ANONYMITY: AN INQUIRY

BY E. M. FORSTER

I

Do you like to know whom a book's by?

The question is more profound and even more literary than may appear. A poem, for example — do we gain more or less pleasure from it when we know the name of the poet? The *Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens*, for example. No one knows who wrote *Sir Patrick Spens*. It comes to us out of the northern void like a breath of ice. Set beside it another ballad whose author is known — *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. That too contains a tragic voyage and the breath of ice, but it is signed Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and we know a certain amount about this Coleridge. Coleridge signed other poems and knew other poets; he ran away from Cambridge; he enlisted as a dragoon under the name of Trooper Comberback, but fell so constantly from his horse that it had to be withdrawn from beneath him permanently; he was employed instead upon matters relating to sanitation; he married Southey's sister, and gave lectures; he became stout, pious, and dishonest, took opium, and died. With such information in our heads, we speak of the *Ancient Mariner* as 'a poem by Coleridge'; but we speak of *Sir Patrick Spens* as a poem.

What difference, if any, does this difference between them make upon our minds? And in the case of novels and plays — does ignorance or knowledge of their authorship signify? And newspaper articles — do they impress more when signed or unsigned?

Thus — rather vaguely — let us begin our quest.

Books are composed of words, and words have two functions to perform: they give information, or they create an atmosphere. Often they do both, for the two are not incompatible; but our inquiry must keep them distinct.

Let us avoid Literature for our next example, and turn instead to Public Notices. There is a word that is sometimes hung up at the edge of a tram line: the word 'Stop.' Written on a metal label by the side of the line, it means that a tram will stop here presently. It is an example of pure information. It creates no atmosphere — at least not in my mind. I stand close to the label and wait and wait for the tram. If the tram comes, the information is correct; if it does n't come, the information is incorrect; but in either case it remains information. The notice is an excellent instance of one of the uses of words. Compare it with another public notice which is sometimes exhibited in the darker cities of England: 'Beware of pickpockets, male and female.' Here again there is information. A pickpocket may come along presently, just like a tram, and we take our measures accordingly. But there is something else besides. Atmosphere is created. Who can see those words without a slight sinking feeling at the heart? All the people around look so honest and nice, but they are not — some of them are pick-

pockets, male or female. They hustle an old gentleman; the old gentleman glances down — his watch is gone. They steal up behind an old lady and cut out the back breadth of her beautiful sealskin jacket with sharp and noiseless pairs of scissors. Observe that happy little child running to buy sweets. Why does he suddenly burst into tears? A pickpocket, male or female, has jerked his halfpenny out of his hand.

All this, and perhaps much more, occurs to us when we read the notice in question. We suspect our fellows of dishonesty, we observe them suspecting us. We have been reminded of several disquieting truths — the general insecurity of life, human frailty, the violence of the poor, and the fatuous trustfulness of the rich, who always expect to be popular without having done anything to deserve it. It is a sort of memento mori, set up in the midst of Vanity Fair. By taking the form of a warning it has made us afraid, although nothing is gained by fear; all we need to do is to protect our precious purses, and fear will not help us to do this. Besides conveying information it has created an atmosphere, and to that extent it is literature. 'Beware of pickpockets, male and female,' is not good literature and it is unconscious. But the words are performing two functions, whereas the word 'Stop' only performed one; and this is an important difference, and the first step in our journey.

Next step. Let us collect together all the printed matter of the world into a single heap — everything: poetry books, exercise books, plays, newspapers, advertisements, street notices, everything. Let us arrange the contents of the heap into a line, with the works that convey pure information at one end, and the works that create pure atmosphere at the other end, and the works that do both in their intermediate positions, the whole line being graded so that we pass from one attitude to another. We shall find that at the end of pure information stands the tramway notice 'Stop,' and that at the extreme other end is lyric poetry.

Lyric poetry is absolutely no use. It is the exact antithesis of a street notice, for it conveys no information of any kind. What's the use of 'A slumber did my spirit seal' or 'Whether on Ida's snowy brow' or 'So we'll go no more a-roving' or 'Far in a western brookland'? They do not tell us where the tram will stop or even whether it exists.

And, passing from lyric poetry to ballad, we are still deprived of information. It is true that the *Ancient Mariner* describes an antarctic expedition, but in such a muddled way that it is no real help to the explorer, the accounts of the polar currents and winds being hopelessly inaccurate. It is true that the *Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens* refers to the bringing home of the Maid of Norway in the year 1285, but the reference is so vague and confused that historians turn from it in despair. Lyric poetry is absolutely no use and poetry generally is almost no use.

But when, proceeding down the line, we leave poetry behind and arrive at the drama, and particularly at those plays that purport to contain normal human beings, we find a change. Uselessness still predominates, but we begin to get information as well. *Julius Cæsar* contains some reliable information about Rome. And when we pass from the drama to the novel, the change is still more marked. Information abounds. What a lot we learn from *Tom Jones* about the west-countryside! And from *Northanger Abbey* about the same countryside fifty years later. In psychology too the novelist teaches us much. How carefully has Henry James

the result of the author's individual outlook, that we are right in asking for his name. It's his property — he ought to have the credit.

An important objection, also a modern one; for in the past neither writers nor readers attached the high importance to personality that they do to-day. It did not trouble Homer or the various people who were Homer. It did not trouble the writers in the Greek Anthology, who would write and rewrite the same poem in almost identical language, their notion being that the poem, not the poet, is the important thing, and that by continuous rehandling the perfect expression natural to the poem may be attained. It did not trouble the mediæval balladists, who, like the Cathedral builders, left their works unsigned. It troubled neither the composers nor the translators of the Bible. The Book of Genesis to-day contains at least three different elements, — Jahvist, Elohist, and Priestly, — which were combined into a single account by a committee who lived under King Josiah at Jerusalem, and translated into English by another committee who lived under King James I at London. And yet the Book of Genesis is literature. These earlier writers and readers knew that the words a man writes express him, but they did not make a cult of expression as we do to-day. Surely they were right, and modern critics go too far in their insistence on personality.

They go too far because they do not reflect what personality is. Just as words have two functions, — information and creation, — so each human mind has two personalities, one on the surface, one deeper down. The upper personality has a name. It is called S. T. Coleridge, or William Shakespeare, or Mrs. Humphry Ward. It is conscious and alert, it does things like dining out, answering letters, and so forth, and it differs vividly and amusingly from other personalities. The lower personality is a very queer affair. In many ways it is a perfect fool, but without it there is no literature, because unless a man dips a bucket down into it occasionally he cannot produce first-class work. There is something general about it. Although it is inside S. T. Coleridge, it cannot be labeled with his name. It has something in common with all other deeper personalities, and the mystic will assert that the common quality is God, and that here, in the obscure recesses of our being, we near the gates of the Divine. It is in any case the force that makes for anonymity. As it came from the depths, so it soars to the heights, out of local questionings; as it is general to all men, so the works it inspires have something general about them, namely beauty. The poet wrote the poem, no doubt, but he forgot himself while he wrote it, and we forget him while we read. What's so wonderful about great literature is that it transforms the man who reads it toward the condition of the man who wrote, and brings to birth in us also the creative impulse. Lost in the beauty where he was lost, we find more than we ever threw away, we reach what seems to be our spiritual home, and remember that it was not the speaker who was in the beginning, but the Word.

If we glance at one or two writers who are not first class, this point will be illustrated. Charles Lamb and R. L. Stevenson will serve. Here are two gifted, sensitive, fanciful, tolerant, humorous fellows, but they always write with their surface-personalities and never let down buckets into their underworld. Lamb did not try: 'B-b-b-buckets,' he would have said, 'are b-beyond me,' and he is the pleasanter writer in consequence. Stevenson was

always trying, oh, ever so hard, but the bucket either stuck or else came up again full of the R. L. S. who let it down, full of the mannerisms, the self-consciousness, the sentimentality, the quaintness which he was hoping to avoid. He and Lamb append their names in full to every sentence they write. They pursue us page after page, always to the exclusion of higher joy. They are letter-writers, not creative artists, and it is no coincidence that each of them did write charming letters. A letter comes off the surface; it deals with the events of the day or with plans; it is naturally signed. Literature tries to be unsigned. And the proof is that whereas, during our reading, we are always exclaiming 'How like Lamb!' or 'How typical of Stevenson!' we never say 'How like Shakespeare!' or 'How typical of Dante!' We are conscious only of the world they have created, and we are in a sense copartners in it. Coleridge, in his smaller domain, makes us copartners, too. We forget for ten minutes his name and our own, and I contend that this temporary forgetfulness, this momentary and mutual anonymity, is sure evidence of good stuff. The demand that literature should express personality is far too insistent in these days, and I look back with longing to the earlier modes of criticism where a poem was not an expression but a discovery, and was sometimes supposed to have been shown to the poet by God.

'Explique-moi d'où vient ce souffle par ta bouche façonné en mots.
Car quand tu parles, comme un arbre qui de toute sa feuille
S'émeut dans le silence de Midi, la paix en nous peu à peu succède à la pensée.
Par le moyen de ce chant sans musique et de cette parole sans voix, nous sommes accordés à la mélodie de ce monde.
Tu n'expliques rien, ô poète, mais toutes choses par toi nous deviennent explicables.'
'Je ne parle pas selon ce que je veux, mais je conçois dans le sommeil.
Et je ne saurais expliquer d'où je retire ce souffle, c'est le souffle qui m'est retiré.
Dilatant ce vide que j'ai en moi, j'ouvre la bouche,
Et ayant aspiré l'air, dans ce legs de lui-même par lequel l'homme à chaque seconde *expire* l'image de sa mort,
Je restitue une parole intelligible.
Et l'ayant dite, je sais ce que j'ai dit.'
— CLAUDEL: *La Ville* (second version)

The personality of a writer does become important after we have read his book and begin to study it. When the glamour of creation ceases, when the leaves of the divine tree are silent, when the intelligible word is restored to the universe, when the copartnership is over, then a book changes its nature, and we can ask ourselves questions about it such as 'What is the author's name?' 'Where did he live?' 'Was he married?' 'Which was his favorite flower?' We are no longer reading the book, we are studying it and making it subserve our desire for information. 'Study' has a very solemn sound. 'I am studying Dante' sounds much more than 'I am reading Dante.' It is really much less. Study is only a serious form of gossip. It teaches us everything about the book except the central thing, and between that and us it raises a circular barrier which only the wings of the spirit can cross.

The study of science, history, and so forth, is necessary and proper, for they are subjects that belong to the domain of information; but a creative subject like literature — to study that is excessively dangerous, and should never be attempted by the immature. Modern education promotes the unmitigated study of literature and concentrates our attention on the relation between a writer's life — his surface life — and his work. That's one reason why it is such a curse. There are no

questions to be asked about literature while we read it because 'peace takes the place of thought,' as Claudel beautifully says. An examination paper could not be set on the *Ancient Mariner* as it speaks to the heart of the reader, and it was to speak to the heart that it was written, and otherwise it would not have been written. Questions occur only when we cease to realize what it was about and become inquisitive and methodical.

III

And now for the newspapers — for they raise an interesting contributory issue. Journalism conveys, or is supposed to convey, information about passing events. It is true, not to itself like a poem, but to the facts it purports to relate — like the tram notice. When the morning paper arrives it lies upon the breakfast table simply steaming with truth in regard to something else. Truth, truth, and nothing but truth. Unsated by the banquet, we sally forth in the afternoon to buy an evening paper, which is published at midday, as the name implies, and feast anew. At the end of the week we buy a weekly, or a Sunday paper, which, as the name implies, has been written on Saturday; and at the end of the month we buy a monthly. Thus do we keep in touch with the world of events as practical men should.

And who is keeping us in touch? Who gives us this information upon which our judgments depend and which must ultimately influence our characters? Curious to relate, we seldom know. Newspapers are for the most part anonymous. Statements are made and no signature appended. Suppose we read in a paper that the Emperor of Guatemala is dead. Our first feeling is one of mild consternation; out of snobbery we regret what has happened, although the Emperor did n't play much part in our lives, and ladies say to one another, 'I feel so sorry for the poor Empress.' But presently we learn that the Emperor cannot have died, because Guatemala is a Republic, and the Empress cannot be a widow, because she does not exist. If the statement was signed, and we know the name of the goose who made it, we shall discount anything he tells us in the future, and weigh it carefully before we believe. If — which is more probable — it is unsigned, or signed 'Our Special Correspondent,' we remain defenseless against future misstatements. The Guatemala lad may be turned on to write about the Fall of the Franc and mislead us over that.

It seems paradoxical that an article should impress us more if it is unsigned than if it is signed. But it does, owing to the weakness of our psychology. Anonymous statements have, as we have seen, a universal air about them. Absolute truth, the collected wisdom of the universe, seems to be speaking, not the feeble voice of a man. Journalists have taken advantage of this. If everything in a paper were signed, it would lose its all-pervading influence on our minds. It is supposed to tell us what is happening. It actually serves up a mixture of true facts, false facts, and comment, and serves it unsigned. Modern journalism is therefore a pernicious caricature of literature. It has usurped that divine tendency toward anonymity. It has claimed for information what only belongs to creation. And it will claim it as long as we allow it to claim it, and to exploit the defects of our psychology. 'The high mission of the Press.' Poor Press! As if it were in a position to have a mission! It's we who have a mission to it. To cure a man through the newspapers or through propaganda of any sort is impossible: you merely alter the symptoms of his disease. We shall be cured

only by purging our minds of confusion. The papers trick us not so much by their lies as by their exploitation of our weakness. They are always confusing the two functions of words, and insinuating that 'The Emperor of Guatemala is dead' and 'A slumber did my spirit seal' belong to the same category. They are always usurping the privileges that only uselessness may claim, and they will do this as long as we allow them to do it.

This ends our inquiry. The question, 'Ought things to be signed?' seems, if not an easy question, at all events an isolated one, but we could not answer it without considering what words are, and disentangling the dual elements they contain. We decided pretty easily that information ought to be signed: common sense leads us to that conclusion, and newspapers, which are largely unsigned, have gained by that device their undesirable influence over civilization. Creation — that we found a more difficult matter. 'Literature wants not to be signed,' I suggested. Creation comes from the depths — the mystic will tell you, from God. The signature, the name, belongs to the surface-personality, and pertains to the world of information; it is a ticket, not the spirit of life. While the author wrote, he forgot his name; while we read him, we forget both his name and our own. When we have finished reading we begin to ask questions, and to study the book and the author we drag them into the realm of information. Now we learn a thousand things, but we have lost the pearl of great price, and in the chatter of question and answer, in the torrents of gossip and examination papers, we forget the purpose for which creation was performed. I am not asking for reverence. Reverence is fatal to literature. My plea is for something more vital — imagination. 'Imagination is as the immortal God which should assume flesh for the redemption of mortal passion.' Imagination is our only guide into the world created by words. Whether those words are signed or unsigned becomes, as soon as the imagination redeems us, a matter of no importance, because we have approximated to the state in which they were written, and there are no names down there, no personality as we understand personality, no marrying or giving in marriage. What there is down there — ah, that is another inquiry, and may the clergymen and scientists pursue it profitably, and to the end.