

Editorial: Philosophical Biography

‘Books are the work of solitude, and the children of silence.’ Thus Marcel Proust. The writer is not the same person as the man. The writer, if any good, is a different person, a higher person or at least one who distils something more worthy than is evidenced in the blunderings and fumbblings and inadequacies of the everyday character who shares the same skin. This was the basis of Proust’s own blistering attack on Sainte-Beuve, to the effect that the critic (or so-called critic) substituted gossip for criticism and, incidentally, failed to recognize the genius of Baudelaire.

In philosophy we have our own Proustian tendency, in the unlikely form of Karl Popper; For Popper, the provenance of ideas is supremely unimportant—and so, by extension is the biography of their authors. A healthy corrective, one might think, to the present day culture of celebrity, even at the intellectual level, and to the flood of philosophical biographies and title-tattle. At a more serious level, it warns us that we should not treat a philosopher’s ideas with suspicion because (just because) he was a Nazi in his lifetime or she was a communist when she was young, or the apostle of equality is a snob living high on the hoof or the advocate of open discussion anything but its practitioner.

And yet, and yet. The purism of Proust, if not of Popper, may seem belied by the fact that Proust’s great novel is actually and patently transformed autobiography. As for solitude, we may be stuck by the fact that Proust’s solitude and his theoretical stance—amounting almost to a philosophical solipsism—is one through which the reader recognizes the poignancy and texture of his own most intimate experience and life (which is why we read him again and again).

And again, whatever may be said of literature, is philosophy really the product of solitude? Isn’t dialogue its characteristic mode and discussion with others its purest form? But, against that, if philosophy is to mean anything in personal terms, the true philosophic dialogue may be that of the soul conversing with itself, rather than of the rough and often corner-cutting and presupposition-blind tumble of the philosophical seminar. And do we really suppose that Hume’s solitary reflections are actually refuted just by his presence at the backgammon table, as opposed to being dissipated by it? Certainly a biography of Hume would also be no

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substitute for a close examination of his books, and would hardly throw light on them, any more than George Painter's biography really does with Proust's writing. Gossip, endlessly fascinating as some find it all the time and all of us some of the time, is one thing; the book, the work of solitude and child of silence is another and a better, outliving its author and transcending the biographies.