Making Sense: The “New Biography”

Abstract: Maurois’ writing style was also determined by avoidance of extremes: in an age of social, intellectual and artistic disarray, his novels and above all his spectacularly successful biographies—like those of Lytton Strachey in England and Emil Ludwig in Germany—offered a grateful public the reassurance of intelligible narratives and knowable agents, without resorting to outworn and discredited novelistic formulas. Fully aware of the difficulty of making sense of events and defining character, respectful of the challenging experiments of writers such as Virginia Woolf, he nevertheless “attached the greatest importance to clarity” and to seeking “permanent forms under the shifting appearances.” The suavity that ensured his popularity was also the quality that ultimately undermined that popularity.

Characteristically, Maurois himself acknowledged that his scepticism, his dislike of “systems” and of moral and intellectual extremes and his willingness to “listen to an adversary with the dangerous desire to understand him”—his “politeness,” in his own words—could constitute, in some respects, a weakness. “‘You lack aggressiveness,’ Lucien Romier [editor of *Le Figaro*—L.G.] used to say to me; and it is true that the moderation which is natural to me robs the mind of its mordancy. ‘Truth is excessive,’ our Alain used to teach, ‘and one must go beyond, well beyond, the point of moderation if one wishes to understand even the simplest thing.’ And Blake: ‘The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.’”  

The effect of Maurois’ moderation on his literary work itself may not have been entirely salutary and may have contributed to his fall from grace in an age less respectful and admiring than his of propriety, elegance and clarity. Reviewing the 1970 edition of his *Memoirs* in the *New York Times*, Thomas Lask described him as “the quintessential French writer: stylish, rational, aphoristic, balanced, without excesses, humane and withal very genuine. […] The two qualities that best describe him,” the reviewer continued, “are kindness and amiability.” These characteristics, however, in Lask’s view, “make for blandness”:

A phrase he likes to use is “a man of good-will,” and in this history it applies to friends, government officials, publishers, readers, students, colleagues, to virtually all men in high places, and, by no means least, to himself. Such a man, learned, informed, precisely articulate, must have made a comfortable companion, an admirable friend, a perfect citizen. But in an autobiography, these virtues make for blandness. The evenness of tone, the lack of bite detract from the sharpness of the portrait […] Maurois probably never published an ugly sentence in his life, never an awkward phrase, a rough or ill-turned sequence, an inept analogy. […] But the result is that a fine though constant film of words intercedes between reader and writer.²

Lask might well have extended his reservations about the autobiography to Maurois’ biographies, which, narrated in a precise, crisp, elegant, often witty French—little practised, it should be said, by writers today—remain probably his most enduring achievement. As Du Bos noted in his Journal in 1923, in *Ariel*, his biography of Shelley, Maurois had given his readers an “histoire de la vie de Shelley” [“story of Shelley’s life”], in which “tout est sacrifié à la trame maintenue du récit” [“everything is sacrificed to the sustained course of the narrative”]. After the early work on Shelley, there was greater emphasis—as also later in his own *Memoirs*—on the public sphere, since in Maurois’ view, one of the merits of his biographies was