

**Joanny Moulin**

Aix Marseille univ, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence

## **André Maurois, or the Aesthetic Advantage of Biography over the Novel**

André Maurois (1885-1967) is today a largely forgotten French writer, and somewhat unjustly so, or rather for a reason that pertains more to French literary history than the intrinsic literary value of his oeuvre. In 1918, in his preface to *Eminent Victorians*, Lytton Strachey wrote: ‘The art of biography seems to have fallen on evil times in England. We have had, it is true, a few masterpieces, but we have never had, like the French, a great biographical tradition; we have had no Fontenelles and Condorcets, with their incomparable *éloges*, compressing into a few shining pages the manifold existences of men.’<sup>1</sup> For a Frenchman today, this reads like a surprising paradox, for we are rather under the impression that, unlike the English, the French have never had a great biographical tradition: we have never had a Walton and an Aubrey, a Johnson and a Boswell, a Carlyle and a Lytton Strachey. But we have had a Maurois. A contemporary of Lytton Strachey and the New Biography movement in Britain, Maurois, in his 1928 Clark lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, gave a seminal reflection on modern biography, *Aspects of Biography*, in the wake of E. M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*, at a time when the theory of the novel was still inchoate. Overall Maurois’s oeuvre comprises no fewer than eighteen biographies of French and English writers, political and historical figures, as well as one of the scientist Sir Alexander Fleming. Toward the end of his life, Maurois devoted most of his energy to writing biographies, as if both he and the public had finally recognized that this was the genre in which he was making his most significant contribution to literature. Because he was a member of the French Academy, and something of an official public figure, Maurois is often thought to have been an ‘*académique*,’ a writer of ‘the old school,’ a capital sin in the days of the ‘*nouveau roman*,’ the theoreticians that ruled the roost for two decades after his death having little time and scant admiration for biography. However, this has occulted the fact that his biographies, unlike his novels, are far from ‘*académiques*,’ but on the contrary have brought new life to the genre, by approaching biography as a form of art, thus setting the trend for what is sometimes called ‘*biographie à la française*,’ as distinct from the more sedate and longer forms of historiography favoured in Britain and America. This article proposes to do justice to Maurois’s achievement as an innovative biographer, rereading his major biographies in the light of his theoretical reflections in *Aspects of Biography*, but also in *Destins exemplaires* and *Mémoires*, so as to cast a new light on the literary value of these undervalued works, that are still to this day such a pleasure to read.

When Maurois died on 12 October 1967, he so embodied the ‘great’ French writer, that his death made headline news in the major newspapers, both in France and abroad, especially in America, where during World War II he had taken refuge as a partly self-appointed cultural ambassador of France to the American people, and where

---

<sup>1</sup> Giles Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1918, p. viii.

he had made numerous lecture tours ever since the nineteen-thirties. Many high officials attended his state funeral, the first that had ever taken place in the courtyard of the French Academy; the quasi-military rituals of the national institution took the place of a religious ceremony. The inscription on his tombstone in the cemetery in Neuilly simply reads: ‘*André Maurois, de l’Académie française, Grand-Croix de la Légion d’honneur, 1885-1967,*’ his official name from 1947 onwards. A horizontal line makes clear that the little cross underneath is related only to the name which his second wife chose for herself, and under which she was buried next to him: ‘*Simone André-Maurois 1894-1967,*’ appending the first name to the second with a hyphen; then, separated from Simone’s by another line, comes the name of Émile and Janine’s son: ‘*Gérald Maurois 1920-1986.*’

A member of the *Académie française* since 1938, he was the ‘*immortel*’ par excellence: a man of letters on whom honours had been continuously poured since he had become famous overnight, at the end of World War I, with the best-selling novel *The Silences of Colonel Bramble* (1918), a lively fictional rendering of the colourful officers, typical of the British army, with whom he had been serving as an interpreter. Then, for half a century, Maurois would remain one of the most prolific writers in French literature, producing some ninety books and countless articles, lectures, reviews, speeches and other texts, under a name that he had chosen for himself:

Commandant de Castéja, our head of personnel, summoned me to Montreuil: ‘I find your book very funny, but you can’t publish it under your own name! [...] The English officers with whom you are living, or have lived, might recognize themselves and they might feel offended [...]. At last I resigned myself and chose the first name *André*, in memory of my cousin, killed in action, and *Maurois*, the name of a village near Cambrai, because I liked the melancholy sound of it [...] *André Maurois* [...] How strange and new these syllables then sounded to me!’<sup>2</sup>

As we listen for a brief moment to Maurois’s voice, in the *Mémoires* that he wrote towards the end of his life, his incorrigible romanticism jumps literally off the page. This is a sample of his style: choosing to dramatize the anecdote, to show rather than to tell, the rather conventional reverie of a lover of the French language, the French veteran who had fought in both World Wars, proud to belong to a family who had shed their blood for the fatherland, and who had chosen for himself a conspicuously French name. Thus, stepping into the *sanctum sanctorum* of French literature, he baptized himself, like Napoleon crowning himself Emperor with his own hands, and like a true romantic hero became the son of his own works, creating himself anew, very much as he would have created the character of a novel. Maurois’s original name was Émile Salomon Wilhelm Herzog, a name which probably should be pronounced *à la française*—/er’zog/—rather than *à l’allemande*—/’hertzog/—, for he was born into a Jewish family of Alsatian industrialists who, when Germany annexed Alsace and Lorraine by force of arms in 1870 (fifteen years before Émile was born), had chosen to

---

<sup>2</sup> ‘Le commandant de Castéja, notre chef du personnel, me fit appeler à Montreuil: “Je trouve votre bouquin très amusant, mais vous ne pouvez le publier sous votre nom !... Les officiers anglais avec lesquels vous vivez, ou avez vécu, pourraient se reconnaître et seraient froissés.” [...] Enfin je me résignai et choisis le prénom d’*André* en souvenir de mon cousin, tué à l’ennemi, et *Maurois*, nom d’un village proche de Cambrai, parce que j’en aimais la sonorité triste... *André Maurois*... Que ces syllabes alors me semblèrent étranges et neuves !,’ André Maurois, *Mémoires*, Paris: Flammarion, 1970, p. 132, my translation.

remove their woollen factory, workers and all, from Bischwiller to the little town of Elbeuf, near Caen, in Normandy. True, Herzog is also a common Yiddish name, yet ‘by his own admission his training in Judaism was minimal,’ and ‘he did not have a bar mitzvah ceremony that would have introduced him formally to the rites of Jewish manhood.’<sup>3</sup> Maurois was the reverse of a determinist: a man who wrenched himself free of his milieu to become whom he wanted to be by sheer force of will, surmounting all obstacles by hard work and constant exertion, just as, as a schoolboy, he had overcome a malformation of the spine to win the first prize in the annual gymnastics competition at high school. He had the mindset of the self-made man, and this no doubt explains in part his affinity with America. In fact, this can be traced back to the days of the philosophy classes in 1901 at the Lycée Corneille in Rouen, and the influence of his teacher Émile-Auguste Chartier, who was already famous under the name of Alain, the pen-name he had chosen for himself with reference to the fourteenth-century French poet Alain Chartier. Maurois remained very much Alain’s disciple and friend to the end. It was Alain who had advised him to go and work in his father’s factory, instead of training as a teacher at the *École Normale Supérieure*, which would certainly have been possible for such a brilliant pupil. ‘As a professor,’ Alain told him, ‘you will hardly see the world which, as a novelist, it would be your duty to create.’<sup>4</sup> The obvious close connection between life and literature that is at the heart of Maurois’s oeuvre—and the idea that life creates literature, and reciprocally that literature creates life—is rooted in, and sustained by, this elected affinity with the author of *Les Propos*. In their lifelong correspondence, Maurois found the encouragement and confirmation of a way of life that was at the same time a literary method.

Maurois had two wives: both of them Catholics. The first was Jane-Marie Wanda de Szymkiewicz, a young Polish-Russian aristocrat, familiarly known as Janine. Maurois, Pygmalion-like, paid for her education at Oxford before he married her. His frequent trips to England during these years were the root of Maurois’s Anglophilia. It was an unhappy marriage: Janine found life stifling in Elbeuf, and had adulterous affairs in Paris while Maurois was in the army during the First World War. She died of septicaemia in 1924, leaving Maurois a betrayed, but nevertheless bereaved widower with three young children.

Maurois’s novels are all autobiographical. *Les Discours du docteur O’Grady* (1922) is arguably a continuation in the vein of *Les Silences du colonel Bramble*; *Bernard Quesnay* (1922), a satirical rendering of his years as a captain of industry in his family business; but most strikingly, his second novel, *Ni ange ni bête* (1919) was an ‘autobiofiction’ *avant la lettre*, a transposition to his own milieu of the life of Percy Byssche Shelley:

Thus, as early as 1918, I had begun a second novel. Since my first visits to Oxford I thought with lively interest of a *Life* of the poet Shelley. It seemed to me that, if I wrote this *Life*, I could express in it the feelings that I had experienced and which were still troubling me. Like Shelley, under the influence of my youthful readings, I had become a doctrinaire, I had wanted to apply rational methods to my sentimental life. Like him, I had encountered living and sensitive material that would not bend to my logic. Like him, I had suffered and made other people suffer. [...] As I lived in Abbeville, without an English library, without any documents, and all the research necessary to write a biography, it was obviously

---

<sup>3</sup> Jack Kolbert, *The Worlds of André Maurois*, Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1985, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Professeur, vous ne verrez guère le monde que, romancier, vous auriez pour devoir de créer,’ Maurois, *Mémoires*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

impossible for me to do so until the war should be over. One day I had had the idea that it would be possible to use this real life to make a novel. Was it possible, with verisimilitude, to transpose the story of Shelley, Harriet Westbrook and Mary Godwin, into modern life? Would so much romanticism be acceptable outside the romantic period?<sup>5</sup>

Four years later, in 1923, after the end of the war had at last enabled him to do the necessary research in Britain, Maurois published his first biography: *Ariel ou la Vie de Shelley*. The book contains all the genius of Maurois's contribution to the genre of biography (Robert Kemp would later call him 'the Prince of biographers'—'*le prince des biographes*'—to nearly universal applause), but it also displays all the shortcomings and dangers of these innovations, and its problematic reception in some quarters casts a light on the pressures of criticism exerted on the genre. His friend Charles Du Bos advised him to write a preface to explain what he had wanted to do.

I followed his advice, and no doubt it was a mistake, for this brief preface gave rise, much against my will, to the absurd and dangerous expression '*biographie romancée*.' I had never used it; quite the contrary, I had said that a biographer has no right to invent either a fact or a speech, but that he can and must arrange his authentic materials like those of a novel, and give the reader this feeling of discovering the world through a hero, which is the true essence of the novel [*le véritable romanesque*].<sup>6</sup>

The passage is hard to translate, because '*biographie romancée*' is relevant to Maurois only if it means 'novelized' biography (in Bakhtin's sense of the term), rather than 'fictionalized' or 'romanticized' biography, and when Maurois writes '*le romanesque*' he means something like 'narrative discourse' (in Genette's sense), or the writing techniques of the novelist, rather than 'the romantic,' 'romance,' or even 'fiction.' Hence a crucial misunderstanding: Maurois had meant to vindicate the right of the biographer to use the forms of fiction in non-fiction, but the critics had inferred that this implied a departure from historical and factual truth, and that by indulging in the forms of the novel a biographer fell *de facto* under the suspicion of *imagining*, or fictionalizing the life of his subject. To deepen the confusion, Maurois had included no footnotes to reference his sources, and he had further innovated by using the hero as a strong focalizer: writing the life of Shelley as if from the point of view of Shelley himself, a posture that was further reinforced and rendered suspect by his personal identification with the poet, already exemplified in *Ni ange ni bête*.

---

<sup>5</sup> 'J'avais donc, dès avril 1918, commencé un second roman. Depuis mes premières visites à Oxford je pensais avec un intérêt très vif à une *Vie* du poète Shelley. Il me semblait que, si j'écrivais cette *Vie*, j'y pourrais exprimer des sentiments qui m'avaient éprouvés et qui me troublaient encore. Comme Shelley, devenu, sous l'influence de mes lectures de jeunesse, un doctrinaire, j'avais voulu appliquer à ma vie sentimentale des méthodes rationnelles. Comme lui, j'avais rencontré une matière vivante et sensible, qui ne se pliait pas à ma logique. Comme lui, j'avais souffert et fait souffrir. [...] Mais j'habitais Abbeville, sans bibliothèque anglaise, sans documents, et tout le travail de recherche nécessaire pour écrire une biographie me demeurerait évidemment interdit aussi longtemps que durerait la guerre. Un jour l'idée m'était venue qu'il serait possible de faire, de cette vie réelle, un roman. Pouvait-on, avec vraisemblance, transporter l'histoire de Shelley, de Harriet Westbrook et de Mary Godwin, dans la vie moderne? Tant de romantisme serait-il supportable hors de la période romantique?', *ibid.*, p. 142-3.

<sup>6</sup> 'Je suivis son conseil et sans doute eus tort car, de cette brève preface, naquit, bien malgré moi, l'absurde et dangereuse expression: *Biographie romancée*. Je ne l'avais jamais employée; au contraire j'avais dit qu'un biographe n'a le droit d'inventer ni un fait, ni un propos, mais qu'il peut et doit disposer ses matériaux authentiques comme ceux d'un roman et donner au lecteur ce sentiment de la découverte du monde par un héros, ce qui est le véritable romanesque,' *ibid.*, p. 155.

Edmund Gosse came to Maurois's rescue, along with other English luminaries of the New Biography movement, where Lytton Strachey was distinguishing himself by insisting in his own way on the importance of 'point of view' in life-writing. In spite of some scathing criticisms, and perhaps because of them, *Ariel* became a best-seller. In 1927, Maurois attracted similar criticism with *Disraeli*, yet another hero 'according to his heart' with whom he strongly identified: it was the story of a man of Jewish origin who by his talent and willpower reaches the highest rung of literary fame and political eminence. There were just four pages of bibliographical references in the incipit. In contrast, his two-volume *Byron* (1930), though just as novelized and readable a 'page-turner' as the previous two, was accompanied throughout by abundant footnote references to sources, chapter by chapter. Now the critics reproached Maurois, just as inappropriately, with having produced an academic thesis. As a matter of fact, over just seven years, Maurois had had a perceptible impact on the aesthetics and reception of the genre: now a biography was expected to read as pleurably as a good novel.

One of the copies of *Ariel* was dedicated 'To Mme Simone de Caillavet, who loves poets and deserves to love them.' Maurois had met Simone de Caillavet in 1924 when he was introduced to the literary salon held by her mother, Jeanne Pouquet, the widow of the playwright Gaston Arman de Caillavet. Simone was the granddaughter of Léontine Lippman, the mistress of Anatole France. These women were Parisian celebrities, and they also prided themselves on being literary characters: Léontine was allegedly one of the models for Madame Verdurin in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. According to Simone, Proust 'had an intermittent but tenacious childhood attachment to my mother. [...] He made her (in my view at least) the model for Gilberte Swann... And in his book I am for my part Gilberte's daughter, Mademoiselle de Saint-Loup.'<sup>7</sup> When, later on, Maurois expressed his radical disagreement with Proust's statement in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* that 'the author of the great books that we love is not the character who has loved, suffered and grown old, but a different being,'<sup>8</sup> he knew what he was talking about, for he had actually married one of Proust's literary characters.

To tell the truth, it seems to me quite impossible to dissociate the oeuvre from the author. The human being is all one. The creator of these moments of ecstasy is also the poor man of sordid moments and a man of everyday life. [...] The beauty of biography is precisely to show how, out of an apparently mediocre existence, a sublime work can spring. I have tried to save the *romanesque* of great existences. What does it mean? The *romanesque*, that is the gap between the provisional image of the world that every adolescent forms for himself, and the more adequate image that life reveals to him little by little. [...] That is exactly what I have tried to do in my biographies. If they have some merit, it is to reveal a society, a human group, slowly, piecemeal, as the hero himself discovers them. [...] I want the reader to feel sometimes that he is in Balzac's very workshop, rich with the same memories that he had, at the very moment of the lightening flash from which *Le Père Goriot* or *Une fille d'Ève* will emerge. If I have succeeded in doing so, if the reader participates a little in Balzac's life and Balzacian creation, then I have achieved my aim, then I know that my work is useful. For it is good for the soul to live with a great man and to admire him.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> 'Il a eu pour ma mère, dit-elle, une amitié d'enfance, intermittente mais tenace... Il a fait d'elle (pour ma part au moins) le personnage de Gilberte Swann... Et je suis, moi, dans son livre, la fille de Gilberte, Mlle de Saint-Loup,' *ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>8</sup> 'L'auteur des grands livres que nous aimons n'est pas le personnage qui a aimé, souffert, vieilli, mais un être différent,' *ibid.*, p. 441.

<sup>9</sup> 'Au vrai il me semble tout à fait impossible de dissocier l'œuvre de l'auteur. L'être humain est un. Le

When they were still courting, André says that Simone showed him her boxes of letters from Proust to her mother and to herself, written ‘in this rapid handwriting that I knew so well,’<sup>10</sup> and this obviously exerted a tremendous charm upon him. When they married in 1926, Simone brought to Maurois more than old money and the château of Essendérias in Périgord. This distinguished woman of letters brought him a literary pedigree, the symbolic capital of several generations of Parisian salons, a remarkable *bibliothèque* including her personal collections of autograph letters by French writers—precious archives for a biographer—and the total devotion of her own life to his literary career. The story of ‘André-Maurois’—with the hyphen, as Simone would discreetly signify when she adopted the name—was from then on the story of an exceptional literary couple: Simone did most of the research, collected documents, took stenographic notes, typed his manuscripts, proof-read his books, and saw to the publicity of the great writer who was for a large part her own creation.

This forty-year partnership produced *La Vie de Disraeli*, *Byron*, and *Lyautey*: the latter being based on Maurois’s personal friendship with Marshal Lyautey. Then *Tourgueniev*, *Voltaire*, *Édouard VII et son temps*, *Chateaubriand*, *À la recherche de Marcel Proust*, *Alain*, *Lélia ou la vie de George Sand*, *Olympio ou la vie de Victor Hugo*, *Les trois Dumas*, *Robert et Elizabeth Browning*, *La vie de Sir Alexander Fleming*, commissioned by the English scientist’s widow, *Adrienne, ou la vie de Madame de La Fayette*, based on the chance discovery of a box of letters written by La Fayette’s wife, and finally *Prométhée ou la vie de Balzac*.

By the time of Maurois’s death in 1967 he was universally acclaimed as one of the most famous French writers, and more particularly as France’s greatest biographer. His work amounted to a defence and illustration of biography as a literary genre in its own right. His major contribution to the theory of biography had been made in 1928 with the Clarke Lectures, published as *Aspects of Biography*, a title that echoed *Aspects of the Novel* by E. M. Forster, who had been invited to give the same series of lectures the year before. That was in the 1920s, when Mikhail Bakhtin, working on his theory of the novel in the U.S.S.R., could rightly complain that there existed as yet no adequate, *sui generis* theorization of the novel. Maurois’s other theoretical remarks on biography are scattered in his biographies themselves, and some other texts as well. They are appositely summed up in a short text, appended to Michel Droit’s short book, *André Maurois*, published by the Éditions universitaires in 1953.

‘Biography is an art, like the novel. This does not mean that a biography must be a novel.’<sup>11</sup> A biographer must be as thoroughly methodical and scientifically minded as

---

créateur des moments d’extase est aussi le pauvre homme des moments sordides et celui de la vie quotidienne. [...] Le beau de la biographie, c’est justement de montrer comment, d’une vie en apparence médiocre, peut jaillir une œuvre sublime. J’ai essayé de sauver le romanesque des grandes existences. Qu’est-ce que cela veut-dire? Le romanesque, c’est l’écart entre l’image provisoire du monde et des êtres que forme tout adolescent, et l’image plus adéquate que la vie lui révèle peu à peu. [...] Voilà exactement ce que j’ai essayé de faire avec mes biographies. Si elles ont un mérite, c’est de révéler une société, un groupe humain, lentement, au fur et à mesure que le héros lui-même les découvre. [...] Je veux que le lecteur se sente parfois dans l’atelier même de Balzac, riche des mêmes souvenirs que lui, au moment où s’opère cette fusion fulgurante dont sortiront *Le Père Goriot* ou *Une fille d’Ève*. Si j’y ai réussi, si le lecteur participe un peu à la vie de Balzac et à la création balzacienne, alors j’ai gagné, alors je sais que j’ai fait œuvre utile. Car il est sain de vivre avec un grand homme et de l’admirer,’ *ibid.*, p. 442.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Elle tira d’une boîte des papiers couverts de cette rapide écriture que je connaissais bien,’ *ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>11</sup> ‘La biographie est un art, comme le roman. Cela ne veut pas dire qu’une biographie doit être un roman,’ Maurois, ‘Textes inédits,’ in Michel Droit, *André Maurois*, Paris: Éditions universitaires, 1958, p. 137.

an academic research writer in the study of his sources, and he must provide evidence of everything he says in abundant yet elegant footnotes, but he must also have the talent of an artist to give aesthetic form to the presentation of the facts. 'The biographer's role is to make a character *live*.'<sup>12</sup> Like Lytton Strachey, Maurois advocates the necessity of selecting and eliminating, instead of making use of every single piece of documentation: a difficult art, for he must be able to find out and retain the Plutarchan detail, or what Virginia Woolf called the 'creative fact,'<sup>13</sup> that 'seems unimportant' and yet 'will suddenly illuminate the personage.'<sup>14</sup> For the overall plan of a biography, Maurois prescribes the 'natural construction' of the chronological order, ruling out as much as possible prolepsis, or flash-forward, and analepsis, or flashback, because 'In real existence, the successive aspects of a being reveal themselves slowly, and variable lighting lends relief to the figure.'<sup>15</sup> For him, the biographer must not 'impose on the personage a unity that his subject did not have.' For Maurois, a biography must not be didactic, and ought not to preach a particular thesis overtly. 'Aesthetics and ethics complement one another; they are not on the same plane. A didactic work is not a work of art.'<sup>16</sup> '*Biographies à thèse*' are 'boring and unconvincing.' The moral or ethical dimension must remain on the implicit level. In *Portrait d'un artiste qui s'appelait moi* (1959), Maurois went on to say that 'biography is a literary genre, important, beautiful, difficult, quite distinct from history and the novel.' Unlike history, it is centred on a human individual: 'biography is the story of the evolution of a human soul: history must be here, as for the portrait painter, the background against which he places his model.'<sup>17</sup> Much remains to be said about Maurois's style as a biographer: the infinite care with which he perfected his sentences, his poetical preoccupation with rhythm and images, his moralist's predilection for maxims and memorable aphorisms, his musical art of rhetorical composition, making much use of *leitmotive*—recurring themes forming diachronic clusters—and counterpoints. In this brief summary, we can make out the outlines of an aesthetics of biography, distinct from that of the novel, whereby the aesthetic experience becomes for the readers a modality and instrument of the quest for knowledge, in which the biographer invites them to follow in his footsteps.

'*L'œuvre biographique restera*'—the biographies will endure<sup>18</sup>—said Michel Droit to Jack Kolbert in private conversation. The greatness of Maurois, the most perennial part of his achievement, is undoubtedly his biographical opus, his firm placing of biography on the map of literature as a distinct literary genre. If perhaps Maurois's novels are '*académiques*'—not very innovative—, he was anything but an *academic*

---

<sup>12</sup> 'Le biographe a pour rôle de faire vivre un personnage,' *ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'The Art of Biography,' in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* [1942], e-artnow, 2013, l. 2161.

<sup>14</sup> 'Tout détail qui semble sans importance [...] est celui qui va soudain éclairer le caractère, comme une minuscule touche de couleur, ajoutée au dernier moment par un grand peintre, donne la vie au portrait,' *ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>15</sup> 'Dans l'existence réelle, les aspects successifs d'un être se révèlent lentement, et des éclairages variables donnent le relief à la figure,' *ibid*.

<sup>16</sup> 'L'esthétique et l'éthique se complètent; elles ne sont pas sur le même plan. Une œuvre didactique n'est pas une œuvre d'art,' *ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>17</sup> 'Je pense que la biographie est un genre littéraire, important, beau, difficile, tout à fait distinct de l'histoire et du roman. [...] La biographie est l'histoire de l'évolution d'une âme humaine; l'histoire doit être ici ce qu'est, pour le peintre des portraits, le fond sur lequel il place son modèle,' Maurois, *Portrait d'un artiste qui s'appelait moi*, Namur: Wesmael-Charlier, 1959, p. 65-66.

<sup>18</sup> Jack Kolbert, 'André Maurois à la recherche d'un genre: la biographie,' *The French Review*, No. 39.5 (April 1966), p. 671-683, p. 671-672.

writer; he was much more the artist than the theoretician, and so he has only laid the basis for a critique of biography in literary science. Nevertheless, his influence on modern biography to this day is undeniable; in France, many biographers obviously owe him much; in the United States too, biographers writing in the style of so-called ‘narrative history’ belong to the same family, although many American biographers today are perhaps more outspoken in their preference for what he would have called ‘*biographies à thèse*.’ On the other hand, the vast majority of biographers in Britain seem to be purposely driving on the other side of the road, jumping forward and backward with a vengeance to ‘impose on the personages a unity that they did not have,’<sup>19</sup> although their finely interlaced patterning of formulae, themes and motives may be viewed as a brilliant, highly sophisticated continuation of his contrapuntal clusters.

While Maurois was widely acclaimed at the time of his death in 1967, what remains something of a mystery is the reason why, a few years later, his star had already waned in the sky of French literature. The American scholar Jack Kolbert notes that in 1969, Marcel Arland, the now utterly forgotten successor to his seat in the French Academy, surprisingly broke with traditional protocol in his acceptance address: ‘in lieu of praise of Maurois, he expressed certain personal reservations about the latter’s true stature in the hierarchy of French letters.’<sup>20</sup> In 1977, the celebrations organized by the Bibliothèque Nationale for the tenth anniversary of Maurois’s death attracted little attention. In 1980, the Israeli scholar Judith Kaufmann published *Aspects d’André Maurois biographe* in Paris, with the school textbook publisher Ophrys. In 1985, on the occasion of the centenary of Maurois’s birth, the American Jack Kolbert published his remarkably well-informed and thoroughgoing study, *The Worlds of André Maurois* (Susquehanna University Press). In this posthumous *traversée du désert*, Maurois has retained some attention abroad, but remains cold-shouldered by his compatriots.

In 2003, Dominique Bona, *de l’Académie Française, a femme de lettres* and a biographer whom André Maurois would no doubt have considered ‘*selon mon coeur*,’ published an astonishing book, *Il n’y a qu’un amour*, with Grasset, Maurois’s historical publishing house. It is a biography in the lineage of André Maurois’s *Adrienne de La Fayette*, in which Bona makes use of his letters in the Bibliothèque Nationale to write a partial prosopography of the three women who counted most in Maurois’s life: Jane-Marie Wanda de Szymkiewicz (Janine), Simone André-Maurois née Simone de Caillavet, and Maria de Las Dolorès Garcia, the young Peruvian who seduced the elderly Maurois on his 1947 trip to Lima. This is a brilliant example of the novelized forms of innovative modern biography, demonstrating that, as British biographer Ruth Scurr puts it in her preface to *John Aubrey: My Own Life*, ‘Biography is an art form open to constant experiment.’<sup>21</sup> ‘*Soignez les personnages secondaires*’—‘Take good care of secondary characters’<sup>22</sup>—Maurois wrote, and indeed Bona has taken very good care of him, as a secondary character in this life-story of three women, in which she renders due homage to the remarkable literary career of Simone André-Maurois in the shadow of her great man. ‘*Je n’ai rien inventé*,’ writes Bona in an epilogue that resonates like an implicit vindication of Maurois’s aesthetics of biography:

---

<sup>19</sup> ‘Contentez-vous de cette construction naturelle, la seule vraie, et ne cherchez pas à imposer au personnage l’unité qu’il n’avait pas,’ Maurois, ‘Textes inédits,’ *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>20</sup> Jack Kolbert, *The Worlds of André Maurois*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> Ruth Scurr, *John Aubrey: My Own Life*, London: Vintage, 2015, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Maurois, ‘Textes inédits,’ *op. cit.*, p. 139.



I have invented nothing. All the characters in this book have existed and appear under their real names. The places are real: they can be looked up on maps. The dialogues, the descriptions, the portraits, the episodes, the anecdotes, as well as the chronology: everything is rigorously exact. In this narrative, I have invented nothing.<sup>23</sup>

In 2016, Thierry Jacques Laurent published *André Maurois, moraliste* (L'Harmattan), an academic book, that deserves to be welcomed as a comforting sign that the silences of French academia about André Maurois may be coming to an end. Laurent is not interested in Maurois the biographer: 'So it is of Maurois the moralist that I would like to speak, and nothing else.' For he considers that 'Maurois is a *philosophe* in the seventeenth-century sense: someone who proposes a form of wisdom and keeps religion at a distance.'<sup>24</sup> In this he is right on target, picking up on Kolbert's remark: 'I personally see Maurois as a kind of eighteenth-century *philosophe*.'<sup>25</sup> Very perceptively, Laurent lists the possible reasons why Maurois, like 'Anatole France, Roger Martin du Gard, or George Duhamel,' has undergone a 'relegation,' and perhaps a 'downgrading of his work to the rank of minor literature': Maurois, he says, embodies 'attachment to bourgeois humanism and classical culture, values that were rather denigrated and became outmoded in the second half of the twentieth century'<sup>26</sup>; his *belle-lettriste* style may look out of fashion; he has been excessively lionized by the hagiographic books of Michel Droit and Jacques Suffel. All this may be true, but it seems mistaken to say that Maurois is perceived as 'writing for the happy few,' although Laurent is right to suggest that he may be perceived as such. It is in fact the other way round: 'in fact he is a brilliant polygraph, or a "book machine,"' *'une machine à livres,'* as Simone André-Maurois would say, a phrase also used by Maurois himself in *Les Roses de septembre*, and echoed by Bona in *Il n'y a qu'un amour*: 'this man she had once furiously loved, but whom, for a long time now, she considered more as an associate and a book machine than as a lover.'<sup>27</sup> Maurois's main defect is that he was a graphomaniac: he wrote compulsively, and certainly he wrote too much. As a result, he is perceived as a vulgarizer, albeit one of the highest order. Maurois was undeniably a popular writer, just a little too popular perhaps. 'Let's add to this,' Laurent goes on to say, 'his moral and political conservatism (that May 68 was utterly to reject)'<sup>28</sup>—Essendérias castle and *la vie de château* of bygone days, which Henry James, in affectionate derision of Edith Wharton's undemocratic lifestyle, one generation before Maurois's, already liked to call 'shatter-life.'

Be that as it may, 1968 was also the year of Roland Barthes' 'The Death of the Author,' and of Jacques Derrida's *On Grammatology* and the philosophy of deconstruction, which brought about a landslide change of mindset. Kolbert sees

---

<sup>23</sup> 'Je n'ai rien inventé. Tous les personnages de ce livre ont existé et figurent sous leurs vrais noms. Les lieux sont réels; ils peuvent être vérifiés sur des plans, sur des cartes. Les dialogues, les descriptions, les portraits, les péripéties, les anecdotes, ainsi que la chronologie: tout est rigoureusement exact. Dans ce récit, je n'ai rien inventé,' Dominique Bona, *Il n'y a qu'un amour*, Paris: Grasset, 2003, e-book, l. 7474.

<sup>24</sup> 'C'est donc de Maurois moraliste que je voudrais parler, et uniquement,' Thierry Jacques Laurent, *André Maurois, moraliste*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016, e-book, l. 178; 'Maurois est un philosophe au sens du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle: quelqu'un qui propose une sagesse et tient la religion à l'écart,' *ibid.*, l. 2137.

<sup>25</sup> Kolbert, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

<sup>26</sup> Laurent, *op. cit.*, l. 108.

<sup>27</sup> 'Cet homme qu'elle avait jadis aimé furieusement mais que, depuis longtemps, elle tenait plus pour un associé et une machine à livres que pour un amant,' André Maurois, *Les Roses de septembre*, Paris: Flammarion, 1964, p. 67, et cf. Bona, *op. cit.*, l. 6960.

<sup>28</sup> Laurent, *op. cit.*, l.106.

Maurois as a *religious* heir of eighteenth-century philosophers, underlining that he was finally buried according to neither Jewish nor Catholic rites, but that he had a state funeral according to the rites of the *Académie*: his religion was Literature, his cult the cult of Great Men, his worship Hero-worship. His close identification with the subjects of his biographies is reminiscent of Loyola's spiritual exercises; then there is his insistence on telling the story of a life chronologically, so that the readers can contemplate the 'evolution of a human soul' as though through the eyes of the subject; all this is more than slightly ritualistic: it partakes of the wishful construction and maintenance of the romantic myth of the literary genius. Whether Barthes was, or more probably was not, among the huge crowd that attended Maurois's funeral, the author of 'La mort de l'auteur,' like everyone else, cannot have missed the newspapers' headlines, and Barthes's writing was indeed very much attuned to the spirit of the times.

### Bibliography

- Maurois, André, *Ariel ou la Vie de Shelley*, Paris: Ferenczi & Fils, 1923.  
—, *À la recherche de Marcel Proust*, Paris: Grasset, 1949.  
—, *Alain*, Paris: Domat, 1950.  
—, *Aspects de la biographie*, Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1935. *Voltaire précédé de Aspects de la biographie*, Paris: Grasset, 2005. *Aspects of Biography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1929.  
—, *Bernard Quesnay*, Paris: Grasset, 1928.  
—, *Byron*, 2 vol., Paris: Ferenczi & Fils, 1930. (*Don Juan ou la vie de Byron*, Grasset).  
—, *Destins exemplaires*, Paris: Plon, 1952.  
—, *Édouard VII et son temps*, Paris: Éditions de France, 1933.  
—, *La Vie de Disraeli* (1927)  
—, *La Vie de Sir Alexander Fleming*, Paris: Hachette, 1959.  
—, *Lélia ou la vie de George Sand*, Paris: Hachette, 1952.  
—, *Les Discours du docteur O'Grady*, Paris: Grasset, 1922.  
—, *Les Trois Dumas*, Paris: Hachette, 1957.  
—, *Lyautey*, Paris: Plon, 1931.  
—, *Mémoires*, Paris: Flammarion, 1970.  
—, *Ni ange ni bête*, Paris: Grasset, 1919.  
—, *Olympio ou la vie de Victor Hugo*, Paris: Hachette, 1954.  
—, *Portrait d'un artiste qui s'appelait moi*, Namur: Wesmael-Charlier, 1959.  
—, *Prométhée ou la vie de Balzac*, Paris: Hachette, 1965.  
—, *René ou la vie de Chateaubriand*, Paris: Grasset, 1938.  
—, *Robert et Elizabeth Browning*, Paris: Hachette, 1957.  
—, 'Textes inédits,' in Michel Droit, *André Maurois*, Paris: Éditions universitaires, 1958.  
—, *Les Silences du colonel Bramble*, Paris: Grasset, 1918.  
—, *Tourgueniev*, Paris: Grasset, 1931.  
—, *Voltaire*, Paris: Grasset, 1935. *Voltaire, précédé d'Aspects de la biographie*, Paris: Grasset, 2005.  
Barthes, Roland, 'The Death of the Author,' in *The Rustle of Language* [1983], trans. Richard Howard, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, p. 49-55.

- Bona, Dominique, *Il n'y a qu'un amour*, Paris, Grasset, 2003.
- Droit, Michel, *André Maurois*, Paris, Éditions universitaires, 1953.
- Kaufmann, Judith, *Aspects d'André Maurois biographe*, Paris, Ophrys, 1980.
- Kolbert, Jack, 'André Maurois à la recherche d'un genre: la biographie,' *The French Review*, No. 39.5 (April 1966), p. 671-683.
- , *The Worlds of André Maurois*, Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1985.
- Laurent, Thierry Jacques, *André Maurois, moraliste*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016.
- Proust, Marcel, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 13 vol., Paris: Grasset & NRF, 1913-1927.
- , *Contre Sainte-Beuve* [1908], Paris: Gallimard, 1954.
- Scurr, Ruth, *John Aubrey: My Own Life*, London: Vintage, 2015.
- Strachey, Giles Lytton, *Eminent Victorians*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1918.
- Suffel, Jacques, *André Maurois*, Paris: Flammarion, 1963.
- Woolf, Virginia, 'The Art of Biography,' in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* [1942], e-artnow, 2013.