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Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Moral Imagination: From Adam Smith to Lionel Trilling*

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Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Moral Imagination: From Adam Smith to Lionel Trilling*, second edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 313 pages. ISBN-10: 1442218290 ISBN-13: 978-1442218291

The fifteen essays collected in this volume cover Anglo-American history from 1723 (the birth year of Adam Smith) to 1990 (the death of Michael Oakeshot) and range in date of initial publication from the early 1960s to today. Each is a reflection upon the life and work of an individual author, with authorship being Himmelfarb's interest. Some of her subjects were political leaders—Disraeli and Churchill—others novelists—Austen and George Eliot—but all were writers and it is that legacy that she explores.

Churchill is a good example. Some have said that his career to 1939 was that of a failed or, at best, undistinguished politician. But Himmelfarb, ever attentive to the writerly art, focuses upon his literary achievements to that date. Even before his finest hour he had “written three books about his military experiences in India and Africa in the late 1890s, a memoir of his early life, a two-volume biography of his father, a four-volume life-and-times of his ancestor, the first Duke of Marlborough, a five-volume history of the First World War and its aftermath, a four-volume history of the English-speaking peoples (published very much later), several other books about his experiences and contemporaries, and one (happily, only one) novel *Savrola*—all of this in addition to the steady stream of newspaper articles from which he derived a substantial part of his income, the innumerable speeches delivered in and out of Parliament (three volumes of which were published before 1939), and the voluminous correspondence, with his wife most notably but with others as well.)” Is his legacy that of a writer or a statesman? The question points to an inadequacy in our professionalized academy rather than to a problem with Churchill. As the title of her chapter says, he was “Quite Simply, A Great Man.”

Himmelfarb practices the historian's art at its finest. Her subjects are neither flotsam on the tides of social and material forces, nor are they judged guilty of the only vice lesser historians seem to acknowledge, namely, not being us. While shaped by the world they lived in they have, in turn, shaped our own. And it is the shaping of that world or, to use the title of the book which is itself an expression used by the first and last authors she treats, it is our “moral imagination” that gives structure to this collection.

The essays are, for the most part, organized chronologically. We are given an explanation of at least one anachronism, namely, that considering the two in reverse order has the effect of “humanizing *Middlemarch* and moralizing *Emma*.” Her fear is that reading these two books in the order in which they were published leaves one with the impression that Jane Austen was trivial and George Eliot severe. Himmelfarb's reordering has exactly the effect she desires, and it would be helpful to know why she chose to select and order her other subjects as she did.

Fresh insights are to be found throughout the book by juxtaposing authors, by understanding them within their own times, by pulling them out and learning from them as if they were our contemporaries. What could be more contemporary than the following passage from Mill? Quoting an earlier review of his own, he decried again in 1836 that “The world reads too much and too quickly to read well.” As if addressing the internet age more than a century and a half early, he concluded, “The public is in the predicament of an indolent man, who cannot bring himself to apply his mind vigorously to his own affairs, and over whom, therefore, not he who speaks most wisely, but he who speaks most frequently, obtains the influence.”

As an author who is interested in other authors the indolence of the modern mind is no small concern for Himmelfarb. Her own readers will have a hard time keeping up with her writings; how does she keep up with those of her subjects? I have already quoted her at length on Churchill’s writings up to 1939 but she also mentions in passing, and with a hint of exasperation, the eight-volume biography by Randolph S. Churchill and Martin Gilbert with its attendant thirteen-volumes of companion documents. As she writes in regards to Charles Dickens, “industrialization magnifies all the other aspects of modernity.” Industrial-scale publishing and our industrial-scale educational system could be said to do the same. In that sense, post-modernity is not the era “after” modernity, but the period in which it is more of what it always was.

But what is modernity? While never addressing this question directly, these essays engage some of the authors most influential for forming our perceptions about it. For instance, our social relations—when we bother to think about them at all—are incomprehensible to us without Jane Austen, as even Hollywood has discovered. And our very notion of Christmas, including the choice of turkey over goose, is owed to Charles Dickens. Himmelfarb cites the remark of a girl selling fruit on the streets of London, “Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?” In this and many other essays Himmelfarb bears out the wisdom of Disraeli’s comment: “The Utilitarians in Politics are like the Unitarians in Religion. Both omit Imagination in their systems, and Imagination governs Mankind.”

Some might consider the other authors to be secondary. For instance, Alfred Marshall and John Buchan rarely make the list of most important authors. Yet Himmelfarb brings out their influence on our moral imagination and how we can better understand ourselves by understanding them.

Alfred Marshall founded economics as we now understand and practice it, especially in the academy. An idea central to his efforts was “economic chivalry.” In Himmelfarb’s words, “Just as feudal chivalry had mitigated the horrors of warfare, so economic chivalry would mitigate the evils of commercial competition.” The notion might strike us as quaint today, but is it? Consider the following from Marshall’s 1907 essay on the topic: “Of course, anyone who bears heavy responsibilities, and uses his brain much, needs larger house-room, more quiet, lighter and more digestible food, and perhaps more change of scene and other

comforts than will suffice for maintaining the sufficiency of unskilled work, and even of artisan work.” When presidents vacation in exotic locations, senators own multiple homes and multi-million dollar yachts, what is our general response? Hedge fund managers and movie stars fly around in private planes and helicopters, and is there much complaint? We generally leave the champagne socialists and caviar conservatives to their pleasures. The fact is, both progressives and conservatives hold to their own notion of economic chivalry, whether it is a matter of experts leading a path to the future or the trickling down of wealth.

As for John Buchan, are our contemporary film heroes much different from his characters? The omni-competent James Bond or Bruce Wayne from the Batman comics both bear more than slight similarities to the classically educated, sportsmen-gentlemen that populate the novels of the one-time Governor General of Canada. The comparison might rankle a few, especially when they find Buchan’s characters more fully developed and complex than our present day Sandy Arbuthnots.

Moral imagination is not the sum total of wisdom, but it is clear from this collection of essays that it is a necessary part of it. The subjects of her essays have helped form our moral imaginations, almost entirely for the better, and reading this book is an excellent way to see how it was done.

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