

### 1. Historical-Biographical

Although the historical-biographical approach has been evolving over many years, its basic tenets are perhaps most clearly articulated in the writings of the nineteenth-century French critic H. A. Taine, whose phrase *race, milieu, et moment*, elaborated in his *History of English Literature*, bespeaks a hereditary and environmental determinism. Put simply, this approach sees a literary work chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of its author's life and times or the life and times of the characters in the work.

At the risk of laboring the obvious, we will mention the historical implications of William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, which is, in addition to being a magnificent allegory, a scorching attack on the corruption in every aspect of fourteenth-century English life—social, political, and religious. So timely, in fact, were the poet's phrases that they became rallying cries in the Peasants' Revolt. John Milton's sonnet "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont" illustrates the topical quality that great literature may and often does possess. This poem commemorates the slaughter in 1655 of the Waldenses, members of a Protestant sect living in the valleys of northern Italy. A knowledge of this background clarifies at least one rather factual reference and two allusions in the poem. Several of Milton's other sonnets also reflect events in his life or times. Two such are "On His Blindness," best understood when one realizes that the poet became totally blind when he was forty-four, and "On His Deceased Wife," a tribute to his second wife, Katherine Woodcock. Milton was already blind when he married her, a fact that explains the line, "Her face was veiled." In fact, Milton affords us an excellent example of an author whose works reflect particular episodes in his life. *Samson Agonistes* and *The*

*Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* may be cited as two of the more obvious instances.

A historical novel is likely to be more meaningful when either its milieu or that of its author is understood. James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*, Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Charles Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*, and John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* are certainly better understood by readers familiar with, respectively, the French and Indian War (and the American frontier experience generally), Anglo-Norman Britain, the French Revolution, and the American Depression. And, of course, there is a very real sense in which these books are *about* these great historical matters, so that the author is interested in the characters only to the extent that they are molded by these events.

What has just been said applies even more to ideological or propagandist novels. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Frank Norris's *The Octopus*, and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* ring truer (or falsier as the case may be) to those who know about the antebellum South, railroad expansion in the late nineteenth century, and scandals in the American meat-packing industry in the early twentieth century. Sinclair Lewis's satires take on added bite and fun for those who have lived in or observed the cultural aridity of *Main Street*, who have been treated by shallow and materialistic physicians like some of those in *Arrowsmith*, who have sat through the sermons and watched the shenanigans of religious charlatans like Elmer Gantry, or who have dealt with and been in service clubs with all-too-typical American businessmen like Babbitt. Novels may lend themselves somewhat more readily than lyric poems to this particular interpretive approach; they usually treat a broader range of experience than poems do and thus are affected more by extrinsic factors.

It is a mistake, however, to think that poets do not concern themselves with social themes or that good poetry cannot be written about such themes. Actually, poets have from earliest times been the historians, the interpreters of contemporary culture, and the prophets of their people. Take, for example, a poet as mystical and esoteric as William Blake. Many of his best poems can be read meaningfully only in terms of Blake's England. His "London" is an outcry against the oppression of man

by society: he lashes out against child labor in his day and the church's indifference to it, against the government's indifference to the indigent soldier who has served his country faithfully, and against the horrible and unnatural consequences of a social code that represses sexuality. His "Preface" to *Milton* is at once a denunciation of the "dark Satanic Mills" of the Industrial Revolution and a joyous battle cry of determination to build "Jerusalem/In England's green and pleasant Land." It has been arranged as an anthem for church choirs, is widely used in a hymn setting, and was sung in London in the 1945 election by the victorious Labour party. The impact of the Sacco and Vanzetti case upon young poets of the 1920s or of the opposition to the war in Vietnam upon almost every important American poet in the 1960s resulted in numerous literary works on these subjects. Obviously, then, even some lyric poems are susceptible to historical-biographical analysis.

Political and religious verse satires like John Dryden's in the seventeenth century and personal satires like Alexander Pope's in the eighteenth century have as one of their primary purposes the ridiculing of contemporary situations and persons. Dryden propounds his own Anglican faith and debunks the faith of both Dissenters and Papists in *Religio Laici*. Later, when he had renounced Anglicanism and embraced Roman Catholicism, he again defended his position, and in *The Hind and the Panther* he attacked those who differed. His *Absalom and Achitophel* is a verse allegory using the biblical story of Absalom's rebellion against his father, King David, to satirize the Whig attempt to replace Charles II with his illegitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth. Pope's *Dunciad* is certainly a satire against all sorts of literary stupidity and inferiority, but it is also directed against particular literary people who had the bad fortune to offend Pope. All these works may be understood and appreciated without extensive historical or biographical background. Most readers, however, would probably agree with T. S. Eliot that "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone" (from "Tradition and the Individual Talent") and with Richard D. Altick that "almost every literary work is attended by a host of outside circumstances which, once we expose and explore them, suffuse it with additional meaning" (5).

The triumph of such verse satires as those of Dryden and Pope is that they possess considerable merit as poems, merit that is only enhanced by their topicality. That it should ever have been necessary to defend them because they were topical or "unpoetic" is attributable to what Ronald S. Crane calls, in *A Collection of English Poems, 1660-1800*, the tyranny of certain Romantic and Victorian "presuppositions about the nature of poetry" and the "inhibitions of taste which they have tended to encourage." He mentions among such presuppositions the notions that

true poetry is always a direct outpouring of personal feeling; that its values are determined by the nature of the emotion which it expresses, the standards being naturally set by the preferences of the most admired poets in the nineteenth-century tradition; that its distinctive effort is "to bring unthinkable thoughts and unsayable sayings within the range of human minds and ears"; that the essence of its art is not statement but suggestion. (v)

In short, even topical poetry can be worthwhile when not limited by presuppositions that make poetry a precious, exclusively personal, even esoteric thing.