

cumstances which moulded his career and determined the course and progress of his *magnum opus*. The other work referred to, which preceded the *Autobiography* by a few years, is Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, which also remains typical in its class, since it is the highest praise of any new biography to bring it within measurable distance of Boswell's book. Yet it may be doubted whether, except under analogous conditions in regard to author and subject, its success could ever be exactly repeated. The peculiar relations of biographer and biographee; the strongly-marked individuality of Johnson and the extraordinary quality of his conversation; the mimetic faculty which enabled Boswell, given the heads or minutes of an interview, to reproduce that interview with a fidelity more characteristic than shorthand, just as selective Art is more convincing than the camera—all these things, combined with a patience, an enthusiasm, and a devotion that no obstacle could daunt, produced a result which, seeing that it is impracticable to reproduce it without similar advantages, must always remain *sui generis*.

In an age favourable to prose, and withal exceptionally leisured and unhurried, it is not surprising that what was somewhat pompously described as Epistolary Correspondence should be found to flourish. And, as a fact, the development of Letter Writing is one of the manifest features of the period. Not only Maids of Honour who could spell, to vary Swift's jibe, but Maids of Honour who could not, resorted freely to this means of communication; and before Swift was an old man he recorded a considerable advance. 'The ladies in general,' he told Mrs Delany, were 'extremely mended both in writing and reading since he was young;' and he goes on to speak of a woman of quality, formerly his correspondent, who 'scrawled and spelt like a Wapping wench.' Hardly a month now passes by without some testimony in the shape of Diary or Miscellaneous Correspondence (the recent *Francis Letters* are an excellent case in point) to the activity with which our ancestors plied their pens under Anne and the Georges—an activity which modern appliances and modern manners have long since diverted into different channels. And if the Old-World in general was given to letter writing, literary men and women were also given to it. Swift himself, in the diary to Esther Johnson, commonly known as the *Journal*

to Stella, has left a series of utterances which remain, and must remain, unapproached as examples of the *chronique intime*. Pope, too, has a goodly budget of epistles; but they are, in general, too artificial, and too obviously arranged for the public eye, to serve as models. Goldsmith's legacy, on the other hand, is too slender, since the few examples which have been preserved have all the simple charm and fluency of his other work. Steele, Gray, Johnson, Sterne, Burke, Gibbon, and many minor authors, all wrote voluminously—the letters of Gray and Sterne especially being hall-marked with their particular idiosyncrasies. But the epistolary reputation clings chiefly to one or two authors, who, like Madame de Sevigné, either did nothing but write letters, or at all events did that best. One of the first of these is Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, whose dispatches from abroad reveal not only her own shrewd impressions of travel, but her absolutely honest and unvarnished views of contemporary society and literature as she knew them. Another who is best remembered by his letters is Lord Chesterfield. The curious strand of moral insensibility which runs through them has seriously prejudiced their other merits, for, apart from this, and the fact that their main doctrine is the converse of *Esse quam videri*, they are everywhere packed with a very varied criticism of life, and a close, if cynical, observation of human nature. After them, and ranging over sixty years of the century, comes the correspondence of Horace Walpole. If Chesterfield dictates the conduct of life, Walpole exhibits the practice of it. Never was there a wittier, a more vivacious, a more amusing, a more original chronicler; never (as Thackeray says) 'such a brilliant, jiggling, smirking Vanity Fair as that through which he leads us.' Lastly must be mentioned the admirable, and in some respects more admirable, letters of Cowper, the most natural, most unfeigned, most easy of English letter-writers. In the art of shedding a sedate playfulness over the least promising themes, in magnifying the occurrences of his 'set gray life' into incidents worthy of record, in communicating to his page all the variations of mood that sweep across him as he writes, he has no equal. But these qualities will doubtless be treated at large hereafter, and it is time to turn once more to the poets.

It was in the year 1764—the year when Walpole wrote the *Castle of Otranto*—that