III The Middle Road

Abstract: Having had to run the family business for a time, Maurois the writer and intellectual could see different sides of most issues. He recognized the value of practice as well as principle, action as well as reflection, tradition as well as innovation. He was on easy terms with politicians and military men as well as poets. On all topics he adopted a moderate stance and aimed to keep an open mind. A quintessential liberal, he disliked and feared excessive systematizing and dogmatic extremes; he admired the English because he saw in them the embodiment of his own sceptical empiricism and preference for adaptation and tolerance.

Maurois’ celebrity was based not only on his literary work but on his role as a public figure representing and speaking out for classic liberal and humanistic values, and in particular for the combination of conservatism and readiness to adapt to changing circumstances, the realism and pragmatism, the tolerance and openness that he associated above all with Britain and the United States. “It is the British liberalism of the nineteenth century,” he wrote in a review of Élie Halévy’s *History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century*, “which has shown and still continues to show us the road to a true and gentle civilization.” Similarly, it was the empirical and practical spirit of the British that had enabled them, he claimed, to adapt to a changing world while avoiding the destructive conflicts and tensions that afflicted cultures more attached to logic and systematic reasoning. There was an advantage to the British willingness to live with inconsistency. “No less ancient, no less proud than France, England resolved the problem [of its relation to its past] in an empirical manner by retaining traditions and ceremonies that are of no importance in themselves, but provide a screen of veneration under cover of which the English can be resolutely modern without offending their sense of historical continuity. They have fairy-tale queens, peers in ermine-lined cloaks, bewigged judges, medieval colleges, but they boldly carry out huge transfers among the social classes.”

As the son of a mill owner, Maurois had had to delay the literary career to which he felt drawn in order to play his part, on his father’s retirement, in the management of the Herzog family firm, by then a very substantial enterprise with over 2,000 workers. This experience enabled him to understand and, in some measure, sympathize with the values of the practical businessman, industrialist or statesman as well as with those of the artist and intellectual. He also served in the military in both world wars and retained from that experience a respect for the army as an institution in which discipline—ideally—is combined with initiative and the ability to size up situations rapidly and act accordingly. The impatience with dreaming, fantasy, and excessive intellectualizing or estheticizing which he reported having encountered among a number of the young American students in his literature class at Princeton was a feeling to which he himself was no stranger, as his admiration for the “empirical” outlook of the British and the Americans, many passages in his *Memoirs*, articles, and prefaces, and the delightfully satirical *Voyage au pays des Articoles* testify. Indeed, he too, as a young man, had once been sufficiently emboldened by a conviction of the importance of