlotte that convinced her of the propriety of artistic pursuits in a woman's life. Moreover, as the final line of the passage above suggests, her friend's life proved to her that a woman could successfully serve both art and domestic duty. It is an important aim of the biography to show that Charlotte Brontë was indeed able to accomplish this--to demonstrate that the two sets of obligations confronting her were "not opposing each other; not impossible . . . to be reconciled." Consequently, Charlotte's dual roles as woman and artist, defined in the first part of the biography, not only balance each other but actually merge in the second half of the work.¹⁸

The domestic trials Charlotte had to endure multiply after this point as she watches Branwell, Emily, and Anne die in rapid succession, each death appearing to bring

with it a different kind of suffering for her. Branwell's death in September, 1848 followed an extended battle with alcoholism and drug addiction that for months created what Mrs. Gaskell calls a "dark cloud . . . hanging over that doomed household, and gathering blackness every hour" (352). Emily's illness and death three months later were an even greater trial, for she would not tolerate anyone's sympathy or assistance and thus inflicted on the family an "agony of forced, total neglect," as Charlotte, who felt the exclusion deeply, later called it (369). Finally, by quoting Ellen Nussey's pious narrative of Anne's death, which followed in May, Mrs. Gaskell calls attention to its pathos and suggests that it presented Charlotte with a still different kind of sorrow.

Anne's death, too, left Charlotte alone at Haworth, except for her reclusive father. It was the loneliness of her friend's life that impressed Mrs. Gaskell most powerfully, accustomed as she herself was to a life of incessant social activity. On her first visit to Haworth she was struck above all by the eerie desolation of the parsonage. "The wind," she wrote afterwards to John Forster, "goes piping and wailing and sobbing round the square unsheltered house in a very strange unearthly way."¹⁹ In the biography, she reflects on the disquieting effect of solitude even on "persons of naturally robust health" and concludes, "How much more must it have been so with Miss Brontë", delicate

and frail in constitution, tried by much anxiety in early life, and now left to face her life alone!" (400). In the letters of her friend, Mrs. Gaskell found abundant evidence for such speculation. In 1850 Charlotte writes--in "pathetic words," the biographer observes, "wrung out of the sadness of her heart"--that "the silence of the house, the solitude of the room, has pressed on me with a weight I found it difficult to bear" (399). A short trip to London only makes the return more frightful. "There was a reaction that sunk me to the earth," she informs Ellen Nussey several months later; "the deadly silence, solitude, desolation, were awful; the craving for companionship, the hopelessness of relief, were what I should dread to feel again" (426). Alone for hours at a time, she is constantly haunted by thoughts of her sisters. "I am free to walk on the moors," she writes; "but when I go out there alone, everything reminds me of the times when others were with me, and then the moors seem a wilderness, featureless, solitary, saddening" (409). "Some long stormy days and nights there were," she writes of the depressing winter months of 1852, "when I felt such a craving for support and companionship as I cannot express. Sleepless, I lay awake night after night, weak and unable to occupy myself. I sat in my chair day after day, the saddest memories my only company" (474).

It was not simply the dread of returning to Haworth that compelled Charlotte to remain at home, but, as Mrs. Gaskell repeatedly points out, her complex and unusual sense of duty. Despite the fact that she rarely saw her father, who continued to take his meals and tea privately even when only the two of them remained, Charlotte was unwilling to leave him alone in the parsonage out of concern for his erratic health. "There is not one letter of hers which I have read," Mrs. Gaskell observes, "that does not contain some mention of her father's state in this respect" (415). Even more striking to Mrs. Gaskell, though, was Charlotte's peculiar feeling that it was her duty to come to terms with a life of solitude, that she was morally bound not to seek a different existence. "As far as she could see," the biographer explains, "her life was ordained to be lonely, and she must subdue her nature to her life, and, if possible, bring the two into harmony" (470). Later, recalling a conversation with Charlotte during her own first visit to Haworth, Mrs. Gaskell writes that in her friend's view "it was well for those who had rougher paths, to perceive that such was God's will concerning them, and try to moderate their expectations, leaving hope to those of a different doom, and seeking patience and resignation as the virtues they were to cultivate" (510). Thus Charlotte's sufferings in the second half of the biography, like her responsibilities earlier in the book, take on unusual

significance as parts of a larger pattern of commitment to duty in her life.

Even as she describes Charlotte's domestic problems and defines her sense of moral obligation, Mrs. Gaskell does not allow us to lose sight of her work as an author. Charlotte's literary fame, we are constantly reminded, changed her life dramatically, making her the object of intense curiosity on her infrequent trips to London and a celebrity in Haworth, where members of the Mechanics' Institute vied for the privilege of borrowing a volume of Shirley. As she describes her friend's monotonous routine at the parsonage, Mrs. Gaskell suggests at the same time the importance of her life as an author by quoting extensively in this portion of the biography from her correspondence with other literary figures, including G. H. Lewes and Harriet Martineau, and by devoting large sections of her chapters to letters in which Charlotte discusses the books sent to her regularly by her publishers.

Equally pervasive here are her thoughts about the creative process, a subject that, as Coral Lansbury has noted, was a "consuming interest" of Mrs. Gaskell's.²⁰ It surfaces frequently in the letters that she has selected, where the subject repeatedly turns to art and the artist. At other times, Mrs. Gaskell introduces it, as in this passage, which follows her observation that the similarities

between the people of Shirley and Charlotte's Haworth neighbors caused her some embarrassment:

Miss Brontë^U was struck by the force or peculiarity of the character of some one whom she knew; she studied it, and analysed it with subtle power; and having traced it to its germ, she took that germ as the nucleus of an imaginary character, and worked outwards;--thus reversing the process of analysis, and unconsciously reproducing the same external development (378).

When she visited Charlotte at Haworth in 1853, Mrs. Gaskell reports, she raised the subject herself:

I asked her whether she had ever taken opium, as the description given of its effects in "Villette" was so exactly like what I had experienced,--vivid and exaggerated presence of objects, of which the outlines were indistinct, or lost in golden mist, &c. She replied, that she had never, to her knowledge, taken a grain of it in any shape, but that she had followed the process she always adopted when she had to describe anything which had not fallen within her own experience; she had thought intently on it for many and many a night before falling to sleep,--wondering what it was like, or how it would be,--till at length, sometimes after the progress of her story had been arrested at this one point for weeks, she wakened up in the morning with all clear before her, as if she had in reality gone through the experience, and then could describe it, word for word, as it had happened. I cannot account for this psychologically; I only am sure that it was so, because she said it (508-9).

Three years after the conversation took place, Mrs. Gaskell's fascination with her friend's procedure has clearly not diminished.

Not surprisingly, Charlotte Brontë's dual roles as woman and author frequently touch in this portion of the

biography. Mrs. Gaskell's description of her domestic sufferings not only helps define the magnitude of the challenge to her sense of duty, but also raises Charlotte's literary work to the level of a heroic act, conducted as it was under such adverse circumstances. Earlier Mrs. Gaskell observed that Charlotte felt "she must labour to do what is not impossible [with her talent]"; now she points out again and again how nearly impossible such work had become:

She went on with her work steadily. But it was dreary to write without any one to listen to the progress of her tale,--to find fault or to sympathize,--while pacing the length of the parlour in the evenings, as in the days that were no more. Three sisters had done this,--then two, the other sister dropping off from the walk, --and now one was left desolate, to listen for echoing footsteps that never came,--and to hear the wind sobbing at the windows, with an almost articulate sound.

But she wrote on. . . (380-1).

When Mrs. Gaskell breaks into her narrative to discuss the charges of Charlotte's literary critics, though, the connection between her two lives becomes even more explicit. Interestingly, though she is in each case defending her friend as an author, Mrs. Gaskell does not deal directly with her books. More important to her is the argument that neither of Charlotte's vocations can be fully understood without reference to the other. While she effectively defends Charlotte against the charges of the critics,

Mrs. Gaskell thus also asserts the impossibility of separating her sufferings and obligations as a woman from her achievements as an artist.

The first of her defenses, the most general of the three, comes early in the narration of Charlotte Brontë's career as a novelist and is directed against all critics who complained of coarseness in the novels of the Brontë sisters. It deserves to be quoted at length:

The year 1848 opened with sad domestic distress. It is necessary, however painful, to remind the reader constantly of what was always present to the hearts of father and sisters at this time. It is well that the thoughtless critics, who spoke of the sad and gloomy views of life presented by the Brontës in their tales, should know how such words were wrung out of them by the living recollection of the long agony they suffered. It is well too, that they who have objected to the representation of coarseness and shrank from it with repugnance, as if such conceptions arose out of the writers, should learn, that, not from the imagination--not from internal conception--but from the hard cruel facts, pressed down, by external life, upon their very senses, for long months and years together, did they write out what they saw, obeying the stern dictates of their consciences. They might be mistaken. They might err in writing at all, when their afflictions were so great that they could not write otherwise than they did of life. It is possible that it would have been better to have described only good and pleasant people, doing only good and pleasant things (in which case they could hardly have written at any time): all I say is, that never, I believe, did women, possessed of such wonderful gifts, exercise them with a fuller feeling of responsibility for their use. As to mistakes, they stand now--as authors as well as women--before the judgment-seat of God (334-5).

In Mrs. Gaskell's view, the "representation of coarseness" in the Brontës' works paradoxically constitutes their defense, for as a true reflection of the adverse circumstances of their lives it is a reason for the reader's pity rather than his condemnation. Surrounded by harshness, she explains, they could not help but produce harsh novels. Though it is a defense of Charlotte as an author, this passage thus recalls her duties as a woman to suggest that these two aspects of her life cannot be considered separately. Even the subject of the charges made by literary critics is placed in the context of "sad domestic distress," on which Mrs. Gaskell's ad hominem attack on them relies for its success. Rather than deny the existence of coarseness in the sisters' novels--something, indeed, that distressed her as well--she seeks only to establish herself as a better informed and thus more sympathetic reader than the "thoughtless" critics, who by implication would not have raised such charges had they known the sufferings of the authors they attacked.

Like this passage, Mrs. Gaskell's second defense draws on the reader's knowledge of Charlotte's life for its effectiveness. Here, too, in her response to Elizabeth Rigby's damning and influential attack on Jane Eyre in the Quarterly Review,²¹ she does not attempt to refute the charges made by the reviewer. "Every one has a right to form his own conclusion respecting the merits and demerits

of a book," she writes modestly. "I complain not of the judgment which the reviewer passes on 'Jane Eyre'" (359). But Rigby's speculations about the sex of Currer Bell provide Mrs. Gaskell with another opportunity to link Charlotte's tasks as author and woman:

Who is he that should say of an unknown woman: "She must be one who for some sufficient reason has long forfeited the society of her sex"? Is he one who has led a wild and struggling and isolated life,--seeing few but plain and outspoken Northerns, unskilled in the euphemisms which assist the polite world to skim over the mention of vice? Has he striven through long weeping years to find excuses for the lapse of an only brother; and through daily contact with a poor lost profligate, been compelled into a certain familiarity with the vices that his soul abhors? Has he, through trials, close following in dread march through his household, sweeping the hearthstone bare of life and love, still striven hard for strength to say, "It is the Lord! let Him do what seemeth to Him good"--and sometimes striven in vain, until the kindly Light returned? If through all these dark waters the scornful reviewer have passed clear, refined, free from stain,--with a soul that has never in all its agonies, cried "lama sabachthani," still, even then let him pray with the Publican rather than judge with the Pharisee (360).

Elizabeth Rigby's primary conclusion, that Charlotte has "long forfeited the society of her sex," is interestingly enough not only correct--it is one of the peculiar aspects of her life that Mrs. Gaskell herself has called attention to.²² What distresses her is the off-hand way in which the reviewer accurately guesses one of the deprivations of Charlotte's life, and that very casualness leads her into another catalogue of her friend's sufferings. At the end,

the quotation from the cross suggests both the lonely desperation of Charlotte's life and the sacredness of her submission to duties imposed on her by God himself. Moreover, by reviewing those duties in the context of Charlotte's literary accomplishments, Mrs. Gaskell makes the important suggestion that they are especially significant because the burden they imposed was made even greater by her concurrent artistic obligations.

The final defense of Charlotte Brontë, evoked by the mention of Harriet Martineau's criticism of Villette,²³ comes late in the book and follows Mrs. Gaskell's assertion that Charlotte was "utterly unconscious . . . of what was, by some, esteemed coarse in her writings" (495). Here, again, the biographer concedes the validity of the charge (with rather startling imagery) but directs our attention to the circumstances of her friend's life:

I do not deny for myself the existence of coarseness here and there in her works, otherwise so entirely noble. I only ask those who read them to consider her life,--which has been openly laid bare before them,--and to say how it could be otherwise. She saw few men; and among these few were one or two with whom she had been acquainted since early girlhood,--who had shown her much friendliness and kindness,--through whose family she received many pleasures,--for whose intellect she had a great respect,--but who talked before her, if not to her, with as little reticence as Rochester talked to Jane Eyre. Take this in connection with her poor brother's sad life, and the outspoken people among whom she lived,--remember her strong feeling of the duty

of representing life as it really is, not as it ought to be,--and then do her justice for all that she was, and all that she would have been (had God spared her), rather than censure her because circumstances forced her to touch pitch, as it were, and by it her hand was for a moment defiled. It was but skin-deep. Every change in her life was purifying her; it hardly could raise her. Again I cry, "If she had but lived!" (495-6).

Because Mrs. Gaskell, as we have seen, regarded Charlotte's fiction as having been shaped by her environment, she once again explains her friend's lapses into coarseness as the unavoidable result of her deprivations and hardships. Like both other defenses, however, this one goes beyond the matter of the influences on Charlotte's writing to suggest a fundamental relationship between art and duty in her life. Charlotte's life has been "openly laid bare," but not because it offers a convenient excuse for the alleged deficiencies of her work. Nor is this life of suffering intended to stand alone as a model of submission to God's will. Rather, Charlotte's womanly duties are extraordinary because they were satisfied despite the "extra responsibility" (334) that her talent imposed on her. By the same token, her literary life is important to the biography not because of the artistic genius of her novels (which is so clear, in Mrs. Gaskell's view, that she declines to discuss it²⁴), but because it paralleled a life of domestic obligation that she perfectly fulfilled. In its design and development, the Life of Charlotte Brontë asserts the importance of these simultaneous achievements.

This is not to suggest that Mrs. Gaskell's view of her friend's life was at all a simplistic one. The conflicting extracts from Charlotte's letters that she publishes give ample evidence that she found her character complex and, as Margaret Ganz observes, even paradoxical--"pious and doubting, ambitious and timid, yearning and self-denying, sentimental and mordantly witty."²⁵ But because she saw in Charlotte Brontë's resolution of duty and art a courageous and unique accomplishment, she constructed her biography around this issue and thereby created a work whose artistic structure and revolutionary message are inseparable.

NOTES

1

J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard, eds., The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), Letter 314. Letters from this volume are hereafter cited by number as Letters.

2

Letters, 241.

3

On the origins of Patrick Brontë's offer, see Clement Shorter, The Brontës: Life and Letters (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), I, 3-10; and John Lock and Canon W. T. Dixon, A Man of Sorrow: The Life, Letters and Times of the Rev. Patrick Brontë 1777-1861 (London: Nelson, 1965), pp. 492-504.

4

Letters, 257.

5

Ibid.

6

Tom Winnifrith, The Brontës and their Background: Romance and Reality (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 116 et passim. One must keep in mind, of course, that even Mrs. Gaskell had reservations about the propriety of her friend's books. The Professor, she observed to Emily Shaen after seeing the manuscript for the first time in 1856, contained "one or two remarkable portraits . . . otherwise little or no story; & [is] disfigured by more coarseness, -- & profanity in quoting texts of Scripture disagreeably than in any of her other works" (Letters, 308).

7

Arthur Pollard, Mrs. Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 159.

8

Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), esp. pp. 17-26.

9
Letters, 68.

10
Letters, 75.

11
Letters, 78.

12
Letters, 79.

13
 Page citations in the text are to The Life of Charlotte Brontë, ed. Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), which reprints the text of the first edition.

14
 Mrs. Gaskell's untrustworthy source for the violent actions of Patrick Brontë that she describes was a day-nurse hired to attend Mrs. Brontë and later dismissed for incompetence. Though Mr. Brontë was delighted with the biography (and even asserted that it would stand "in the first rank of Biographies till the end of time"), he did ask Mrs. Gaskell to alter her description of him. "I have no objection whatever to your representing me as a little eccentric," he wrote on 30 July 1857, ". . . only don't set me on in my fury to burning hearthrugs, sawing the backs of chairs, and tearing my wife's silk gowns" (see Lock and Dixon, pp. 227, 508-9). The offending details were accordingly suppressed in the third edition.

15
 See, for example, Winifred Gerin (Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976], p. 172), who writes that Mrs. Gaskell "dismissed one of the most potentially fruitful lines of research into the creative processes of Charlotte Brontë." Coral Lansbury (Elizabeth Gaskell: The Novel of Social Crisis [New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975], p. 139) is one of the few readers to disagree. In the Gondal and Angrian cycles, she says, Mrs. Gaskell recognized "the seeds that were to flower as the novels and poetry of later life."

16
Letters, 297. Cf. the Life, p. 119, where Mrs. Gaskell writes that in the juvenilia Charlotte's "fancy and . . . language alike run riot, sometimes to the very borders of apparent delirium."

17

And for this reason the now famous objections to the work by Lady Scott, Carus Wilson, Harriet Martineau, and others upset her greatly. "I did so try to tell the truth," she wrote bitterly to Ellen Nussey as the storm of protest broke around her, "& I believe now I hit as near the truth as any one could do" (Letters, 352). For a summary of the changes Mrs. Gaskell eventually made, see Pollard, pp. 163-71.

18

Readers of the biography seem to have overlooked this balance in the past. Indeed, apart from the complaints that Mrs. Gaskell too gullibly accepted the Brontës' story of Branwell's seduction by Lady Scott and suppressed the evidence of Charlotte's love for M. Heger, the most common charge against her biography is that it pays too little attention to Charlotte as an artist. Arthur Pollard quotes Mrs. Gaskell's own words to conclude that her primary purpose was to show "what a noble, true and tender woman" Charlotte Brontë was. "This aim is intermingled with the continual indication of Mrs. Gaskell's sorrow for Charlotte's lot and regret for what in better surroundings she might have become" (p. 159). Edgar Wright goes even further. Observing that the attraction of the biography for Mrs. Gaskell was the same prospect of "handling character in setting that provided the creative impulse behind all of [her] work," he finds in the biography "virtually no literary criticism at all, no investigation of the psychology of the genius or creative imagination of Charlotte. . . . It is Charlotte the woman who is Mrs. Gaskell's concern" (Mrs. Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment [London: Oxford University Press, 1965], pp. 149, 148). Even Margaret Ganz, who realizes that Mrs. Gaskell was "painfully aware of the problems facing a woman who pursued an artistic career in the middle of the nineteenth century" and wished "to do justice to the writer as well as to the woman," concludes that the biographer was "far more attuned to portraying the human aspects of the Brontë story" (Elizabeth Gaskell: The Artist in Conflict [New York: Twayne, 1969], pp. 182, 191, 192).

19

Letters, 166. Cf. the Life, p. 401, where Mrs. Gaskell adds to the supernatural character of the phenomenon: "On windy nights, cries, and sobs, and wailings seemed to go round the house, as of the dearly-beloved striving to force their way to her."

20

Lansbury, p. 128.

21

[Elizabeth Rigby], "Vanity Fair--and Jane Eyre," Quarterly Review, 84 (1848), 153-85.

22

See the Life, p. 91: "The daughters grew up out of childhood into girlhood bereft, in a singular manner, of all such society as would have been natural to their age, sex, and station."

23

Even before she publicly criticized the preoccupation with love in Villette (Daily News, 3 February 1853, p. 2), Harriet Martineau explained her objection in a letter answering Charlotte's request for her thoughts on the book. "Unfortunately," writes Winifred Gerin, "the offending feature was of the book's essence, and to dislike that was to dislike all. . . . For Charlotte, there could be no reconciliation of principles so divergent; though Harriet expressed great surprise at Charlotte's reaction, and harboured no ill will herself, the friendship never revived" (Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius [London: Oxford University Press, 1967], p. 522).

24

See, for example, her remarks on Jane Eyre in the Life, p. 326.

25

Ganz, p. 188.

CHAPTER IV

THE ARTIST AND THE FRIEND IN FORSTER'S LIFE OF CHARLES DICKENS

None of the biographers we have considered enjoyed the advantage of such thorough knowledge of their subjects as John Forster had when he began his Life of Charles Dickens. Mrs. Gaskell, as we have seen, had a deep and sympathetic interest in Charlotte Brontë's life, but she met Charlotte only five years before her death and consequently was forced to rely on secondary accounts of her friend's life--not all entirely accurate, as it proved--for much of the framework of her narrative. Carlyle knew John Sterling intimately, but only in the decade of his literary career--a limitation that doubtless helped to shape his interpretation of Sterling's life. Even Lockhart, who was an associate of Scott's for fourteen years and a member of his family for twelve, was of a different generation, and had to compensate in his biography for his limited knowledge of the poet's early years.

No such obstacles confronted Forster, who was Dickens's exact contemporary--born just two months after him in April 1812--and his closest friend for almost thirty-four years.

"In the history of English biography," writes Elliot Engel, "there has perhaps never been a biographer so intimately acquainted with the personal life as well as the literary career of his subject."¹ When they met in 1836 at the home of their mutual friend, Harrison Ainsworth, both had firmly established themselves in London's literary circles-- Dickens as the author of the popular Sketches by "Boz" and the enormously successful Pickwick Papers, Forster as a rising critic for the Examiner and assistant to its editor, Albany Fonblanque. Both, writes James A. Davies, "were lively men, passionate about the theatre, keen on drinks and company and excursions, on being intensely gay, relaxing strenuously, responding vehemently."² In the years that followed they became the closest of friends, Forster acting alternately as Dickens's legal agent, literary adviser, confidant and correspondent. He knew Dickens, his family, and his friends as well as anyone could, and was uniquely well suited to write the life of the novelist after his death in 1870.

Yet the three volumes of the Life of Charles Dickens evoked only mixed reviews as they appeared between 1871 and 1873. The Quarterly claimed that "a more faithful biography could not be written," and the Fortnightly Review found it "difficult to speak with too much approval" of Forster's accomplishment,³ but other periodicals were less enthusiastic, citing with displeasure the biographer's

relentlessly eulogistic tone and the indelicacy of his own prominence in the work. Even the substance of the biography came under attack. The image of Dickens that Forster presented, a number of reviewers complained, was disappointingly indistinct, and the biography failed to present his inner life in sufficient detail. "We are told, and fully believe," commented the Saturday Review, "that he was most kindly and generous, the staunchest of friends and the most sympathetic of helpers. But here Mr. Forster seems either to have been hampered by a commendable desire not to intrude into private life or to be really unable to draw a vivid portrait."⁴ Observing that "somehow we do not get a clear, distinct idea of the man," the North American Review was led to the similar conclusion that "Mr. Forster has not the knack of catching a likeness."⁵

Indeed, compared with such a modern biography of Dickens as Edgar Johnson's, Forster's portrait of his friend does appear strikingly incomplete. Contemporary standards of biographical delicacy prohibited him from dwelling on Dickens's separation from Catherine, who was still living, or discussing his liaison with Ellen Ternan, but clearly Forster had available a great deal of perfectly acceptable information about Dickens that he chose not to use. Missing from the biography, for example, is all but the barest account of his domestic situation; the recorded births of his children, together with the occasional account

of a dinner party at Devonshire Terrace or an amateur theatrical performance at Tavistock House, constitute Forster's depiction of Dickens's home life. One gets little sense of Dickens as a popular figure in London society, either, since Forster avoids any lengthy discussion of the range of his friendships and omits all but the most unavoidable references to the close friends of Dickens's later years such as Wilkie Collins and W. H. Wills. The letters he quotes, in fact, are almost all Dickens's letters to himself, and as a result we have little opportunity to see Dickens in any light except that provided by his relationship with Forster.

It is Dickens the husband, the father, and the ebullient social companion that we miss here, and considering the wealth of information that Forster had at his disposal, such apparent deficiencies must at first seem surprising. Dickens's enormous popularity as a novelist certainly dictated that his public career should be a prominent part of the biography, but it does not alone explain Forster's virtual exclusion of all other topics from the narrative. Scott, too, was an author of unprecedented popularity in the earlier decades of the century, yet Lockhart, who traced the composition of his works and the evolution of his career in great detail, gave equal prominence in his Life, as we have seen, to Scott's social and domestic life and his numerous other interests, and by doing so produced

a biography of the man whose richness has not been surpassed.

No such claim can be made for Forster's Life of Dickens, which, though indispensable, remains incomplete as a biography. As an interpretation of Dickens's life, however, it has an internal completeness that Forster repeatedly defends. For to understand Dickens the author, he believed, was to grasp the essence of the man--an idea he states directly in a chapter devoted to Dickens's achievement as a novelist: "His literary work was so intensely one with his nature that he is not separable from it, and the man and the method throw a singular light on each other" (II, 263).⁶ Later, responding to reviews critical of his first two volumes, Forster pauses to comment similarly that Dickens's writings "formed the whole of that inner life which essentially constituted the man; and as in this respect he was actually, I have thought that his biography should present him" (II, 376-77). The details of Dickens's life that he has omitted, Forster implies, would contribute little to our understanding of the man.

Forster's primary interest in Dickens as an imaginative genius explains the biography's emphasis on the unusually intense and acute power of his observation, constantly "exalted and refined" by his imagination (I, 348). Once introduced in the opening pages, it becomes a recurrent subject that contributes to the consistency of Forster's

depiction of Dickens as it helps to establish the major theme of the work. "It seems almost too much to assert of a child," the biographer writes in the first chapter, ". . . that his observation of everything was as close and good, or that he had as much intuitive understanding of the character and weaknesses of the grown-up people around him, as when the same keen and wonderful faculty had made him famous among men" (I, 12). But the biographer's confidence in the accuracy of his friend's childhood recollections is reflected in the heavily autobiographical cast of the book's opening chapters, where Forster constructs his narrative around recreated conversations with the mature Dickens. As Forster has learned, David Cooperfield's claim "that I was a child of close observation, [and] that as a man I have a strong memory of my childhood" is "unaffectedly true" of Dickens as well (I, 4). In Portsmouth with Dickens during the composition of Nickleby, for example, he discovered that his friend "recognised the exact shape of the military parade seen by him as a very infant, on the same spot, a quarter of a century before" (I, 4). At Chatham, where Dickens lived between the ages of four and nine, "the most durable of his early impressions were received; and the associations that were around him when he died were those which at the outset of his life had affected him most strongly" (I, 4). Dickens's unusual power to preserve in his imagination the scenes of his

childhood is suggested as well by Forster's mention of his visits as an adult to many of those places, only to find them altered beyond recognition. Revisiting Chatham in search of the day school he attended, Dickens learned that "it had been pulled down to make a new street 'ages' before":

[B]ut, out of the distance of the ages, arose nevertheless a not dim impression that it had been over a dyer's shop; that he went up steps to it; that he had frequently grazed his knees in doing so; and that in trying to scrape the mud off a very unsteady little shoe, he generally got his leg over the scraper (I, 6).

A similar fate met the Wellington House Academy in Hampstead Road, vividly recreated, the biographer observes, in the Household Words piece "Our School." "We went back to look at the place only this last midsummer," Dickens writes, "and found that the railway had cut it up, root and branch" (I, 37). Only in the interplay of keen observation and a powerfully retentive imagination, Forster suggests by the inclusion of such details, does the reality of the past endure.

For Forster it is axiomatic that the fullest evidence of the sensitivity of Dickens's perception is provided by the imaginative recreation of reality in the novels themselves, and he returns to this theme regularly in his discussion of Dickens's works. Of Martin Chuzzlewit, for example, he writes that in none of Dickens's earlier compositions had "the intensity of his observation of individual

humours and vices . . . taken so many varieties of imaginative form" (I, 295). The vivid description of the circus in Hard Times, similarly, is one of the "successes [that] belonged to the experiences of his youth; he had nothing to add to what his marvellous observation had made familiar from almost childish days" (II, 121). The river scenes in Great Expectations, Forster tells us, are based on a day-long steamer excursion from Blackwall to Southend that Dickens arranged in 1861; while his family and friends were enjoying the trip, "his sleepless observation was at work all the time, and nothing . . . escaped his keen vision on either side of the river" (II, 287).

Forster's fascination with his friend's perceptions of the world gives rise to the touchstone that he most frequently uses in evaluating Dickens's success as a novelist: the lifelike quality of his fictional characters. Reflecting on his own first reading of Pickwick, Forster suggests that it was the book's unusually vivid characterizations that arrested the public's attention. "We had all become suddenly conscious," he writes, "in the very thick of the extravaganza of adventure and fun set before us, that here were real people. It was not somebody talking humorously about them, but they were there themselves" (I, 73). In Forster's view such an accomplishment--typical of all Dickens's major works--was the result of the all-important interplay of observation and imagination. "He had the

power of projecting himself into shapes and suggestions of his fancy which is one of the marvels of creative imagination," Forster writes, "and what he desired to express he became" (I, 374). Throughout the biography, indeed, Forster quotes from Dickens's letters to reveal his own intense personal involvement with the characters that flowed from his pen. As he approached the death of little Nell, for example, Dickens suffered in a way that the biography suggests became common at the conclusion of all of his novels. "Nobody will miss her like I shall," he wrote. "It is such a very painful thing to me, that I really cannot express my sorrow. Old wounds bleed afresh when I only think of the way of doing it: what the actual doing it will be, God knows" (I, 122).

Though the novels most fully present Dickens's powerful imagination, Forster indicates that the letters in the biography have been selected in part because they, too, reflect Dickens's sensitivity to his surroundings. The novelist's letters from his first American tour, he points out, "have claims, as mere literature, of an unusual kind. Unrivalled quickness of observation . . . never found more natural, variously easy, or picturesque expression" (I, 221). The letters written during Dickens's residence in Italy in 1844-45, similarly, show "what cheerful, keen, observant eyes he carried everywhere" (I, 348),

just as those written from Switzerland two years later reveal to the reader

the great observer and humorist; interested in everything that commended itself to a thoroughly earnest and eagerly inquiring nature; popular beyond measure with all having intercourse with him; the centre, and very soul, of social enjoyment; letting nothing escape a vision that was not more keen than kindly; and even when apparently most idle, never idle in the sense of his art, but adding day by day to experiences that widened its range, and gave freer and healthier play to an imagination always busily at work, alert and active in a singular degree, and that seemed to be quite untiring (I, 417).

Unfortunately, since all but fifty-five of the nearly one thousand manuscript letters that Forster used in composing the Life have vanished,⁷ it is impossible to determine precisely how his sense of the importance of the letters guided his selections from them. Throughout the biography, however, the letters from Dickens's various trips seem to have been arranged to emphasize his powers of observation and description. "[I]t will be difficult . . . to look over letters so marvellous in the art of reproducing to the sight what has once been seen," comments Forster near the end of his narrative, ". . . and to believe that the source of . . . whatever gave wealth to his genius, was other than habitual, unbounded, and resistless" (II, 378).

It is the "unbounded," spontaneous force of Dickens's imagination, in fact, that the biographer finds particularly striking. In his frequent comments on Dickens's

method of composition, Forster returns over and over to the idea that Dickens had but to formulate an outline of a character or plot, and his imagination would then spontaneously complete it. "Invention, thank God, seems the easiest thing in the world," Dickens writes from Lausanne while working on Dombey in 1846; "and I seem to have such a preposterous sense of the ridiculous . . . as to be constantly requiring to restrain myself from launching into extravagances in the height of my enjoyment" (I, 419). "Thus always," Forster observes, "whether his tale was to be written in one or in twenty numbers, his fancies controlled him. . . . Once at the sacred heat that opens regions beyond ordinary vision, imagination has its own laws; and where characters are so real as to be treated as existences, their creator himself cannot help them having their own wills and ways" (I, 338).

Such irrepressible imaginative power was not only the origin of the characteristic "freshness" of Dickens's work, Forster suggests, but the source of his seemingly inexhaustible physical energy as well. The descriptions of Dickens throughout the biography emphasize his vitality and liveliness. When Forster first saw him in the offices of the True Sun in 1832, he was struck, he says, by the "keen animation of look [that] would have arrested attention anywhere" (I, 49). What he recalls most vividly from his first meeting with Dickens four years later is that "which no

time could change, and which remained implanted on [his face] unalterably to the last":

This was the quickness, keenness, and practical power, the eager, restless, energetic outlook on each several feature, that seemed to tell so little of a student or writer of books, and so much of a man of action and business in the world. Light and motion flashed from every part of it (I, 65-66).

Throughout the rest of his association with Dickens, the biography suggests, this "restless and resistless vivacity" (I, 66) continued to impress him. "[H]e never wrote without the printer at his heels. . . ," Forster notes later. "[T]he more urgent the call upon him the more readily he rose to it. . . . [H]is astonishing animal spirits never failed him" (I, 100). In society his animated conversation and "unwearying animal spirits" made him "the most delightful of companions" (I, 135). As manager of the first of many amateur theatricals produced with his friends in 1845, Dickens was "the life and soul of the entire affair." "He took everything on himself, and did the whole of it without an effort. He was stage-director, very often stage-carpenter, scene-arranger, property-man, prompter, and bandmaster. . . . For all he had useful suggestions, and the dullest of clays under his potter's hand were transformed into bits of porcelain" (I, 377). And the same animation characterized his benefit performances. "His animal spirits, unresting and supreme, were the

attraction of rehearsal at morning, and of the stage at night. . . . There seemed to be no need for rest to that wonderful vitality" (II, 18). Even near the end of his life, weakened by illness and exhaustion during his frantic round of American readings, he had hidden reserves of energy. "What is expressed in [his American] letters," Forster writes, "of a still active, hopeful, enjoying, energetic spirit . . . was also so strongly impressed upon those who were with him, that, seeing his sufferings as they did, they yet found it difficult to understand the extent of them" (II, 342).

Throughout the biography Dickens's physical vitality is thus linked with a variety of creative endeavors--conversing, play directing, acting, reading in public. But the clearest connection between Dickens's intellectual and physical energy is provided by the subject of his habitual midnight walks, which Forster explains were "indispensable" when he was engaged in writing (II, 396). Walking at a furious pace through the streets of London or Paris in the dead of night, he would release the restlessness produced, the biography suggests, by his creative fervor. "The absence of any accessible streets continues to worry me, now that I have so much to do, in a most singular manner," Dickens writes from the hilly town of Lausanne in 1846. "I should not walk in them in the daytime . . . but at night I want them beyond description. I don't seem able to get

rid of my spectres unless I can lose them in crowds" (I, 420). "I have been greatly better at Geneva," he writes later, "though I am still made uneasy by occasional giddiness and headache: attributable, I have not the least doubt, to the absence of streets" (I, 427). His rambles were not prompted simply by anxiety over his work, as Forster is careful to point out; instead, they were a physical manifestation, however mysterious, of the imaginative power within him. "[I]t was no impatience of labour, or desire of pleasure," the biographer writes,

that led at such times to his eager craving for the fresh crowds and faces in which he might lose or find the creatures of his fancy; and recollecting this, much hereafter will be understood that might else be very far from clear, in regard to the sensitive conditions under which otherwise he carried on these exertions of his brain (I, 422).

It is worth observing that Forster undercuts these themes of unlimited physical energy and spontaneous creative power in his narration of the years after 1850, in order to suggest that the climax of Dickens's life has been passed. The selections from letters written during the reading tours of the 1850's and 1860's (of which Forster did not approve, it must be remembered) return over and over to the exhaustion Dickens suffers as he throws himself wholeheartedly into his performances. "The expenditure of lungs and spirit," he writes from Edinburgh in 1861 in a typical passage, "was (as you may suppose) rather great;

and to sleep well was out of the question. I am therefore rather fagged to-day" (II, 242). The letters from America are more dismal. "The work is very severe. . . ," Dickens writes from New York. "It . . . happens, not seldom, that I am so dead beat when I come off that they lay me down on a sofa after I have been washed and dressed, and I lie there, extremely faint, for a quarter of an hour" (II, 336). Gone, apparently, are the "animal spirits" that needed no refreshment. During the same years, moreover, Forster detects a "certain strain upon his invention" (II, 194). In Dickens's outline of Little Dorrit he finds indications of "labour and pains"--in contrast with the "lightness and confidence" of the David Copperfield notes--which suggest to him that "the old, unstinted, irrepressible flow of fancy had received temporary check" (II, 182). Dickens's habit during the 1850's of keeping a book of memoranda to work from strikes Forster similarly as an ominous sign of diminishing creative energy. "Never before had his teeming fancy seemed to want such help," he points out; "the need being less to contribute to its fulness than to check its overflowing" (II, 195). From this point the composing process becomes increasingly difficult, and the light-hearted author of the earlier pages of Forster's Life becomes an older novelist weighed down by the burden of his work. By 1862 Dickens considers escaping to Australia in search of new material--a plan, says the biographer, that

would not have been "entertained for a moment, but for the unwonted difficulties of invention that were now found to beset a twenty-number story" (II, 244). Forster insists, of course, that even in these problematic years Dickens's genius was "still able to assert itself triumphantly" (II, 313), but his emphasis on the difficulties of creation, like the stress on Dickens's new physical exhaustion, signals the approaching end of the spectacular career that the biography has depicted.

This, then, is for Forster the essential Dickens--keenly observant from his earliest days, incessantly active, possessed during his years of greatest achievement by the power of his imagination and driven by it to compose the most successful series of novels in English history. Yet despite Forster's stated desire to concentrate on Dickens's life as an author, this is only part of the portrait that his biography offers. Beside its image of the creative genius at work is the more human picture of Dickens as Forster's own closest friend.

The Life of Dickens, in fact, owes more to the friendship between its author and subject than any biography since Boswell's Johnson. Unlike Boswell, however, who portrays Johnson not only as a close personal friend but also as a member of a large social circle, Forster strives to focus attention exclusively on his own relationship with Dickens. The fact of their friendship is obliquely but

firmly established even in the first chapter of the Life, where the two men share the narration of the novelist's youth, Forster supplying the necessary facts, Dickens offering the recollections that give life to the story. "He has often told me. . . . I have often heard him say. . . . Many, many times has he spoken to me of this" (I, 4, 9, 12)-- such phrases suggest from the first pages of the biography an intimacy of extended duration. In the second chapter, with its description of the blacking warehouse, that suggestion is strongly reinforced. Forster, we learn, was Dickens's only confidant; from the hour of his deliverance from Hungerford Stairs, the novelist writes, "I have never, . . . in any burst of confidence with anyone, my own wife not excepted, raised the curtain I then dropped, thank God" (I, 33). Once again, Dickens and Forster appear as figures of nearly equal importance in the narrative. Here, the interweaving of Dickens's autobiographical fragment and details supplied by Forster "from letters and recollections of my own" (I, 26) suggests the shared nature of the experience being described.

The surviving manuscripts of Dickens's letters reveal that later in the biography Forster achieves the same effect of isolating himself and Dickens by altering plural pronouns to remove others from the letters and thus, effectively, from Dickens's life.⁹ On 24 June 1838, for example, Dickens writes, "We start precisely--precisely

mind--at half past one. Come, come, come, and walk in the Green Lanes" (Letters, I, 407); but in Forster's text the letter begins, "I start precisely. . ." (I, 75). A similar alteration occurs in a letter from Broadstairs on 18 September 1839. Dickens writes:

It has been blowing great guns here for the last three days, and last night--I wish you could have seen it--there was such a sea! Fred (who is here) and I, staggered down to the Pier and creeping under the lee of a large boat which was high and dry, watched it breaking for nearly an hour. Of course we came back wet through, but it was most superb (Letters, I, 581).

In the Life, Dickens appears to share the experience only with Forster, for the biographer has carefully excluded the reference to his brother and changed his "we" to "I" (I, 102).

Elsewhere in the biography Forster includes passages from Dickens's letters whose only apparent purpose is to demonstrate the closeness of their relationship. On 11 December 1837, for example, he sent Forster one of three "'extra-super' bound copies of Pickwick," with the request that he accept it "with one sincere and most comprehensive expression of my warmest friendship and esteem; and a hearty renewal, if there need be any renewal when there has been no interruption, of all those assurances of affectionate regard which our close friendship and communion for a long time back has every day implied" (I, 81).¹⁰ The same suggestion of their close contact with each other surfaces in Dickens's letter of 22 September 1841, written as he

was preparing to leave for America: "How I am to get on without you for seven or eight months, I cannot, upon my soul, conceive. I dread to think of breaking up all our old happy habits for so long a time" (I, 172-73). But the warmest expression of his affection apparently came in 1845 in a letter written from Italy after the death of Forster's only brother. The biographer prints it in a footnote, ostensibly "for what it relates of his own sad experiences and solemn beliefs and hopes." "I would to Heaven, my dearest friend," writes Dickens, "that I could remind you in a manner more lively and affectionate than this dull sheet of paper can put on, that you have a Brother left. One bound to you by ties as strong as ever Nature forged. By ties never to be broken, weakened, changed in any way" (I, 357).¹¹

Even apart from such expressions of Dickens's regard for Forster, his letters from abroad suggest their intimacy by reflecting his constant desire to share his experiences with him. The long descriptive passages alone imply this, but they are frequently punctuated as well by outbursts that suggest his regret that Forster is not by his side. From Nova Scotia he writes in 1842:

I wish you could have seen the crowds cheering the Inimitable in the streets. I wish you could have seen judges, law-officers, bishops, and law-makers welcoming the Inimitable. I wish you could have seen the Inimitable shown to a

great elbow-chair by the Speaker's throne, and sitting alone in the middle of the floor of the House of Commons, the observed of all observers, listening with exemplary gravity to the queerest speaking possible, and breaking in spite of himself into a smile as he thought of this commencement to the Thousand and One stories in reserve for home and Lincoln's Inn Fields and Jack Straw's Castle.--Ah, Forster! when I do come back again!--(I, 180).

From Boston he writes enthusiastically, "How can I give you the faintest notion of my reception here; of the crowds that pour in and out the whole day; of the people that line the streets when I go out; of the cheering when I went to the theatre; of the copies of verses, letters of congratulation, welcomes of all kinds, balls, dinners, assemblies without end?" (I, 181). In Venice, similarly, he writes of the "magnificent and stupendous" reality of the city. "My dear Forster, if you could share my transports (as you would if you were here) what I would not give!" (I, 347).

Forster's deliberate inclusion of such passages led, not surprisingly, to widespread criticism of his prominence in the biography. Wilkie Collins, partly out of disgust over Forster's virtual exclusion of him from Dickens's life, referred to the work bitterly as "The Life of John Forster with occasional anecdotes of Charles Dickens."¹² But the severest attack came from the Saturday Review following the publication of the second volume:

We have no doubt whatever--indeed, almost every page contains conclusive proofs--that Dickens entertained a very high regard for Mr. Forster, but Mr. Forster might have been content with

establishing that fact, say, fifty times. The fifty-first demonstration becomes a little tedious, and one is inclined to say to the author, before the end of the four hundred and sixty-second page, "My dear sir, you have been very polite in pointing out all the beauties of the object you are describing, and now, if you would be so very kind as just to stand out of the light for a little, we shall be able to see it all the better for ourselves."

Like Collins, the reviewer suggested caustically that a more appropriate title for the biography would be the "History of Dickens's Relations to Mr. Forster."¹³

Responding to this criticism in his final volume, Forster not only defended his reliance throughout the biography only on Dickens's letters to himself, but suggested at the same time the appropriateness of his own prominence in the work. Noting once more that the "story of [Dickens's] books" was his primary interest in the biography, he explained:

With that view, and to give also to the memoir what was attainable of the value of autobiography, letters to myself, such as were never addressed to any other of his correspondents, and covering all the important incidents in the life to be retraced, were used with few exceptions exclusively; and though the exceptions are much more numerous in the later sections, this general plan has guided me to the end. Such were my limits indeed, that half even of those letters had to be put aside; and to have added all such others as were opened to me would have doubled the size of my book, not contributed to it a new fact of life or character, and altered materially its design. It would have been so much lively illustration added to the subject, but out of place here. The purpose here was to make Dickens the sole central figure in the scenes revived, narrator

as well as principal actor; and only by the means employed could consistency or unity be given to the self-revelation, and the picture made definite and clear. It is the peculiarity of few men to be to their most intimate friend neither more nor less than they are to themselves, but this was true of Dickens; and what kind or quality of nature such intercourse expressed in him, of what strength, tenderness, and delicacy susceptible, of what steady level warmth, of what daily unresting activity of intellect, of what unbroken continuity of kindly impulse through the change and vicissitude of three-and-thirty years, the letters to myself given in these volumes could alone express. Gathered from various and differing sources, their interest could not have been as the interest of these; in which everything comprised in the successive stages of a most attractive career is written with unexampled care and truthfulness, and set forth in definite pictures of what he saw and stood in the midst of, unblurred by vagueness or reserve (II, 377).

As Dickens's most intimate correspondent, then, Forster claims to have had access to a collection of candid letters that provided a singularly complete image of the man. Even more important to the integrity of the biography, though, is the repeated suggestion that these letters offer a special perspective on Dickens the artist, that they trace "the successive stages of a most attractive career." No one, in fact, was closer to Dickens the writer; no one shared in his literary sufferings and successes more fully than Forster. The subject of their friendship, conveyed through these letters, is therefore more than merely appropriate to the biography; it is the logical extension of Forster's emphasis on Dickens's imaginative genius.

Far from obscuring the portrait of Dickens, Forster's presence in the Life completes it in a unique and crucial way.

What the letters to Forster reveal is that Dickens consistently shared his creative work with his friend, relying on him not only as a negotiator with his publishers, but as a constant source of encouragement and advice. Thus while long extracts from Dickens's letters outlining plans for new novels are included partly to prove that his artistic design was established even before he received the public's reaction to his works, they serve at the same time to suggest the closeness of Forster's connection with the origin of each of his major projects. In the letters that follow such proposals Forster permits us to trace Dickens's progress on each work--his characteristic gloominess at beginning, his constant need for encouragement as it takes shape, his mixed relief and sorrow as it comes to a close. "Alas!" he writes in a typical passage as he starts work on Our Mutual Friend. "I have hit upon nothing for a story. Again and again I have tried. But this odious little house [a friend's house near Kensington, Forster explains] seems to have stifled and darkened my invention" (II, 292). But the inspiration would come, and Dickens would begin sending pieces of the manuscript to Forster. "There was nothing written by him after [the beginning of Oliver]," the biographer observes, "which I

did not see before the world did, either in manuscript or proofs; and in connection with the latter I shortly began to give him the help which he publicly mentioned twenty years later in dedicating his collected writings to me" (I, 71). The egotistical overtones of such a remark are subdued if we regard it as the biographer certainly intended: as the expression of a kind of literary partnership between Dickens, the creative master, and Forster, his constant sounding board and private critic. The rest of the biography suggests strongly, indeed, how dependent Dickens was on Forster's reactions to his work. Responding to Forster's approval of the conclusion of The Old Curiosity Shop in 1841, for example, he wrote, "I can't help letting you know how much your yesterday's letter pleased me. . . . The assurance that this little closing of the scene touches and is felt by you so strongly, is better to me than a thousand most sweet voices out of doors" (I, 123). Or again, near the end of Dombey: "I need not say, I can't, how delighted and overjoyed I am by what you say and feel of it" (II, 34).

But Forster's help was not limited to approving Dickens's work. Instead, the extracts from Dickens's letters emphasize his constant reliance on Forster's advice and suggestions as each work took shape. A series of letters written during the composition of The Battle of Life provides perhaps the best illustration of Dickens's regard

for his friend's contributions. Wondering about the advisability of dating the events of the book through its illustrations, Dickens writes on 29 October 1848, "Do you think it worth while, in the illustrations, to throw the period back at all for the sake of anything in the costume? . . . Whatever you think best, in this as in all other things, is best, I am sure" (I, 435). "I shall hope to touch upon the Christmas book as soon as I get your opinion," he writes early in November. "I wouldn't do it without" (I, 436). After receiving Forster's letter he responds, "I hope to make these alterations next week, and to send the third part back to you before I leave here. If you think it can still be improved after that, say so to me in Paris and I will go at it again" (I, 437). But Forster finds it satisfactory now, and Dickens thanks him on 21 November for his help. "I am glad you like the alterations," he writes. "I feel that they make it complete, and that it would have been incomplete without your suggestions" (I, 437).

Similar passages can be found throughout the biography, acting as a constant reminder to the reader of Forster's participation in the shaping of Dickens's works. On occasion, indeed, when Dickens was abroad and material had to be deleted or added at the last minute before publication, the final decisions about the text were left to him. "In case more cutting is wanted," Dickens writes in 1846 upon

hearing that the first number of Dombey is too long, "I must ask you to try your hand. I shall agree to whatever you propose" (II, 23). Later the third number, too, is found to be overwritten by three pages. "I have taken out about two pages and a half," Dickens writes to Forster, "and the rest I must ask you to take out with the assurance that you will satisfy me in whatever you do" (II, 30). At the close of Dombey in March 1848, he recalls a final detail to be added and writes, "I suddenly remembered that I have forgotten Diogenes. Will you put him in the last little chapter? . . . [Y]ou might say 'and an old dog is generally in their company,' or to that effect. Just what you think best" (II, 34).

Just as the essence of Dickens's life, in Forster's view, was his artistic achievement, the essence of Forster's relationship with him, this biography suggests, was his participation in that success. In this light the Life of Dickens becomes more than the detailed recollection of an intense friendship. It is, instead, a re-enactment of the essential part of that friendship, a composition, like those it describes, built on the cooperative efforts of both men. In the integration of Forster's narration and Dickens's letters, in the interweaving of their recollections of the past, these two friends share for a final time in the creation of a great and lasting literary work.

Forster's refusal to accept the help of Dickens's other friends, and his all but total exclusion of them from the biography, have frequently been attributed to jealousy and defensiveness.¹⁴ The inclusion of such material would certainly have broadened the perspective of the work, but it would have, in Forster's own words, "altered materially its design" (II, 377). Gone, then, would be the unique texture of the Life of Dickens, the special intimacy and consistency that result from its limited focus. And gone would be Forster's last opportunity for communion with the man whose life and work he shared for more than thirty years.

NOTES

1

Elliot Engel, "Dickens's Obscure Childhood in Pre-Forster Biography," The Dickensian, 72 (1976), 4.

2

James A. Davies, "Forster and Dickens: The Making of Podsnap," The Dickensian, 70 (1974), 146.

3

[Whitwell Elwin], "Forster's Life of Dickens," Quarterly Review, 132 (1872), 125; J. Herbert Stack, "The Life of Charles Dickens," Fortnightly Review, NS 11 (1872), 117.

4

"Forster's Life of Dickens," Saturday Review, 32 (1871), 756.

5

"Forster's Life of Dickens," North American Review, 114 (1872), 414.

6

The text cited is The Life of Charles Dickens, ed. A. J. Hoppé, 2 vols. (London: Everyman's Library, 1969).

7

Madeline House and Graham Storey, Preface to The Letters of Charles Dickens, Pilgrim Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-), I, xi. Cited hereafter as Letters. Because so few of Dickens's letters to Forster have survived in manuscript, generalizations about Forster's editorial procedures in the Life are difficult. On the basis of the surviving manuscripts, House and Storey suggest that most of Forster's alterations were likely cosmetic changes, made in the interest of balance, narrative continuity, or stylistic improvement (Preface to Letters, I, xii-xiii). Gerald G. Grubb, analyzing many of the same letters, agrees that Forster's changes in general probably did not affect meaning (K. J. Fielding and Gerald G. Grubb, "New Letters from Charles Dickens to John Forster," Boston University Studies in English, 2 [1956], 150-93). Some notable exceptions are discussed below.

8

Because of the destruction of the Dickens-Forster correspondence, the full extent to which Forster may have exaggerated his friend's complaints through the manipulation of these letters may never be known. However, the eventual publication of Dickens's letters to his daughter Mamie and to Georgina Hogarth, used by Forster without acknowledgment throughout this section of the biography, may be expected to shed some light on his methods. See note 9.

9

John Wilbert Braymer, "The Literary Biographies of John Forster," Diss. University of Tennessee 1977, p. 133. House and Storey note as well that in his narration of the years after 1852, Forster occasionally compensates for the decline in the number of letters he received from Dickens by printing letters to other correspondents (mainly Georgina Hogarth and his daughter Mamie) and implying, often tacitly, that they were written to himself (Preface to Letters, I, xv).

10

Essentially the same in Letters, I, 340. Manuscripts for the three letters that follow are not available.

11

Their relationship did change, of course, and considerably, after the early 1850's, when Forster's marriage and Dickens's friendships with younger men, including Collins and Wills, interfered with their previously close contact. Forster's disapproval of his friend's public readings, moreover, reduced the volume of correspondence between them when Dickens was away on tour. But House and Storey point out that "in matters of real moment [Forster] still held central place." It was Forster, they note, who represented Dickens in his separation from Catherine, Forster to whom he dedicated the Library Edition of his works in 1858, Forster to whom he bequeathed his manuscripts, Forster whom he named, along with Georgina Hogarth, his executor (Preface to Letters, I, xiv-xv).

12

Kenneth Robinson, Wilkie Collins: A Biography (London: Bodley Head, 1951), p. 260.

13

"Forster's Life of Dickens," Saturday Review, 34 (1872), 668.

14

See, for example, J. W. T. Ley, The Dickens Circle: A Narrative of the Novelist's Friendships (London: Chapman and Hall, 1918), pp. 351-52; Malcolm Elwin, Victorian Wallflowers (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), p. 198; Robinson, p. 260.

CHAPTER V

BALANCE AND BIAS IN TREVELYAN'S LIFE AND LETTERS OF LORD MACAULAY

George Otto Trevelyan was only twenty-one years old in 1859 when Macaulay died quietly in his Kensington home. But years of intimate association with his famous uncle had fixed in Trevelyan's mind an impression of Macaulay's remarkable character that would eventually prove invaluable when he undertook the biography which is still the best known of his works. He had grown up in almost daily contact with the bachelor Macaulay, whose unusual devotion to his married sister, Trevelyan's mother, resulted in constant visiting between the two London households. As a schoolboy he had spent leisurely afternoons with his sisters sharing Macaulay's delight in sightseeing. Throughout London they had gone together, to Madame Tussaud's or the National Gallery, or along the corridors of the British Museum, with Macaulay "making the statues live and the busts speak by the spirit and color of his innumerable anecdotes."¹ The bond between the two deepened when Trevelyan went up to Trinity in 1857. Delighted with this new link between himself and Cambridge, Macaulay took a special interest in his nephew's undergraduate life,

visiting and writing to him regularly until his death two years later.

Almost twenty years passed before the appearance of the Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay, but the reasons for Trevelyan's delay in preparing his uncle's life are not hard to surmise. In the first place, a massive two-volume biography of one of the leading figures of the day was not an undertaking for an inexperienced writer, however well supplied he might be with his subject's journals, papers, and letters. The 1860's, moreover, were years of intense political activity for Trevelyan, who entered the House as the member for Tynemouth in 1865, was returned by the Scottish Border Burghs in 1868, and served as Civil Lord of the Admiralty until his resignation from that post in 1870. He was a man of "nervous artistic temperament," his son writes, who "could not drive two great tasks abreast."² Just as important as finding the leisure to write, no doubt, was Trevelyan's problem of settling on the proper design for this biography, the writing of which he regarded seriously as a personal duty.³ For familiar as he was with his uncle's personality, he had had little adult association with Macaulay. That limitation probably helped Trevelyan to distance himself sufficiently from his subject,⁴ but it also restricted the possibilities for development within the life-and-letters format. Unlike the other biographers we have considered, Trevelyan

did not have at his disposal a rich supply of recollections and personal anecdotes with which to develop a narrative of his subject's life. Instead, the Life of Macaulay rests primarily on Trevelyan's skillful selections from his uncle's letters and journals, which, together with the observations of an unobtrusive but important narrator, give his portrait of Macaulay its unity and consistency.

In the judgment of his contemporaries, at least, Trevelyan's finished work was a thorough success. James Anthony Froude, writing in Fraser's Magazine six years before the appearance of the first volumes of his own remarkable biography of Carlyle, found it "impossible to speak too highly" of Trevelyan's accomplishment. "For all time," he explained, "those who desire to know what Macaulay was will find him here, line for line, feature for feature, an exact image, from which nothing need hereafter be deducted on the score of a relation's partiality, nothing need hereafter be added to compensate for the artist's deficiencies."⁵ The major reviews agreed. In his Quarterly Review article Gladstone praised Trevelyan above all for "imparting life" to the figure of Macaulay in his pages. Henry Reeve, editor of the Edinburgh Review, was struck by the "skill and candour" of the biography, and the Westminster Review noted Trevelyan's success in focussing the work so clearly and steadily on its subject.⁶

Yet the modern reader who picks up Trevelyan's Macaulay is less likely to be struck immediately by its merits than by its apparently clumsy organization. For in many ways this biography seems to have fallen victim to the incoherence that threatened every life-and-letters biography during the nineteenth century,⁷ and whatever unity it possesses appears to exist despite, rather than because of, the biographer's efforts. More often than not, Trevelyan's use of documents, especially letters, seems at first reading exceptionally awkward. In some chapters he thoroughly integrates his narrative and his subject's letters; but in others he makes little attempt to do so, and instead lumps together at the end of a long chapter a massive selection of letters written over the entire period he has just narrated. Such apparent carelessness is not restricted to Trevelyan's manipulation of documents, for even in his narration of events he frequently disregards chronology. One chapter covering Macaulay's life from 1847 to 1849 is followed by another that deals with the years 1848 to 1852. In a single ten-page passage in the second volume, a narrative which begins in July 1853 jumps back to November 1852, ahead to December 1853, back again to March, and forward once more to July, the starting point. As a result of such narrative freedom, the reader who seeks a coherent view of Macaulay's career must engage in incessant mental juggling of incidents and dates.

What such a technique suggests is that chronology is simply not an organizing principle in this biography and that we must look elsewhere for the source of its unity. Trevelyan's opening paragraphs, which reflect his clear sense of what the Victorian reading public demanded from biography, confirm that suggestion. After recognizing the general interest in every person who achieves public distinction, he concludes that it may "be taken for granted that a desire exists to hear something authentic about the life of a man who has produced works which are universally known, but which bear little or no indication of the private history and the personal qualities of the author" (I, 18). This aspect of Macaulay's life, it is clear, is to occupy Trevelyan's attention. In this biography we should not anticipate an encyclopedic account of the man's political or literary accomplishments, for incident and chronology are to be valued only insofar as they help to illuminate Macaulay's character. Quotations from his letters, similarly, should be expected to reveal his unusual personality, not the evolution of his career. In Trevelyan's view the documents available to him are especially appropriate to such a goal. "He was by nature so incapable of affectation or concealment that he could not write otherwise than he felt, and, to one person at least, could never refrain from writing all that he felt," the biographer observes with an allusion to his own mother; "so that we

may read in his letters, as in a clear mirror, his opinions and inclinations, his hopes and affections, at every succeeding period of his existence" (I, 19). Only with Trevelyan's purpose in mind can we make sense of the book's numerous apparent deficiencies--the obviously incomplete description of Macaulay's duties in India, the limited mention of events from his political life, the absence of discussion of his published works, the sparse details about his physical appearance. For this is not a book about politics or publications, but an intimate analysis of attitudes, emotions, and private goals.

If we cannot find in the arrangement of documents or the sequence of events the source of the unity that we do sense in reading this biography, then, we should instead look for it first of all in the remarkable consistency of the personality it exhibits. Trevelyan's comment that his uncle's personal qualities are not easily found in his published works seems only partially correct, for the cheerful optimism, the unshakable equanimity, and the boundless self-confidence that characterize so much of Macaulay's published writing appear in the biographer's selections from Macaulay's diaries and correspondence to be equally typical of the man himself. How complete, in light of his claim that Macaulay's character was reflected in his personal papers "as in a clear mirror," is the reflection that Trevelyan permits the reader to see?

The full extent of his manipulation of these texts will be revealed only by the publication of Macaulay's journals and the completion of the edition of his letters now in progress, but Thomas Pinney's analysis of the unpublished correspondence suggests that the image of Macaulay that we behold here is at least somewhat distorted. "[T]he letters make clear that Macaulay's life was hardly one of placid self-satisfaction," he writes. "It is tempting, and would be easy, to draw a portrait of Macaulay from the materials provided by the letters which would present an exact antithesis to Trevelyan's--dark not bright, moody not placid, susceptible not self-reliant, violently unstable, not equable."⁸

This is not to say, however, that the Life of Macaulay is without value for the modern reader, for despite its distortions Trevelyan's biography offers the fullest account available of Macaulay's private life. Instead of the politically active figure we know well, we more often encounter here a solitary Macaulay immersed in reading and reflection, a man who enjoyed and valued solitude. "I never was left for so long a time so completely to my own resources," he wrote to his sister Margaret at the end of his tedious trip to India in 1834; "and I am glad to say that I found them quite sufficient to keep me cheerful and employed" (I, 321). In the record of his reading for the next year are indications of the boundless private enjoyment

he derived from books. "I have cast up my reading account, and brought it to the end of the year 1835," he wrote to his friend Thomas Flower Ellis:

It includes December, 1834; for I came into my house and unpacked my books at the end of November, 1834. During the last thirteen months I have read Aeschylus twice; Sophocles twice; Euripides once; Pindar twice; Callimachus; Apollonius Rhodius; Quintus Calaber; Theocritus twice; Herodotus; Thucydides; almost all Xenophon's works; almost all Plato; Aristotle's "Politics," and a good deal of his "Organon," besides dipping elsewhere in him; the whole of Plutarch's "Lives;" about half of Lucian; two or three books of Athenaeus; Plautus twice; Terrence twice; Lucretius twice; Catullus; Tibullus; Propertius; Lucan; Statius; Silius Italicus; Livy; Velleins Paterculus; Sallust; Caesar; and, lastly, Cicero. I have, indeed, still a little of Cicero left; but I shall finish him in a few days (I, 389).

Crossing from Ireland to England in 1849, he passed the time by reciting Paradise Lost from memory. "I never really enjoyed it so much," he wrote later. "In the dialogue at the end of the fourth book, Satan and Gabriel became to me quite like two of Shakespeare's men" (II, 228). He could hardly look about himself, it seems, without recalling a pertinent piece of literature or history. "My birthday," he notes in a typical passage in 1838 at Lyons. "Thirty-eight years old. Thought of Job, Swift, and Anthony. Dressed, and went down to the steamer. I was delighted by my first sight of the blue, rushing, healthful-looking Rhone. I thought, as I wandered along the quay, of the singular love and veneration which rivers excite in those

who live on their banks; of the feeling of the Hindoos about the Ganges; of the Hebrews about the Jordan; of the Egyptians about the Nile; of the Romans, Cuique fuit rerum promissa potentia Tibrin; of the Germans about the Rhine" (II, 23-4).

Trevelyan's selections from his uncle's letters and journals suggest a major reason that Macaulay enjoyed his own company so well: he knew himself thoroughly and was sustained throughout his life by buoyant self-assurance. At the completion of the first two volumes of his History, he was pleased with his achievement and did not hesitate to compliment himself. "I am glad to find how well my book continues to sell," he wrote in his journal in January 1849. ". . . I remember no success so complete; and I remember all Byron's poems and all Scott's novels" (II, 217). The same frank satisfaction with his accomplishments appears in his journal six years later, on the eve of the publication of the next volume. "On the whole, I think that it must do," he writes in an entry that Trevelyan characteristically gives without comment. "The only competition which, as far as I perceive, it has to dread, is that of the two former volumes" (II, 323). But Trevelyan makes it clear that Macaulay knew his limitations as well. Urged by Macvey Napier in 1838 to review Lockhart's Scott for the Edinburgh Review, he was quick to decline. "There are extensive classes of subjects which I

think myself able to treat as few people can treat them," he wrote to his editor, ". . . but I have never written a page of criticism on poetry, or the fine arts, which I would not burn if I had the power. . . . There are hundreds who will criticise [Scott's works] far better. Trust to my knowledge of myself" (II, 14-15).

No matter what the subject, in fact, Macaulay appears in Trevelyan's biography to consider it with similar balance and common sense. It was a practical view of his financial status, for example, rather than any dream of political power or material gain, that prompted him to accept a post on the Governor-General's Council in India when it was offered. "Every day I live I become less and less desirous of great wealth," he wrote to Lord Lansdowne in 1833 after having been nominated for the position. "But every day makes me more sensible of the importance of a competence" (I, 306). The reviews of the first volumes of his History, whether good or bad, could not alter his own balanced view of his achievement. "Part of the censure I admit to be just, but not all," he noted in February 1849 after reading the two most recent ones. "Much of the praise I know to be undeserved" (II, 218). It seems to have been a combination of faith in his own abilities and this special power to view every issue with detachment grounded in common sense that helped Macaulay remain cheerfully optimistic, even in adversity. When he

was attacked by the Times as Secretary at War in 1839, he wrote calmly to Napier: "What does it signify whether they abuse me or not? There is nothing at all discouraging in their violence. It is so far from being a means or a proof of strength, that it is both a cause and a symptom of weakness" (II, 67). Turned out of office at the fall of the government two years later, he delighted in his new leisure. Defeated in the Parliamentary election of 1847, after a particularly vicious campaign had been waged against him, he wrote to his sister that he was "as cheerful as ever I was in my life" (II, 166).

No wonder that the Westminster Review found the subtlety of the biographer's role in this work worthy of special comment. For all the while that Macaulay stands before us, revealing his most intimate thoughts in his letters and journals, Trevelyan remains out of sight, quietly making the selections from these materials that determine the reader's conception of his uncle's character and personality--a conception constantly reinforced and confirmed by extracts that recall similar passages scattered earlier throughout the work. Because Trevelyan rarely steps between his subject and his reader, the apparent consistency of Macaulay's personality becomes a powerful unifying factor in the biography. The complementary selections from the documents of his life gradually fuse to create in each reader's mind a strikingly unified image

of the man that is perceived in every chapter of the work. In many ways it is Lockhart's technique without Lockhart. Freed of the omnipresent biographer, the reader seems to be able to encounter Macaulay directly and to conclude for himself what kind of man this was, but the evidence has been so arranged that only one set of conclusions is actually possible.

At the same time, Trevelyan's biography is more than a psychological portrait created from the mass of private papers Macaulay left behind. Though Trevelyan served notice early in the work that his volumes would "only touch politics in order to show to what extent Macaulay was a politician, and for how long" (I, 148), he realized that any discussion of his uncle that lacked some treatment of his brilliant public life would be incomplete. The main outlines of Macaulay's career, therefore, are clear enough here; excerpts from his Parliamentary addresses ring through the book; and Trevelyan's selection of letters serves well to indicate the range of Macaulay's political interests and associates. But still the discussion of his public life remains far from complete. What Trevelyan presents instead is a strictly limited picture of Macaulay as legislator and administrator in which only a few carefully selected incidents stand out sharply. For Trevelyan, it becomes obvious, they are noteworthy not simply as important elements in an outstanding career, but as reflections of attitudes and values that were thoroughly

typical of his uncle. Even the public incidents of Macaulay's life, then, are made to serve Trevelyan's primary purpose of illustrating the "private history and the personal qualities" of the man.

The entire discussion of the most dramatic incident in Macaulay's early career, for example, his administration in India, is curiously vague, despite the fact that Trevelyan, whose own father served in India in a number of capacities, knew well the importance of Macaulay's official duties there. "The narrative of that work may well be the despair of Macaulay's biographer," he writes after describing his uncle's landing in India. "It would be inexcusable to slur over what in many important respects was the most honorable chapter in his life; while, on the other hand, the task of interesting Englishmen in the details of Indian administration is an undertaking which has baffled every pen except his own" (I, 344). Some readers, like Karl E. Gwiasda, have concluded that Trevelyan avoided a detailed analysis of his uncle's administrative duties in the interest of preserving the balance of his narrative. "The subject," he notes, ". . . is complex. Had the biographer devoted to it all the attention which it deserved, he would probably have lost all sight of his hero."⁹ Gwiasda is perhaps right; but more important, I think, is the fact that presenting the India years in the vaguest and most general terms enabled Trevelyan to draw

attention to a few major incidents of Macaulay's administration that best reveal his character. Despite Trevelyan's avowed reluctance to deal at length with his uncle's official duties, he succeeds, then, in giving them special prominence in this chapter. Indeed, only after he has dealt with them does he go on to mention Macaulay's surroundings and daily routine and to offer some selections from his correspondence.

As Trevelyan presents them, each of the key incidents in Macaulay's Indian administration simultaneously illuminates a number of aspects of his character. Macaulay's relations with the Calcutta newspapers, for example, reflect both his deep belief in freedom of the press and his ability to resist even the strongest personal attacks when his convictions were at stake. For ironically, during the two years that Macaulay argued against the licensing of Indian newspapers, he was being violently denounced by the same press whose defense he had undertaken. On their mildest days the newspapers called him a "cheat, swindler, and charlatan," but Macaulay's "cheery and robust common sense," Trevelyan tells us, "carried him safe and sound through an ordeal which has broken down sterner natures than his, and embittered as stainless lives" (I, 346). Though he was often forced to hide the papers from his sister because of the vileness of their attacks, Macaulay remained firmly opposed to any form of censorship. With his characteristic

ability to reduce a complex issue to its simplest terms, he wrote in his Minute on the Press Act, from which Trevelyan quotes: "The question before us is not whether the Press shall be free, but whether, being free, it shall be called free. . . . We are [now] exposed to all the dangers . . . of a free Press, and at the same time we contrive to incur all the opprobrium of a censorship" (I, 345). Even after eighteen months of abuse he was happy to argue the same position again before the Court of Directors.

Macaulay had fallen under attack for his support of the so-called Black Act, which Trevelyan introduces next to explain the hostility of the English press in India, but more importantly to illustrate Macaulay's instinctive sense of fairness and his respect for the Indian people. Indeed, in Trevelyan's presentation of his uncle's disdain for what he carefully calls the Englishmen's "so-called privilege of bringing civil appeals before the Supreme Court at Calcutta" (I, 348), Macaulay appears to stand alone in his faith in the courts that England had established for the administration of justice among the Indian people. Repelled by the double standard of justice he perceived on the part of his countrymen, Macaulay expressed his feelings on the issue with characteristic directness. "If [the Sudder Court] is fit to administer justice to the great body of the people," he writes in one of the official papers

from which Trevelyan quotes, "why should we exempt a mere handful of settlers from its jurisdiction?" (I, 349). Despite the ignominy and thinly veiled threats that Macaulay was subjected to at a public meeting called by his opponents, he stood firm. "We were enemies of freedom," Trevelyan tells us he wrote later, "because we would not suffer a small white aristocracy to domineer over millions. How utterly at variance these principles are with reason, with justice, with the honor of the British Government, and with the dearest interests of the Indian people, it is unnecessary for me to point out" (I, 352-53). With such documents at his disposal, it is equally unnecessary for the biographer to call attention to Macaulay's patriotism, sense of justice, and genuine concern for India.

Despite his apparent respect for India and its people, Macaulay loved his own culture and was eager to further its introduction in the East. In Trevelyan's discussion of the famous Minute on Education, this point above all stands out. Arriving in India at "the very turning point of her intellectual progress" (I, 353), he writes in a simplified account of the events,¹⁰ Macaulay became arbiter of a dispute in the Committee on Public Instruction over the proper language to be used in education and defended English with a vehemence and authority that, as Trevelyan puts it, "set the question at rest once and forever" (I, 355).¹¹ English, Macaulay wrote, including in a few

sweeping sentences a consideration of all the world's languages, "stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the West. It abounds with works of imagination not inferior to the noblest which Greece has bequeathed to us; with models of every species of eloquence. . . . Whoever knows that language has ready access to all the vast intellectual wealth which all the wisest nations of the earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations. It may safely be said that the literature now extant in that language is of far greater value than all the literature which three hundred years ago was extant in all the languages of the world together" (I, 353-54). Significantly, Trevelyan does not quote Macaulay's invidious and exaggerated comparisons in the same Minute between English and the Indian vernacular languages--his observations, for example, that "a single shelf of a good European library [is] worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" and that "all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England."¹² "Macaulay's style of behavior and writing," observes one modern historian, "was apparently so obnoxious that even his warmest admirers today must surely wince from embarrassment by his complete lack of tact or sensitivity for the feelings of the very people whom he wished

to reach."¹³ In the Life, though, Trevelyan's extracts from the Minute suggest only the profundity of Macaulay's love for Western culture and the English language in particular--a love implicit elsewhere in the book in the frequently quoted records of his incessant reading.

Apart from Trevelyan's discussion of Macaulay's labors on a new Penal Code, which in its wealth of literary allusion also reflects the importance of literature in his life, the biographer has little else to say about his uncle's administrative work in India. But far from slurring over this episode in Macaulay's life, Trevelyan has made it serve the end of further revealing Macaulay the man to the reader. Because they so well illustrate his personality, it is these few incidents in his official work that are made to command our attention here.

It is worth noting briefly that the incidents Trevelyan selects for discussion from his uncle's political career in England also serve multiple purposes in this biography. Of course they offer some indication of the range of causes in which Macaulay was interested, but more important, clearly, are the aspects of his character that they reveal. From the beginning Macaulay's political career appears to have been marked by an independence of spirit that Trevelyan suggests was risky and courageous. Macaulay expected to win votes on the basis of his personal integrity alone, and he had little use for electors who

wanted him to solicit their votes personally--regardless of the power they held over his future. "This young politician," comments the biographer, "who depended on office for his bread, and on a seat in the House of Commons for office, adopted from the first an attitude of high and almost peremptory independence which would have sat well on a prime minister in his grand climacteric" (I, 249). Standing for Leeds in 1832 Macaulay expressed his opinions on the electoral process in a letter to the secretary of the Leeds Political Union that Trevelyan prints with the special observation that it is "strongly marked in every line with the personal qualities of the writer" (I, 249). With the strength of conviction that has been seen to be typical of him, Macaulay condemns the practice of canvassing for votes as "the height of absurdity." "To request an honest man to vote according to his conscience is superfluous," he writes. "To request him to vote against his conscience is an insult. . . . My conduct is before the electors of Leeds. My opinions shall on all occasions be stated to them with perfect frankness. If they approve that conduct, if they concur in those opinions, they ought, not for my sake, but for their own, to choose me as their member" (I, 250). In one of his few dramatic passages, Trevelyan describes Macaulay's violent reaction at a subsequent public meeting when the cry was heard, "An elector wishes to know the religious creed of Mr. Marshall

and Mr. Macaulay":

The last-named gentleman was on his legs in a moment. "Let that man stand up!" he cried. "Let him stand on a form, where I can see him!" The offender, who proved to be a Methodist preacher, was hoisted on to a bench by his indignant neighbors; nerving himself even in that terrible moment by a lingering hope that he might yet be able to hold his own. But the unhappy man had not a chance against Macaulay, who harangued him as if he were the living embodiment of religious intolerance and illegitimate curiosity. "I have heard with the greatest shame and sorrow the question which has been proposed to me; and with peculiar pain do I learn that this question was proposed by a minister of religion. I do most deeply regret that any person should think it necessary to make a meeting like this an arena for theological discussion. I will not be a party to turning this assembly to such a purpose. My answer is short, and in one word. Gentlemen, I am a Christian." At this declaration the delighted audience began to cheer; but Macaulay would have none of their applause. "This is no subject," he said, "for acclamation. I will say no more. No man shall speak of me as the person who, when this disgraceful inquisition was entered upon in an assembly of Englishmen, brought forward the most sacred subjects to be canvassed here, and be turned into a matter for hissing or for cheering. If on any future occasion it should happen that Mr. Carlile should favor any large meeting with his infidel attacks upon the Gospel, he shall not have it to say that I set the example. Gentlemen, I have done; I tell you, I will say no more; and if the person who has thought fit to ask this question has the feelings worthy of a teacher of religion, he will not, I think, rejoice that he has called me forth" (I, 253-54).

The episode is not intended to illustrate Macaulay's thoughts on religion, a subject of only very minor importance in the biography. Instead, it presents in the context of his public life Macaulay's absolute confidence

in the rightness of his opinions and serves, therefore, as additional confirmation of the private self-assurance that repeatedly surfaces in Trevelyan's extracts from his letters and journals.

Trevelyan's careful selection of such details from Macaulay's public life is guided, then, by more than concern for balance and proportion. But that concern is certainly important here and throughout the biography, and it is nowhere more evident than in Trevelyan's manipulation of chronology. To avoid focussing too closely on any single period of Macaulay's life and thereby distorting the reader's total image of his uncle, Trevelyan constantly shifts the temporal perspective of his narrative, so that the reader is able to view Macaulay simultaneously in various stages of his life. By doing so, Trevelyan ensures the balance of the biography while he affirms the consistency of Macaulay's personality throughout his life.

In the opening chapters, for example, which deal with Macaulay's youth, schooling, and matriculation at Trinity College, Trevelyan uses this technique frequently to suggest the inevitable development of the young Tom Macaulay into the statesman and scholar we will encounter later. The family's decision to send Tom to a private rather than a public school achieves significance because Trevelyan looks into the boy's future to evaluate the benefits he gained. The matter, he writes,

was of more importance than they could at the time foresee. If their son had gone to a public school, it is more than probable that he would have turned out a different man and have done different work. So sensitive and home-loving a boy might for a while have been too depressed to enter fully into the ways of the place; but, as he gained confidence, he could not have withstood the irresistible attractions which the life of a great school exercises over a vivid, eager nature, and he would have sacrificed to passing pleasures and emulations a part, at any rate, of those years which, in order to be what he was, it was necessary that he should spend wholly among his books. Westminster or Harrow might have sharpened his faculties for dealing with affairs and with men, but the world at large would have lost more than he could by any possibility have gained. If Macaulay had received the usual education of a young Englishman, he might in all probability have kept his seat for Edinburgh, but he could hardly have written the essay on Von Ranke, or the description of England in the third chapter of the "History" (I, 48-49).

In the figure of young Tom, the reader is thus urged to see the mature Macaulay, whose presence even this early in the biography contributes to the unity of the narrative. The youthful and adult Macaulays merge again when Trevelyan considers his uncle's astonishing memory. As a schoolboy at Mr. Preston's academy at Aspenden, he says, Macaulay read voraciously, storing away masses of information.

The secret of his immense acquirements lay in two invaluable gifts of nature: an unerring memory, and the capacity for taking in at a glance the contents of a printed page. During the first part of his life he remembered whatever caught his fancy, without going through the process of consciously getting it by heart.

As a child, during one of the numerous seasons when the social duties devolved upon Mr. Macaulay, he accompanied his father on an afternoon call, and found on a table the "Lay of the Last Minstrel," which he had never before met with. He kept himself quiet with his prize while the elders were talking, and on his return home sat down upon his mother's bed, and repeated to her as many cantos as she had the patience or the strength to listen to. At one period of his life he was known to say that, if by some miracle of vandalism all copies of "Paradise Lost" and "The Pilgrim's Progress" were destroyed off the face of the earth, he would undertake to reproduce them both from recollection whenever a revival of learning came. In 1813, while waiting in a Cambridge coffee-room for a post-chaise which was to take him to his school, he picked up a county newspaper containing two such specimens of provincial poetical talent as in those days might be read in the corner of any weekly journal. One piece was headed "Reflections of an Exile," while the other was a trumpery parody on the Welsh ballad "Ar hyd y nos," referring to some local anecdote of an hostler whose nose had been bitten off by a filly. He looked them once through, and never gave them a thought for forty years, at the end of which time he repeated them both without missing, or, as far as he knew, changing, a single word (I, 60-61).

Starting with a suggestion of the wealth of information that Macaulay gathered throughout his life, Trevelyan moves back to an incident in his early life, ahead to his remarks on Milton and Bunyan, back again to an event in 1813, and forward to the last years of Macaulay's life for the rest of the anecdote. Under Trevelyan's influence, the young schoolboy and the aged author are united into the same figure.

To appreciate the complex uses to which Trevelyan can put this technique, we must examine at least one passage at

length. At the start of his chapter on Macaulay's university years, Trevelyan writes:

After no long while he removed within the walls of Trinity, and resided first in the centre rooms of Bishop's Hostel, and subsequently in the Old Court between the Gate and the Chapel. The door which once bore his name is on the ground-floor, to the left hand as you face the staircase. In more recent years under-graduates who are accustomed to be out after lawful hours have claimed a right of way through the window which looks toward the town; to the great annoyance of any occupant who is too good-natured to refuse the accommodation to others, and too steady to need it himself. This power of surreptitious entry had not been discovered in Macaulay's days; and indeed he would have cared very little for the privilege of spending his time outside walls which contained within them as many books as even he could read, and more friends than even he could talk to. Wanting nothing beyond what his college had to give, he reveled in the possession of leisure and liberty, in the almost complete command of his own time, in the power of passing at choice from the most perfect solitude to the most agreeable company. He keenly appreciated a society which cherishes all that is genuine, and is only too outspoken in its abhorrence of pretension and display: a society in which a man lives with those whom he likes and with those only; choosing his comrades for their own sake, and so indifferent to the external distinctions of wealth and position that no one who has entered fully into the spirit of college life can ever unlearn its priceless lesson of manliness and simplicity.

Of all his places of sojourn during his joyous and shining pilgrimage through the world, Trinity, and Trinity alone, had any share with his home in Macaulay's affection and loyalty. To the last he regarded it as an ancient Greek or a mediaeval Italian felt toward his native city. As long as he had place and standing there, he never left it willingly or returned to it without delight. The only step in his course about the wisdom of which he sometimes expressed misgiving was his preference of a London to a Cambridge life. The only dignity that in his

later days he was known to covet was an honorary fellowship which would have allowed him again to look through his window upon the college grass-plots, and to sleep within sound of the splashing of the fountain; again to breakfast on commons, and dine beneath the portraits of Newton and Bacon on the dais of the hall; again to ramble by moonlight round Neville's cloister discoursing the picturesque but somewhat exoteric philosophy which it pleased him to call by the name of metaphysics. From the door of his rooms, along the wall of the chapel, there runs a flagged pathway which affords an acceptable relief from the rugged pebbles that surround it. Here, as a bachelor of arts, he would walk, book in hand, morning after morning, throughout the long vacation, reading with the same eagerness and the same rapidity whether the volume was the most abstruse of treatises, the loftiest of poems, or the flimsiest of novels. That was the spot where in his failing years he specially loved to renew the feelings of the past, and some there are who can never revisit it without the fancy that there, if anywhere, his dear shade must linger (I, 79-80).

The first paragraph illustrates Trevelyan's ability to accomplish a number of artistic objectives at once. It is, of course, primarily a description of Macaulay's surroundings and routine at Cambridge, but in Trevelyan's hands it also serves the important purpose of reducing the distance between Macaulay and the reader. Trevelyan brings us closer to his uncle first of all by interjecting the second person pronoun in the middle of his description in order to place us on the scene and familiarize us with the modern custom surrounding the ground-floor window in the room that belonged to his uncle. He then reduces our distance still further by shifting smoothly from the present to the past, a time when the "power of surreptitious

entry had not been discovered" and Macaulay actually lived in the room we behold. The change in the time frame does more than draw the reader to Macaulay, too, for the detail on which it hinges, the present use of the window, also serves to characterize the past occupant of the room. As a young man who wanted "nothing beyond what his college had to give," Macaulay, his nephew points out, could not have appreciated the advantages of a room that offered unrestricted access to the world outside.

In the second paragraph the shift in time is still more complicated, as Trevelyan moves from Macaulay's love for Trinity College as a student to the affection he felt for the place "to the last." Here it is an older Macaulay whom we encounter, recalling with delight the daily routine he enjoyed as a Cambridge undergraduate. Then suddenly we are on the scene again, viewing the flagstone path along the chapel that Macaulay walked as a student, book in hand. That spot called up the most pleasant recollections for him "in his failing years," Trevelyan tells us in the last sentence, and the lingering presence of his "dear shade" is still perceptible there. In these final brilliant sentences, then, Trevelyan uses the flagstone walk by the chapel to fuse for the reader images of Macaulay as student, mature man, and dead hero.

It would be tedious to multiply examples of Trevelyan's use of this technique. Because his narrative is rarely

time-bound, he is able to present a variety of images of his uncle simultaneously throughout the biography by reminding us repeatedly of Macaulay's past and his future. Just as important to the balance of Trevelyan's narrative as such carefully arranged images of its subject is his deft handling of a number of delicate areas of Macaulay's private life. Trevelyan's comment on these subjects, as we would expect, is minimal; for he lacked the extended adult association with his uncle that would give authority to his own observations on Macaulay's private feelings and conduct. Instead, through careful selection from the appropriate documents, Trevelyan leads the reader to inescapable conclusions about his uncle's life without actually articulating them.

The presentation of Macaulay's relationship with his father illustrates his technique well. Doubtless unwilling to criticize his mother's father for the coldness he often showed toward his son, Trevelyan relies instead on extracts from their correspondence over an entire decade to convey the strain between them. At the outset, he calls attention to his own apparent conclusions about the mutual respect that existed between Zachary Macaulay and his son by pointing out that the frequency with which political topics surface in the boy's letters proves "how freely, and on what an equal footing, the parent and child already conversed on questions of public interest" (I, 53). The

letters that follow this remark, though, suggest if anything a certain uneasiness in the relationship between Tom Macaulay and his father. On 14 August 1813, in the middle of a period of desperate homesickness, he recalls his mother's suggestion that he might visit at home once before the term holidays. "There is nothing which I would not give for one instant's sight of home," he writes pathetically, suspecting already what his father's reaction will be. "I think I see you sitting by papa just after his dinner, reading my letter. . . . I think too that I see his expressive shake of the head at it. Oh, may I be mistaken" (I, 56). He was not; and Trevelyan knows that he need not quote his father's curt negative response for us to detect immediately a lack of sympathy between the two.¹⁴

That suggestion is reinforced by Trevelyan's ambiguous observation in the next paragraph that "Mr. Macaulay's deep anxiety for his son's welfare sometimes induced him to lend too ready an ear to busybodies who informed him of failings in the boy which would have been treated more lightly, and perhaps more wisely, by a less devoted father" (I, 56-7). Though Trevelyan manages to avoid taking sides by carefully balancing this sentence, it certainly suggests that Macaulay and his father were not entirely on an "equal footing" after all. The letter from Zachary Macaulay that follows confirms that impression, for it indicates his severe disappointment over hearing "through a friend" that Tom was given to "loudness and vehemence" in his

conversation. "I do long and pray most earnestly," he continues, "that the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit may be substituted for vehemence and self-confidence" (I, 57). Instead of loudly complaining about the people of Shelford, he suggests, Tom should consider reforming them by distributing Bibles and religious tracts. Trevelyan's comment on the letter is typically ambivalent. "A father's prayers are seldom fulfilled to the letter," he writes, apparently taking Zachary's part. But by shifting the time frame in the next sentence, he seems to side with Macaulay: "Many years were to elapse before the son ceased to talk loudly and with confidence, and the literature that he was destined to distribute through the world was of another order from that which Mr. Macaulay here suggests" (I, 58).

Trevelyan's excerpts from the letters exchanged between Tom Macaulay and his father once the boy had taken up residence at Cambridge are similar. On the one hand, they reflect even more clearly the intense interest that both took in the political events of the day and recall once more Trevelyan's opening comment regarding their "equal footing" in this area. At the same time, the letters Trevelyan has chosen here clearly point to Zachary Macaulay's profound misunderstanding of his son and to the boy's disappointment and indignation over his father's lack of trust in him. Shortly after the Peterloo Massacre, for example, he writes

in surprise about the "extraordinary inferences" that his father had made from his last letter. "I can only assure you most solemnly that I am not initiated into any democratical societies here, and that I know no people who make politics a common or frequent topic of conversation." With pointed indignation, he adds, "I can scarcely be censured, I think, for imparting [my political opinions] to you--which, however, I should scarcely have thought of doing (so much is my mind occupied with other concerns), had not your letter invited me to state my sentiments on the Manchester business" (I, 96-7). In a letter that follows shortly afterward we find the same tone of confusion and defensiveness. On 9 August 1821, two days after the death of Queen Caroline, he had written, "His Majesty, I presume, must return [from Ireland]. . . . He cannot in decency spend in pageantry and revels the interval between the death and burial of his wife."¹⁵ What response this apparently casual remark drew from his father can be imagined from the next letter that Trevelyan quotes. "I pretend to no great insight into party politics," Macaulay writes in apparent amazement at his father's reaction; "but the question whether it is proper for any man to mingle in festivities while his wife's body lies unburied is one, I confess, which I thought myself competent to decide" (I, 105).

Trevelyan clearly perceived the elder Macaulay's lack of trust in his son, and despite his own ostensible impartiality and strict reserve, the passages he presents from their correspondence are intended to make the reader aware of it as well. But why, we might ask, does he take such pains to lead the reader to a conclusion that he is unwilling to assert directly? The answer is that the issue of Tom Macaulay's relationship with his father is actually an integral part of the first volume of the biography. It immediately engages the reader's sympathy for Macaulay, who is seen to have grown up with little parental encouragement or understanding. In this light, the perfect self-knowledge and complete contentedness that will later emerge as typical of the mature Macaulay must strike us as even more remarkable. Most important to Trevelyan, though, is the fact that Macaulay's difficulties with his father never diminished the boy's love or respect for him. Indeed, Macaulay typically ends his indignant rebuttals of his father's unreasonable attacks with an apology for the uneasiness that his own letters have apparently brought to the people he loves most. And later in the biography Trevelyan is able to offer even more convincing proof of the sincerity of the young man's love. When the possibility of his appointment to the Indian administration arises, Macaulay thinks first not of the inconveniences of the post, but of the means it will give

him to help his family out of the difficulties into which his father's financial problems had sunk them. "The prospects of our family," he writes to his sister in defense of his decision to accept the position, "are, if possible, darker than ever" (I, 290). No reader of the biography can encounter that sentence without recalling the uneasy relationship between Macaulay and his family that Trevelyan has subtly but clearly presented.

Trevelyan is equally reserved when he approaches Macaulay's curious relations with his sisters, for whom he felt an unusually intense attachment. For Trevelyan, Macaulay's devotion to Margaret and Hannah was an important part of his private life and therefore an appropriate and necessary subject for inclusion in the Life. Even Trevelyan, however, finds it necessary to establish a context for the passages of peculiar ardor that he publishes from his uncle's letters.

He introduces the subject in a paragraph that points out first of all the necessity of including it in such a biography as the one he is writing. "There are many who will be surprised at finding in Macaulay's letters," he writes, "both now and hereafter, indications of certain traits in his disposition with which the world, knowing him only through his political actions and published works, may perhaps be slow to credit him; but which, taking his life as a whole, were predominant in their power to affect

his happiness and give matter for his thoughts" (I, 256-57). The tender emotions that characterized his private life, the biographer explains, were simply the obverse of the public virility for which he was known. Macaulay's regard for his sisters was not only an indication of the full development of his personality, though, but also another product, as Trevelyan presents it, of his naturally generous spirit. Having observed that "where [Macaulay] loved, he loved more entirely, and more exclusively, than was well for himself," he goes on to comment mildly, "It was improvident in him to concentrate such intensity of feeling upon relations who, however deeply they were attached to him, could not always be in a position to requite him with the whole of their time and the whole of their heart" (I, 257). Instead of apologizing for Macaulay's odd behavior, then, Trevelyan presents it as a further indication of his natural goodness, innocuously couched in terms of investment and return.

Trevelyan's technique has led A. O. J. Cockshut to doubt that he recognized the actual depth of his uncle's emotions.¹⁶ But although Trevelyan does not comment on the subject again, a comparison of the complete texts of Macaulay's letters to his sisters with the selections quoted here reveals that his apparent candor has carefully defined limits. And it once again illustrates, in addition, the skillful interplay of the biographer's narrative and his

subject's own writings that we have seen to be so important to this work's unity and effect. From Macaulay's letter on the "attachment between brothers and sisters" that follows his explanatory paragraph, Trevelyan quotes only the passages that confirm the explanation he has just given. Admitting that brothers and sisters must ultimately part, Macaulay here surrenders his claim to Margaret with a sentence that echoes the suggestions of his improvidence and generosity that Trevelyan made just above. "To repine against the nature of things," he writes, "and against the great fundamental law of all society, because, in consequence of my own want of foresight, it happens to bear heavily upon me, would be the basest and most absurd selfishness" (I, 258). A sampling of the passages Trevelyan excised, however, suggests that more than thematic unity directed his editing:

Very few, even of those who are called good brothers, do suffer [the attachment between brothers and sisters] to become indispensable. But to me it has been in the place of a first love My affection for my sisters has prevented me from forming any serious attachment. But for them I should be quite alone in the world. I have nothing else to love. . . .

When we meet [after Margaret's wedding] I shall, I hope, be reconciled to what is inevitable. But I cannot think, without a flood of tears, of that meeting. Once so much to each other-- and henceforth to be so little. . . .

Farewell, dearest. . . . May he to whom you are about to entrust the care of your happiness love you as much, as you deserve,--as much as I have loved you.¹⁷

The Macaulay we encounter here is certainly less stoical, if not less generous, than the man who appears at this point in Trevelyan's biography. Trevelyan has not concealed the essence of his uncle's relationship with his sisters, but neither has he presented it as fully as he might have done. What his excisions suggest is that he fully understood the intensity of Macaulay's devotion to his sisters but perceived as well the exact extent to which it could be introduced without upsetting the balance of the image of Macaulay that the biography presented.

A year after Margaret's marriage, Macaulay wrote to Hannah, begging her to accompany him to India. The letter, says Trevelyan, is written "in terms too clear to require comment," and he reprints it substantially intact. Again, though, his omissions from the text, underlined in this extract, indicate the balance he sought between truthfulness and full disclosure:

Whether the period of my exile shall be one of misery, or of comfort, and, after the first shock, even of happiness, depends on you, my dear, dear Nancy. I can scarcely see the words which I am writing through the tears that force themselves into my eyes. Will you, my own darling, if, as I expect, this offer shall be made to me, will you go with me? Will you entrust to me for a few years the care of your happiness? I call God to witness that it is as dear to me as my own--that I love the very ground that you tread on. . . .¹⁸

In his letter to Margaret shortly before her wedding, Macaulay alluded to Hannah's inevitable marriage in a passage partially excised by Trevelyan. "There remains an event for which, when it arrives, I shall, I hope, be prepared. I have another sister, no less dear to me than my Margaret, from whom I may be separated in the same way."¹⁹ Two years later, when the moment he dreaded had come, Macaulay wrote from India to inform Margaret of Hannah's engagement to Trevelyan's father.²⁰ Because of Trevelyan's careful editing, his version of the letter once again emphasizes the dual themes of improvidence and generosity that are associated with this subject earlier in the biography. After acknowledging that he had seen the affection between Hannah and her fiance growing but asserting that "no thought of . . . base selfishness" had occurred to him, Macaulay continues in Trevelyan's text:

What I have myself felt, it is unnecessary to say. My parting from you almost broke my heart. But when I parted from you I had Nancy; I had all my other relations; I had my friends; I had my country. Now I have nothing except the resources of my own mind, and the consciousness of having acted not ungenerously. But I do not repine. Whatever I suffer I have brought on myself. I have neglected the plainest lessons of reason and experience. I have staked my happiness without calculating the chances of the dice. I have hewn out broken cisterns; I have leaned on a reed; I have built on the sand; and I have fared accordingly. I must bear my punishment as I can; and, above all, I must take care that the punishment does not extend beyond myself (I, 341-42).

In the original letter, however, between the fourth and fifth sentences given here, comes a long passage the excision of which again clearly shows the kind of balance Trevelyan seeks to achieve in his presentation of this aspect of his uncle's life. "This it is to make war on nature," Macaulay begins. "This it is to form a scheme of happiness inconsistent with the general rules which govern the world." In a striking departure from the tone of quiet resignation that characterizes Trevelyan's selections from the letter, this passage soon reaches a crescendo of grief and despair. After once more reflecting on his blindness ("I could not see that others might wish to marry girls whose society was so powerfully attaching as to keep me from marrying"), Macaulay looks ahead bleakly to a life devoid of meaning and purpose. "At thirty four I am alone in the world. I have lost everything--and I have only myself to blame. . . . She was always most dear to me. Since you left me she was everything to me. I loved her--I adored her. . . . She was everything to me: and I am henceforth to be nothing to her--the first place in her affections is gone."²¹

It is easy to overlook the biographer's role in creating the impression of Macaulay's relationship with his sisters that develops so clearly in Trevelyan's Life. For after suggesting a thematic context for this subject, Trevelyan disappears from view and instead lets Macaulay's carefully edited letters develop the themes he has

established. The authority of his presentation of Macaulay here is a product not of the biographer's own credibility, then, but rather of the apparent consistency of his materials. The treatment of Macaulay's affection for his sisters is incomplete, but it has a coherence that compels our assent.

Besides Macaulay's own papers, Trevelyan, like Lockhart, had at his disposal a wealth of eyewitness accounts of his subject. Just as he draws on passages from his uncle's letters and journals to recall and affirm suggestions made elsewhere in the text, Trevelyan uses extracts from these materials to corroborate other evidence presented in the biography. Again, what his use of such materials enables him to do is to generate an authority in the biography, independent of himself as biographer, that develops from the apparent organic unity of its materials. When the subject is Macaulay's appearance while speaking in Parliament, for example, Trevelyan quotes congruent descriptions of his uncle by those who observed him most regularly--reporters from three London newspapers (II, 126-27). Similarly, the extracts from letters praising the first volumes of Macaulay's History--each focussing on a different aspect of his accomplishment--form what Trevelyan himself calls "a chorus of eulogy" (II, 210). But perhaps the best example of the skillful integration of such material occurs early in the biography, when Trevelyan is confronted with

the problem of describing a startlingly precocious child in a way that will engage not only the reader's amazement, but his interest and sympathy as well. We have already seen that Trevelyan accomplishes this goal partly through repeated interruptions in the chronology of the biography that remind the reader of the equally amazing adult who is to develop from this child. But to give the biography even greater breadth, Trevelyan shares the narration of his uncle's early years with others who knew him well at the time. After presenting the child as a boy who read incessantly from the age of three and had the social grace at the age of four to comment, when his hostess spilled hot coffee on him, "Thank you, madam, the agony is abated" (I, 40), Trevelyan prints a letter written by his mother in 1808 that offers further examples of his accomplishments and introduces a number of new ideas as well. Mrs. Macaulay, acting now as narrator, reports on the boy's attempt at a compendium of universal history, his paper persuading the people of Travancore to convert to Christianity, and his attempted imitation of Scott's poetry, abandoned after three cantos in favor of a heroic poem, "Olaus the Great." More important, though, than these additional examples of young Tom Macaulay's accomplishments is the engaging sense of his mother's wonder and amusement over his abilities. "You will believe that to him," she writes with evident delight, "we never appear to regard anything he does as

anything more than a school-boy's amusement" (I, 42). This point, in turn, serves as a link with the next of Trevelyan's narrators, "one who knew him well from the very first," introduced a few pages later. Though he himself admits to having been astonished at the boy's verbal fluency, he writes from a later perspective that it "was scarcely ever that the consciousness was expressed by either of his parents of the superiority of their son over other children"-- and he adds a remark whose significance, as we have seen, will become clear later in the biography: "Indeed, with his father I never remember any such expression" (I, 44-45). Selections from Hannah More's letters to the boy, quoted next, give us still another perspective on his accomplishments while they recall once more the image of the adult author. "Though you are a little boy now," she writes when he is six, "you will one day, if it please God, be a man; but long before you are a man I hope you will be a scholar. I therefore wish you to purchase such books as will be useful and agreeable to you then, and that you employ this very small sum in laying a little tiny corner-stone for your future library" (I, 46).

The adult Macaulay's cousins and sisters are joined later in the biography by Lord Jeffrey, Lord Carlisle, Lord Cockburn, Crabb Robinson, Fitzjames Stephen, Sir James Mackintosh, and many others, all of whom appear in the Life to offer their own impressions of the man they each

knew differently. Of course, the reports from Macaulay's associates that Trevelyan includes in his text do more than simply corroborate the biographer's presentation of his subject; throughout the two volumes, they give a somewhat exaggerated sense of Macaulay's popularity in London's political and literary circles, and they act as indirect but constant reminders of the wide range of his public activities. Thus it is to a great extent the scarcity of such testimonies in the closing chapters of the biography that most clearly suggests the radical change occurring in Macaulay's life as he begins to "enjoy the ease which he had so laboriously earned" (II, 332) in 1856. Restricted by his failing health from active participation in politics, he is further isolated from the circles of his earlier activity by his move to Holly Lodge, his retirement home in Kensington. Few voices break into Trevelyan's narration now, except to suggest Macaulay's physical deterioration. "I often think of . . . our merry time together," writes Hannah, recalling the celebration that followed Macaulay's elevation to the peerage in 1857; "the last unbroken circle; for change began the following year, and change has since been the order of my life" (II, 359). A year later, indeed, Lord Carlisle is upset, as Trevelyan reports, "to see and hear Macaulay much broken by cough" (II, 361).

It is Macaulay's own journals, with their record of his quiet retirement activities, that dominate the last full-length chapter of the biography, suggesting a solitude rarely interrupted by the old demands of public life. Reading, as always, occupies much of his time, but it is joined by a variety of new, humble tasks--organizing his library, answering the appeals of fellow authors in financial distress, planning the design of his garden. "I have turned gardener," he writes to his sister after only a few months in his new home; "not indeed working-gardener, but master-gardener. I have just been putting creepers round my windows, and forming beds of rhododendrons round my fountain. In three or four summers, if I live so long, I may expect to see the results of my care" (II, 336). Twice in 1858, when India is the subject under discussion in the House of Lords, he prepares a speech with a burst of energy and self-confidence that recalls his political enthusiasm as a young man, but no opportunity for his address arises. "Shaftesbury presented the petition with only a few words," he writes in disappointment after the second occasion. "Lord Ellenborough said only a few words in answer. To make a long set speech in such circumstances would have been absurd; so I went quietly home" (II, 365).

Though Trevelyan notes that his uncle's retirement home was "so pleasant . . . that its occupant did not care to seek for pleasure elsewhere" (II, 340), his presentation

of Macaulay's pastimes at Holly Lodge suggests a certain emptiness in his life. Looking through Macaulay's journal, Trevelyan observes without comment that he has made "an elaborate computation, which must have consumed a whole morning, in order to ascertain the collective annual value of the livings in the gift of the several [Cambridge] colleges" (II, 360). "He would pass one evening," says Trevelyan at another point, "in comparing the average duration of the lives of archbishops, prime ministers, and lord chancellors; and another in tracing the careers of the first half-dozen men in each successive mathematical tripos, in order to ascertain whether, in the race of the world, the senior wrangler generally contrived to keep ahead of his former competitors" (II, 381). As age weakens his body, Macaulay pauses more and more often to consider the soundness of his mind--perhaps with the figure of the aged Scott before him--and his brilliant memory serves him now only as a pathetic assurance that his intellect is still strong. "I have now," he notes in his journal, "the whole of our university Fasti by heart; all, I mean, that is worth remembering. An idle thing, but I wished to try whether my memory is as strong as it used to be, and I perceive no decay" (II, 379).

In these final pages, Trevelyan, again like Lockhart, brings before the reader images of a younger Macaulay that appeared earlier in the biography. Though Macaulay was too

weak for extensive walking on his visit to his nephew at Cambridge in 1858, his mind, Trevelyan observes, was "still as fresh as when, in 1820, he wore the blue gown of Trinity, and disputed with Charles Austin till four in the morning over the comparative merits of the Inductive and the a priori method in politics" (II, 361). At his uncle's inauguration as high steward of the Borough of Cambridge shortly afterward, Trevelyan reports, he gave an address that evoked "a touch of sadness in the minds of all present as they listened to the brief but expressive phrases in which he reminded them that the time had been when he might have commanded a hearing 'in larger and stormier assemblies,' but that any service which he could henceforth do for his country must be done in the quiet of his own library" (II, 362-63). And when his uncle's journal entries turn to reminiscence, Trevelyan includes them so that we, too, may reflect with Macaulay on his youth. "I took up Knight's Magazine the other day," he writes, "and, after an interval of perhaps thirty years, read a Roman novel which I wrote at Trinity. To be sure, I was a smart lad, but a sadly unripe scholar for such an undertaking" (II, 380). On another occasion he notes, "I read my own writings during some hours, and was not ill-pleased, on the whole. Yet, alas! how short life and how long art! I feel as if I had just begun to understand how to write; and the probability is that I have very nearly done writing" (II, 380).

No one would deny the importance of the contribution that Macaulay's own eloquence makes to Trevelyan's Life, but the careful reader will not permit it to mask the biographer's art. For it is Trevelyan's hand that not only blends the reminiscences of Macaulay's many friends into the narrative, but also consistently selects from among his uncle's private writings the telling phrase, the expressive passage. After reporting Macaulay's quiet death in his library, with the first number of the Cornhill Magazine open before him, Trevelyan brings his biography to a swift and simple close. There is no need to quote the tributes of his friends here, for their words have already helped to tell his life. And it is appropriate, besides, that the dominant voice in the closing pages of this biography should be Macaulay's own.

NOTES

1

G. Otto Trevelyan, The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1876), II, 188. Subsequent references to this edition will be included in the text.

2

George Macaulay Trevelyan, Sir George Otto Trevelyan: A Memoir (London: Longmans, 1932), p. 94.

3

See Trevelyan's comments in the Life, I, 19.

4

Karl Eric Gwiasda, "The Boswell Biographers: A Study of 'Life and Letters' Writing in the Victorian Period," Diss. Northwestern 1969, p. 207.

5

[James Anthony Froude], "Lord Macaulay," Fraser's Magazine, NS 13 (1876), 675.

6

[W. E. Gladstone], "Lord Macaulay," Quarterly Review, 142 (1876), 1-50; [Henry Reeve], "Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay," Edinburgh Review, 143 (1876), 544-81; "Lord Macaulay," Westminster Review, 106 (1876), 1-28.

7

See Richard D. Altick, Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America (New York: Knopf, 1969), pp. 198-99.

8

Thomas Pinney, Introduction to The Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974-), I, viii.

9

Gwiasda, p. 219.

10

The actual complexity of the issue and Macaulay's role in the controversy have been discussed at length by John Clive in Macaulay: The Shaping of the Historian (New York: Knopf, 1973), pp. 342 ff.

11

The recent appearance of yet another defense of Macaulay's position suggests how far from settled the controversy actually is. See Gerald and Natalie Robinson Sirkin, "The Battle of Indian Education: Macaulay's Opening Salvo Newly Discovered," Victorian Studies, 14 (1971), 407-28.

12

Minute of 2 February 1835, in Macaulay: Prose and Poetry, ed. G. M. Young (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 722.

13

David Kopf, British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), p. 247.

14

Zachary Macaulay responded: "I am sorry you should have set your heart on anything so unattainable as a visit to Clapham before the regular holidays, because not only is such an intermission of school labours disapproved by Mr. Preston, but it is opposed to all my own views of what is right and proper" (The Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay, I, 34n).

15

Ibid., I, 159.

16

A. O. J. Cockshut, Truth to Life: The Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century (London: Collins, 1974), p. 135.

17

The Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay, II, 203-4.

18

Ibid., II, 301; cf. Trevelyan's text in the Life, I, 291.

19

Ibid., II, 203.

20

Margaret had already died in England, but the news would not reach India until after Hannah's marriage.

21

The Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay, III, 104.

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