II A Literary Phenomenon

Abstract: Maurois was a prolific writer of best-selling novels, short stories, moral and critical essays, histories, children’s books, even works of science fiction—all translated into multiple languages. He also wrote on both literary and political topics for French, British, and American newspapers and magazines. He was especially renowned as the author of fifteen full and several short biographies. In 1936 the English translation of his biography of Shelley was the first book selected for the newly established popular Penguin paperbacks.

Born in 1885, as Émile Salomon Wilhelm Herzog, into a highly assimilated Jewish family that had transferred its large cloth-weaving mill in Alsace, along with some 400 of the mill’s workers, to Elbeuf near Rouen in Normandy after the German annexation of Alsace in 1871, Maurois—he himself recounts in his Memoirs how he came to adopt André Maurois as his nom de plume and then, finally, in 1947, as his legal name—was not only one of the most respected writers of his time, he was also one of the most popular and certainly one of the most productive. His books sold in the hundreds of thousands of copies in Britain, America, and Germany (until they were banned there on racial grounds in 1933), as well as in France. When Allen Lane began his pioneering sixpenny Penguin paperback series in 1935, the English translation of Maurois’ Ariel—a best-selling biography of Shelley originally published in 1923—was the first book selected for the popular format; it is Penguin no. 1. Two years later Ariel was joined as a Penguin paperback by the English translation of Maurois’ biography of Disraeli (originally published in 1927). In the United States, the biographies of Disraeli and Byron were serialized in the monthly magazine The Forum. Almost everything Maurois wrote—much of it about the two English-speaking countries, their peoples, and cultures—was immediately translated into English and published in one edition after another.

And he wrote a great deal: ten novels, from his first literary success, the amusing and wildly popular Les Silences du Colonel Bramble, based on his experiences as a French soldier attached to a Scottish unit of the British army in World War I and published in 1918 (Engl. trans., 1919), to his last work of fiction, Les Roses de septembre (1956; Engl. trans., 1958), by way of two other major successes—Bernard Quesnay (1926; Engl. trans., 1927) and Climats (1928; Engl. trans., 1929), the latter of which sold over two million copies in France alone—and La Machine à lire les pensées (1937; Engl. trans. 1938), one of several ventures into science fiction; as many volumes of collected short stories; numerous books on moral, literary, and political topics, such as La Conversation (1927; Engl. trans., 1930), Un Art de vivre (1939; Engl. trans., 1940), Cinq visages de l’amour (1942; Engl. trans., 1944), a witty and entertaining Cours de bonheur conjugal (1951; Engl. trans. 1953), Lecture, mon doux plaisir (1960; Engl. trans., 1960); substantial histories of England (1937; Engl. trans. 1937), France (1947; Engl. trans. 1948), and the United States (1943–1944; Engl. trans., 1944), all three also in popular illustrated adaptations published by The Bodley Head in London and the Viking Press in New York (1960–1969),