Concluding Comment: The Limits of the Middle Ground

Abstract: Maurois’ very success in pursuing a middle way, his aversion to risk and “extremes,”—the basis of his appeal to a relatively privileged but threatened educated public in his own time—may be a cause of his failure to speak to those born later into an age that no longer sets great store by “civility.”

Between the reputation Maurois enjoyed in his lifetime or the many honours he received and his significance for subsequent generations there is obviously no necessary connection. The reputation and the honours were won in large measure because of his ability to appeal to a fairly broad, educated public of moderate and thoughtful individuals like himself. In his politics, as in his literary style, he was conservative but not reactionary, critical and open-minded but not revolutionary, almost always engaging and at times modestly innovative but not sharply provocative or aggressive, patriotic but not chauvinist. He upset no apple-carts, either as a public figure or as a writer, except for the one time—after the fall of France—when his non-partisan, middle-of-the-road stance aroused hostility instead of deflecting it. His strategy was always rather to tame or domesticate what might otherwise be disturbing or disruptive, to integrate the unfamiliar into the realm of the known, and to render the obscure as intelligible and communicable as possible, while at the same time insisting that what counts as “knowledge” is constantly being revised in the light of new experiences and circumstances, that that is as it should be, and that the mutability of knowledge in no way justifies our disregarding it or disdaining to pursue it. It is still possible to read him with pleasure, as a “civilized” and eloquent voice from an earlier time, but at best his work offers—as it already did in his own day—an avoidance of intractable conflicts and disorienting uncertainties. A bruising confrontation with these is not to be found in Maurois’ writing. His preference was for irony, tolerance and adaptation. As friendly and unfriendly critics alike have pointed out, he remained attached, as a writer, to the French literary tradition, which he sought to adapt to modern times but not to alter radically or reject. He has become a witness to a certain period in Western culture, rather than a writer who can still speak to us today, unless it be to remind us of the modest virtues and benefits of a liberal temperament that was probably always the property of a privileged and cultivated elite. In the view of his successor at the Académie Française, Marcel Arland, full of admiration as Maurois was for Balzac and Proust, he knew that he had neither the creative energy of the former, his ability to bring to life an entire society, nor the latter’s uncompromising dedication to his singular vision. As Maurois himself acknowledged in an essay on Flaubert, “in the history of the arts it is not, generally, the most perfect works that stand out, but those that, because of their novelty, are the military milestones on the great highway of literature. The novels of Mérimée are ravishingly composed; they are far