

STRACHEY AND GUEDALLA;

AN ESSAY IN COMPARISON

CHARLES RITCHIE.

THE recent death of Lytton Strachey has come to many of his readers with almost the shock of a personal loss. It is not only that the world of letters has been deprived of one of its most brilliant ornaments, but the general reader has lost a guide of fastidious taste and one of the most delightful of literary companions. One had looked forward to exploring so much more territory in this stimulating company. The biographies that he might have written present such tantalizing possibilities. His last work, *Portraits in Miniature*, slight as it was, gave us a savour of the delights that we have missed. Throughout the book there are hints of the fresh fields in which he might have exercised his genius. He touches lightly on Mme. de Sévigné, has a few illuminating pages on Boswell, and in a witty anecdote reveals again the attraction which the personality of Voltaire has always had for him. The miniatures are perfect of their kind, but one sighs for the full length portraits which he was so superbly capable of giving us. His death is indeed both a disaster and a bitter disappointment, for his work was as small in output as it was uniformly distinguished in quality.

Although Strachey was an acute literary critic and a great master of the English essay, it is pre-eminently as a biographer that he will survive in literary history. He and Philip Guedalla may indeed be considered the high-priests of the post-war revival of the art of biography. The association of the two names is something more than accidental; for both men, so different in many respects, are primarily distinguished by their passionate interest in character, in the varieties of human personality seen against the background of history. History is the drop-curtain before which their characters perform their parts; and in so much as they are both concerned with personalities rather than historic tendencies, they are essentially biographers.

Between them, these two authors have rescued biography from the pompous mausoleum of dullness where it lay buried, and brought it into the stir and movement of the market-place. They have created a new literary fashion; and the extraordinary popularity of their work, as well as its literary importance, makes it

of some significance in interest to compare these two very different writers and to analyze, however slightly, the fascination which they have exercised over the reading public.

Of the two, Mr. Guedalla is far the inferior as a literary artist. His style, at its best brilliant, is, at its worst, one of the most distressing contortions of which the English language is capable. His pages are disfigured by a positive rash of epigrams. He seems to have set out to defy history to provide any event upon which he cannot coin a phrase. Of course he is clever—persistently, maddeningly, self-consciously, clever. But this craving to be forever titillating one's literary palate when spread over volumes of four or five hundred pages is sure to prove rather exhausting. After all, a seven-course dinner composed entirely of caviare will upset the strongest stomach. And one may be pardoned for finding that large quantities of Guedalla taken at a time produce a rather acute intellectual indigestion. Now this constant striving after effect is all the more unfortunate in that it interferes with one's appreciation of the qualities which underly his best work—his genuine originality of approach to historical problems, his essentially well balanced outlook, and his gift of vigorous narrative. He has above all a sense of the dramatic, a keen eye for effective externals, a capacity for flashing before one's eyes little scenes which seize upon one's mind with almost the vividness and sometimes the poignancy of a personal memory. Moreover, he has, of course, a very pretty wit—thus his description of Chesterton "wearing next to his skin the protective but somewhat bulky underclothing of a mediaeval gentleman with a taste for physical violence and a preference for his Jews under lock and key", or his picture of Voltaire "leading a dainty crusade against the theological inelegance of the Middle Ages". But Guedalla's wit has at times a curiously youthful flavour; and he wallows in felicitous phrases with something of the reckless abandon of the clever undergraduate. Nor is his occasionally rather naive self-satisfaction in his own intelligence a very reassuring quality in a historian. Moreover, he writes too much, and one suspects, too quickly; and his taste frequently betrays him. He has already fallen into irritating mannerisms, such as his habit of working certain words to death; and his mechanical use of certain tricks of style, originally effective, but now become slightly threadbare through indiscriminate usage. In his frantic desire to be readable, he sometimes arrives at a peculiar staccato tediousness all his own. This is particularly noticeable in his recently published life of Wellington, *The Duke*. It is in many respects a most remarkable work, covering an enormous

mass of documentary evidence with apparent facility. Mr. Guedalla has given us a penetrating study, not only of a man but of an historical period; and yet the book remains a disappointment. "His portrait" (Wellington's), says Mr. Guedalla in his preface, "richly deserves to hang in the great gallery of English prose". The work which follows is a distinct contribution to biography, a brilliant essay in history. It is as efficient in method as it is vigorous in presentation; but it is not great English prose. It is marred at every turn by the author's incessant striving after effect which in its turn produces a sense of strain in the reader. Moreover, and this perhaps is a bye-product of an over-emphatic style, there is a marked tendency to labour certain points in the narrative. For example, Mr. Guedalla assures us in his preface that Wellington had no great respect for crowds and "that the purely arithmetical basis of democracy failed to impress the Duke." It is well to be reminded of this, though most of us had suspected it already, but is it necessary to reiterate the statement on every occasion during Wellington's career in which he is faced with a democratic assembly or booed by a mob? Similarly, the biographer sees Wellington and Palmerston also as *emigres* from the eighteenth century who had lingered on into the new Victorian England, and from this point of view is able to explain their reactions to many current events. The point is an interesting one and was first clearly brought out by Mr. Strachey in the case of Lord Melbourne. It provides Mr. Guedalla with some fine effects, but it is reiterated with a persistency which in the long run becomes monotonous.

For many readers *The Second Empire* must remain his most satisfactory work. In that intensely interesting book, he displayed imagination, his exuberant literary high spirits, and his great sense of the dramatic. His *Palmerston* showed no decline from this high standard; but the novelty of his methods had somewhat worn off and one was able to examine a little more critically the quality of his writing. Moreover, as it was a longer book, it tended to show up the characteristic weakness of his style more clearly. In his numerous volumes of essays, and in his study of the United States, these weaknesses have become increasingly glaring. There is only too much evidence that Mr. Guedalla is thinking less and writing more, and his originality of phrase sometimes conceals a very shallow thought. Of his permanent place among historians, it is for the professional historian to speak. In certain academic circles, where the cult of the unreadable is firmly established, his very popularity at first agitated against him. He has been described as "unsound" or "superficial". The unsoundness of

his facts or his main conclusions remains, however, unproved, and he has gradually been recognized as a very able and suggestive historian, even by those who prefer their history in a less epigrammatic form.

If Mr. Guedalla's claims to be considered as an historian are more considerable than Mr. Strachey's, it must be admitted that Mr. Strachey entirely surpassed Mr. Guedalla as a writer. Indeed Lytton Strachey was a literary artist of the highest order. His style, characterized by the utmost flexibility, and with almost the easy charm of conversation, was nevertheless a delicate instrument in the hands of a great virtuoso, who made of it the perfect expression of his irony, his poignancy, and his penetrating analysis of his character, and who controlled it with the easy assurance of strength. Armed with this consummate literary ability, Mr. Strachey approached what was always for him the central and fascinating problem—that of the human personality. He chose as his material a variety of historical characters; and his descriptive genius, his great narrative gifts, and his varied knowledge enabled him to indicate a cultural or a physical background with the assurance of a master; but his fundamental interest was always the psychological one, and in this field his amazing subtlety manifested itself; for every shade of feeling, every bizarre and equivocal human relationship, gave him a fresh opportunity to display the sensitiveness of his perceptions and the delicate balance of his judgment. It was the publication of *Eminent Victorians* which first brought Mr. Strachey to the attention of a wide public. It had a *succes de scandale*. The outcry was enormous. The author was accused of malice, of gross inaccuracy, and an immoral desire to belittle the achievements and blacken the characters of the greatest figures of Victorian England. And indeed he had ventured on sacred ground. Florence Nightingale and General Gordon, to take two examples, had long been removed from all human criticism, and isolated in an atmosphere of chill piety which killed all intelligent interest in their motives and personalities. Mr. Strachey breathed life into these stereotyped figures, and at the same time penned an ironic foot-note to the Victorian Era which will not easily be lost among the more pompous memorials of that age. The fascination of the Victorians for him lay in their triumphant individualism and their abundant vitality. It was marvellous quarry from which to hew his human material.

Moreover, that age of magnificent certitudes and of great affirmations offered a superb foil to his ironical comment and his lively scepticism. The 18th century, which he knew so well that its atmos-

phere seemed at times his native air, was perhaps too congenial. It required the Victorianism in whose shadow he and his generation had grown up to arouse the full potentialities of that keen intelligence. Under the circumstances, it was natural, it was inevitable, that in the end he should be attracted by the central figure of the age, by the Queen herself. In his *Queen Victoria* he achieved his masterpiece, and made a great and permanent contribution to English prose. His interpretation of the Queen's personality was bound to give rise to controversy, nor did the accuracy of some of his historical facts escape criticism. But Mr. Strachey, whatever his historical shortcomings, presented in this work a study in personality which in its imaginative vigour is unsurpassed. Embellished though it is with irreverent anecdote and pointed comment, it is stupid to accuse the writer, as many critics did, of mere malice towards his subject. For indeed it is his sympathy, his comprehension and his humanity which lift the work out of the ruck of ordinary biography and make of it a masterpiece. Without these qualities, neither his piercing wit nor his flawless literary style would have sufficed to interpret the temperament of Queen Victoria. If this biography be considered, as I think it must be considered, Mr. Strachey's greatest work, what is to be said of *Elizabeth and Essex*, his fascinating experiment in a world so different from the Victorians? That it is a brilliant bit of work must of course be conceded at the outset. It contains passages in the author's best manner, such, for example, as his analysis of the Elizabethan temperament in the first chapter, in which with exquisite lucidity he reviews the psychological complexities of that most complex age. But taken as a whole the book is a failure, though a failure for which one must be eternally grateful to the author. It is a failure because, quite simply, Mr. Strachey fails to "make his characters live" for the reader. He clothes them in magnificent prose; he gives us portraits painted by a master; but we somehow remain unconvinced. The wizard has breathed upon his figures, but they do not move. Mr. Strachey was baffled by the Elizabethans; he expresses his bewilderment in that passage, already referred to, in which he examines the character of the age. The sense of unreality which he experienced in approaching the figures of the age communicates itself to the reader. Like the author, one is fascinated but bewildered. Nor is the style really suited here to his subject. That flexible, coloured and sophisticated language, so perfect an adornment to his account of the reign of Victoria, seems a little top-heavy when it is employed upon the age of the baroque. Moreover, one feels throughout

that he has allowed no niggling details of historical exactitude to stand in the way of an effective piece of writing. He is certainly effective; and yet, perhaps, it is one of Mr. Strachey's greatest claims to distinction that he succeeded in making Queen Victoria a more interesting figure than Queen Elizabeth. It was no small achievement.

Guedalla and Strachey have been fortunate in their public. They created a taste for biography which became a craze. Their sales must at times have come within measuring distance of the giddy heights attained by Mr. Edgar Wallace and Mrs. Elinor Glyn. But they have been cursed in their imitators. And no two writers are less susceptible of competent imitation. The secret of Mr. Strachey's serene ease in handling words does not come overnight; and Mr. Guedalla, who alas! is so often a parody of himself, is no model for the aspiring biographer. Yet some good work has been done which owes its inspiration to the demand which they created. Unfortunately the bad far outweighs the good. The volumes of cheap "debunking" of historical characters, loosely written, flashy, and liberally smattered with unfounded anecdotes and still-born epigrams, are still pouring from the press. Most of the great figures of history have already been exposed to the "new biography". The stock of major personalities having been exhausted, we may shortly expect a fine-combing of the minor statesmen of the nineteenth century (of whom, luckily, there is an almost endless supply); and failing any fresh information of the "love-life" of Napoleon, descriptions of the rococo enticements of court life in the smaller German principalities still abound. But the two great biographers who were indirectly responsible for so much bad writing have only paid the penalty for their exceptional talents. And when the fashion they have set passes, the best of their work will remain.