CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Any discussion on *Eminent Victorians* and its sources must take stock of two important studies in Post-War years. The first is George Kuppler Simson's¹ "Lytton Strachey's use of his sources in *Eminent Victorians*." The other one is John Halperin's² "*Eminent Victorians and History*." The two studies treat Strachey's book from two different standpoints.

Simson states at the beginning that his study of Strachey is balanced between praise and blame. He writes that Strachey's sketches do not reveal any original research, he does not attempt to dig up new facts. His subjects with the exception of Florence Nightingale were all second-raters. This was probably because Strachey wanted to show that the most influential Victorians were second-raters; that their tastes, intellects, and accomplishments all lacked excellence. Not only was he interested in his subjects; he was also interested in the biographies from which he got his information. In other words not only was he

Simson divides Strachey's artistry into matter and means, and finds two major classes of controlling factors:

(a) his cognitive ideas influenced by George Edward Moore and the Bloomsbury;

(b) his technical notions including the 'dramatic principle' and the 'dramatic tension'.

Purcell's biography of Manning had earned a bad reputation of being a very poorly executed work but it was Strachey's chief source in his essay Cardinal Manning. Strachey shows how he could improve upon the two-volume epic of Purcell, and transform it into, what Simson calls, "a comic epic in prose". In writing such a parody of Purcell Strachey cannot be blamed of destroying a form by his random sampling, says Simson. This was because there was no form to destroy. "There is neither form nor theme in Purcell's Life of Manning," Simson says that it was built on the structure of Milton's Paradise Lost.

The essay on Manning follows an analogy with Fielding's Tom Jones when Simson calls it a comic epic in prose. "Florence

4. Ibid., p. 20.
5. Ibid., p. 77.
6. Ibid., p. 77.
"Mightingale" follows the pattern of a tightly knit drama. Cook's book on Florence Nightingale was a good model but Strachey changes the epic biography to a dramatic biography. The emphasis is on the dramatic relationship of the persons. In "Dr. Arnold" Strachey adopts the technique of caricature. Simson points out the defect of such a method. In it the dramatic complexity is lost because Arnold's character is over-simplified and the diversity of his interest is not presented. Caricature according to Simson is a "narrowing technique" which cannot be used "upon a subject such as Arnold". Simson calls "The End of General Gordon" a combination of successes and failures. It succeeds thematically when it exposes Gordon's "fanaticism", the "duplicity of the Gladstone administration" and the barbarity of the European "civilizers". Yet Strachey fails to utilise his sources properly and is unable to establish Gordon's share of the vices of his age. Simson calls this "a failure in significant form." The plot does not meet the demands of the theme but confuses us regarding the character of Gordon.

Simson tries to look into the principles, attitudes or theories which guide Strachey's interpretations. Most critics

7. Ibid., p. 38.
8. Ibid., p. 194.
9-10. Ibid., p. 233.
were adverse to Strachey. Even those who admired him on the whole found certain faults with him. Most of the critics accused him of hero wrecking and idol smashing. Even as late as in 1962 he was termed as the father of debunkers. Simson tries to free Strachey from this accusation of being a frivolous historian by proving that he was not a debunker. According to him a real debunker leaves out the big issues. Strachey did not. In "Cardinal Manning", the big issues are the theme of the piece. The problems of ultramontanism, of succession to the See of Westminster, of Church Government, of the Ecumenical Council, of the dockers' strike, of the Birmingham Oratory are all dealt with. In "Florence Nightingale" the personalities are involved in two of the biggest issues of the day — the reform of the hospitals and the reform of the War Office. In "Dr. Arnold", the problems of Keate's method at Eton as opposed to Arnold's method at Rugby is discussed. In "The End of General Gordon" the issues of administrative expedience and the imperialist policy are dealt with. In this piece these issues are touched upon at such length that Gordon very nearly drops into the background. So Strachey was not a debunker.

Simson favourably quotes Sanders 12 and Clive 13 to point

11. Ibid., pp. 18-19.
out Strachey's positive beliefs: his admiration for a life characterized by unaffected simplicity, individual freedom and "sanity"; his balancing of heroic endeavour against stupidity, idealism against ambition, moral certainty against intellectual muddle, true piety against hypocrisy. In applying terms like plot, characterisation, comic epic and dramatic complexity on Strachey's biographies Simson is emphasising literary technique rather than history. The success of the literary form is more important to Simson than a faithful narration. He criticises Strachey's distortions not so much because they fail as history but more because they fail as significant literary form. The biographer as an artist gains priority over the biographer as a historian in Simson's treatment.

Halperin is of the opinion that Strachey treats history lightly and that Strachey's facts are not always the truth. According to him Strachey's motive in Eminent Victorians was to mock, to startle, to debunk and to make himself famous. The book managed to do all these things but it did not manage to become history. He feels that after emerging wearily from the First World War the younger generation at once hailed the book because they felt that the terrible war took place due to the bungling and blundering of their grandfathers. He quotes Edel's

14. Ibid.
saying "that they overlooked Strachey's mannerisms, inaccuracies
his wantonly imagined details, it was too easy to laugh at the
past and too easy to take shortcuts with documents," but the
result was not history. Halperin thinks that Strachey was never
a dependable historian. This was a reflection of the Bloomsbury
trait; they were disinterested in the fact of political history.
Strachey's approach to history was governed by Bloomsbury's idea
of "significant form". His works were works of art with their
own internal coherence and less reproductions of exterior reality.
History to Strachey was less science than literature. His personal
approach to his subjects destroyed "pure" historiography. He did
not believe in placing historical facts before his readers so as
to allow them to draw their own conclusions. Instead he tried to
force the readers to accept his point of view.

Halperin goes on to say that Strachey made a mistake by
applying to older customs and beliefs the modern standard of a
less reverent age. This made the events of past history to appear
like a series of "farcical imbecilities, trivial eccentricities,
bigotries, and crimes resulting from a human nature consistently
imperfect." He laid too much emphasis on personality but did not
care for the outside forces that shape the personality. This was
an influence of the Bloomsbury Group. The group itself was anti-
historical, observes Halperin. He says that Strachey's works are
interesting as expressions of his age's perception of other ages whether it is the age of the English Renaissance, or the Elizabethan Age or the 19th century (Victorian Age).

After examining Simson's opinion upon Strachey's historical sense and Halperin's opinion of the same, this conclusion can be drawn that their views were different. Simson felt that when borrowing he was not too scrupulous nor was he always fair in interpretation. But as a controversialist he threw a valid question at his readers. In this matter he is important as well as right, he does not cajole his readers into accepting his point of view.

Halperin on the other hand says that he always selected his presentable facts in order to force the reader to reach the same conclusion he himself had reached before he began to write. Halperin emphasises biography as history and is opposed to the treatment of individual psychology at the expense of details contributed by social and political history. Both Simson and Halperin accept Bloomsbury as a shaping influence on Strachey's cognitive ideas. But while Simson accepts Strachey's ideas of biography "as biography, the psychological basis of biography, and the ideal man" as criteria to judge Strachey, Halperin holds the Bloomsbury views to be an unscientific foundation for any biographer and challenges not Strachey's methods but also the

15. Ibid., p. 20.
things for which he stood. These conflicting views on Strachey's treatment of his sources are, therefore, related to conflicting statements about the nature of biography itself. It is impossible to decide in favour of either view unless both are placed in the context of the history of English biography before Strachey, and more importantly in the context of the major theoretical statements on biography. The major part of this chapter therefore will be devoted to these two subjects. This will help us to take a more balanced look at Strachey's own views and his biographical practice, especially his controversial way of selecting details from his sources.
Harold Nicolson traces the English biography from the chroniclers of the Middle Ages, and more specially from the Tudor Chronicles. Among sixteenth century Biographies he gives special importance to Roper's Life of Thomas More and Cavendish's Life of Wolsey. It is owing to Roper and Cavendish, he says, "that English biography was first differentiated as a species of literary composition distinct from history and romance". Nicolson calls seventeenth century English biography "a great disappointment" inspite of Aubrey's Brief Lives, Walton's Lives and Sprat's Cowley. Nicolson writes that Aubrey's desire for truth is highly commendable. He calls Walton's works literary masterpieces but he writes that Walton fails to present truth, his own feelings and predilections intrude into his works, while Sprat is so objective and impersonal that his biography appears cold and reads like an obituary. Sprat was the originator of the "discreet" biography because he thought it indecent to publish private letters in a biography. Shelston writes that Aubrey's method is entirely anecdotal. There is a delightful

17. Ibid., p. 37.
18. Ibid., p. 47.
19. Ibid., p. 65.
20. Ibid., pp. 69-70.
freshness in the discoveries that he records but he does not go behind the anecdote to investigate the deeper aspects of human character, we also fail to see his characters whole because he does not organise his recollections into a consistent framework. This anecdotal method offers an impressionistic rather than an analytic approach to character.  

About Walton he writes that the Lives "represent a continuation of the exemplary mode and the anecdotal method, substantiated in this instance by the discursive deployment of documentary evidence". All the three biographies fall short of Nicolson's concept of "pure biography", a term he uses again and again in The Development of English Biography.

"Pure biography", according to him, suffers not only from the intrusion of history and romance but also from the intrusion of the biographer's own feelings, predilections and ethical values. Perhaps Nicolson underestimates the value of seventeenth century English biography because he is creating impossible ideas out of neutrality and objectivity. Historians like E.H. Carr and Herbert Butterfield think that historical objectivity and ideological neutrality are impossible goals for a historian:

22. Ibid., p. 28.
It is a mistake for writers of history and other teachers to imagine that they are discussing history without any presuppositions. Among historians, as in other fields, the blindest of all the blind are those who are unable to examine their own presuppositions, and blithely imagine therefore that they do not possess any. 

This is true of the biographer too. One cannot blame the seventeenth century English biographer because he felt the need of a political or an ethical framework to evaluate the characters he discussed. If we keep this in view, biography before Johnson ceases to be a disappointment.

Nicolson hails the 18th century as a great age of English biography. He specially names North and Mason, Johnson and Boswell as the great contributors. The early part of the eighteenth century took a greater interest in the drama and the novel; it did not have much time for biography. But the most important thing to be remembered here is that whether in the drama, or in the novel, or in the essay, the theme happened to be contemporary events. This led writers to seek realism; curiosity, sympathy as well as a habit for psychological observation were created; the public developed a taste for detail. All these things when applied to biography gave it a turn for the better.

To Nicolson, Roger North deserves a very high place in the history of English biography. He wrote the biographies of his three brothers about the year 1715 but they were not published before 1740. There is nothing of the Sprat or Walton manner in him. He follows completely the Aubrey manner. He tells the truth vividly and racily though the details may be inaccurate. He brings in letters and his style is that of a conversation. He is full of fun and it is enjoyable to read about the peculiar traits of his brothers.

Nicolson writes that North's works were examples of a really healthy taste for biography in the early eighteenth century inspite of its lean period in the history of biography. With North there arose a sudden interest in the lives of the obscure. Nicolson concludes with the opinion that the "actuality" of Aubrey was linked to the "actuality" of Boswell by North. Robert Gittings too praises North. He writes that Aubrey was the first biographer of the under-privileged. In his Lives there are studies of unimportant people, and in Aubrey's manner North also wrote the lives of his three elder brothers. The best of these three lives is the one which dealt with his little known third brother John North, a Cambridge scholar, later on a teacher in the college where the author Roger North read later. With great

25. Nicolson, p. 76.
enjoyment, good humour, sympathy and frankness he describes the college rooms, certain incidents in his brother's life and some pranks which the other colleagues played upon his teacher brother. Gittings' idea is that North's Life of his brother John should be considered as the first intimate biography in English and this intimate biography is what Johnson and Boswell presented to us.  

It was Mason's Life of Gray, says Nicolson, which first introduced the 'life-and-letters' method and influenced Johnson and Boswell. In the manner of Walton he introduced letters but his use had a definite purpose which Walton did not have. The letters which he introduced with a short explanatory caption or a vivid note told their own story. Yet Mason had many faults; he altered the texts of Gray's works, — something that is not done to-day and cannot be supported. Mason's sincerity is blurred by his friendly feelings for Gray. Johnson accuses Mason of fidelity and his admiring zeal which makes him partial to his subject. Mason was prejudiced and jealous. He left out important persons who illuminated Gray's life simply because he did not like them. Perhaps unconsciously he devised a new biographical method which is of literary value. He sought the reader's co-operation and left it to the readers to draw their own conclusions. Nicolson 

is of the opinion that Mason himself was ignorant of this discovery. It was by chance that he hit upon this method which would be the technique of later biographies. 27

Dr. Johnson, writes Nicolson, was the real founder of pure biography, for it was he who first proclaimed that biography was a distinct branch of creative literature. He found in biography a satisfaction which he said no other branch of literature could provide him. Dr. Johnson's *An Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage* appeared in 1744. Though unquestionably the first masterpiece in English biography, it went almost unnoticed. Only when it was reprinted in the *Lives* (1777-1780), Johnson's genius as a biographer was recognised. 28

Gittings writes that Johnson's *Life of Savage* was unique because it dealt with the life of a man who was not only unsuccessful but also in many respects a scoundrel. Biography was no longer considered to be the laudation of a noble life. Life itself was what interested Johnson and he assumed that it would also interest his readers. Though he accepts Savage's personal history to some extent from Savage's own valuation, Johnson does not hide the facts that Savage was an importunate borrower, a frequent

27. Nicolson, pp. 77-79.
28. Ibid., p. 76.
swindler and professionally vain. In spite of all these his tone was sympathetic. ¹²⁹ Shelston discusses the book elaborately from the angle of author-subject relationship. ¹³⁰ There are two moral generalisations in the book — one is that those who suffer should reflect that even Savage, a man of great ability, was not exempt from this suffering and the other is that those who feel proud of themselves for being different from accepted standards of conduct should remember that nothing can be gained from indulgence in human weaknesses which Savage embodied. In this way the Life of Savage fulfils the requirement that biography should be instructive. But Shelston is critical about the moralisation. To him, it is inconsistent because Savage's misfortunes were due to his own weaknesses. He also accuses Johnson of being too sympathetic towards Savage. 'He appreciates the generosity of Johnson's feelings but he does not feel satisfied with Johnson's attitude. Shelston thinks that the book helps us to understand not Savage, but Johnson, a far more complicated character. It may be read as an autobiography because it was written at a time when Johnson like Savage was in poverty and trying to establish himself as a literary figure. At times one feels that the character of Savage has been transformed into that of Johnson himself. Again it fulfils another requirement of biography that it must ultimately be

²⁹. Gittings, p. 31.
³⁰. Shelston, pp. 44-47.
an expression of its author's own sensibility. That biography should be essentially moralistic and must ultimately express its author's own feelings are Johnson's views. Shelston uses them to evaluate Johnson's own work.

Nicolson praises the biographical portion of the Lives of the Poets as charming. But more important is the determination to tell the truth courageously. Johnson brought to biography what Lytton Strachey calls his "immovable independence of thought — his searching sense of actuality".31 Johnston writes that with Lives of the Poets "what has come to be known as critical biography had its recognized beginning".32 Garraty considers the Lives of the Poets to have expanded the scope of biography by blending a critical evaluation of the poets' works with accounts of their characters and activities.33 Interestingly enough the writer of so many lives himself became an attractive subject for other biographers. Three such biographies of Johnson appeared in the eighteenth century. There was Sir John Hawkins' Life of Samuel Johnson(1787). In 1786 came Mrs. 

31. Quoted by Nicolson, p. 86.
Thrale's *Anecdotes of Dr. Johnson* and then in 1791 appeared Boswell's *Life of Johnson*

John Hawkins was neither a man of learning nor one with an interest in the personality of others. Even then his *Life of Johnson* is readable and, but for Boswell, would have remained popular to this day. His writing is dry but still the vivid humanity of Johnson is reflected well and this gives a realism and an actuality to the book. Nicolson considers Hawkins' Johnson as more convincing and complete than Boswell's. Certain sidelights of the later period which Boswell failed to understand are presented by Hawkins. An interesting supposition of his was that Johnson was at heart a coward. He also draws the gentler side of Johnson, the picture of Johnson watering his flowers is scarce in Boswell. 34

Nicolson cites examples where both Hawkins and Thrale excelled Boswell. And to get a rounded figure of Johnson Boswell alone does not suffice. Hawkins and Thrale have to be read together. Thrale's biography reveals what is not stated elsewhere: Johnson's peevishness, his love of sheer nonsense, his sense of fun. 35

34. Nicolson, p. 96.
35. Ibid., pp. 97-99.
Gittings has no words of praise for Hawkins. Shelston just mentions Hawkins's work by name and comments that it was superseded at once by Boswell's *Life* in 1791.

Nicolson thinks that Boswell was not a genius. Biography to be a success did not require genius. Only a peculiar form of talent was enough and Boswell possessed that talent. He had great mental vivacity, and a remarkably independent intellect and above all, he was passionately interested in life, his mind was inquiring and open. His *Life of Johnson* lacked form. But it is amazing how Boswell put the great mass of documents into a readable whole. There is no note of unity and continuity even though the book is not divided into chapters. Boswell's work is a work of art. The credit belongs to Boswell alone. He was not the first to introduce original letters, or record actual conversations or introduce anecdotes; these were already in vogue. What he did was to combine them all in a single whole. He did this not by accident, he did it consciously and deliberately:

> He was able, by sheer constructive force, to project his detached photographs with such continuity and speed that the effect produced is that of motion and life.37

Nicolson hints at an analogy between this mode of

36. Shelston, p. 34.

biography and the continuity and speed of the cinema, while Gittings\(^3^8\) says that Boswell seems to reveal scene after scene on the stage. Obviously, both of them are welcoming Boswell's introduction of a dramatic narration in biography.

Strachey's biographies characterize speed. But this element was nothing new. It was present in Boswell's work. Though it was forgotten during the Victorian Age Strachey revived it.

Shelston notices how Boswell makes events and conversations credible. In order to evoke the reality of the remembered moment Boswell underlines Johnson's physical peculiarities. Shelston also praises Boswell's recreation of scenes. "Narrative effectively becomes drama",\(^3^9\) Boswell's biography proves that "intimacy between author and subject could scarcely have been taken further".\(^4^0\) This living relationship within the book which is about an individual life is the most interesting aspect of the book:

Boswell's *Life of Johnson* thus fulfills Johnson's own requirements for biography: it records the domestic details of a life which affords moral instruction, while the proximity of author and

\(^{3^8}\) Gittings, p. 33.

\(^{3^9}\) Shelston, p. 36.

\(^{4^0}\) Ibid., p. 37.
subject are such as to ensure as nearly as possible the authenticity that, ideally, can only come from autobiography.41

Even before Boswell's Life of Johnson was published in 1791 an anti-biographic campaign had started. The truth-revealing aspect of biography came under attack. The frankness of biography was considered to be derogatory to the public taste which was beginning to undergo changes as the eighteenth century was drawing to a close.

The nineteenth century opened promisingly with an outburst of biographical writings and many prominent personalities of the Romantic Movement figured in these early productions. Coleridge, Scott, Southey, Hazlitt, Lockhart, Carlyle and Mrs. Gaskell were some of them. A firm biographical tradition had now been established. The Boswell tradition continued till 1840. Moore, Southey and Lockhart were followers of Boswell.

After this "came earnestness, and with earnestness hagiography descended on us with its sullen cloud".42 The healthy tradition which persisted till 1840 was blurred out within a period of four years. By 1844 the very mode of biographical writing changed, by evading and omitting truth.

41. Ibid., p. 42.
42. Nicolson, p. 110.
Between 1800 and 1840 some excellent biographies were written and they all followed Boswell's method. Thomas Moore heads the list with his *Life of Sheridan* (1815), and his more famous *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* (1820). Nicolson is of the opinion that the second book did not receive its due recognition. Though Moore was writing in the Boswell tradition he was not wholly free from the prejudices which had already gripped men's minds. He did not tell the whole truth, but it may be argued in his favour that he did not lie either. The book is significant because it helped to destroy some popular false impressions regarding Byron. But Nicolson regrets that had Moore been courageous enough his biography could have become more interesting.  

Even from Garraty's comment it becomes evident that though Moore was writing in Boswell's tradition he could not shake off the emerging trends of avoiding the truth. Garraty writes that Moore not only suppressed evidence but destroyed the source because he feared that others might gain access to knowledge regarding Byron which he considered unfit for human perusal.

André Maurois writes that a comparison of Moore's portrayal of Byron with H. Nicolson's *The Last Journey* will prove to every

43. Ibid., p. 114.

impartial observer that Nicolson has a much greater regard for truth than Moore.

Southey was another prominent name in the early nineteenth century biography. He represented the Walton tradition. Nicolson praises Southey highly. His Life of Nelson (1813) and his Life of Wesley (1820) are praised and admired even now. He selects and arranges his material well. His style is picturesque. His description of the Battle of Trafalgar is famous. Both these biographies are works of art but they lack movement and internal development.

Gittings blamed Southey for concealing facts:

Thus the poet laureate, Robert Southey, in his life of Nelson, had to say, of the great hero-admiral's notorious affair with Lady Hamilton, 'There is no reason to believe that this most unfortunate attachment was criminal [i.e., sexual], but this was criminality enough, and it brought with it its punishment'.

Southey felt the heroes and heroines could do no wrong. In other words, biography became the art of concealment; it was written not to reveal but to conceal human nature. But Shelston holds a different view. He writes that Southey's Life of Nelson was a break from the usual norm. Though

47. Gittings, pp. 34-35.
it was cautious about Lady Hamilton, it "tells us enough to make the nature of her relationship with Nelson clear to the most innocent reader, and yet the book became a classic of Victorian boys' literature". The work, he writes, is interesting for a different reason also; it reveals that much of Nelson's greatness lay in not doing what he was told.

Nicolson ascribes to Lockhart the honour of being the second greatest after Boswell for his outstanding work — Life of Scott (1836-38). He discusses the book's merits in great detail. He also clears Lockhart of all the charges made against his book. It is interesting to see how he counter-attacks the critics who had attacked Lockhart's book. He writes that Carlyle inspite of his admiration for the book criticised Lockhart for his lack of construction, for his failure to make proper use of the vast material he had to deal with. He regretted that it was a "compilation" rather than a "composition". Nicolson proves that it is the best form of composition because there is no break of continuity when Lockhart moves from the earlier Scott to the Scott of his own recollection. The indirect is perfectly blended with the direct narration. Nicolson also counters Andrew Lang's charge of "lack of self-consciousness" and establishes Lockhart as a conscious artist.

48-49. Shelston, p. 50.

50. Nicolson, p. 119.
Nicolson states that Lockhart had to use Boswell's method with a difference. Unlike Johnson Scott was no conversationalist, so he had to be painted out of doors. It was with sympathy, understanding, and absolute frankness, that Lockhart painted Scott.

Shelston has no word of praise for Lockhart. He simply regrets that Victorian biography did not make the best out of a book like Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, though biographies followed Boswell's methods to some extent. It was Froude's four-volume account of Carlyle (1882-84) which came as an exception. To prove his point, Shelston picks up Lockhart's *Life of Scott* and compares it with Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. They were both close to their subjects but where Boswell's instinct was to be frank, Lockhart replaces frankness by circumspection. Shelston seems to regard Lockhart as a precursor of Victorian discreetness. He, like the other Victorian biographers, was more interested in guarding the domestic privacy of his subject. Garraty writes that Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, published in seven volumes between 1836 and 1838, provided a foretaste of what was to come. He wrote in the Boswellian tradition, using personal knowledge of the subject as well as letters and personal documents:

But perhaps because he was Sir Walter's son-in-law, he exhibited a reticence that, while not

51. Shelston, pp. 48-49.
dishonest, would have been inconceivable to Boswell.52

Among pre-Victorian biographies, Nicolson praises Godwin's Chaucer (1803) as the first "reconstructional biography"53 and Scott's scholarly Life of Dryden (1808). Each poem or play by Dryden is examined by Scott in relation to its time and context; even a long instructive review of the state of literature before Dryden is given. These works inspired monumental works, such as David Masson's Life of Milton (1881) and Drummond of Hawthornden (1873), Spedding's Bacon (1861) and Aitken's Steele (1889). Monk's Bentley (1833) was not so scholarly but deserves mention for its frank and convincing tone.

Historians of biography differ in their assessment of the post-Lockhart period. While there is a general agreement between Nicolson and Garraty about the damage done by commemorative biographies, Shelston is not ready to over-emphasize the damage.

Nicolson writes that by 1840 Victorian biography was coming into being and the Boswell tradition was dead. People preferred to go back to the "unworthy origins of English biography".54 In fact he thinks it is not worth going into the

54. Ibid., p. 125.
details of the development of English biography between 1838 and 1882, that is, between Lockhart's *Scott* and Froude's *Carlyle*. Nicolson thinks that though biography was written enormously, hagiography and a deterioration of quality had set in. Houghton's *Keats* (1844) and Dean Stanley's *Life of Arnold* (1844) were written in this vein. The commemorative strain was responsible for many 'widow biographies', and also a biography of George Eliot by the *widower*. Nicolson mentions Mrs. Grote's study of her husband (1873) as being the best of this type; Mrs. Kingsley's biography of her husband (1877) and Cross's *Life of George Eliot* (1884) being average types; and Lady Burton's work on her husband being the worst. To him, the damage which the Victorians did to biography becomes clear from these works.  

About this lean period of biography, Garraty reminds his readers that at the accession of Victoria in 1837:

> Already the fiery reformist spirit of romanticism was degenerating into the smug moral earnestness of the era that bears her name. For biography it was a regressive age marked by the return to popularity of the panegyric and the commemorative life.

By the forties "respectability" had descended upon biography completely. He comments that nothing much could be

55. Ibid., p. 126.

56. Garraty, p. 98.
expected from the biography because it was an age which considered "leg" an indelicate word, so how could it excel in biography. "Authorized" and "commemorative" lives multiplied rapidly though they grew duller and more reserved.

The 'Life and Letters' variety flourished in two or even three stout volumes —often with dashes substituted for the names of persons still living and "offensive" passages were either "modified" or entirely removed. 57

Garraty also feels that though the middle years of the nineteenth century were dominated by priggishness, healthier biographical trends were also noticeable. The habit of reading biography increased. This was due to the spread of literacy. This period also produced sound scholarship, especially when the subjects were non-contemporary figures. Carlyle's *Sterling* (1851) and *Frederick*; Henry Lewes's *Goethe*; David Masson's *Life of Milton* are examples of these scholarly types of biographies; they reflected the growing concern over source materials and thorough research. Professionalization of biography came with the growth of scholarship. John Forster and Morley were professional biographers.

Gittings links the failure of the Victorian age to produce any good biography with that of the people's religious

57. Ibid., p. 99.
58. Ibid., pp. 101-102.
beliefs. He writes that the nineteenth century proved in the field of biography how fragile was the myth of inevitable progress. It did not produce a single biography to be compared with Boswell's. The process of biography suffered a severe setback. This was almost wholly due to the Evangelical movement — and its hold on the emerging middle classes. No amusement, no relaxation, no light or trivial reading was permitted. "Seriousness"59 was the rule of the day. The effect of this seriousness on biography, still more on biographers, was disastrous. The biographer's heroes and heroines could do no wrong; only three Victorian biographers broke out of this "paralysing moral strait-jacket".60 They were Carlyle, Mrs. Gaskell and Froude. Nicolson also separates these three biographers from the rest of their contemporaries. His praise for Carlyle and Gaskell, however is muted. Carlyle's **Sterling** (1851) is more a criticism of Archdeacon Hare's work on the same subject than an assessment of Sterling. Mrs. Gaskell's **Charlotte Bronte** (1857) though superior in treating the life of an individual with high literary skill falls short of Nicolson's third requirement (for "pure biography" — accuracy — and is relegated to the rank of a sentimental novel.61 Gittings ranks Mrs. Gaskell's admirable **Charlotte Bronte** as the best English biography of the nineteenth century. She had advantages which

59-60. Gittings, p. 35.

set her apart from her contemporaries. She and her husband were Unitarians, belonging to English non-conformism; she had no faith in Evangelical piety and thus escaped its drawbacks. She attacks in her work the school of Reverend Carus Wilson, which was run on Evangelical principles:

Charlotte emerges as a real smouldering person, a credible creator of the barely concealed and sometimes quite unconcealed passions of Jane Eyre and Villette.  

According to Shelston, Carlyle's Sterling and Gaskell's Charlotte Bronte prove that the commemorative spirit was not the only guiding factor in Victorian biographies; Nicol does injustice to Victorian biography when he writes that hagiography returned triumphantly with Stanley's biography of Arnold and continued throughout the century. The fact remains that commemorative biography, even 'widow biography' offers a personal viewpoint which no other analysis can obtain.

Mrs. Kingsley's Charles Kingsley (1877), "is a famous manifestation of the memorial spirit", but then it remains the primary source of information in its subject. The modern biographers' advantages in possessing all the facts and in

62. Gittings, p. 36.
63. Shelston, pp. 60-61.
64. Ibid., p. 52.
being unrelated to Kingsley are no real advantages. The image of Kingsley in his wife's biography is hardly altered by modern efforts, though recent books tell us that Kingsley decorated his letters to his future wife with erotic drawings. Mrs. Kingsley suppressed what she considered to be an aberration; almost it is an idiosyncrasy which does not greatly affect the earlier view. Shelston raises a question: does it become impossible for the biographer to practise his art if he excludes facts? A reply in the negative would probably result in a paradox where so-called hagiography becomes a possible predecessor of Strachey-type debunking which excludes facts for the sake of form.

Among the positive aspects of Victorian biography, Nicolson mentions scholarship, interest in lives of foreigners (e.g., Goethe and Rousseau), and "biography for students" which includes both Leslie Stephen's Dictionary of National Biography and Morley's "English Men of Letters" series. The Victorian age created the professional biographer and the official biography. Nicolson thinks that the hagiographic attitude did not have a lasting influence but later biographers profited from Victorian industry and competence. Victorian biographies will survive only as literary curiosities or works of reference.

65. Ibid., p. 51.
Nicolson writes that we have advanced since Froude. The public now demand that the vast and various sea of human experience be put before them in a portable form. Edmund Gosse and Lytton Strachey did this for us. Gosse as a biographer will be judged by *Father and Son* (1907). He showed great courage and originality in this work. He writes of the clash between the age of belief and the age of reason, the struggle of Puritanism with science. These struggles take a personal form in his work; the clash between his own temperament and that of his father is described. Though Victoria's reign was over, Victorianism was still prevalent, when he was writing, but it was by denouncing superstitions that he showed his originality. He set out not to write a life but to present "a genuine slice of life". He portrays his father not as a zoologist but as he appeared in family life. But what is amazing is Edmund Gosse's detachment "from the tragedy in which he was so closely implicated". He is humorous, ironic, pathetic, but he is never sentimental. A singular specimen of human character is presented to us, with no irrelevant material. The exposition does not last a moment longer than it is necessary;

at the same time it is most interesting and instructive. The impression left by *Father and Son* is that of a masterpiece. It combines the "maximum of scientific interest with the maximum of literary form". 70

To Shelston, Gosse's astringent account of his father in *Father and Son* and Froude's detected irony in his *Carlyle* are the precursors of the new biographical spirit. But it was Strachey who was the founder of the "New Biography". 71 James Clifford also writes that Edmund Gosse may be taken as the leader of the movement towards a freer attitude. But it was not until the First World War and the advent of Lytton Strachey that modern biography made its appearance. 72

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70. Ibid., p. 148.

71. Shelston, p. 63.

III

In considering the major theoretical statements before Strachey, we find that the interest in the private and inner life of a person grew in the eighteenth-century biography. Before that little interest was taken in these. This must be one of the reasons why Shakespeare remains an enigma to this day. He would have been as well known to us as Johnson, had his contemporaries taken a biographer's interest in him. In spite of the later development of the form, it has not received from critics as much attention as the other literary types. Henry James claims a freedom for the novelist which the biographer does not enjoy. The biographer is not free to act on his own. D.H. Lawrence feels that compared to saints, scientists, philosophers and poets (who are only masters of different bits of man), the novelists are superior because they get the whole man. The biographer is not mentioned by him. This only proves that biography has been a neglected form.

Michael Holroyd, in his "History and Biography", laments that

biography was not quite an accepted literary type till recently and biographers were considered to be disrespectful. Even financially they lagged behind poets, dramatists and novelists. It is true that the novelist is free to use his imagination as much as he desires but the biographer cannot give "free play" to his imagination, the material being pre-determined; the facts cannot be altered, though selection is possible. Edel laments that Harold Nicolson's *The Development of English Biography* and André Maurois's *Aspects of Biography*, inspite of the liveliest discussion, tend to be neglected because the readers of biography take for granted the facts they are given; they are not interested in how the biographer arrived at them. Readers of novels are often interested in the problems of story-telling and in the theories of fiction. For this reason, E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* or Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* are widely read. No wonder Harold Nicolson, writing in 1928, was not very hopeful about the future of biography. He saw it as doomed to become a work of science; lives of individuals would gradually cease to be a branch of literature, and would become case histories, he feared. Edel explains to us the cause of Nicolson's despondency. He thinks Nicolson was writing under


78. Edel, p. 5.
the influence of transplantation of monkey-glands and of the popularization of psycho-analysis. More recently Nadel assures his readers that contemporary biographies, by demonstrating new ways of uniting the drive for creativity with the need for fact, have disproved Nicolson's assertion.

Maurois wanted biography to be accepted as an art only, while Virginia Woolf thought of it as neither art nor science but as a superior craft. Writing in 1957 Edel draws the conclusion that biography is scientific when elucidation is required about the human personality; it is an art when language is used to capture human experience, and craftsmanship is required when the biographer has to master the past and varied amount of material at his disposal. But he thinks it is more of an art than science because it deals with the emotions which impel literary creations. Edel writes that no chemical process has yet been developed by which the biographer can turn his base metals (i.e. the disparate facts) into gold (i.e. the human personality). To turn his dead materials into a living whole the biographer has to perform an unusual and almost impossible task. He has to incorporate into himself the experience of another. In other words he has to become for a

80-81. As quoted in Edel, p. 6.
while that other person; he must move to the age of that other
person, take on that person's career, habits and ways, and yet
must remain himself, he must retain his own mind, his own sense
of balance. "He must be warm, yet aloof, involved, yet un-
involved." In "The Poetics of Biography", written in a
dialogue form in 1977, Edel tells us that while the biographer
feels his subject at certain moments, as if he
were that subject, he detaches himself and
uses his own eyes as well as those of the sub-
ject in order to arrive at his final picture.
This involvement at one moment and then his detachment at
another gives rise to certain problems. The involvement un-
doubtedly leads to a relationship which is intimate and
subjective; the possibility of the subject being refashioned
in the author's own image arises. Yet the detachment will
demand impartiality. The biographer then has to perform a
difficult task. To solve the difficulty, Strachey, as we will
find later, prescribed impartiality and motivelessness.

Edel admits that the biographer, like his subject, is
human, he is not omniscient, he has his limitations. He also
agrees that a biographer chooses his subject because he is drawn

82. Edel, p. 7.
83. Leon Edel, "The Poetics of Biography", Contemporary Approac-
es to English Studies; ed. by Hilda Schiff (London: Heinemann,
84. Lytton Strachey, Preface to Eminent Victorians (London:
to it. If he is honest he will inquire of himself why he feels impelled to write some particular life. Unless he gets to know the psychology playing behind his choice he will be in a state of doubt and he will fail to see that his subject can do wrong. One cannot possibly write the life of one hates:

Biographies are written in love rather than hate, but it is love in which the lover divests himself of his passion; the distortions of love fade, the subject becomes human, interesting, beautiful, ridiculous, odd, characteristic, original — a person who must be seen as he was, and not idealized.85

There are bound to be differences between the portraits drawn by a biographer who had personal knowledge of the subject and that drawn by a biographer who had none and had, therefore, depended solely on documents and second-hand reports. Johnson was of the opinion that biography can only be written by a close acquaintance of the subject and the writing must not be far removed in time from the subject's life. He also thought that the author must have the privilege of knowing his subject socially. Johnson felt that moral improvement could be gained from biography and that recording great events did not supply this improvement, instead the minute details of daily life provided it.

Boswell also felt that the sooner the conversations of Dr. Johnson were recorded for the sake of authenticity, the

better the result. The credibility of the events are the plus points of his book. Both Edel and Shelston agree that Boswell was the first great modern biographer or at least anticipated modern biography.

What Edel regards as 'modern' in Boswell is the use of first hand 'records', sometimes the result of 'occasions' and 'encounters' organized and engineered by the biographer himself, "mirrors deliberately held up to catch the reflection of the living Johnson." In "The Poetics of Biography", Edel no longer seems to hold Boswell's first hand 'records' as a 'modern' element. He writes that though "Boswell was a fine reporter, he was the worshipful kind. The combination Boswell-Johnson worked but such combinations are rare." He goes on to give examples of a few such other combinations that were formed with hopes of producing biographies like The Life of Johnson and failed because the feelings of the biographers for their subjects were not genuine. The buried feelings of the biographer behind the praises for his subject will have to be examined. The true feeling of Boswell for Johnson will also have to be examined.

86. Edel, p. 18.
87. Shelston, p. 15.
89. Ibid., p. 18.
91. Ibid., p. 53.
Shelston says that the Life of Johnson anticipated modern biography especially "in its combination of comprehensiveness and an interpretative impulse that never imposes itself on the reader." What Shelston calls "comprehensiveness" doubtless includes the use of what Edel calls "a vast long-gathered archive, documentary and reminiscential".

In modern theory of biography therefore there is a shift from Johnson's emphasis on first-hand knowledge; interpretation and second-hand material are also held to be important.

Interpretation, which Shelston holds inseparable from selection, entails the organisation of various, often conflicting points of view. When Edel says that Boswell puzzles out "a large series of mirror-images, some with as many distortions as the mirrors in a fun-house at a fair", he probably includes this characteristic in Boswell's modernity.

Both Shelston and Edel, therefore, consider the use of records, interpretation, selection and some necessary distortion to be part of modern biography.

93. Edel, p. 18.
95. Edel, p. 19.
In "Poetics of Biography" Edel uses the terms "conjecture and speculation" that are required in the writing of a biography. He asks the readers to call it "the educated guess", and asks the biographer to make the readers aware of the guessing process. In recent times the biographer encounters "prodigious archives", "entire libraries". He must not throw the segments of these archives at his readers. The art of summary is the supreme importance. Like Madam Curie the biographer must find from the vast amount of documents of many years the tiny glowing particle, the radium of human personality ... Having obtained his particle, the biographer must retain the glow, provide the intensity.

Edel also entrusts upon the biographer the task of involving the reader as well in the biography. The art of the biographer lies in making the reader feel that he is at work with the biographer in creating a mosaic of the subject's life from the fragments. The biographer makes the reader a party to a "weighing of evidence". This idea of the reader participating in the biography is a new aspect of biography. The questions which Strachey throws at the readers in his biographies produce this desired intimacy between the author, readers and even with the characters.

Edel divides biography writing into three categories: (1) The chronicle type, (2) The pictorial type, and (3) The narrative-pictorial type or the novelistic type. The first and the most common type is the "traditional documentary biography, ... in which the biographer arranges the materials — ... so as to allow the voice of the subject to be heard constantly." Boswell falls under this category. This type is usually lengthy in nature and the author quotes largely from the great mass of documents which always remain in the foreground. These biographies are designed so as to become the Standard Biographies and contain much more material than the other types of biographies. Masson's Life of Milton is also an example of this type. Such a biography is scholarly in nature. Edel seems to hint that just because this type of biography abounds in documents it need not be taken for granted that they are all facts. Documents are not always "all revealing." It could be that some letters are preserved while some others are destroyed and it could also be that those which are preserved are trivial and the destroyed ones the important ones. It all depends on the deft handling of the biographer. If the biographer knows the art of expression and "has a large sense of life," he can easily impart a continuity.
and completeness to his work despite all its drawbacks. But such a biographer is rare and the biography turns out to be a cold expression.

The second or the "Portrait" type of biography is quite different from the classical chronicle type. Aubrey's *Brief Lives* falls under this type. It is a brief life of a person, and only the essential traits are captured. Just like a framed picture a man is framed in a given position. The "English Men of Letters" series edited by John Morley is another example of this type. According to Edel these "portraits" are never complete pictures.

The third type of biography is larger than the portrait but smaller than the full-length one. Edel associates the origin of this type with Lytton Strachey. Strachey's biography, *Eminent Victorians* falls under the third kind of biography according to Edel's classification. It is "larger than the portrait and yet smaller than the full-length biography", the documents are not quoted at length, they are reduced and refined to create a figure that fits the changing background. The method is that of a novelist's, but the work is not a fiction. Lytton Strachey is the inventor of this kind of biography.

105. Ibid., p. 84.
106. Ibid., p. 87.
Shelston holds the same opinion when he refers to a deliberate selection of parts which produces "a biographical mood that is impressionistic rather than historical. The result is often closer to fiction than to biography." Shelston finds support for Strachey's practising method in Norman Mailer who, contemplating the problem of writing Marilyn Monroe's life, writes that the elusive quality of her nature is not a fit subject for biography. The novel, written in the form of biography, is the more appropriate instrument. Edel states that the biographer is more free here to act on his own. He is not bound to follow chronology strictly. On the other hand he is at leisure to leave out certain things and at the same time to include other trivial incidents which he feels will illuminate his subject's character better. He becomes so "saturated" with the documents that he is at liberty to cut himself off from it without cutting himself off from the truth. This he achieves by selective and psychological means.

Shelston is stressing the same point when he writes of the impressionistic biographers that however doubtful the authenticity of their impressions, they may claim that, by the freedom to select, they can achieve a truth more "instinctive"

and more "intrinsic" than the facts of the chronicle type of biography.

Given the multiplicity of lives and the variety of styles of biographical expression, Nadel considers it impossible to have a theory of biography, a systematized set of principles regarding the form and composition of the genre. Nadel considers Edel's generalisations in this matter as not very clear and says that if a theory of biography is to emerge it must begin by looking less at the historical development of the genre and more at the formal properties of individual texts. According to him a biographer is above all a writer, how he presents the details of a life is more important than the details themselves. He laments that it is still the accuracy of materials that takes precedence over form of presentation. He lays all the emphasis on form. According to him a biographer transforms his craft into an art by the use of language. The biographer in order to achieve a definite objective life account should use a language enriched with such literary means as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Each of these plays an important role in biography. But these tropes alone cannot constitute a poetics of biography. Narration is the

110. Shelston, p. 15.
111. Nadel, p. 151.
112. Ibid., pp. 154-155.
113
means by which these are made consistent with their function. Besides language and narration myth is the third consideration in the theory. It is with the myth of the subject that the biographer has to contend in a biography. This creates certain problems. The first desire of the biographer is to correct or revise the existing myth and in doing so he unconsciously creates a new myth. Biography is a demythologizing form. Its function is to correct, restate or reinterpret false or distorted accounts of the subject. Boswell wrote his Life of Johnson to correct the mistaken impression given by Hawkins. Carlyle wrote his Life of Sterling to counteract Archdeacon Hare's biased view, "Strachey revises the lives of his representative Victorians to expose their shortcomings". According to Nadel configurations in biography is established by language, narration and myth.

Nadel defines the biographical narrators by their relation to the story and method into three types. They are the dramatic/expressive, the objective/academic and the interpretative/analytic. The first emphasizes participation, the second detachment and the third analysis. Boswell represents the first, Lockhart the second and Strachey the third.

In the first type the presence of the dramatic narrator characterizes the biography. He may be present either in a

114. Ibid., p. 175.
symbolic form or in an actual form, as a character or commentator. In this form a unique relationship exists between the hero and the biographer who is acquainted with his subject. The subjective involvement of the biographer sometimes affects accuracy.

In the second or objective type, the narrator eliminates himself from presentation of the life and due to the historical distance or scholarly ideals there is no involvement on the part of the biographer. The nineteenth century "Life and Letters" form initiated this approach; the subject speaks for himself. Some scholarly biographies of this century are an extension of this method. Fact and record are the most important points in this type. The biographer's point of view and narration are not considered important. In this type research replaces experience and the result is usually a dull but accurate account, a reference book rather than a life story.

In the third type interpretative narrators, are not present in the biography as characters but as commentators, they play the role of a guide by establishing the meaning of the material for the reader. They are the most absorbing to read. The interpretative narrator while maintaining objectivity does not hesitate to intervene at unexpected moments when he senses that the reader requires an analysis of the life.

Strachey is considered to be the pioneer of the kind of biography that Edel calls "Selective and psychological".
Shelston calls it "impressionistic rather than historical"; Nadel's term is "interpretative/analytic".

Nadel thinks that twentieth-century biography links itself to fiction rather than history. "This is partly the consequence of Strachey's psychologizing, candour and stylistic energy and partly a reaction by biography to new forms of fictional expression". Biographies have become more aware of how they tell their story. Modern biography considers it impossible to achieve "the unity or completeness of self former biographies presented or the cohesiveness represented by history". Nineteenth century biography by its reliance on fact and quantity of information gave a fuller shape to the subject but from the architectural point of view it lacked structure. The idea of a single coherent personality in a biography denies the multiplicity of selves we all possess. The modern biographer does not endeavour to present a single self for the subject. Due to "literary modernism, psychology and an awareness of the power of fiction" modern biography has become bold in nature. It has become more intimate in revealing more personal details. The facts in it are transformed from chronicle to "story" by being represented as certain forms of plot structure.

116. Ibid., p. 185.
117-18. Ibid., p. 186.
119. Ibid., p. 205.
Strachey and Virginia Woolf made attempts to enlarge the scope of biographical writing with fictional techniques. Modern biography in this respect also owes its origin to Strachey.

Strachey considered biography to be an art. He did not remain satisfied with the mere evidence he collected. He tried to go beyond them and also see the hidden truths behind the known facts. In other words he exposes that secret life of man which reveals itself in his actions. It was this quality which made his biography as real as fiction. He realized that biography could never become interesting from mere accurate accumulation of facts; in order to make it genuinely lively he closely followed the technique of contemporary fiction in the selection of materials so as to create an effect of singular unity, with the elimination of irrelevances and dullness.

Fictional style in biography is Strachey's invention. In writing the fantasy Orlando Virginia Woolf adopted this style. But just because this style was taken into fantasy it must not be supposed that Strachey's works were wholly fantasy. In Elizabeth and Essex Strachey was much more free to use the methods of novel because of the remoteness of period and the unreliability of the few available fact evidences. But it is this lack of information probably that did not make Elizabeth convincing. According to Virginia Woolf the combination of
fact and fiction refused to mix in this biography. On the other hand, this method has made Queen Victoria a great success.

From the superabundance of material Strachey carefully selects his details with a determination to present Victoria's inner history. The other characters like the events are grouped about Victoria. They have all become living like the Queen; with great skill he reconstructs their inner life too. This reminds one of a novelist. His method is vivid, convincing and economical. Often a few lines convey much more than paragraphs of description. His theme is like a popular novel in which the heroine at last marries and lives happily ever after.

Scott James writes that Strachey is also successful in persuading us to believe all this as history because the framework of solid fact based on sound evidence has been industriously prepared and his interpretation of the facts follows so plausibly. The character-drawing is not inconsistent with what we know.

Queen Victoria is Strachey's most honest work. Michael Holroyd's words also carry the same idea:

Strachey was able legitimately to persuade his readers that a book which gives the impression of a consummately written romantic novel was, in reality, a serious and soundly evidenced work of history.


Scott James is of the opinion that every one of Strachey's biographies long or short reads like a novel or a short story, done "with sensitive art and in a manner which gives full scope to irony and wit", and here lies its difference with other novels and short-stories. He writes:

He uses just so much of his available material as will lead to the significant episode, the dramatic situation, and climax, and every detail fits into its place as part of a composed picture. Life 'as he understands it' — that is his material. He endeavours to give an account of the world as his imagination has conceived it, and his world of the past is peopled with all sorts of complex, odd, characters, expressing themselves stupidly and divinely, dressing up and behaving, thinking thoughts which can be read, hiding or indecently exposing their emotions, and after a time so dying as to give him a congenial death bed scene... He serves up to us all this so lightly for our entertainment adding as showman his own spice of comment, delicate, humane, sententious, provocative, witty, or slightly impertinent. 122

Since Strachey's biographies win the qualified acclaim of critics, for all the trends that go to make a modern biography, a look at Strachey's views on biography and the literary techniques he adopted may be useful. In his Preface to the Eminent Victorians he writes that the art of biography had fallen on evil times in England (meaning the Victorian age). The French had a biographical tradition. Fontenelles and Condorcets have to their credits incomparable "eloges", which.

122. Scott-James, p. 32.
 compress into a "few shining pages the manifold existences of man". Compared to this England, barring a few masterpieces, had nothing. In fact biography which Strachey regards as "the most delicate and humane of all the branches of the art of writing" had been assigned to writers not very proficient in the art. It was never realized that it was just "as difficult to write a good life as to live one". What is known as biography in England is, to Strachey, nothing but:

Those 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. One is tempted to suppose, of some of them, that they were composed by that functionary, as the final item of his job.

So much so he places the biographies he uses for writing Eminent Victorians, in the above mentioned class. Apart from providing him with indispensable information Strachey says that these Standard Biographies provided him with something more precious. They were to him an example. And adds "How many lessons are to be learnt from them!" As for the duties of a biographer he writes that to preserve brevity is the first duty. Everything that is redundant ought to be excluded. This quality of brevity he praises in the works of the French writers. The second duty of a biographer is "to maintain his own freedom of..."

The business of a biographer is not to praise but to lay bare facts of the case, as he understands them and goes on to add that it is this which he tries to do in *Eminent Victorians*, "to lay bare the facts of some cases, as I understand them, dispassionately, impartially, and without ulterior intentions". This was Strachey's view of biography. His views about some biographers are strewn over the pages of his essays. Of Aubrey he writes, "He was an assiduous biographer". He jotted down on scraps of paper every information he could gather of famous English people of his own time as well as of the previous generations. This made him accurate. Moreover, "he had an unfailing eye for what was interesting, and he possessed — it was almost inevitable in those days — a natural gift of style". These qualities made Aubrey's *Brief Lives* not only an authority upon seventeenth-century England, but one of the most readable of books. According to Strachey a biography should either be as long as Boswell's or as short as Aubrey's. He would have nothing in-between these two forms. He writes that the method of "enormous and elaborate accretion" which produced the *Life of Johnson* is excellent. But if one fails to

127-129. Ibid.
130. Ibid., pp. 15-16.
131. Ibid., p. 16.
do that then "let us have the pure essentials — a vivid image, on a page or two, without explanations, transitions, commentaries or padding. This is what Aubrey gives us". About Boswell he writes:

Boswell triumphed by dint of abandoning himself, through fifty years, to his instincts. The example, no doubt is not one to be followed rashly. Self indulgence is common and Boswells are rare. He also writes that there are many with desires to confess but only a few possess the power to do so. "A rare clarity of vision, a still rarer candour of expression" are qualities without which it is not possible for a man to seek to unburden his heart. Boswell possessed these qualities to the highest degree, at the same time "he had no pride, no shame and no dignity." These are admirable qualities but they are fatal for the purpose of biography, so when Boswell was untroubled by these, the result was that he could write an excellent biography. But he was by no means detached:

His was not the method of the scientific observer, noting his introspections with a cold exactness — far from it; he was intimately fascinated by everything to do with himself — his thoughts, his feelings, his reactions; yet he was able to give expression to them all with absolute ingenuousness, without a shade of self-consciousness, without a particle of reserve.

Strachey writes that Boswell's appetite for life was insatiable. Life of Johnson won immortality but the author was ruined. So

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432. Ibid., p. 16.
433. Ibid., p. 147.
134-136. Ibid., p. 149.
Aubrey and Boswell were Strachey’s ideal biographers. It is natural therefore that Strachey himself will practise their qualities while writing biographies himself.

Johnstone writes that though Strachey had said that a biography should either be as short as Aubrey’s or as long as Boswell’s he did not carry his theory that far. He practised the short form of biography in *Eminent Victorians* and the long form in the biography of Queen Victoria. It is some of his biographical essays that give us the "pure essentials of the man on a page or two".

The sharp incisive picture given in "Manning" is not to be achieved by "the method of enormous and elaborate accretion". Similarly in the essay Dr. Arnold brevity is achieved by keeping the scene at Rugby School and Arnold’s career there.

As for Strachey’s likes and dislikes we get to know from his various writings that he liked the eighteenth century and disliked the nineteenth century. He liked everything about the eighteenth century. This love grew out of his love for eighteenth century France and its writers. "France was a model to him of civilization". He found La Bruyère’s writings "so subtle and

so simple ... so radiant and so intimate". He greatly appreciated Elizabeth Lee. His ironic temperament took shape from the writings of La Rochefoucauld, Pascal and Voltaire. He admired eighteenth century England as well as its writers like Pope, Swift, and Hume because he found in these writers the virtues of French prose. He was drawn to the literature of France and England of the eighteenth century for its language and style. He was also attracted by the habits of that age. Its personalities, its loves, its scandals, its wits, its elegant conventions and all that has been preserved in its poetry, prose, letters, diaries, buildings, gardens even grottoes were enchanting and nourishing to his spirit.

He likes people who are interested in beauty and the arts, who value friendships, and delights to look at them when they are in love or flying into a passion or talking gaily.

Compared to this, the age of Victoria "was an age of self-complacency and self-contradiction". It was an age of barbarism and prudery, of nobility and cheapness, of satisfaction and desperation; an age in which everything was discovered and nothing known. He was disgusted with the age. He feels — "the heartless, irreverent, indecent eighteenth century produced the

140. Scott James, p. 31.
141. Lytton Strachey, Biographical Essays, p. 283.
French Revolution" 142 Then he asks ironically "The Age of Victoria produced — what?" 143

Strachey is quite conscious of his favouritism and tries to explain the reason. He writes:

Why is it that the eighteenth century so particularly delights us? Are we perhaps simply reacting against a reaction? Is the twentieth century so fond of the eighteenth because the nineteenth disliked it so intensely? No doubt that is partly the reason; but the whole truth lies deeper. Every age has a grudge against its predecessor, and generally the grudge is well founded. The Romantics and the Victorians were probably right; they had good reason to dislike the eighteenth century, which they found to be intolerably rigid, formal and self satisfied, devoid, to an extraordinary degree, of sympathy, adventure and imagination. 144

Strachey thinks that just as he was bewitched by the eighteenth century, it could be that about the year 2000, "our descendants no doubt, will cast longing eyes towards the baroque enchantments of the age of Victoria." 145

As Strachey made biography into a popular art, it is worth discovering the characteristics which made his works so appealing. We cannot claim that his works were successes because of his subject matter only. His subjects were by no

142-143. Ibid., p. 283.
144. Ibid., p. 201.
145. Ibid., pp. 201-202.
means all captivating. There were far more interesting characters (with the exception of Florence Nightingale,) than Manning, Dr. Arnold or General Gordon. But he turns them into such that we can hardly give up the book midway. So there is something else which lends his work this quality of readability and entertain-ment. Srinivasa Iyengar states that the study of Manning is full of ecclesiastical history, theological subtleties, Vatican diplomacy. The pages reveal step by step Manning's spiritual progress, from the Church of England's curacy in Sussex to the Cardinal's Hat in the Roman Catholic Church. Running parallel to this picture, sometimes intersecting it, is Newman's history. The Oxford Movement and Papal Infallibility are discussed and woven into the texture of the main study. These are by no means captivating topics. Similarly the discussion of educational theories and policies in the essay on Dr. Arnold and the discussion on military strategy and imperial diplomacy in the essay on Gordon are least calculated to make a book entertaining. So the question again arises how did he breathe life into the dead matter of blue books, military manuals, educational codes, and other things equally flat and weary?

Iyengar thinks that if we say that Strachey breathes life into these by the notorious method of Stracheyan debunking, 

we will not be giving a satisfactory explanation. Besides we
have seen at the beginning of this chapter that to Simson
Strachey was no debunker for he dealt with the main issues of
the day in the four biographies. It is also not, Iyengar writes,
the studied belittlement of accepted eminence that makes the
book fascinating.147

It is the illusion of art; what pleases us, what
for the time being convinces us, nibbles away
our sense of values and makes us think erroneou-
ly of the whole as being only an enlargement of
the unpleasant particular that we have been
permitted to scrutinize. It is the fatal
triumph of supreme art.148

A.C. Ward is of the same opinion. He writes that:

... it is impossible to separate style from
content in *Eminent Victorians*, the book is more
remarkable as a literary feat than as a repre-
sentation of personal history. As tales of men
and women, these are absorbing from first to
last, whether the subject be Manning, Newman,
Arnold of Rugby, Gladstone or another. Yet
there is less in the tale than in the telling.
All these lives had been written before — but
no similar thrill had previously resulted. The
new brilliance and new force came from Lytton
Strachey's achievement of his purpose to make
biography in England an art instead of an
industry.149

Johnstone after projecting the view of Bloomsbury comes to the

147. Ibid., p. 56.
148. Ibid., p. 57.
149. A.C. Ward, *Twentieth-Century Literature 1901-1963* (Methuen,
the novels of Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster, the biographies and essays of Lytton Strachey, and the aesthetic criticism of Roger Fry are mere superficial variations on a generic pattern. He discovers some basic agreement between their work and G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*. He also finds that

the integrity and careful composition of their books demonstrate a profound respect for art, and a conviction that form is as important to a work of art as content; that, indeed, the two are inseparable since the artist cannot express emotions and ideas adequately except in significant form.

To make the subject interesting and readable Strachey uses certain rhetorical devices. This is also what Nadel thinks a biographer should do. The entire structure of his writing is ironical. This is mainly true of *Eminent Victorians*. Besides having a general air of irony, there are in his work satirical details contributing to the total effect. Such details are supported by the use of paradox, anticlimax, juxtaposition and other familiar figures of speech which however are absent in Victorian biography. For this rhetorical prose style Strachey was indebted to seventeenth century French writers and eighteenth century English writers like Swift and Pope. About French literature he writes that two main impulses which were at work could be perceived. These two impulses, combined, have created great masterpieces in French. One, "there

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150. Johnstone, p. 375.
was that positive spirit of searching and unmitigated common sense; this had given a peculiar distinction to French prose. It had also given rise to a strain of realism and a regard for truth. The second impulse was totally different and quite contradictory to the first tendency, but this was as important and as clearly marked as the first — it was a "tendency towards a pure Rhetoric". The two influences met and achieved a perfect balance in the works of the great masters of the seventeenth century — Pascal, Racine, La Fontaine, La Bruyère. Strachey writes that:

in their work, the most penetrating realism is beautified and ennobled by all the resources of linguistic art, while the rhetorical instinct is preserved from pomposity and inflation by a supreme critical sense.

Both these impulses are present in Strachey's work. He deals with facts but gives expression to these facts in a flowery language. Thus it becomes absolutely clear where he picked up this style. He writes that a change had come about in the eighteenth century. It was an age of prose and common sense. Its writers did not care for rhetoric, and the rhetorical impulse of the seventeenth century became blurred. Voltaire's

152. Ibid., p. 104.
153. Ibid., p. 105.
style is representative of this age; it is "so brilliant and yet so colourless, so limited and yet so infinitely sensible".  

Strachey writes of the French Romantic Movement that it came as a reaction against the realism which had come to perfection in the prose of Voltaire. By this movement the rhetorical instinct reasserted itself. He benefitted from both these centuries. His tastes were fairly catholic. He admired the classicists and romantics with equal ardour. He admired Racine and Stendhal on the one hand and Beddoes and Blake of the Romantic Movement on the other. In Racine there was "nothing for the imagination to feed on, nothing to raise expectation ...". But yet he loved Racine for in him he found "the beauties of restraint, of clarity, of refinement and of precision." Regarding Strachey's admiration for Beddoes, Holroyd writes:

It is easy to understand the appeal which Beddoes held for Strachey. Eccentric, mysterious, brilliant, a figure as improbable as the characters in his own dramas, this strange personality fascinated him.  

Strachey picks up the best of every age and combines them in his remarkable style. When he began his literary career

154. Ibid., p. 105.  
156. Ibid., p. 66.  
writing about the Elizabethans, the French and English literary figures of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries he attracted little public notice. His admiration for elegance, control, precision and delicacy of craftsmanship are revealed in these works. Iyengar writes:

Strachey was a romantic by temperament, a classicist by training and often, in his own literary practice, both. The eccentrics and the romantics, the buffoons and the mad men fatally attracted him. He must pore over their memoirs and memoranda, their incoherent letters and illegible script; he must read aloud their frenzied verses and run hot in pursuit of their fugitive beauties; and he must reason out his case with the rigorous training of a classicist and he must write down his conclusions with cogent reasoning but in coloured prose. 158

It is his biographies Eminent Victorians (1918), Queen Victoria (1921) and Elizabeth and Essex (1928) which brought him into the limelight. We get Strachey's mature prose style here.

We know from the Preface to Eminent Victorians that Strachey was about to break into the stronghold of the Victorian biography. He was out to say some truths without hiding anything. About the problem of method he writes that previously biographies had been just accumulation of material, but his aim would be rather "scrupulous selection and ruthless rejection." 159

158. Iyengar, p. 50.

159. Eminent Victorians, Preface.
research done, but to his amazement he found that much of the amassed material was left unused probably due to the fact that the Victorian sense of decency thought of them to be unfit for revelation, and yet to Strachey they seemed to be of most importance. In Strachey's hands the characters were no longer inanimate beings; they were presented as men and women. Strachey writes that if the explorer of the past is wise:

he will attack his subject in unexpected places,
he will fall upon the flank, or the rear; he will shoot a sudden, revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hitherto undivined. 160

To put all this into practice Strachey has adopted a style which has helped him to fulfil his desire. To unmask what he did not like in the Victorian society he took the help of irony. This reminds one of A.C. Ward's comment that, nothing made the English people more uneasy than irony:

Some hate it as abstainers hate alcohol ... Literature gets drunk upon irony more quickly than upon anything else ... Twentieth century biography got briskly and entertainingly drunk upon Lytton Strachey's irony. 161

Irony is inseparable from Strachey's art. The very title Eminent Victorians is ironical once we get to know what he does to their eminence. Strachey's deft handling of Manning's success in the College Union makes us feel that he would go out to be a successful politician, a glamorous career lay ahead of him, but

160. Ibid.
very soon we are made to realise our mistake. Manning has to begin life as a poor clerk due to his father's sudden bankruptcy in business. Overwork imposed on Sidney Herbert by Florence Nightingale instead of doing any good kills him. Clough, another of Dr. Arnold's prize pupils, has nothing better to do than tie up brown paper parcels for Florence Nightingale. It is an irony that while the world was fast progressing, Dr. Arnold took pride in sticking to the study of Classical languages or that he employed the Sixth Form to keep the discipline of the school. So much so even the teachers had no voice. It was the Sixth Form and himself. It is an irony that Gordon's severed head, displayed between two tree-branches after his murder, becomes the centre of attraction for the very hawks he admired. The same note of irony is present in Queen Victoria. In 1820, a fortune-teller had told the Duke of Kent that two members of the Royal family would die. He wondered who they would be. He speculated on the various possibilities: the King could not live much longer, and the Duchess of York had been attacked by a mortal disease. Probably it would be the King and the Duke of York; or the King and the Regent. He considered himself to be one of the healthiest men in England:

"My brothers are not so strong as I am; I have lived, a regular life. I shall outlive them all. The crown will come to me and to my children. He went out and got his feet wet. On
coming home, he neglected to change his stockings. He caught a cold, inflammation of the lungs set in, and on January 22 he was a dying man.\footnote{Strachey's criticism of Manning for his double standard of behaviour is revealed when he writes ironically:}

On Newman's death, Manning delivered a funeral oration, which opened thus: 'We have lost our greatest witness for the Faith, and we are all poorer and lower by the loss ....' In private, however, the surviving Cardinal's tone was apt to be more ... direct. 'Poor Newman!' he once exclaimed in a moment of genial expansion 'Poor Newman! He was a great hater!'\footnote{In the Gordon essay he attacks the civilizing zeal of the English by uniting it with the vandalism of the East. His irony is sharp when he writes:}

Though he was too late to take part in the capture of the Taku Forts, he was in time to witness the destruction of the Summer Palace at Peking – the act by which Lord Elgin, in the name of European civilisation, took vengeance upon the barbarism of the East.\footnote{There were other rhetorical means which helped his satire along. Wit is also inseparable from his writing. His dislike of Florence Nightingale is expressed in these witty lines:}

Yet her conception of God was certainly not orthodox. She felt towards Him as she might have felt towards a glorified sanitary engineer;

\footnote{162. Lytton Strachey, \textit{Queen Victoria} (London: Châtto & Windus, 1924), p. 18.}

\footnote{163. \textit{Eminent Victorians}, p. 196.}

\footnote{164. \textit{Ibid.}, p. 212.}
and in some of her speculations she seems hardly to distinguish between the Deity and the Drains. Strachey uses the device of anticlimax to get his desired result. When he describes Queen Victoria following Albert around while he was giving instructions on various things from the hanging of pictures correctly to breeding of cattle, Strachey writes that she felt perfectly certain that no other wife had ever had such a husband. She felt that his mind was capable of everything and she was not at all surprised to learn that he made an important discovery of converting the sewage into agricultural manure. Albert himself had felt that unlike other plans that had cost millions, his would cost next to nothing. Strachey's comment was "Unfortunately, owing to a slight miscalculation, the invention proved to be impracticable ..." At one stroke both Victoria and Albert are made to look foolish.

Strachey makes liberal use of adjectives. These adjectives are no superficial adornment — they are an integral part of his expression. He chooses them carefully and deliberately with an intention to qualify, beautify or destroy.

About Cardinal Manning he writes:

... his sagacity led him swiftly and unerringly up the little winding staircase in the Vatican.

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166. *Queen Victoria*, p. 164.
and through the humble door which opened into the cabinet of Monsignor Talbot, the private secretary of the Pope. 167

Describing Dr. Arnold's personal appearance he writes:

The thick, dark clusters of his hair, his bushy eyebrows and curling whiskers, his straight nose and bulky chin, his firm and upward-curving lower lip — all these revealed a temperament of ardour and determination. 168

Another winding sentence runs this way:

A minority of susceptible and serious youths fell completely under his sway, responded like wax to the pressure of his influence, and moulded their whole lives with passionate reverence upon the teaching of their adored master. 169

Now the importance of the adjectives will at once be noticed if we omit these adjectives and qualifying words. The sentence will surely be cut down to size, but it would lose all its charm and the intended irony would be carried away from the prose. It only proves that every word that he writes is necessary to bring out the very spirit of the situation.

Nadel lays great importance on the role of metaphors in Strachey's Eminent Victorians. He thinks Strachey understood the value of metaphor from his earliest considerations of

167. Eminent Victorians, p. 60. (E.V. in subsequent references).
169. Ibid., p. 201.
biography. The book is controlled by military metaphors. Nader thinks this is because Strachey wrote *Eminent Victorians* when the war was taking place and to express the conflict between the educated and the philistines he found battle-imagery attractive. The animal metaphors in the book are used to "mix the bestial with the natural". Then Nadel writes:

On the social scale, for example, the divisions in such Victorian institutions as the church, public health, education and the military that Strachey confronts are resolved most confidently and completely in the text through metaphor.

Ridicule was another characteristic feature of Strachey's writing. Johnstone writes that Strachey ridicules Arnold by comparing him to Jehovah and hints that Arnold maintained the Jehovah-like attitude not only at school but in his family and in his writings. He did play with his children, but Strachey does not forget to add "the sense of his authority as a father was never lost in his playfulness as a companion." This is Strachey's attack on the Victorian attitude of the father dominating the household. Johnstone feels that Strachey's tone is comic and full of ridicule when he writes that Arnold's stern pre-occupation with morals kept him from appreciating

171. Ibid., p. 163.
beauty in nature and in art; his pomposity and his lack of humour prevented him from seeing himself.

Johnstone finds some faults in this rhetorical style of Strachey. He thinks that the metaphor in "Manning" of the eagle and the dove is undoubtedly successful but the metaphor of the tigress and the stag used to illustrate the relation between Florence Nightingale and Sidney Herbert is unsuccessful. He does not approve of Lord Panmure in the guise of the bison. He describes these as bad descriptions. According to Johnstone, Strachey at times became the victim of certain characteristics of his own art. He writes that though it might seem paradoxical but he at times did become diffuse and failed to select subtly. His love of anecdote and of irony causes uncertainty of purpose and some of his accounts become irrelevant. For example Johnstone cites the discussion on Florence Nightingale's excursions into theology or the account of the relations between Lord Panmure and General Simpson. He feels that Strachey could have easily left them out in a short biography.

These defects would appear to be minor once it is accepted that Strachey used his sources faithfully. Only a

173. Ibid., p. 287.
174. Ibid., p. 290.
distortion of the source materials would render the satire mis-directed and the rhetorical devices supporting that satire would then be useless. Johnstone himself, however, states that Strachey's use of his sources is in order. He has great faith in the authenticity of Strachey's deductions. "The figures in Eminent Victorians emerge with extraordinary clarity and force" if this were not the case, the book would not have stirred the wrath of its opponents as it has. He argues that if Strachey had lied to his readers in the slightest degree the characters would not have emerged in that way. He also thinks that most of the materials were true because they were taken from diaries, and letters and were within quotation marks.

Strachey's biographies are worth reading not only for the information they give; but also for the delight they provide.

175. Ibid., p. 274.
Most of the critical discussions (e.g., Edel, Shelston and Nadel) summarized above concentrate on the form of biography. When considering it as an art the emphasis is very often on plot-construction and character-drawing, thus relating Strachey's biographies more to the novel than to history. Even Simson who has meticulously pointed out Strachey's agreements with or departures from the sources of *Eminent Victorians* has used this process for a better understanding of Strachey's form. It is more the defective plot in "the End of General Gordon", or the defective characterisation in "Arnold", which concern him than history, defective or successful. It will be my purpose to compare Strachey's work in *Eminent Victorians* with the sources in order to answer the problems raised by Halperin and others and mentioned above. Each of the next four chapters will take up one biography from *Eminent Victorians*, assess the focal points of criticism or attack in relation to the major sources and see how far Strachey was using source material honestly. Much of the ground already covered by Simson has therefore to be traversed again: but the purpose will be different because the answers sought are answers to problems raised since Simson's work was done.

To reach a solution an effort will be made in the sixth
chapter to examine how post-Strachey biographies have used the same sources and whether post-Strachey biographers, using the same sources in treating the same subjects, have vindicated or exploded Strachey's way of using his sources in *Eminent Victorians*.