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## **Lytton Strachey (1880-1932), André Maurois (1885-1967) and the “New Biography”: English revolution versus French evolution?**

As we are celebrating the centenary of Lytton Strachey’s masterpiece, *Eminent Victorians*, which stands as his seminal work and is more than ever considered to have revolutionized biography, I thought about the man who has invariably been seen in Great-Britain as one of his imitators<sup>1</sup> on the Continent and wished to ponder over the two trajectories of these men, whose fates and works were linked in such a strange way. André Maurois was Strachey’s contemporary and although the two men rarely met, it is acknowledged (even by Maurois himself as we shall see) that Strachey’s works exerted a considerable influence on his career as a biographer<sup>2</sup>. I would like to try and understand why what worked so admirably for Strachey in Great-Britain did not work quite so well for Maurois in France. Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* is still hailed as “the Biography that changed biography forever”<sup>3</sup>; the centennial anniversary of the publication of *Eminent Victorians* was the subject of a panel during the last MLA Convention in New York in January 2018. I doubt we, French people, will celebrate the centenary of any of Maurois’s biographies, yet in comparison, Maurois’s *œuvre* is certainly more impressive, quantitatively at least, than Strachey’s. During his almost 50-year-long career as a novelist, essayist, historian, lecturer, reviewer and biographer, Maurois wrote no less than 18 biographies. He was lionized during his lifetime, considered as “The Prince of Biographers” by some critics<sup>4</sup>, and was quoted among the greatest biographers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century precisely for his ability to narrate authentic lives that read like novels<sup>5</sup>. He was a member of the Parisian intellectual elite, had, in brief, a brilliant literary career crowned by his becoming a member of the French Academy in 1938. But almost immediately after

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance G. G. Benjamin’s article “The New Biography” which mentions Maurois as belonging to the “host of imitators” of Strachey, *The Historian*, Kingston, vol. 1, n° 2 (Spring 1939), p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> Maurois admitted with surprise, at the beginning of his essay devoted to Strachey in *Prophets and Poets*, that Strachey reached fame—and the utmost kind of fame—with three history books at a time when novelists seemed to reign supreme over literature, “Lytton Strachey,” in *Prophets and Poets*, London, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1935, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Dirda, “The Biography that changed biography forever,” Book Review, *The Washington Post*, 31 January 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-biography-that-changed-biography-forever/2018/01/>, accessed 27 March 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre de Boisdeffre, “Balzac et Maurois,” *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* (8 April 1965), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> See Jack Kolbert’s “André Maurois à la recherche d’un genre” for the numerous French and foreign testimonies of Maurois’s fame and popularity in the late 1960s. Kolbert’s article may be said to be hagiographic, so superlative is his portrait of the man and biographer: “André Maurois à la recherche d’un genre: la biographie,” *The French Review*, vol. 39, n° 5 (April 1966), p. 671-683.

his death in 1968, his fame waned and today he is largely although unjustly forgotten<sup>6</sup>. It occurred to me that the three main acceptations of the word “revolution” could help us cast a light upon Strachey’s and Maurois’s contributions to the genre of biography. The first acceptation is the astronomical one, which implies, on the part of celestial bodies, that they move round in an orbit or circular course (notably referring to the apparent movement of the sun, stars, etc. round the earth) or that they move round an axis, or centre. Together with the second acceptation which means that you turn considerations or reflections in your mind, we could be led to say that Maurois’s practice and theory of biography largely revolved around Strachey’s and that he was an ardent promoter of Strachey’s ideas in France. But “revolution” also means change, alteration and mutation and although rarer, this acceptation invites us to look at how Maurois’s art distinguished itself from Strachey’s. Finally, under the light of the third but most common acceptation of the word “revolution” we shall ponder over the reasons why, in France, Maurois’s biographies were never regarded as an overthrow of previous norms and canons although his contribution to the “New Biography” was more than significant.

### **The Maurois/ Strachey relationship: a one-way admiration**

In 1918, when Strachey gained immediate and enduring fame thanks to the publication of *Eminent Victorians*, Maurois published his first novel, *The Silences of Colonel Bramble*, which became a best-seller<sup>7</sup>. It was a lively rendition of the officers of the British Army, with whom he served during the First World War as an interpreter. The two men were put in the limelight at the same time, but for different reasons, and their trajectories in the literary world were to remain diametrically opposed. Maurois came to biography by chance, having discovered Shelley while he was an interpreter among the British soldiers in Flanders. Shelley’s life inspired him to write a first “autobiofictional attempt,” *Ni Ange ni bête*, which was “a transposition to his own milieu of Shelley’s life” published in a novelistic shape in 1919<sup>8</sup>. The book was not quite a success, which led Maurois to launch into his first truly biographical venture: *Ariel or Shelley’s Life*, published in 1923. August 1923 was precisely the time when Strachey and Maurois met for the first time: Strachey was invited by André Gide to attend the summer conferences at the Cistercian Abbey of Pontigny, a gathering of eminent French intellectuals who discussed a variety of moral and literary subjects during ten days. André Maurois (who then read his unfinished version of *Ariel* to André Gide) was one of them, like Roger Martin du Gard, Georges Raverat, Charles du Bos, Paul and Blaise Desjardins<sup>9</sup>. Strachey was not really impressed by this set of intellectuals, although Maurois was to vividly

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<sup>6</sup> Even fairly recent and thorough studies devoted precisely to the New Biography like Ruth Hoberman’s *Modernizing Lives: Experiments in English Biography, 1918-1939* mention Maurois’s role only very cursorily: *Modernizing Lives: Experiments in English Biography, 1918-1939*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> For details about the success of this first novel and the history of its printing see Jean Bothorel, *Bernard Grasset: Vie et passions d’un éditeur*, Paris, André Grasset, 1989, p. 124-129. *The Silences of Colonel Bramble* reached 50,000 prints in just a few months.

<sup>8</sup> Joanny Moulin calls the book an “‘autobiofiction’ *avant la lettre*.” See Joanny Moulin, “André Maurois or the Aesthetic Advantage of Biography over the Novel,” *Les Grandes figures historiques dans les lettres et les arts*, n° 6 (2017), p. 71, <http://figures-historiques.revue.univ-lille3fr/6-2017-issn-2261-0871/>, accessed 4 December 2017.

<sup>9</sup> See Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: The New Biography*, London, Vintage, 1995, p. 525-527.

recall the impression Strachey made on them. It is an interesting coincidence that Maurois's narration of this encounter should be found at the end of the preface he wrote for the French translation of *Eminent Victorians*<sup>10</sup>. The very last words of the preface are in fact a pastiche of Strachey's own art of portraiture, with its insistence on one particular physical aspect of the biographee, its suppositions and concessive clause "and yet," and its oxymoronic irony:

I met Lytton Strachey once. He had come to spend a few summer days at Pontigny Abbey. We found him very similar to the portrait of him that is at the Tate Gallery. On the first day, we were alarmed by his tall lanky frame, his long beard, his immobility, his silence; but when he spoke in his "bleating falsetto" it was in delightful, economical epigrams... He listened to our daily conversations with a mild and polite spite. [...] Looking at him there we had the impression of an almost infinite disdain, of a wilful abstraction, of a refusal... And yet sometimes, for one fleeting instant, a glance would flash behind his spectacles so vividly that we wondered if all this lassitude might not be the mask of a man really amused and keen, and more Britannic than any Briton.<sup>11</sup>

Strachey was certainly very British but was also a great lover of French literature and philosophy, an unconditional admirer of Voltaire and Racine, just as Maurois was to become the most Anglophile of French writers<sup>12</sup>. This should have brought the two men together, but apparently, Strachey's disdain for his French contemporaries (he read Proust with effort but admired Gide's *La Porte étroite*), extended to Maurois himself: Gabriel Merle, Strachey's first French biographer, reminds us that, among friends, Strachey referred to Maurois as "le petit merdaillon."<sup>13</sup> Although Maurois was a friend of Dorothy Bussy, one of Strachey's sisters, their relationships were to remain episodic and Strachey certainly did not read any of Maurois's works. Conversely Maurois proved his admiration for Strachey's works repeatedly: first in his 1928 *Aspects of Biography*, where he discussed "Mr. Strachey"'s breakthrough in biography at length<sup>14</sup>, then by prefacing the French translation of *Eminent Victorians* in 1933, a text which was to be rewritten and expanded into the essay he included in *Prophets and Poets* in 1936<sup>15</sup>. Lytton Strachey then figured among the English writers whom Maurois considered as having brought to

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<sup>10</sup> Preface to Lytton Strachey, *Victoriens Éminents*, trans. Jacques Dombasle, pref. André Maurois, Paris, Gallimard [coll. "NRF"], 1933.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12-13, my translation.

<sup>12</sup> Strachey devoted a large number of essays to French writers and philosophers and published *Landmarks in French Literature* early in his career (1912). Maurois's interest in the Anglo-Saxon world and culture took many guises, among which his numerous stays in England and the United States, where he lived for the duration of the Second World War, and numerous essays devoted to various English writers (*Études anglaises*, 1927).

<sup>13</sup> Gabriel Merle, *Lytton Strachey [1880-1932]: Biographie et critique d'un critique et biographe*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 1980, p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> It is to be noted that Strachey was not the only modern biographer Maurois admired. *Aspects of Biography* is as much about Harold Nicolson's *The Development of English Biography* and Virginia Woolf's "The New Biography" as it is about Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria*. About the latter Maurois was to confess to Jacques Suffel in 1963 that it was Strachey's *Queen Victoria* that taught him the art of biography, see Jacques Suffel, *André Maurois, avec des remarques par André Maurois. Portrait-dialogue*, Paris, Flammarion, 1963, p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> The French edition was entitled *Magiciens et logiciens: Rudyard Kipling, H.G. Wells, Bernard Shaw, G.K. Chesterton, Joseph Conrad, Lytton Strachey, Katherine Mansfield, D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley*, Paris, Bernard Grasset, 1935.

their contemporaries “not only an aesthetic pleasure but also a philosophy.”<sup>16</sup> Strachey was the only biographer mentioned in *Prophets and Poets*, figuring among Kipling, Wells, Shaw, Chesterton, Conrad, Mansfield, Lawrence and Huxley. Maurois was to spread Strachey’s ideas not just in his theoretical essays but in fictional biographies of his own: *Ariel ou la vie de Shelley* (1923), *Disraeli* (1927), *Don Juan ou la vie de Byron* (1930), *René ou la vie de Chateaubriand* (1938), *A la Recherche de Marcel Proust* (1949), *Lélia ou la vie de George Sand* (1952), *Olympio ou la vie de Victor Hugo* (1954), *Les Trois Dumas* (1957), *Prométhée ou la vie de Balzac* (1965) are peppered with comments on the art of biography that are reminiscent of Strachey’s preface to *Eminent Victorians* and of Strachey’s own remarks about biography scattered through his own biographical essays and portraits. Interestingly, Maurois’s first biographies and main theoretical approach of the genre were written just as Harold Nicholson published *The Development of English Biography*, and *Some People* (1927), as Virginia Woolf published her essay entitled “The New Biography” (1927) and *Orlando* (1928), and as Strachey published his last mainly fictional biography: *Elisabeth and Essex: A Tragic History* (1928)<sup>17</sup>. This is no coincidence but only goes to show how these writers, who were both theoreticians and practitioners, joined forces to renew an ill-used genre and contribute to its revival<sup>18</sup>. At the heart of their preoccupations was the truthful rendition of character, a difficult and dangerous blend of fact and fiction, which in the end would determine whether biography could be considered as an art in its own right.

### **The advent of the New Biography: Maurois’s evolutionary reading of Strachey’s revolutionary ideas—fact versus fiction**

Both Maurois’s and Strachey’s works illustrate Ira Bruce Nadel’s definition of 20<sup>th</sup>-century biography as including “illustrative detail, symbolic action, thematic organization, psychological interpretation and character analysis.”<sup>19</sup> But can we say that Maurois revolutionized the genre as Strachey did in England? The fact is that when he started writing his life of Shelley, biography was moribund in France. Maurois deplored the fact that biography was a non-existent genre when he came to it: apart from a few well-known works like Voltaire’s *Charles XII*, *La Vie de Rancé* by Chateaubriand, the

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<sup>16</sup> Introductory note to *Prophets and Poets*, *op. cit.*, np.

<sup>17</sup> *Aspects of Biography* was the outcome of a series of six lectures Maurois was invited to deliver at Trinity College, Cambridge, in May 1928. E.M. Forster had been his immediate predecessor as guest of the Clark Lectures and had taken as his subject “Aspects of the Novel.” Accordingly, Maurois said he “chose a complementary subject and following his example, made no attempt to trace the history of a literary form.” *Aspects of Biography* [1928], trans. Sydney Castle Roberts, New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1966, preface, p. VII. Original edition: *Aspects de la biographie*, Paris, Au sans pareil [coll. “Le Conciliabule des Trente”], 1928.

<sup>18</sup> Maurois was a great admirer of Virginia Woolf as a novelist. He read *Jacob’s Room* with delight and prefaced the French translation of her *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf was amused by Maurois’s *Ariel*, see the letter to Ethel Sands dated 24 April 1924, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 1923-1928*, vol. 3, Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (eds.), New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, p. 100-101. Leonard and she considered publishing Maurois’s paper about “The Nature of Literary Honesty” which Fry had heard during his stay at Pontigny in August 1925; it was in the end not published by the Hogarth Press (*ibid.*, p. 208). She read his *Disraeli* and “enjoyed it very much” (*ibid.*, p. 404, p. 417). Finally Woolf and Maurois met at a dinner at Lady Colefax’s and she found him “disappointing” (*ibid.*, p. 501). Maurois commented “The Art of Biography” at length in *Aspects of Biography*.

<sup>19</sup> *Biography, Fiction, Fact and Form*, New York, St Martin’s Press, 1984, p. 31.

very brief lives by Stendhal, the uneventful lives by Victor Cousin, the collective biographies by Sainte-Beuve and heroic lives by Romain Rolland, biography was an academic genre<sup>20</sup>. The nineteenth century was the century of the novel and Strachey's 1918 regrets that England had no great biographical tradition like the French<sup>21</sup> come as a surprise to the French reader. Joanny Moulin rightly argues that "we have never had a Walton and an Aubrey, a Johnson and a Boswell, a Carlyle and a Strachey. But we have had a Maurois."<sup>22</sup> Unlike Strachey whose *Eminent Victorians* took the world of biography by storm at a time when his English readership was ready to embrace revolt against the Victorian mores that had led to the horrors of the First World War, Maurois's work did not create as big a stir. He was hailed essentially during his lifetime for his capacity to write biographies that read as pleasurable as a good novel. He was nevertheless thoroughly aware that if "biography is an art like the novel, this does not mean that a biography must be a novel."<sup>23</sup> Both Strachey and Maurois were at heart historians: Strachey studied history at Cambridge, and history remained one of his subjects of predilection<sup>24</sup>; as for Maurois he wrote several history books, he had the discipline of a scholar and his interest in history buttressed his biographies<sup>25</sup>. Biography and history walked hand in hand in Maurois and Strachey's works: the French nineteenth century and the Victorian Age were an inexhaustible source of enquiry and of fascination for both of them. Strachey therefore hoped that *Eminent Victorians* would "prove to be of interest from the strictly biographical no less than from the historical point of view."<sup>26</sup> Because they both agreed that history was not a science, but an art<sup>27</sup>, they considered that compiling documents was not an end in itself but just a means to refresh or correct their predecessors' portraits: history was "the background fresco"<sup>28</sup> against which the life of their heroes developed.

One of the main differences between Strachey and Maurois is precisely that

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<sup>20</sup> André Maurois, "Le Biographe et ses personnages: poésie et vérité," *Les Annales*, n° 196 (février 1967), p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> See the Preface to *Eminent Victorians*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1918, p. 7: "[...] we have never had, like the French, a great biographical tradition; we have had no Fontenelles and Condorcets, with their incomparable *éloges* [...]."

<sup>22</sup> "André Maurois, or the Aesthetic Advantage of Biography over the Novel," *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> "La biographie est un art, comme le roman. Cela ne veut pas dire qu'une biographie doit être un roman," André Maurois, "L'Art de la biographie," in Michel Droit, *André Maurois*, Paris, Éditions Universitaires [coll. "Classiques du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle"], 1953, p. 136-137.

<sup>24</sup> "The Historian of the Future," an Apostolic article written in 1903, expresses Strachey's early intuition of the position he was to defend all his life long: "History made interesting by judicious selection and made beautiful by art is one of the most valuable things we know [...]. History is, so far as it deals with individual minds, artistic," see Gabriel Merle, *Lytton Strachey (1880-1932)*, *op. cit.*, p. 105. Strachey then developed his theory about history in 1909 in a *Spectator* article entitled "A New History of Rome": "the first duty of a great historian is to be an artist. [...] Uninterpreted truth is as useless as buried gold, and art is the great interpreter. It alone can unify a vast multitude of facts into a significant whole, clarifying, accentuating, suppressing, and lighting up the dark places with the torch of the imagination," in *Lytton Strachey, Spectatorial Essays*, James Strachey (ed.), London, Chatto & Windus, 1964, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Maurois was regarded as a scholarly historian in his own right and published three history books in a decade: *A History of England* (1937), *A New History of the United States* (1948) and *A History of France* (1947).

<sup>26</sup> Preface to *Eminent Victorians*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> On their common vision of history as an art, see André Maurois, *Aspects of Biography*, *op. cit.*, p. 111: "Our reply accords with Mr. Strachey [...]."

<sup>28</sup> Jack Kolbert, "André Maurois's Esthetics of Biography," *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association*, vol. 21, n° 2 (June 1967), p. 47.

Maurois was first and foremost a novelist, whose work, he said, was not very different whether he worked on a biography or on a novel<sup>29</sup>. Yet Maurois acknowledged that the biographer is less free than the novelist and that is why he was first attracted to the freedom of the novel and gradually moved to accept the restraints of the biography. This move was not sudden nor easy: Maurois felt very strongly about the failure of his *Ni Ange ni démon* which, with the benefit of hindsight, can be said to exemplify Virginia Woolf's feeling that the truth of fiction and the truth of real life are "antagonistic" and "incompatible," and that "the imagination will not serve under two masters simultaneously."<sup>30</sup> Maurois tried to correct his first impulse by writing a more biographical version of Shelley's life, but he again failed to amalgamate dream and reality (to paraphrase the conclusion of "The New Biography" by Woolf). His "Note to the benevolent reader" prefacing his *Ariel or the Life of Shelley* was an awkward attempt to get the best of both (dream and reality) and he was harshly criticized for that<sup>31</sup>. He was accused of producing a "biographie romancée" and the controversy which arose was a stain on Maurois's mind for a long time. Although the book was a best-seller, Maurois, unlike Strachey who relished provocation and defiance, surrendered to the demands of the critics<sup>32</sup>. With his next biography of Byron, he fell into the opposite excess of thoroughly documenting his biography: sources, quotations, dates, facts were indicated chapter by chapter at the end of the book, the biography was deemed too academic and not lifelike enough. After excessively novelizing Shelley's life and excessively documenting Byron's, Maurois learnt to "weld [...] into one seamless whole" the "rainbow-like intangibility" of personality and the "granite-like solidity" of truth (again in Virginia Woolf's words<sup>33</sup>). His years of apprenticeship as a biographer (1923-1930) correspond to the decade when this tension between the two poles of fact and fiction, science and art gave birth to the most challenging theoretical reflections on biography in Great-Britain. Maurois's work, theoretical or practical, can be read as an intellectual conversation with his English counterparts and his contribution to the new definition of the genre was huge. Because he was a novelist himself, he was particularly attracted to writing writers' lives, a specificity that became his hallmark and distinguishes him somewhat from the other new biographers, and from Strachey in particular. Out of the eleven full biographies written between 1923 and 1965, nine were devoted to poets and novelists. From the 1930s onwards Maurois relentlessly sought the way to blend

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<sup>29</sup> "I know from experiment that my work as a novelist, when I was writing *Climats*, was not very different from my work as a biographer when I wrote *Adrienne de la Fayette*," André Maurois, *Soixante ans de ma vie littéraire*, Paris, Pierre Fanlac, 1966, p. 44.

<sup>30</sup> "The New Biography," in *The Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, Leonard Woolf (ed.), London, The Hogarth Press, 1967, p. 233-234.

<sup>31</sup> In his preface to *Ariel* Maurois admitted that he aimed at "working like a novelist rather than like a historian or a critic," *Ariel or the Life of Shelley*, trans. Ella D'Arcy, New York, D. Appleton & Co, 1924, p. 7. It is therefore not surprising that Georg Lukács should have quoted this very preface in *The Historical Novel* "to highlight the principles of the mixture between Novel and History, a mixture that is objectively neither a novel nor a history," quoted by Judith Kauffmann, *Aspects d'André Maurois biographe*, Paris, Ophrys, 1980, p. 43. In *Ariel*, Maurois contented himself with a few bibliographical references gathered at the end of the volume under the title "Note for the curious reader," *op. cit.*, p. 355. For details about the way the preface to *Ariel or Shelley's Life* misled some readers into thinking that they were about to read a "biographie romancée" ("a novelized biography"), see Joanny Moulin, "André Maurois or the Aesthetic Advantage of Biography over the Novel", *op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>32</sup> Even at the end of his life, in 1966, Maurois commented on his *Ariel* with mixed feelings, considering it as a failure.

<sup>33</sup> "The New Biography," *op. cit.*, p. 229.

harmoniously the life and works of his biographees. It is therefore not surprising that he should have admired Strachey who “[drew] his characters as a great novelist might, with an eye on the movements of the body, stressing an unconsidered remark and coming nearer and nearer to life with each recorded figure.”<sup>34</sup> On this point, there is another major difference between Maurois and Strachey: from *Eminent Victorians* to *Elizabeth and Essex* (through *Queen Victoria*) Strachey moved further from fact and closer to fiction, whereas Maurois’s path was from novelized biography towards more critical and more documented biographies. From his life of Proust on, he included end-page notes (although he was initially against the process)<sup>35</sup> and his next lives (those of Georges Sand, Victor Hugo, the three Dumas, Fleming, Madame de Lafayette and finally Balzac) were accompanied by hundreds of notes, precise references, complete bibliographies and indexes of names cited. Maurois refined his art and sought to give us readers what Woolf defined as “the creative fact, the fertile fact; the fact that suggest and engenders” in her 1938 essay entitled “The Art of Biography.”<sup>36</sup> Both Strachey and Maurois shared the idea that biography was “the most delicate and humane of all the branches of the art of writing,”<sup>37</sup> requiring the combined qualities of the historian, the social-scientist, the psychologist, and of the critic, never forgetting in the process that the main quality needed was the artistic vision<sup>38</sup>. Maurois in particular always kept in mind the well-known definition he gave in *Aspects of Biography* that “a beautiful portrait is at once a portrait resembling its subject and an artistic transference of reality.”<sup>39</sup>

Strachey’s influence on Maurois is perhaps best traced by looking at how Maurois introduced *Eminent Victorians* to French readers and by reading the theoretical writings of both writers in a cross-fertilizing way.

### **“Homo Biographicus”, method and subject matter: Maurois’ and Strachey’s “subtler strategies” or how the preface to *Eminent Victorians* inspired Maurois**

Strachey’s preface to *Eminent Victorian* started with the provocative statement that “[i]gnorance is the first requisite of the historian—ignorance which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits, with a placid perfection unattainable by the highest art.”<sup>40</sup> Maurois was also to stress the importance of the choices operated by the biographer: in his liminal note to *Olympio*, he explained that he had undertaken the synthesis of various documents so as to let the man surge out of them<sup>41</sup>. This means he had to discard a huge number of letters because “one needs to avoid burying the hero

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<sup>34</sup> Preface to *Victoriens Éminents*, *op. cit.*, p. 9, my translation.

<sup>35</sup> “I have been wary of end-page notes for a long time; but I have come to require them lately,” “L’Art de la biographie,” in Michel Droit, *André Maurois*, *op. cit.*, p. 137, my translation.

<sup>36</sup> Virginia Woolf, “The Art of Biography,” *The Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf*, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

<sup>37</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> See André Maurois: “I think biography is an important, beautiful and difficult literary genre, that is quite distinct from history or from the novel,” *Portrait d’un ami qui s’appelait moi*, Namur, Wesmael-Charlier, 1959, p. 65, my translation; or “I think a biography should be both a historian’s work and a work of art”, in Jacques Suffel, *André Maurois*, *op. cit.*, p. 96, my translation.

<sup>39</sup> *Aspects of Biography*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>40</sup> Preface to *Eminent Victorians*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> “J’ai entrepris de faire la synthèse de documents épars et d’en faire surgir un homme,” *Olympio ou la vie de Victor Hugo*, Paris, Hachette, 1954, p. 7, my translation.

under a mass of evidence.”<sup>42</sup> The metaphor of burial is common to Strachey’s indictment of the Victorian biography:

[T]hose two fat volumes with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead—who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyric, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design? They are as familiar as the *cortège* of the undertaker, and wear the same air of slow, funereal barbarism.<sup>43</sup>

Maurois insisted that once the research is over, the artist’s work starts: “the biographer’s duty is to know everything, not to use everything. He needs the courage to eliminate and the wisdom to choose.”<sup>44</sup> “Laying bare” was an obsession for both men<sup>45</sup>. Strachey meant to “lay bare the facts of the case as [he] understood them, dispassionately, impartially, and without ulterior intentions.”<sup>46</sup> Maurois also insisted that “general ideas” be verified by “fresh and independent research, conducted with care and without passion.”<sup>47</sup> His biographies are teeming with such expressions as “à la vérité,” “en vérité,” “à vrai dire,” “au vrai”<sup>48</sup> which are an index of this constant search for the biographical truth. Both biographers were avid researchers, but perhaps Maurois was the most conscientious scholar of the two. Maurois tracked down all the possible, hitherto unpublished documents relating to his subject<sup>49</sup> (private papers like correspondences, memoirs, the least scrap of personal reminiscence, manuscripts, sketches, but also all sorts of public records, police reports etc.), visited the places where his heroes and heroines had lived, (Nohant, George Sand’s home and Newstead Abbey, Byron’s home). It took him sometimes as much as three years to gather evidence, analyse the various documents he assembled and select them before he started writing. He lived in symbiosis with his characters for the duration of the gestation of the book. The danger was to collapse under the weight of all these accumulated documents, hence the necessity to select, and that was the moment when the biographer *cum* artist took over from the biographer *cum* historian and researcher. Adopting an artistic or poetic point of view was the crucial step helping the biographer to organise his data and equally helpful in case there were not enough documents at hand.

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<sup>42</sup> “En fait j’ai renoncé à introduire dans ce livre un grand nombre de lettres, en elles-mêmes intéressantes, parce qu’elles n’ajoutaient rien d’essentiel. Il faut se garder d’enterrer le héros sous les témoignages,” *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> *Eminent Victorian*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> “The Art of Biography,” in Michel Droit, *André Maurois*, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>45</sup> The fact remains that the “becoming brevity” mentioned by Strachey as one of the modern biographer’s first duty, “the brevity that excludes everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant” (Preface to *Eminent Victorians*, *op. cit.*, p. 7-8), is probably not Maurois’s first quality. Among his full-length biographies, only his *Voltaire* (1932) was a brief form, more in the style of Aubrey’s lives, but Maurois had mixed feelings about it. We may equally argue that except for his *Eminent Victorians* (and his various shorter portraits in biographical essays), Strachey also discarded the short form to the benefit of full-length portraits in his *Queen Victoria* and *Elisabeth and Essex*. Both biographers sometimes took liberties even with their own theory, although the unity between theory and practice is greater in Maurois’s works than in Strachey’s.

<sup>46</sup> *Eminent Victorian*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> André Maurois, *Aspects of Biography*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> “Truth to tell,” “truly,” “in truth”; for further examples see Judith Kauffmann, *Aspects d’André Maurois biographe*, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>49</sup> It is now well known that his second wife, Madame Simone André-Maurois, was a collector of unpublished documents by some of the greatest French writers, which means that Maurois had at his disposal quite a variety of documents which he could exploit at home, at leisure.

In that case, the biographer needed more than ever to resort to his “sentimental intelligence”<sup>50</sup> in order to feel like the biographee. The truth of the subject mattered less than the poetic truth which implied a certain manipulation of facts and of the reader, to make him/her see the character the way the biographer saw him. On this point both Strachey and Maurois pretended to let their readers decide about the plight of their biographees and yet firmly guided them into interpreting this way or another. Maurois compared Strachey to a prestidigitator letting us choose from a set of cards, having beforehand artfully disposed them to guide our choice<sup>51</sup>. Maurois did the same in his biographies, guiding us and asking us to make an effort to imagine a character’s mindscape in a given situation<sup>52</sup>. This is highly paradoxical given that “the courageous search for truth” was considered to be the first characteristic of modern biography by Maurois<sup>53</sup>. The same ambiguity is to be found in Strachey’s formulation: “I have sought to examine and elucidate certain fragments of the truth which took my fancy and lay to my hand,”<sup>54</sup> which is in complete contradiction with the motto extolled at the end of the preface: “Je n’impose rien; je ne propose rien: j’expose.”<sup>55</sup> Both Maurois and Strachey tried to solve this paradox: poetic truth and factual truth are sometimes inimical. Maurois certainly agreed with Strachey that the second duty for the modern biographer was to “maintain his own freedom of spirit.”<sup>56</sup> The choice of the biographee most often resulted from this great freedom of spirit.

In his Preface to the French translation of *Eminent Victorians*, Maurois presented *Eminent Victorians* as a “small book which made a great stir” in England, and as “a challenge” because the characters presented by Strachey were “all almost sacred, already embalmed by legend.” Maurois admired the originality of Strachey’s method, which consisted in rejecting the legend and searching for the lively and fallible human being mummified by Victorian biographers. Maurois hailed Strachey first and foremost for his choice of biographees, a choice commented upon by Strachey in 1918:

I have attempted through the medium of biography to present some Victorian visions to the modern eye. They are, in one sense, haphazard visions—that is to say *my choice of subjects* has been determined by no desire to construct a system, or prove a theory, but by simple motives of convenience and of art.<sup>57</sup>

Maurois and Strachey were linked by a fascination for their immediate predecessors, the Victorians for Strachey, the Romantics for Maurois (Voltaire, Boswell, Disraëli, Edward VII, were portrayed both by Maurois and Strachey). They were particularly attracted to great statesmen and politicians (Disraëli, Edward VII, Napoleon, Lyautey, Eisenhower for Maurois, Louis XIV, Warren Hastings, Cromwell, Captain Gordon, Essex, for Strachey) who were not treated as “mere symptoms of the past.”<sup>58</sup> The principle that

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<sup>50</sup> *Aspects of Biography, op. cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>51</sup> “Choisissez vous-mêmes, nous dit le prestidigitateur en nous tendant son paquet de cartes, mais il a pris grand soin de le disposer pour diriger notre choix,” Maurois about Strachey in *Magiciens et Logiciens, op. cit.*, p. 238.

<sup>52</sup> “Essayons d’imaginer [...]” “Ne l’imaginez pas [...],” see Judith Kauffmann, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>53</sup> *Aspects of Biography, op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>54</sup> Preface to *Eminent Victorians, op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6; emphasis mine.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

biography should be the story of a unique individual (in opposition to history which is interested in the story of societies and groups) guided them both. If one considers the whole of their biographical production (including *Books and Characters*, *Characters and Commentaries*, *Portraits in Miniature* for Strachey) one cannot but wonder at the diversity of men and women our two biographers were drawn to. They had a predilection for prolific writers (Proust, Balzac, Hugo, Byron for Maurois, Shakespeare, Molière, Racine, Rousseau for Strachey) and this went together with the idea that the character chosen needed to be a man or woman of action<sup>59</sup>, having left behind them “signs of their actions,” such as letters, diaries or testimonies of friends<sup>60</sup>. Women were an object of study and fascination no less than men as attested to (on Maurois’s side) by the lives of George Sand and of Madame de La Fayette and by his portraits of Elisabeth Browning, Emily Dickinson, and on Strachey’s side, by his portraits of Mademoiselle de Lespinasse, Madame Du Deffand, the Electress Sophia, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu among others, and the full-length portraits he devoted to two queens<sup>61</sup>. They also shared an admiration for the romantic poets (Shelley and Byron for Maurois, Robert and Elisabeth Browning, Coleridge and Wordsworth for Strachey). Whether they chose their subjects because they despised them or admired them, or sometimes by chance for Maurois, they insisted on the complexity of personality, which was defined by Maurois as the second characteristic of modern biography. Both meant to give an impression of life, and understood that biography being the story of “the evolution of a human soul,”<sup>62</sup> it should benefit from the advances made by psychology and psychoanalysis. Maurois, who was not naturally inclined to the examination of the hidden motives of his characters, was encouraged by his friend Charles Du Bos to go deeper into the analysis of his characters’ feelings. Although he thought that the Freudian system had been pressed too far and that perhaps too much emphasis had been put upon the unconscious, Maurois followed Strachey’s advice to “shoot a sudden, revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hitherto undivined.”<sup>63</sup> On this score, they followed the same path towards more psychological insight, even if Strachey was naturally readier to acknowledge the need to search the childhood of his characters to find the hidden motivations of the adult’s behaviour. His portrait of Florence Nightingale is particularly relevant to this point, but the same applies more or less to his four eminent Victorians and his two queens. Unlike Strachey, Maurois admitted that he chose his characters because he felt a real sense of kinship with them. Sometimes there was more than kinship and a real identification process took place: “Biography is a means of expression when the author has chosen his subject in order to respond to a secret need in his own nature [...]. To a certain extent it will be autobiography disguised as Biography.”<sup>64</sup> Maurois confessed he was attracted to Shelley “because his conflicts somewhat resembled [his] own, with due regard to proportion.” He added “*Ariel* was the true story of Shelley’s lost illusions and of my own.”<sup>65</sup> Here we may

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<sup>59</sup> This is one the three main characteristics of *Homo Biographicus* according to Maurois, the other two being a precarious existence and an exceptional destiny; see *Aspects of Biography*, *op. cit.*, p. 202-203.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>61</sup> Both Maurois and Strachey were conquered and seduced by one of their feminine biographees: the fascination exerted by Queen Victoria upon Strachey may be compared to that exerted by George Sand upon Maurois.

<sup>62</sup> *Aspects of Biography*, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>63</sup> Preface to *Eminent Victorians*, *op. cit.*, p. 6. See also André Maurois, *Mémoires*, Paris, Flammarion, 1970, p. 157.

<sup>64</sup> *Aspects of Biography*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>65</sup> By that he meant among other things an unfortunate first wedding; see “Le Biographe et ses

argue again that Strachey and Maurois moved in opposite directions: if Maurois's biography of Shelley (his first) was the most autobiographical of all, Strachey's most autobiographical biography was his last. Holroyd said about *Elisabeth and Essex* that "Strachey was unfolding what, in places, almost amounts to an imaginary love-affair with himself."<sup>66</sup> So, whereas Strachey moved from subjects he did not feel any empathy for, towards a queen who mesmerized him, Maurois moved from a subject he felt very close to, psychologically speaking, to subjects he felt more remote from, hence the shift in his career from empathetic biography to more critical biography. Maurois considered that Strachey was the great master of the magnificent poetry of life, precisely because he had a great style and a unifying vision of his characters:

Strachey's style is finely shaded, to the point sometimes of preciousness. He sketches, he tests, he scores out, he glosses. He masters the indefinite and the complex [...]. Nearly always his dissections lead, not to conclusions but to questionings. His favourite words seem to be *subtle* or *perhaps*. [...] Like Proust Strachey is above all a poet, *i.e.* a man who, by fresh images, can recreate a living world.<sup>67</sup>

This could have been a description of his own style: Maurois's biographies are strewn with images, rhetorical questions; his drafts attest to the care he took to choose the right formula. Both Maurois and Strachey were aware that characters, to be made alive, should be stylized (but not oversimplified). Therefore, Maurois built his characters round one guiding and unifying theme (Ariel, Lélia, Don Juan, René, Prometheus, Olympio). In Shelley's *Life* the air and the water are used as metaphors of the aerial element constitutive of the man and of his poetry. In Disraëli's life, it is his attraction to flowers and nature that becomes the man's defining trait. Byron is first identified to his Childe Harold and then to Don Juan, Victor Hugo to the Titan Olympio, the three Dumas are also associated to Titans, and Balzac will be Maurois's Prometheus: like Strachey then, Maurois consistently used Titanic metaphors<sup>68</sup>, but unlike him, he did not undermine them with irony. His tone towards his biographees was most often one of gentle humour and soft irony, he was a benevolent and amused witness of his biographees's faults and failures, adopting Strachey's attitude towards the Queen in *Queen Victoria* rather than Strachey's utterly ironic tone in *Eminent Victorians*. But like Strachey he considered it his duty to paint the weaknesses of his characters, as much as their virtues, never forgetting in the process to insist on details and anecdotes. Maurois admired the slight

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personnages," *op. cit.*, p. 6. And in *Aspects of Biography* he came back at length on his motivations to write Shelley's life: "I felt that to tell the story of his life would be in some measure a deliverance for myself [...]. I don't like the book any longer. In my eyes it is spoilt by an ironic tone which came from the fact that the irony was aimed by myself at myself. I wanted to kill the romantic in me; and in order to do so, I scoffed at it in Shelley, but I loved it while I scoffed [...]. Biography is a means of expression when the author has chosen his subject in order to respond to a secret need in his own nature. It will be written with more natural emotions than any other kind of biography, because the feelings and adventures of the hero will be the medium of the biographer's own feelings; to a certain extent it will be autobiography disguised as biography," *Aspects of Biography, op. cit.*, p. 121-125.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: The Years of Achievement, 1910-1932*, London, Heinemann, 1968, p. 601.

<sup>67</sup> Maurois, *Prophets and Poets, op. cit.*, p. 223-224.

<sup>68</sup> See Ira Bruce Nadel, "Strachey's 'Subtler Strategy': Metaphor in *Eminent Victorians*," *Prose Studies*, vol. 4, n° 2 (1981), p. 150 or *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form, op. cit.*, p. 162. Nadel shows how Strachey consistently uses "the Fates, Chaos, Demi-Gods and Prophets" to enhance his characters' stature before he undermines them with irony.

touch of caricature this insistence on details could bring forth:

The biographer must not lose sight of the fact that the smallest details are often the most interesting. The part played by the body in helping to form our ideas of the Character of our acquaintances should always be borne in mind [...]. Mr. Strachey plays this game admirably.<sup>69</sup>

### Conclusion: Strachey's and Maurois' legacy

Strachey's and Maurois' contributions to biography, although different in scope, attest the same effort to grapple with "the most delicate and humane of all the branches of the art of writing." They were well aware that "it is perhaps as difficult to write a good life as to live one,"<sup>70</sup> which led Maurois to claim pessimistically that *Homo Biographicus* was a species in process of disappearance<sup>71</sup>. Strachey's posthumous fame and the amount of literature and criticism devoted to his *œuvre* seem to have proven him wrong. Strachey was, for good or worse, universally acclaimed as a debunker, a revolutionary, and his name does not fail to appear even in the most recent analyses of the history of biography. The international critical reception of Strachey, then and now, has universally acknowledged the revolutionary value of his *œuvre* and of his *Eminent Victorians* in particular<sup>72</sup>.

Maurois's fame when he died (1967) was great, he was honoured with a national ceremony in the courtyard of the French Academy, aptly buried in the place where books are worshipped, books which were Maurois's only religion during his life time. But Jack Kolbert, the Professor who most contributed to his fame in the United States thanks to a very well-documented and insightful 700-page biography, noticed that ten years after his death, Maurois had more or less fallen into oblivion. A major exhibition and colloquium organized at the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1977 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of his death temporarily resurrected Maurois and Professeur Kolbert kept hoping that the decline of Maurois's fame would only be temporary. It is rather sad to notice that even the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death (2017) went by very discreetly, without any national commemorations. As Joanny Moulin says, "in this posthumous *traversée du désert*, Maurois has retained some attention abroad, but remains cold-shouldered at home."<sup>73</sup>

Maurois has received unequal attention from 20<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Saxon criticism: Marston Balch treats him in a rather allusive way in his *Modern Short Biographies and Autobiographies* (1935). John A. Garraty in *The Nature of Biography* (1957) discusses Sainte-Beuve and his intuitive portraits, he also mentions Gamaliel Bradford and Emil

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<sup>69</sup> *Aspects of Biography, op. cit.*, p. 64. The way Strachey used one often physical (and sometimes false) detail of his biographees to draw conclusions about his/her character has often been commented upon: Dr. Arnold's legs, which were "shorter than they should have been," are an excellent case in point, Strachey, *Eminent Victorians, op. cit.*, p. 194.

<sup>70</sup> Both quotations from the preface to *Eminent Victorians, op. cit.*, p. 7. Carlyle was the first to insist that a well-written life was almost as rare as a well-spent one. See Maurois, *Aspects of Biography, op. cit.*, p. 204.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>72</sup> Reviewing *Orlando* in 1929, Raymond Mortimer said about Woolf and Strachey: "She has revolutionised fiction, and he, biography...", "Mrs Woolf and Mr Strachey," *The Bookman*, vol. 68, n° 6 (February 1929), p. 625.

<sup>73</sup> "André Maurois or the Aesthetic Advantage of Biography over the Novel," *op. cit.*, p. 76.

Ludwig (both contemporaries of Maurois) but fails to mention Maurois at all. Ira Bruce Nadel mentions him only very briefly in his *Biography, Fiction, Fact and Form* (1984), and Maurois is equally absent from *The Troubled Face of Biography* edited by Eric Homberger in 1988 and from John Batchelor's *The Art of Literary Biography* (1995). Even thorough studies devoted precisely to the "New Biography" like Ruth Hoberman's *Modernizing Lives: Experiments in English Biography, 1918-1939* (1987), mention Maurois's role only very cursorily. In a similar way, Laura Marcus briefly discusses Maurois's "essential task as a search for the thematic unity and harmony of the life he recounts, claiming that this is not an imposed but a natural aesthetics,"<sup>74</sup> but the reference is rare enough to be mentioned. Maurois is altogether absent from Dale Salwak's *The Literary Biography* (1996). The last books devoted to him in France are an academic study which mentions him as a moralist more than as a biographer<sup>75</sup> and a biography devoted to the three women he loved and shared his life with by Dominique Bona, a French Academician<sup>76</sup>. Yet Maurois' *œuvre* and his role in the renewal of biographical studies were given due attention in Daniel Madelénat's 1984 study of biography: not only did Daniel Madelénat comment on Maurois' biographies at length but he also adopted the critical terminology created by Maurois (notably the phrase "*Homo Biographicus*")<sup>77</sup>. Reading Madelénat also helps us understand that Maurois's fall into oblivion was mainly contextual: on looking back at the years between the 1930s and 1984, Madelénat could only note that biography was particularly gifted at surviving in a hostile cultural environment<sup>78</sup>. In 2004, Denis Maraval, then director of publications at Fayard, argued that historical biography had gone through a *traversée du désert* from the late 1930s to the 1970s, which he explained in part by the fact that the *École des Annales* had imposed a positivist reading of history which gave pride of place to the study of great collective movements to the detriment of the individual. Bartholomé Bennassar, who studied history in the 1950s, adds that, from his experience, most academics at the time deterred their students from reading biographies of the kind Maurois had written<sup>79</sup>. It looks as if the biographical genre was truly exhausted then, a phenomenon charted in 2010 by Vincent Broqua and Guillaume Marche in their study aptly entitled *L'Épuisement du biographique?* The other cause of biography's further marginalization in all the other fields of Human Sciences during the 1960s and 1970s was the advent of structuralism. Barthes's 1968 article "La Mort de l'auteur" sounded the death knell of the cult of heroes, already adumbrated right after the Second World War by American critic M. C. Beardsley's concept of "intentional fallacy" (as Frédéric Regard and Robert Dion remind us)<sup>80</sup>. So it would appear that the reason why Maurois was considered as a master

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<sup>74</sup> Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1994, p. 92.

<sup>75</sup> Thierry Jacques Laurent, *André Maurois, moraliste*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2016.

<sup>76</sup> *Il n'y a qu'un amour*, Paris, Grasset, 2003.

<sup>77</sup> There are more than 25 references to Maurois' works in Daniel Madelénat's *La Biographie*, Paris, PUF [coll. "Littératures modernes"], 1984; see the Index p. 219. *Homo biographicus* is mentioned in Madelénat's conclusion, p. 207.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>79</sup> Bartholomé Bennassar, "La Biographie: un genre historique retrouvé," in Kmar Bendana, Katia Boissevain, and Delphine Cavallo (eds.), *Biographies et récits de vie*, Tunis, Institut de Recherche sur le Maghreb Contemporain, 2005, p. 89-95, [http:// books.openedition.org/irmc/624](http://books.openedition.org/irmc/624), accessed on 28 March 2018.

<sup>80</sup> Frédéric Regard and Robert Dion, *Les Nouvelles Écritures biographiques: la biographie d'écrivain dans ses reformulations contemporaines*, Lyon, ENS Editions, 2013. See in particular the introduction, "Mort et vies de l'auteur," Robert Dion et Frédéric Regard, p. 7-23.

of biography during his lifetime, was precisely the reason why he was forgotten after his death: his interest in writers' lives at a time when it became quite unnecessary to search into the writer's life to understand the text. If Strachey wrote *Eminent Victorians* at a propitious moment, Maurois died at an inconvenient one. Maurois's death in 1967 almost coincided with the May 1968 movement, days of social unrest that changed the intellectual make up of France and turned the moral and political conservatism that Maurois represented into a thing of the past<sup>81</sup>. So Strachey, who was considered as a rebel at heart and as a debunker, a member of the Bohemian set of the Bloomsbury Group, has enjoyed an unparalleled longevity, whereas Maurois, who belonged to the Bourgeois establishment and represented both a capitalist figure and a classicist literature, has been forgotten. History likes dissenters and revolutionaries, but there are signs that things might change: François Dosse in his *Le Pari biographique* devotes a number of pages to Maurois in the first chapter, entitled "La Biographie, un genre impur," and in his preface to the 2011 edition of his book claims that such writers as Yannick Haenel, Gilles Leroy and Jean Echenoz but also J. M. Coetzee take after André Maurois or Stefan Zweig. He also quotes Abel Gerschenfeld, the director of literary publications at Laffont (after years at Flammarion), who claims that the distinction between Anglo-Saxon biography and French biography is justified, arguing that "French Biography is André Maurois"<sup>82</sup>: this distinction between the English tradition of biography and the French one is perhaps another factor which caused Maurois some harm—I wonder if seeing Maurois as the representative of the French Tradition is not the source of a misunderstanding and a misreading of his works. He was in fact in between the two traditions, torn between his admiration for the English "New Biographers" and his own natural French tradition of the Belles-Lettres. In 1978, Claude Monet devoted his PhD dissertation to "André Maurois et l'apprentissage de la biographie: les biographies anglaises (1923-1930)" and in his 1995 study, Peter France noticed how English biography was indebted to André Maurois, praising the aerial elegance of Maurois who never forgot to ferociously select his material in order to keep life "lifelike."<sup>83</sup> Could Maurois's biographies have been too English for the French? Robert Dion and Frédéric Regard date the advent of what they call "the new French biographies" to the late 1980s or early 1990s, which means that between the advent of the New Biography in the 1920s and 1930s in England to the advent of the new biographies in France, more than half a century has elapsed, a very long purgatory indeed. Interestingly, what this shows is the extraordinary resilience of a genre, which accomplishes revolutions and whose cyclical pattern of thriving and waning proves that like the phoenix, biography has the ability to be reborn out of its ashes. Dosse, Dion, Regard, Montluçon and Salha, Ferret and Mercier-Faivre can only testify to biography's

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<sup>81</sup> See Thierry Jacques Laurent, *André Maurois, moraliste*: Laurent analyses the reasons why Maurois's fame and reputation declined so soon after his death. According to him, Maurois embodied "attachment to Bourgeois humanism and classical culture, values that were rather denigrated and became outmoded in the second half of the twentieth century," *op. cit.*, p. 1, p. 108. Joanny Moulin explains the misunderstanding around Maurois's figure and work in similar terms. He says Maurois "was thought to have been an 'académique,' a writer of the old school," and that was a "capital sin in the days of the 'nouveau roman,'" "André Maurois, or the Aesthetic Advantage of Biography over the Novel," *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>82</sup> "La biographie à la française, c'est André Maurois, des biographies à la hussarde, c'est enlevé, l'essentiel est dans l'atmosphère, la fresque, l'écriture," Abel Gerschenfeld quoted by François Dosse, Preface, *Le Pari biographique: écrire une vie* [2005], Paris, La Découverte [coll. "Poche"], 2011.

<sup>83</sup> Peter France, "Histoire littéraire et biographie: le modèle britannique," in Claude Pichois, Marc Fumaroli, Sylvain Menant (eds.), *L'Histoire littéraire hier, aujourd'hui et demain, ici et ailleurs, Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* [Colloque du Centenaire], Paris, Armand Colin, 1995, p. 96, p. 100.

incredible vitality<sup>84</sup>. Far from being exhausted, it remains a timely means of exploration of the human mind and of any given society. Maurois's insights into the inherent questions of fact vs fiction, biography vs autobiography, art vs science prove to be particularly enlightening today, when writers' biographies are all the rage, in France and abroad. More than just as a satellite of the New Biography and of Strachey then, Maurois deserves to be seen as a star in the firmament of biography, an inspiration in his own right.

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<sup>84</sup> Anne-Marie Montluçon and Agathe Salha also date the renaissance of fictional biography to 1984, *Fictions biographiques, XIX<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Toulouse, Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2007, p. 9. See also the introduction to *Biographie & politique: Vie publique, vie privée de l'Ancien Régime à la Restauration*, Olivier Ferret et Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre (eds.), Lyon, Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2014.

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