

“Epicurus’ Owne Sone”

Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography, Volume I: The Unknown Years (1880-1910), Volume II: The Years of Achievement (1910-1932), by Michael Holroyd, *New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968. 475 pp., 754 pp. \$21.95 the set.*

IF VIRGINIA WOOLF, as is alleged, reigned as Queen of Bloomsbury, Lytton Strachey reigned as King. The truth of this is fully confirmed by Michael Holroyd’s two-volume biography, which in scope, content, and execution is a superb literary monument, as fitting a memorial as any monarch could wish.

There are over a thousand pages in the two volumes, and under more ordinary circumstances it would be possible to endorse Professor Leon Edel’s assertion that, in contrast to Strachey’s gifts as a biographer, a “master of human character, of brevity and lucidity, of paradox and irony,” Mr. Holroyd’s work contains a “mass of material that is at once indiscriminating and suffocating.” Similarly, Patrick Anderson, reviewing the first volume in the *Spectator*, attacked not only the length but also the style and the method of presentation—“the verbosities and extravagances and unsupported cruelties of the book.”

Holroyd’s critics—and the two cited above are typical in delineating some of the objections to this biography—base their disapproval on what can be called essentially purist grounds. That is to say, if we understand the objections correctly, the two volumes deviate a great deal from their main subject and purpose and fail to maintain academic standards of one kind or another, e.g., in documentation, organization, diction, redundancy, repetition, etc.—those sophomoric criticisms scholar-pedants generally invoke.

It is not unlikely that such criticisms

may consciously or unconsciously result from questions, or rather resentments, relating to Holroyd's credentials: his youth—he was born in London in 1935; his education—he went to Eton, where he specialized in science, but received no “disciplined” university training; his obviously unimportant position in the literary “establishment.” A scholar with reputation, it can be more or less inferred, would have avoided Holroyd's errors, would have written a more traditional biography, would have been more resourceful and “critical” with both the old and the new materials (thirty thousand letters to and from Strachey, trunkfuls of diaries, and other documents) on which this biography is based.

Whatever the complaints, Holroyd has written a compelling work. Surely he has saved the author of *Eminent Victorians* from those who, to quote a feverish reviewer in *The Cambridge Quarterly*, would have avoided what they consider Holroyd's greatest error—“to defend Strachey's posturings, and to praise his work . . . [for] the task is impossible. Lytton Strachey was not a ‘mind;’ as such he deserves to die.”

The tone of this stricture, as pontifical as it is nasty, is precisely the tone that Holroyd shuns and the absence of which makes these two volumes such excellent reading, unimpeded and unimpaired by the jargon and the rigidities of so much criticism published nowadays. We can imagine the results if the reviewer in *The Cambridge Quarterly* had been assigned the task of writing the biography of Strachey: “as such he deserves to die,” and the tone of this dictum, so narrow and intolerant, would inform his approach. (In a review of Holroyd's first volume, Malcolm Muggeridge generously admits: “I shudder to think what might have been made of this material [Strachey's correspondence] in less meticulous hands; mine for instance.”)

In Holroyd, Strachey has been singularly favored with a biographer who presents all the facts of Strachey's life and circle without the biases that could easily mar any

biography, let alone *the* biography of the King of Bloomsbury, whom that “severe magistrate of literature,” Dr. F. R. Leavis (b. 1895), dismissed as follows: “Articulateness and unreality cultivated together, callowness disguised from itself in articulateness; conceit casing itself safely in a confirmed sense of high sophistication; the uncertainty as to whether one is serious or not taking itself for ironic poise: who has not at some time observed the process?”

Noel Annan, whose *Leslie Stephen: His Thought and Character in Relation to His Time* received the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1951, sums up the strength of Holroyd's accomplishment, the obstacles that he had to overcome, the complexities of his tasks, in a passage underlining the reasons why more established critics, or “period” experts, would be unequipped, by training or by disposition, or both, either because they have accepted the thesis advanced by Leavis, or because they have adhered to the Bloomsbury view of “civilization”—to achieve what Holroyd has achieved, even while lacking the support of any orthodox view or “valuation” and defying the position of any vested interest, be it that of a Bloomsbury enthusiast or that of a Bloomsbury hater (and the hater could be virulent, ranging from the morally inflexible Leavis to Bloomsbury's most abusive enemy, Wyndham Lewis, whose epithets “Bloomsburies” and “Pansy-clan” speak volumes):

He [Holroyd] is the first to begin to make a map of Bloomsbury and to establish the identity of the minor as well as the major characters. Not for him the security of a university post: he worked in the most straitened circumstances and his transparent honesty won him the support of James Strachey, Lytton's brother and literary executor. He has not written a literary masterpiece and his style is at times overblown: but then he did not need to. He needed to construct a work out of a mountain of material nearly all of which is fascinating. This he has done with skill and with integrity, which was

not easy to maintain when so many of the survivors from those days were adamant that he or she alone knew the true story of these intricate relationships. Perhaps wisely he declines sometimes to choose among the various accounts of incidents or states of mind and prints four or five separate versions. There are passages in the first volume in which he himself seems to tire; and indeed seems there almost to dislike Strachey. But in the second volume the story takes hold of him, the pace is excellent, and he is sensitive in the one field in which Strachey's biographer must excel: personal relations.

Inevitably any assessment of Strachey's place in the history of English literature, and of the significance of the Bloomsbury Group, must confront the criticism of Leavis and his adherents. Both Strachey and Bloomsbury are repugnant to the Leavisites and are equated with devitalization, snobism, shallowness, dilettantism, sham. Even E. M. Forster, despite a tenuous connection with Bloomsbury, is reprimanded for lacking the "personal vigour" and the "intellectual strength which impresses as the best source of vitality," to quote the words of Mrs. (Q. D.) Leavis—words peculiar to the Leavis view of Bloomsbury and of any creative writer failing to live up to the "refreshing sardonic" qualities of Leavis's bellwether, D. H. Lawrence, who detested Bloomsbury and satirized it in his short novel *St. Mawr* (1925):

Believe in nothing, care about nothing: but keep the surface easy, and have a good time. *Let us undermine one another. There is nothing to believe in, so let us undermine everything. But look out! No scenes, no spoiling the game. Stick to the rules of the game. Be sporting, and don't do anything that would make a commotion. Keep the game going smooth and jolly, and bear your bit like a sport. Never, by any chance, injure your fellow man openly. But always injure him secretly. Make a fool of him, and undermine his nature.*

Break him up by undermining him, if you can. It's good sport.

Lawrence's condemnation of Bloomsbury re-echoes in the Leavis view of Strachey and in the pages of *Scrutiny*, the quarterly edited by Leavis between 1932 and 1953. To read Lawrence on Bloomsbury is to read Leavis and, then, to read Leavis's followers, like T. R. Barnes, who, reviewing Strachey's *Characters and Commentaries* (1933) in *Scrutiny*, made this comment on Strachey: "Incapable of creation in life or in literature, his writings were his substitute for both."

Leavis's response to Strachey, and to Bloomsbury, uncovers some curious facets of the history of English literature and criticism in the twentieth century. That the two men represent antithetical literary forces is evident. For the difference between the Leavis outlook and the Strachey outlook is as sharp, in terms of literary taste and criticism, as is the difference between D. H. Lawrence and, say, James Joyce in terms of the novel and the novelist's technique. Leavis upholds a strongly moral, social, and vital strain in literature, in the teaching of literature, and in criticism. His views are hard and rational. (The Leavisite admiration of Sir Leslie Stephen comes to mind here: "We believe with Stephen that literary criticism is not a mystic rapture but a process of the intelligence.") For Leavis, to quote Henry James, the critic must be absolutely "damned critical—for it's the only thing to be, and all else is damned humbug." His refusal to compromise often stamps his criticism with petulance and authoritarianism. And, as would be expected from a devotee of Lawrence, his writing lacks humor, that very element without which, as one Bloomsbury art critic, Clive Bell, declared in his book *Civilization* (1928), civilization is rendered inadequate and even hazardous.

The critical act predicates for Leavis "moral discrimination, and judgment of relative human value." In time the critic will be forced to become "explicitly a

moralist." Moreover, as a critic who emphasizes "life" in its concreteness and immediacy, he is preoccupied with the English provincial tradition, as opposed to that of London, with its clubs, its brassy journalism, its spirit of coterie, its literary poses, with which Bloomsbury has been identified. His interest in non-English literature is only token and there is even disparagement of classical studies—facts prompting Professor René Wellek to single out Leavis's "provinciality and insularity." Any art or criticism which is playful, impressionistic, rhetorical, ornamental, or formalistic he finds meaningless, and thus can be seen his hostility to Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Dylan Thomas—and, of course, Lytton Strachey. According to a recent critic, Dr. Leavis's own style of writing "expresses a personality—it is always recognizable: It is not a style that readily allows profitable argument or discussion. It is expressive of personal evaluations, and presents these with an impressive authority, an authority dependent on the style: everyone has noticed how disciples of Leavis echo his verbal manner." "Verbal manner," indeed! There it is, unmistakably, in some of the critical reactions to Holroyd's *Lytton Strachey*, and brings to our attention the appropriateness of Wellek's contention that "There is a Leavis position, even an orthodoxy which can be described and criticized."

It would not be farfetched to point out that the irreconcilability of the Leavis and the Strachey literary positions can be likened to that of the Stoics and the Epicureans in the philosophical framework of Hellenistic times. In his unbending characteristic of judging and punishing and chastising, and knowing neither pity nor indulgence; in his stress on "life" in terms of moral growth; in his struggles for literary "standards" and "discrimination;" in his rationalistic and dogmatic critical approaches, his famous "revaluations" of literature, e.g., the apotheosis of D. H. Lawrence, the "dislodgment" of Milton: in these and in other aspects of his teaching

and criticism Leavis, like a Stoic sage who declared that philosophy is the "exercise" of an art to achieve "Wisdom," stresses the disciplined study of literature in "the great tradition" (Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence) that can lead to a better life and to an "organic community." There is also something of the Roman in Leavis and his followers: that tendency toward severity. Leavis himself is something of a modern Cato (234-149 B.C.): the literary "censor" of the English cultural scene who resembles the famous Roman moralist seeking to defend Rome's "primitive integrity" against "the hydra-like luxury and effeminacy of the time."

On the other hand, Strachey, and Bloomsbury, in style and in taste, are the modern English equivalent of ancient Epicureanism. A relaxed nonconformity, a marked gentility; a love of quietude and safety, equitably shared by selected and, above all, civilized "old friends;" a profound skepticism and a reverence for the private, "inner" life; a respect for intelligent conversation (carried on in the felicitous London confines of Bloomsbury as a modern Epicurean garden) among such luminaries as Strachey himself, G. E. Moore (Bloomsbury's theoretician *extraordinaire*), John Maynard Keynes, Roger Fry, Desmond MacCarthy, Leonard and Virginia Woolf; an enlightened view of God and of death, a severe indictment of Christianity (though Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* nearly converted Strachey), especially a Victorian mould of it as crystallized in *Eminent Victorians* in the chapter on Cardinal Manning; an appreciation of "stabilized pleasure" as an intrinsic part of human happiness: these were some of the traits that the King of Bloomsbury and his retinue perpetuated in ways that Epicurus and his followers would have sanctioned.

In Strachey's life we are in the presence of "an amused Epicurean Zeus," to use the phrase of the late F. L. Lucas. It was a life that dramatized precisely the traits enumer-

ated above, with one chief difference being Strachey's obsessive homosexuality, a trait that Epicurus strongly disapproved of. Certainly the style of Strachey's life with its parties, gossip, and travels, with its involved homosexual love affairs, aberrational in character (Strachey wanted to play the feminine role in his affairs with a continuing series of male lovers), with its appetite for jokes and clever remarks at the expense of innocent bystanders and acquaintances, as well as good friends—including one's host or hostess, is a style that can hardly lend itself to the fancy of the Leavisite view of life and literature. (Cicero's feeling that Epicureanism corrupted Roman lives "with bowered seclusion, luxury, ease, indolence, and sloth" can be seen as an equivalent feeling that Leavis and his followers have all along held with respect to "the world of Lytton Strachey.")

Yet, despite his personal idiosyncrasies and what some critics have thought to be the absurdity of his style, in life as in literature, Strachey gained popularity and was to have a marked influence on English life. It is in opposition to this influence, in its very nature and form, that we can discern what we have termed the Leavisite outlook. In other words, in matters of life Strachey represents to the Leavisites a sickening and, to use a favored Lawrentian word, a "disintegrating" human personality peculiar to members of the Cambridge and Bloomsbury "gang," of whom Lawrence wrote: "Their attitude is so irreverent and blatant. They are cased each in a hard little shell of his own, and out of this they talk words." And in matters of literature, as already indicated, Strachey obviously represents the blatancies of what Leavis terms "the literary racket" with its "prepossession, conceit and insensibility so potently banded" in a spirit "inimical to criticism, that is, to intelligence."

The significance of the Leavisite objections can be better understood when one considers the predominant homosexual tone and climate of the English world during and after Strachey's time—in business, in

government, in teaching, in journalism: in short, in the essential makings and functions of English cultural life and taste in the years between the two World Wars. Leavisites contend that the Strachey outlook, by its unwholesomeness, damaged irreparably the cultural vitality of English life, especially in the years following the Great War when English society sorely needed vigorous, healthy-minded leadership and guidance, emotionally and intellectually, to withstand the disillusionments that that war caused. In a review of Holroyd's volumes Goronwy Rees points out that between 1918 and 1939 the English universities (Oxford and Cambridge) were deeply affected by homosexuality; that this fact also significantly influenced those who studied in the universities during this period—an influence that most probably continued when some of the graduates had come into positions of importance; and that the positions occupied by such persons in English life had "given them a distinctive and identifiable influence on English life as a whole." Rees's uneasy feelings about "a significant stratum of English life [the extent of homosexuality] . . . still to be uncovered" can be correlated with the Leavisite objections to the effects of the Strachey attitude, in particular, and of the Bloomsbury ethos, in general. The homosexual element, which Strachey espoused with intense dedication, it goes without saying, could not but contribute to the kind of softness that in the end led to the appeasement of Hitler, nowhere better dramatized than in Mr. Neville Chamberlain's mission to Munich. Homosexuality, in this connection, reflected a facet of decadence, and in the years 1933-1939 this decadence was duly recorded in the decline of English political thought. In the final analysis, it can be further said, what Leavis deplores in Bloomsbury is this decadent tone, this lack of toughness and vitality.

As a writer and a personality, Strachey had much impact on his times; but his times, and his contemporaries, were in need of examples of emotional and intellectual

toughness. Strachey and his circle were disinclined to sacrifice (even in the midst of the Great War!) what was funny and gay. Holroyd's biography, to quote a review in *Punch*, takes us "back to an infinitely remote, deliciously leisured world of long vac. reading parties and shy, homosexual *schwärmerei*, where you can imagine Goldie Lowes Dickinson dancing elegant little fairy dances on the King's lawn in front of Gibbs Building." At the same time it takes us back to a crucial period of English civilization which demanded of both its legislators and its *littérateurs* something more than gay reading parties and fairy dances on lawns that would eventually be the targets of deadly Messerschmitts.

Interestingly, reviewers of Holroyd's volumes have complained that the portrayal of Strachey's life fails to appreciate its pervasive comic elements. Leonard Woolf, a confidant of Strachey's, protests that the biography lacks humor and misleadingly depicts Strachey's life as a never-ending "state of passion, passionate love, passions of ecstasy or despair." Hence, Strachey is invariably revealed as "dying of love." Yet, Woolf avers, Strachey did not have any strong passions or emotions: "He loved to dramatize himself, his friends, and his loves. And he was hardly ever completely serious when he had his pen in his hand, writing the tragedy or comedy of his perpetual love affairs to Maynard Keynes, James [Strachey], or me." Woolf's comments give all the more reason why Strachey's life is in the end the tragedy it is found to be in the pages of Holroyd's biography. Ironically, both the Leavisite view and the Bloomsbury view enunciated here by Woolf, underline the limitations that Annan draws to our attention in the long passage cited earlier. It is exactly the tragic dimensions of Strachey's life that a moral critic who writes in almost athletic terms of disapproval, like Leavis, and a Bloomsbury compatriot, like Woolf, cannot see. In the case of the former, a deep literary puritanism and an inordinate self-righteousness rule out any compassionate response to the

fatuity and the tragedy of it all. ("Criticism must be by Leavis' own definition," observes George Steiner, "both central and humane. In his achievement the centrality is manifest; the humanity has often been tragically absent.") In the case of Woolf, the requisites of loyalty and friendship preclude an objective view. And in these reasons, too, we can understand why Holroyd, given his dispassionate point of view, for he is neither a Leavisite nor a bedazzled spectator of glittering Bloomsbury, has proved to be a brilliant biographer.

Hence Holroyd's biography gives us an amazingly impressive understanding of a writer who, as Anthony West observes, transcending his writing, lived for something greater: "personal relationships and their analysis in conversation"—the belief that "the personal life is the essence and the public performance no more than its shadow." More importantly, it also enables us to fathom the tragedy of a man who was sick throughout his life and died of cancer at the age of fifty-two; who was unhappy in his family life and in his school years until he entered Cambridge University; who failed to get firsts in his university studies, as well as a much desired fellowship at Cambridge; who, for a major part of his career, was faced with financial plight; who suffered from a kind of nomadism (though not on D. H. Lawrence's cosmic scale); who, above all, demonstrated in his sexual habits and anomalies an unrequited passion surely no less consuming or pathetic than what André Gide in *The Immoralist* and Thomas Mann in *Death in Venice* depict as the intolerable condition of their protagonists, searching for a love that, as Oscar Wilde somewhere writes, defies the name itself.

No doubt, Strachey's life had its comedy and its cleverness, but this part of his life was built on words, of which Bloomsbury had a plenitude. (Strachey, for example, described Aldous Huxley as "a piece of seaweed," and his friend Virginia Woolf, who also had a gift for epistolary invective, wrote of poor Middleton Murry as "a moon calf

looking youth.") But even as he was debunking a Victorian past (while recruiting his male loves) with furious irreverence, there weaved through his life an underlying sense of disappointment, an element of dissatisfaction, of futility, of emptiness, of desperation, that no glibness could hide. The sadness of Strachey's life—the sadness which Virginia Woolf in *Jacob's Room* (1922) speaks of as "brewed by the earth itself. . . . We start transparent, and then the cloud thickens. All history backs our pane of glass. To escape is vain"—cannot easily be disregarded on the basis of Strachey's literary accomplishment or comic posturings. Ultimately, Holroyd's biography communicates an overarching sadness and pathos. It is the kind of sadness that has its literary counterparts, too: in André Gide's impassioned confessions in his letters to Paul Claudel; in the poetic erotica of C. P. Cavafy; in Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*. The tone of this sadness evinces an inner paralysis, a sterility, an incompleteness.

Even as he joked and laughed and scorned, Strachey, who detected the subtlest psychic tones in the lives of Florence Nightingale, General Gordon, Queen Elizabeth, and the Earl of Essex—deep and troubling tones which other commentators could never hear, even as close as a heartbeat—Strachey could not have eluded tones that reverberated in his own being and that exposed his own malaise and provoked an awareness of those terrible mortal limitations which he sought to overcome, or ignore, with Voltaire as his bible and the eighteenth century as his example, in vain. In his life as in his art, Strachey chose the way of the Enlightenment, of which he was a fervent modern champion and in which he saw his own and the world's salvation. But it was, we know, an enlightenment founded on the illusion of man's sinlessness. Although he did not go deep within himself to meditate and to discover himself completely, the King of Bloomsbury could hardly have overlooked either the sadness of his own life or the tragedy of the human

condition. Man must, John Milton reminds us, "Some time let Gorgeous Tragedy/ In Scepter'd Pall come sweeping by."

Reviewed by GEORGE A. PANICHAS

All the King's Men

The Supreme Court from Taft to

Warren, by Alpheus Thomas Mason, *Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968. 293 pp. \$6.95.*

Poverty Is Where the Money Is, by

Shirley Scheibla. *New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1968. 280 pp. \$5.95.*

THESE BOOKS complement each other. Professor Mason's suggests the climate of attitude generated over recent years by our ultimate guide to civic virtue and political morality; Mrs. Scheibla's presents a picture of consonant phenomena at ground level in the annual one-and-a-half-billion-dollar "war on poverty," which, well intended, proceeds in waste and culminates in pandemic turbulence. The Scheibla survey is more facts and figures than philosophic interpretation: but the reflecting reader will have no trouble relating what she describes to the improvising jurisprudence that Mason celebrates.

His book is a revised and somewhat enlarged edition of a work published and reviewed here ten years ago. (Mason was McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University.) Its premise is that the Warren Court's decisions touching crime, education, prayer, and, at another level, the legislative self-determination of the states are only mirror images of the "Old Court's" rejection of minimum wage laws and other Federal intrusions on private business. There is little sense of