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Holroyd/Strachey/Shaw: Art and Archives in Literary Biography

Biographies are written for an age, rather than for all time, particularly in the present age, which does not believe in “all time.” What constitutes “the facts” of a life is generally far from clear-cut, and principles of interpretation that seemed brilliant when they were first employed have a way of seeming ridiculous a few decades later. Given this nature of things, few biographies survive as classics, since their facts and their explanatory principles inevitably do them in. In the end, an amorphous quality that we conveniently call “literary merit” is what finally keeps a handful of biographies alive.

Both the facts of the “real” world and their possible interpretations for the literary world have changed so greatly since the biographies of Bernard Shaw in the forties and fifties that the first volume of Michael Holroyd’s “life” has been long-awaited and eagerly anticipated. Since St John Ervine produced his account in 1956, just a few years after Shaw’s death, anything has seemed possible—and as far as lifewriting is concerned, much of that “anything” can be attributed to Holroyd himself. Although he had produced a critical biography of the relatively unknown writer, Hugh Kingsmill, in 1964, as well as a later biography of the painter, Augustus John, in 1974–75, it was with the appearance of his *Lytton Strachey* in 1967–68 that Holroyd was catapulted into the fame he now enjoys, prompting this look into its origins.

First published in two volumes which divided the life chronologically, Holroyd’s biography of Strachey was reissued in 1971 in a revised, corrected, and updated version that separated the critical and biographical chapters into two new volumes, a judicious decision that enabled the life to be nar-

rated without interruptions by the long, detailed examinations of the writings. In the Penguin edition that I have used, volume one is called *Lytton Strachey: A Biography* and occupies 1078 pages of text, excluding the index. The second volume, *Lytton Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group: His Work, Their Influence*, fills 374 pages of text.¹ It is perhaps an understatement to describe this as quite a dose, prompting one to ask: Apart from the excitement produced at the time by Holroyd's candid accounts of the "amatory gyrations" (to quote Leonard Woolf) of Strachey's circle, was it worth it?

In the revised edition, Holroyd provides a compelling new preface that relates the story of his remarkable discovery of unpublished materials at the home of Strachey's younger brother, James—the English translator of Freud—where he spent five years sifting through perhaps thirty thousand letters, not only Strachey's, "preserved since the age of six, [but] the letters from his friends, many of them internationally famous as painters, philosophers, novelists and economists." As the massive list of acknowledgments also reveals, Holroyd traveled widely in order to visit other collections as well as to interview a large number of survivors of both Strachey's circle and his more casual acquaintances. The result is the sort of registration of a life that has hardly appeared since Boswell, with whom, indeed, it would not be stretching things to make a comparison. For here are the copious letters and memoirs of a large group of interlocking men and women whose actions and reactions have been minutely recorded and preserved, affording a density and continuity of record with few equals. Although a certain amount of pruning might have been advisable, especially in the earlier, more adolescent years, most of this material is of superior interest.

Given the fact that by far the major part of these documents was and is unpublished, Holroyd wisely avoided using the cumbersome machinery of bibliographic references: we are

¹ Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography. Volume I: The Unknown Years, 1880–1910; Volume II: The Years of Achievement, 1910–1932*. London: Wm. Heinemann Ltd., 1967, 1968. These volumes were also published in the USA by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. The Penguin edition, retitled as described in my text, was published by Penguin Books in England, the USA, and Australia in 1971. All my references to this biography are to the first volume of the Penguin edition.

furnished simply with explanatory footnotes to identify people who appear in the course of the narrative, while the bibliography at the end alludes only to the published sources. Speaking of Strachey's letters and diaries, Holroyd remarks that "in places I have tried to use his own phrases, sentence rhythms and other stylistic qualities to show how and where the connection between the life and the work are [*sic*] especially close."² It is important to grasp exactly what this means, because the matter comes up once again in connection with the life of Bernard Shaw. In addition to extensive quotations from the letters of Strachey and his friends, it becomes increasingly apparent as one gets to know Strachey's voice that a very great deal of the Holroydian narration is being conducted in that same voice, and since one has no access to the unpublished sources (which in any case are not specifically identified), one must assume that not only paraphrases but verbatim quotes are woven into this narrative substrate. The effect, however, is stunning—and for long stretches the reader has a sense of being steeped in Strachey's innermost psyche even though it is Holroyd who is speaking, speaking—one might say—by means of the narrative voice of an Omniscient Biographer. And yet, most remarkably, the narrator seems at one and the same time not only cool, exterior, controlled, and unflappable, but warmly sympathetic, interior, and deeply involved, almost sharing (as it were) his subject's vital juices. He seems at once a Flaubertian/Joycean god, not above critical or even satirical observations, paring his disinterested fingernails behind the arras, and a partaker of the feelings and fixations of his characters as though they were his very own.

Strachey's life was driven by an almost single-minded obsession with love, sex, and art. From the endless flirtations and relationships with other young men at Cambridge to his long-term loves of Duncan Grant, Ralph Partridge, and Roger Senhouse, Strachey sought—through physicality and dependence—the type of fulfillment that only transcendence can

² Elsewhere, Holroyd remarks: "One of my own biographical devices has been to use, here and there, my subjects' techniques, attitudes, vocabulary, tricks and manners: and, short of parody, apply them back." See "Literary and Historical Biography," in *New Directions in Biography* (A Biography Monograph, Published for the Biographical Research Center by The University Press of Hawaii, 1981), p. 14.

afford. Although greater and greater intimacy seems to promise a final access to total satisfaction, nothing on earth could ever really provide it, and one comes to feel that the Platonic Ladder of Love was invented more than two millennia ago in order to handle this very problem, however dismal its failure. Strachey's ongoing ménage à trois with Dora Carrington and Ralph Partridge is a study in human inter-attachment of a kind that has rarely been documented, each loving the others with a different type of consuming and half-demented passion. Carrington's ultimate and inevitable suicide soon after Strachey's death provides the final seal on a devotion beyond the merely mundane. Holroyd's characterization of her love, like most of his writing throughout, is masterful in the extreme—and when this skill is multiplied by almost 1500 pages, the quality of his performance can only be described as astounding:

Yet with all her fears and uncertainties, it was a good life she enjoyed with him, materially and otherwise. She travelled widely and met many people. Towards Lytton's young men she felt no jealousy, and since they adored her, she basked in their playful attentions. These years at Tidmarsh were probably the happiest in both their lives. For her happiness was Lytton's happiness, and all her energies were orientated towards what they both wanted. She was certain, too, that though he might feel little sexual desire for her, yet she would be closer to him, and better for him, than anyone else could be. Never again would he be enfeebled by unnecessary illness or prostrated by secret misery and depleted vigour. She would see to it that he led a regular life supported at every turn by glasses of warm milk, reviving country walks, measured doses of quinine, Bemax and Sanatogen, and sensible clothes, and Extract of Malt, and Dr Gregory's rhubarb powder, and eucalyptus oil and all the other wholesome syrups, nourishing foods and cunning medicaments the world had to offer.

On the face of things, one would strongly doubt that much could be made of a relatively minor writer like Strachey, perpetually invalidated, for years involved in scatterbrained and histrionic adolescent crushes, constantly pouring himself out in letters full of gossip, malice, trivia, and producing a somewhat limited body of work. Yet these often wonderful letters (not to mention the vital, eccentrically spelled and punctuated letters of Dora Carrington) provide a rare documentation of the transitory, as well as the deepest, feelings of an individual

psyche whose growth, development, and enrichment are foregrounded by the biographer's synthesizing skills. Holroyd's artistry in mastering this immense cache of materials and weaving them into a story that appears seamless and continuous even while (without notes yet as unobtrusively as possible) it identifies dates and correspondents, is immeasurably enhanced by his freely offered opinions, his completely involved—yet independent—point of view, his characterizations that attempt to explain personality and motivation while avoiding cheap psychologizing and Freudian mechanism. Of Strachey in his youth he remarks, "Ironically, in his eagerness to attain a satisfactory companionship of mind and emotion, he would frequently act as his mother did towards himself—and with similar results. For he lavished on his most esteemed friends such a passionate intensity of adoration as to infect them with a feeling of guilt and inadequacy, even embarrassment, so that they shied away from his suffocating, alternately maternal and filial attentions." Of his relationship with D. H. Lawrence, he writes: "Lawrence's and Lytton's mutual aversion seems to have been aggravated by their many points of apparent similarity. With their reddish beards and their puny bodies, their crippling physical infirmities, their irritated contempt for ordinary men and women and intense internal envy of those vaulted up into high positions, their love of traveling—of 'moving on'—and their years of struggle to disburden themselves from the very different but pervasive influence of their mothers, each one seemed to stand as a painful caricature of the other's least admirable qualities." Passages like these, in steering clear of trendy or obsolescent explanatory schemata, do not yet seem dated despite the lapse of twenty years and are very unlikely to seem so within the next twenty. And because of the fluency and discursiveness of the prose, with its thorough assimilation of massive materials into the very fibers of the sentences, this biography almost never threatens to turn into a chronicle or history, depending as they do on an unconvincing thread of mere chronology. Furthermore, Holroyd's prose, even after 1500 pages, functions like an almost transparent medium, betraying unusually few tics or irritating mannerisms, the absence of which contributes to the effect of omniscience that permeates the narrative. (Doubtless, a computer concordance

would reveal mannerisms, but a reader is not a computer.) Speaking of Carrington's resistance to Ralph Partridge's overtures of marriage, Holroyd writes: "But despite all her opposition, Ralph was amazingly persistent, and Carrington began to fear that her own stubbornness might soon alienate Lytton, ruining their life at Pangbourne together, which she loved so much. He had said nothing, of course. She would not expect him to. But she sensed his growing disapproval of their fractious relations. As Ralph's exasperation mounted, so, in proportion, did her own anxiety." This is the most supple and varied of prose, its rhythms entrancing, its surprises—like "which she loved so much" and "fractious"—disarming.

Although this biography presents a public Strachey and a private Strachey who are sufficiently different to require synthesizing, as well as a man and an artist who convey a somewhat different tone of being, it is notably successful in displaying the connections between the two. This leaves the reader with a sense that he has actually made contact with the centrality of the biographical subject, a rare achievement, though admittedly the nature of the available materials is crucial—and Holroyd struck pay dirt in this regard. Remarkably enough, what starts out looking like the eccentric utterances of an individuality too extreme to connect with the rest of the world, emerges through Holroyd's skills as the kind of atypical typicality associated with classical art forms that address the generic human race in all of its schizophrenic irreconcilabilities.

Holroyd's review of Quentin Bell's biography of Virginia Woolf (reprinted in *Unreceived Opinions*) gives us some insight into the aims of his art. "Literary biography," he remarks, "is an opportunity for the subject to write, in collaboration [with the biographer], a posthumous work,"³ a claim that he repeats in the Shaw book and which is surely borne out in his account of Strachey, where Holroyd is both within and without, ventriloquist and critic at the same time. Although he has much praise for Bell's book, he finds it unsuccessful in presenting the inside view: "In Quentin Bell's biography . . . we see something of what it was like looking at her, less of what it was like for her

³ Michael Holroyd, *Unreceived Opinions* (New York, 1974), p. 217.

looking at us. . . . We do hear her voice in this biography, but it is distant. For we have the letter of the truth rather than its spirit, the duty not the joy." And most tellingly, Holroyd concludes: "To have plumbed her inner life of emotion and thought . . . , he would have had to take a step on his own initiative; to present what Virginia herself called 'that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow,' he would have had to evolve a biography as daring and difficult as one of her own novels. As it is, she has slipped through his fingers, and he has given us, faultlessly, the expected not the real thing." Beyond any doubt, insofar as biography can do it at all, of Strachey he has given us the daring and difficult real thing.

Although there was considerable hubbub about *Lytton Strachey* when it appeared twenty years ago, the reviews, if my sampling is representative, were hardly enthusiastic. Leon Edel, for example, remarked that "to write the life of the sedentary, often ailing Strachey, whose art was lucid and brief, as if he had been a great prime minister or a Lord Byron of homosexuality does raise serious questions, and precisely about 'selection, detachment, design [Strachey's own requirements for biography].'" And he adds that it is the "mass of material that is at once indiscriminating and suffocating," including "every boy Strachey ever winked at."⁴ Calvin Bedient found it "soggy with detail, heavy with observation, pallid and unshapely" and commented on "the sheer awfulness of the writing."⁵ Even Leonard Woolf found it "heavy handed and heavy minded," complaining not only of its "inordinate length" but its "misreading of Lytton's character," which he finds Holroyd taking much too seriously.⁶ But Noel Annan's powerfully authoritative review for the *New York Review of Books* alluded to "a mountain of material nearly all of which is fascinating" and he praised Holroyd for his "skill and integrity," though he too felt pruning was in order, as well as a bit more contextualization of the letters.⁷

⁴ *Saturday Review*, 51 (April 27, 1968), p. 32.

⁵ *The Nation*, 206 (May 20, 1968), p. 670.

⁶ *The New Statesman*, 74 (October 6, 1967), p. 438.

⁷ *The New York Review of Books*, 10 (June 6, 1968), p. 8.

Although, as I have said, some of the repetitious, play-acting, amatory letters could well have been left out, the density of the material as experienced twenty years later seems one of the biography's greatest strengths, especially since the lengthy critical chapters have been removed to another volume. That such density can be dangerous even for Holroyd, however, is evident in his surprisingly tedious biography of Augustus John.⁸ Nevertheless, apart from occasional overwriting, complaints about Holroyd's prose now require reinterpretation. The most interesting question is why, despite the impact that *Lytton Strachey* originally made because of its extraordinary documentation and, *for then*, sensational sexual candor, so much of the response should have been negative. Twenty years later the reasons do not seem far to seek: for aside from the evident massiveness of the biographical materials, in itself overwhelming, the detailed recording of sexual feelings in 1967 came as an immense and discomfiting surprise *in the concrete* (as opposed to *theoretical* open-mindedness), even though the "sexual revolution" was well underway. And when the candid sexuality turned out to be homosexuality, the body blow was that much more breathtaking, even though (or more likely *because*) Holroyd treated it in the most matter-of-fact way possible. Yet twenty years later the sexualized biography has become such a commonplace that one is now surprised at the absence of any really *explicit* physicality in the Strachey book, the sexuality of which consists mostly of raptures. How vastly things have changed! Since the late sixties we have had sexualized or homosexualized accounts of everyone from Willa Cather to Paul Tillich, W. H. Auden to John F. Kennedy. In these twenty years, to cite just one example, Leon Edel has moved from uneasiness about Strachey to new "candor" about Henry James in his recent one-volume abridgement of the life. "We are [now] able to offer," he remarks in his new introduc-

⁸ Holroyd himself comments on this matter: "The length of a biography does not reflect the importance of its subject (a ludicrous though popular notion): it reflects the interest of the material available and the effect that material has produced on the mind and feelings of the biographer." "Literary and Historical Biography," p. 22. Unfortunately, despite its skill, this 1975 biography of Augustus John provides a good example of the ways in which the quality of the archives limits the quality of the art. Though less than 600 pages, it is probably twice as long as it ought to have been.

tion, “a more forthright record of personal relations, of deeper emotions and sexual fantasies, and need no longer wrap indiscretions and adulteries in Victorian gauze.”⁹

Thus, Holroyd’s *Lytton Strachey*—revised and resituated—is not the same phenomenon it used to be. Now, far from sounding “awful,” its prose reads like the language of Lyrical Biography: a Wagnerian onslaught of erogenous psychological details fusing teller and told in a *Tristan*-like ocean of affect and power. In its compatibility of form with content, Holroyd’s book is a work of literary genius.

And now, in contrast to the somewhat ambivalent nose-holdings of the late sixties, Holroyd’s life of Shaw is being hailed as a biographical masterpiece, an accomplishment *extraordinaire*, a lesson of the master. From the glitzy histrionics of the review for *Time* (describing a book I couldn’t quite recall having read) to the more controlled but generally enthusiastic reviews in the big journals, the approval has been euphoric. Yet, as is so often the case, almost none of the reviews I have seen has much to say about the biography itself: after some vague and woolly praise, the subject is changed invariably to Shaw and often to sex. What begs to be addressed, however, is whether a performance of the caliber of the Strachey biography can be surpassed or even equaled by its author. And this time the stakes are much higher: a genuinely major literary figure about whom numerous biographies have already been written.

“I was invited to write this biography in the early 1970s,” Holroyd reports in his acknowledgements for *Bernard Shaw: The Search for Love*. “The most recent Shaw biographies, by St John Ervine, Archibald Henderson, Hesketh Pearson and Stephen Winsten, appeared in or before 1956, Shaw’s centenary year.” The Shaw Estate, he goes on to explain, “felt that the time was approaching for an assessment of his life and work to be made for a new generation of readers and *by a writer who had not known G.B.S. personally* [my emphasis].”¹⁰ This was certainly a valid feeling on the part of the Shaw Estate, since Shaw’s domination over his biographers—and over everyone else—

⁹ Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (New York, 1985), p. xii.

¹⁰ BERNARD SHAW, Volume I, 1856–1898: *The Search for Love*, by Michael Holroyd. Random House. \$24.95.

had been irresistible, as Hesketh Pearson made perhaps clearer than he intended in the acknowledgements of his readable and compact *Bernard Shaw* of 1942 (reissued in 1950 with no evidence of updating):

My first thanks are due to Mr. Bernard Shaw, who has answered every question I have put to him, either verbally or by letter, has allowed me to quote his published and unpublished correspondence, and has given me much hitherto unavailable information about his own life. A great deal that could not have been made public before is here released by the parties having passed from life into history. *Whenever possible I have narrated what he has told me of his life and times in his own vivid phrases* [my emphasis]. On every doubtful point I have consulted him, and the reader may feel confident that all the facts in my book have been checked by the only living person who is in a position to do so.¹¹

This authentication turned out to be a mixed blessing, for although Pearson's book could make some claim to a mind of its own, the takeover by GBS was great nonetheless. Shaw, after all, was a man who conducted interviews with himself for newspapers and magazines without letting on that what looked like a conversation was in reality a monologue. And Archibald Henderson's third (and monumental) biography of Shaw, *George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century*, published in 1956, had its own problems:

When, on February 24, 1903, I descended to eight o'clock breakfast at the Harcourt on 57th Street, South Park, Illinois, little did I dream that I was on the threshold of the greatest intellectual venture and spiritual adventure of my life. With the close of this day I was, all unconsciously, taking the first step toward becoming, in the near future, the biographer of a new immortal. Had I realized, at that moment, the daring of my aspiration and the magnitude of the undertaking, I should have shrunk back in alarm and perhaps discarded the most glorious biographical and critical opportunity of the era.¹²

These already daunting remarks are followed by 952 densely printed pages in a similar vein, so that for all its extraordinary

¹¹ Hesketh Pearson, *Bernard Shaw: His Life and Personality* (London, 1950), p. 13.

¹² Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century* (New York, 1956), p. xiii.

weight of achievement as a documentary (if certainly not a high-art) life, one can hardly imagine many people actually reading this gushing, mindbreaking book from cover to cover, so prolix and omnipresent is its author throughout. Though Henderson does not flinch from critical observations, it is nonetheless true that Shaw's prodigious presence hovers over every page, however much it may be upstaged by Henderson's unrelenting self-dramatizations. Contrary to this pattern, St John Ervine's 1956 biography, despite the author's intimacy with both GBS and his wife (it is dedicated to Charlotte Shaw), is an elegantly told and highly readable narrative, with a distinctive character of its own that admires while resisting GBS throughout:

In reading G.B.S.'s diatribes against his schools and teachers, it is well to bear in mind that they were written in his middle manhood and old age, and may have been derived more from his theories about education than from his experience of it. He refers habitually to schools as if they were concentration camps or penitentiaries, and to masters as if they were brutal warders or sadistic commandants. In his account of his schools in *Sixteen Self-Sketches*, he says, 'At the Wesleyan I had never dreamt of learning my lessons, nor of telling the truth to that common enemy and executioner, the schoolmaster.'

This fantastic tosh reads like the remark of a man so far removed from his boyhood by age and ideas that have long ceased to have any relevance to known facts that even his reminiscences have become romantic figments. To say this is not to deny that G.B.S. disliked formal education or what was considered to be formal education. It is merely to remind the reader that he probably attributed to Sonny Shaw, the nervous and sensitive boy who was starved of affection at home, the horror of schools which he had developed long after he had left them, which was, indeed, the result of his rebellion against society in general and the views he formed in the Fabian Society, though these were not views that the Webbs, for example, could ever have shared.¹³

Ervine's narrative, more than almost any other, relies on its own words and has its own courtly, gallant, now slightly anachronistic but still charming flavor, an old gentility struggling to fuse itself with modernity. Given Ervine's success at achieving

¹³ St John Ervine, *Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work and Friends* (London, 1956), pp. 30–31.

not only a measure of autonomy but a resistance to Shaw's distinctive voice, the reader of Holroyd will be eager to learn whether the Shavian steamroller still rolls on apace, even though its driver has long since fallen off.

Bernard Shaw: The Search for Love begins life with its own particular liabilities, the most crushing of which Holroyd is determined to explain away. In an attempt to forestall criticism, he raises this very problem in a "Bibliographical Note" at the end: "Shaw himself was determined that his books should be easily accessible to the general reading public, and I have tried to follow this example. I have not added to the length or cost by appending a bibliography, since such a listing would merely repeat in part the excellent Soho Bibliography prepared by Dan H. Laurence and published at the Clarendon Press in 1983." Then, after listing some sources that were not published until after the Soho Bibliography, he alludes to Shaw's many "posthumous" appearances in print and the choice this seemed to present between "providing a list of sources that would (if I were to preserve consistency through the three volumes of this biography) be stupendously out of date, or of delaying publication beyond everyone's endurance including my own." He explains how he got around this difficulty:

I have decided to print my sources separately after the publication of the third volume of my biography. To those Shavian scholars who feel they cannot 'use' my book until these sources are to hand I offer my apologies. But they will know that by not charging general readers for an apparatus they will never use I am acting very much in line with Shaw's own economic practice of making his work fall within the means of as many people as possible. I hope that when my source notes become available, they will appear in a form that is both easier to use and of more lasting use.

This explanation, so unconvincing in its solicitude for the pocketbook of the "general" reader (who is apt to sound a little feeble-minded) and its account of the flux of Shavian publications, was contested rather sharply by Bernard Crick (Orwell's biographer) and responded to, still unconvincingly, by Holroyd in a three-round altercation in *TLS*.¹⁴

¹⁴ *The Times Literary Supplement*, issues of October 14, 21, and 28, 1988.

The biography's second procedural problem is closely related to the first: Holroyd nowhere explains—as he explicitly does in connection with Strachey—how he intends to use his sources, especially letters and diaries. Will he make extensive and free use of paraphrase? Will he use verbatim quotations without any indication that he is doing so? Since this volume totally eschews documentation, since there is not even one single footnote, since people, places and things are either explained in the text itself or not explained at all, the reader has no way of finding out whether any given words are by Holroyd or by Shaw or by anybody, unless Holroyd happens to say so or use quotation marks.

With regard to the identification of quotes from Shaw, Holroyd usually has little to say in his text unless the source is particularly pertinent. Quotations can come from public documents like prefaces to plays, or private documents like letters and diary entries. Even worse, they can have been written in 1880 or in 1945. In dealing with Strachey, Holroyd almost always gave us the context of quotations as part of his general narrative, so the missing notes were not crucial, especially since the source materials were generally unavailable in any case. But here this is not consistently his practice, even though he must have realized that a large part of the meaning of any remark derives from its context. Is Shaw speaking to the world, to his lover, his mother, his diary? Is he speaking at age 18, 46, 73, 91, and as an obscure or a famous person? Without such information, many of the quotations are virtually unintelligible. For example, in a discussion of Shaw's relationships with women and the ways in which he harangued them, Holroyd writes, "However much he did lecture, urge, flatter and coax, he could not make the worlds of fantasy and actuality coalesce: 'Many vices appear seductive to me in imagination that in reality revolt me by their coarseness.'" It makes all the difference in the world whether Shaw was saying this to his mistress, Jenny Patterson, or his wife-to-be, Charlotte Payne-Townshend, or whether it is part of an autobiographical sketch addressed to no one in particular. And one of the many epigraphs that Holroyd uses to introduce sections of the book reads, "I shall never be able to begin a new play until I fall in love with somebody else." Is this a gallant remark to a new girlfriend or a parting shot to

an old one—or neither? Just what does it mean? In the case of someone like GBS the problem of meaning is especially acute because Shaw was nothing if not rhetorical; and to understand a Shavian utterance we generally need to know something about the underlying programs of his rhetoric, programs not so much philological as psychological or philosophical.

The matter of paraphrase and quotation without quotation marks is even more complex and it would take a Stanley Weintraub to shake it all out. But apart from Shavian echoes, we sometimes come across a passage like this one about Shaw's career as a reporter and essayist for the *Pall Mall Gazette*: "He seemed to fill these columns from a magic well that never ran dry or lost its sparkle provided he pumped hard enough." In his preface to *Plays Unpleasant*, Shaw wrote: "In my weekly columns, which I once filled full from a magic well that never ran dry or lost its sparkle provided I pumped hard enough, I began to repeat myself. . . ."

Why, then, one might ask, should documentary techniques that worked so well for *Lytton Strachey* now serve as grounds for strong objection? The answer has to do with the radical differences between the circumstances of the two biographies. Lytton Strachey, for all his influence, remains a fairly minor writer whose works are not well-known; and the documents upon which Holroyd's biography was constructed are almost entirely unpublished, unfamiliar, and unavailable. Holroyd's use of letters and diaries was consistently chronological—it was generally clear at any given moment who wrote them and when; and if there was any doubt, he gave us explicit identifications. We always knew where we were in the ongoing story. And because the documents would never be generally available, Holroyd felt free to employ the daring technique of using Strachey's own words beyond the conventions of customary biographical quotation.

But the circumstances surrounding this new biography are entirely different. Bernard Shaw is one of the major British writers of the twentieth century. A majority of the sources upon which this biography depends (despite all its new material) have been previously published and many of them are generally known, some even being a part of common culture. With so many of the sources virtually public property, the act of faith

that was a necessary part of the reading of *Lytton Strachey* cannot be expected or exacted from any but the most passive of readers. Any new biography of Shaw is inevitably a rearrangement of a good deal of such public property and attempts to resist that fact will only cause trouble. This is not meant to suggest that Holroyd has anything to conceal but that presenting us with notes and bibliography many years hence, when we are in fact reading this book *now* and want to deal with *and understand* it now, has an unavoidably obstructionist air.

Without notes, then, it is often impossible to be certain of the sense of Holroyd's narrative, because of the way in which he uses the multitudinous works of Shaw irrespective of their genres, dates, or addressees, as if they had all been written in an eternal present for the same audience. And if he sometimes uses Shaw's own words without acknowledgement or quotation marks, the effect can be eerie because we *have* heard many of them before.

Although we can infer—from the immense list of acknowledgements as well as the brief list of books published since the Soho Bibliography of 1983—that Holroyd has built his biography from a good deal of new material as well as the familiar old material, what we cannot find out with any certainty is the nature and extent of what is unpublished. By putting a few pieces together, however, we can at least determine that two of the most important and useful caches of documents that became available since the fifties not only have been used by Holroyd but are now in print, although they were not fully so while he was doing his work: Dan Laurence's recently completed volumes of selected letters (with their extremely informative headnotes and footnotes); and the two volumes of diaries, edited by Stanley Weintraub and issued in 1986. Hesketh Pearson provided a chapter on Shaw's "women," but the information was sparse. Henderson, while providing much detail about Shaw's childhood, made no mention of Alice Lockett, Jenny Patterson, or even Shaw's addiction to Jaeger wool suits, subjects about which Holroyd has plenty to say. In a word, Henderson's account is mainly concerned with the public career, and even on Shaw's marriage he offers next to nothing. According to Weintraub, Shaw's secretary, Blanche Patch, had begun late in Shaw's life to work on a somewhat surreptitious

translation of the shorthand diaries of 1885–97, although she made frequent bowdlerizations, omissions, and errors. Thus, Ervine had access to and made good use of them. As early as 1956, he was able to provide personal details that were not to be found in the rival accounts. Since these diaries are a principal source of information about Shaw's love life and journalism of the eighties, Holroyd has made even more extensive use of them than Ervine, having consulted them some time before Weintraub put them into print but after they were rendered more readable than they had been for Ervine. And with all the unpublished collections and helpful people he has seen, this undertaking involves the most complete mastery to date of the Shaw archives, both floating and fixed, even if we do not know exactly what those archives contain.

Although other biographers give considerable weight to Shaw's family life as a child, Holroyd regards his mother Bessie's coldness and lack of affection for Sonny as the radical germ of his personality and the driving force of his career. He traces the theme of mother love and its absence (along with the corresponding need to subvert authority and remain emotionally un beholden to others) through the five novels, many of the plays, and countless Shavian human relations. So, from the *The Irrational Knot*, for example, Holroyd quotes a character who laments, "Can you understand that a mother and a son may be so different in their dispositions that neither can sympathize with the other? It is my great misfortune to be such a son . . . she felt nothing for me but a contemptuous fondness which I did not care to accept," and so on. The extraordinary Shavian language machine—and machine was a word often used in connection with Shaw, as when Yeats dreamed of him as a smiling, clicking sewing machine—is seen by Holroyd as an obsessive and frenetic substitute gratification. "There were three categories of relationship in Shaw's life: flirtations with single women, usually at this [early] time young Fabian girls; philanderings with the wives of friends, usually socialist colleagues; and a consummated love affair with a divorced or separated lady. With Alice Lockett he had tried in a conventional way to combine all his emotional needs in one person, and failing, concluded that it could not be done." But the period of intense sexual involvement was brief and emotionally

unrewarding, as badly as he needed it at the time. It was *talking*, in its largest sense, that provided a more profoundly satisfying medium of expression; and the engine of this talking was a generalized love of mankind rather than an individualized romantic love, for which, as we know from plays like *The Devil's Disciple*, he had little but contempt. In place of an unsatisfactory Eros that excessively divided the sexual from the rest of life, he preferred an Agape that was not subject to the whims of the hormones and that seems in his case to have operated principally through language. In establishing a de-sexualized marriage relationship with Charlotte Payne-Townshend, GBS appears to have made a wise choice, although Ervine thinks a little sex would not have done them any harm. Eric Bentley, in what is generally thought of as one of the best critical treatments of Shaw, summed up his rhetorical, impersonal, jesting/loving persona as "the fool in Christ."

What differentiates the "search for love" in the Strachey biography from the search in the Shaw, and what contributes to the two biographies' dissimilarity as literary accomplishments is that sex, eros, and the need for intimacy are undisguisedly and powerfully present throughout most of the documents and events of Strachey's life, which was in any case a more domestic and personal one than Shaw's. They required very little overt, interfering "interpretation" from the biographer while supplying a unity of tone and feeling that is one of the biography's greatest strengths. In connection with Shaw, however, the search for love is a thematic grid that the biographer employs to unify his narrative. It is certainly plausible, this deprivation of maternal affection and the quest for a surrogate as Holroyd traces them throughout these early years of his life, but it is clearly a schema, drawn admittedly from many persuasive instances, but nevertheless a case of authorial imposition. Thus,

In his relationships with women Shaw was seeking a second childhood in which he could receive all the attention and happiness he had been denied by his mother. But since it was impossible for him literally to achieve this, he shifted his desires into his literary life. Sexual excitement produced in him an ejaculation of words from which letters were conceived, novels and plays born. Any sexual relationship that could not provide an alternate world, partly made out of words, tended to disgust him.

Such metaphoric psychologizing has become by now a naturalized method of understanding experience, just as God's will was a "natural" thematizer in the past. So today the result of a cold mother is likely to be a search for love. Yet when we realize how dated even Freudian explanations have already become, we also recognize that there are fashions in explanatory schemata as in everything else: much that was attributed to the psyche a few decades ago is increasingly attributed to chemicals, genes, social forces, or "epistemes." This, then, is a troubling concern of any biographer: how to unify his narrative without making implausible or obsolescent thematic claims. In *Lytton Strachey* this important responsibility of the biographer was accomplished more through organization and selection than through overt insistence, hence the book's emotional power. In *Bernard Shaw: The Search for Love* the imposition of a thematizing program causes a distancing from the biographical materials that did not occur in the earlier work.

This distancing, as well as the rather recalcitrant nature of Shaw as a biographical subject, encumbers Holroyd with various problems of execution. Although he is always sophisticated, witty, intelligent, and appallingly knowledgeable about more than just Shaw, the early years present obstacles of narration that he is not entirely successful in overcoming. His pulling together of myriad disparate materials, required for handling almost anybody's childhood and youth, results here in a tendency toward chronicle or history rather than a seamless narrative, with sudden changes of subject, paragraphs of hard-to-follow exposition, extensive pastiches of quoted phrases, alternation between brilliant and purely functional narrative voices, and a certain amount of riding his themes. In discussing, for example, Shaw's last novel, *An Unsocial Socialist* (and he is prone to describe novels, plays and reviews at tiresome length), he writes:

Agatha [in the novel] is incorruptible, but everyone is to some extent corrupted. In a letter to Alice Lockett, Shaw regretted that they had not met in Ireland where she could have seen 'the round towers of other days in the wave beneath you shining there'. Though pretty and green, 'England is a vile country,' he wrote. 'I speak not of the men and women—they are vile everywhere; but of the scenery.' Shaw deliberately picked up the vulgarities of his

enemies and came to battle as well-armoured as they were. Trefusis [in the novel] is similarly affected by the society in which he lives. 'I can only say that Trefusis was none of my making,' Shaw wrote to one of his correspondents.

Incoherences like this are frequent in the first half of the book, during which the reader often becomes too conscious of the mechanics of his own reading. In the second half, with Holroyd fired by the psychologically richer interests of Shaw's life, the prose warms up and smooths out.

Holroyd's most insurmountable problem, however, turns out to be Shaw himself: Shaw/Rhetor, to be exact, the nonstop talking machine par excellence. The Shaw Estate's concern to produce a new life without Shaw hovering over the biographer's shoulder or sending him ceaseless correspondence was well founded. As things have turned out, Holroyd *is* remarkably independent in some respects. But for *his* version of the early years, St John Ervine managed to produce a story much freer of Shavian echoes because he rationed the use of brief quoted phrases, reserving quotation for key moments in the narrative, where he was disposed to use fairly substantial chunks. This gives Ervine the effect of having greater control over the teller's voice, producing a more fluent and coherent delivery as well. But probably more important than this, Ervine was a deeply affectionate friend of Shaw, so that even his most dismissive remarks issue from a bedrock of warm feeling and a well-defined point of view. Holroyd is judicious, fair-minded, sympathetic, admiring, interested, but Shaw does not really engage his sensibilities the way Strachey was able to do.

Along with the problem of "voice," the fact of Shaw/Rhetor means that there is very little distinction to be made between Shaw's public and private utterances. Whether he is writing a letter to his mistress or a letter to the editor, a Fabian tract or the preface to one of his plays, he sounds remarkably the same. No matter how much of him one reads, one feels as distant from the "real" center as ever. Holroyd's criticism of Quentin Bell's biography of Virginia Woolf, "We see something of what it was like looking at her, less of what it was like for her looking at us," must inevitably apply to his own as well. But one assumes that whereas a biography *could* be written about Woolf (given the nature of her letters and diaries) that gets closer to the

center than Bell's, it would be virtually impossible for anyone to get very close to Shaw. The handicap is not so much one of the biographer's art as of the nature of the biographical subject. In an oft-quoted passage that Shaw wrote late in life about his youthful meeting with May Morris, William Morris' daughter, we get the full Shaw/Rhetor flavor: "I was immediately conscious that a Mystic Betrothal was registered in heaven, to be fulfilled when all the material obstacles should melt away, and my own position rescued from the squalors of my poverty and unsuccess . . ."

So many variants of this rhetoric, a making-it-so-through-language, abound in the Shavian corpus that we are not surprised, as Volume One draws to a close around the time GBS marries Charlotte Payne-Townshend, to find Holroyd asking, "But what did Shaw think? Charlotte had not seen his mind, despite his flow of words, because he had not revealed it to her." This passage could well serve as epigraph to any biography of Shaw. For the flow of words *is* Shaw's mind and no one can reconstruct what it might be that lies behind them. More than with most people, the Shavian flow of words seems less to *represent* than to *constitute* a self.

With more information at his disposal than any previous biographer, Holroyd is certainly able to provide denser accounts of Shaw's earlier life, of the sad publishing history of his early writings, of the genesis and development of his plays, of their failure on the stage, of his attempts to break into the West End Theater, and of his extraordinary involvement in the publication of his plays for a novel-reading audience. Indeed, his arrival at the weightier phases of Shaw's career releases Holroyd's powers, so that he takes more vigorous and feeling control of his story, with less reliance on thematizing, and the reader begins to be carried along.

These are several of the undeniable strengths for which Holroyd deserves to be praised. Yet, while keeping in mind that we are dealing with an unfinished work, I find that it is the revised *Lytton Strachey* rather than *Bernard Shaw* that comes off as a product of very high art indeed. With its complex, distinctive, narrative voice—a fusion of subject and biographer—and its propulsive emotional energy, it is the sort of event that cannot simply be willed into existence. *Bernard Shaw:*

The Search for Love arises from soil that is very fertile but whose circumstances are far from nurturing. Its biographical subject is a rhetorical killer, always threatening to shout down his biographer. A number of previous attempts have already been made at a life, of which St John Ervine's succeeds by virtue of an artless artistry, a narrative grace, a warmth towards its subject, and a distinction of voice that Holroyd's version so far does not outshine. The materials, while immense and varied, are largely familiar but too diverse to produce a clear effect through any tendency of their own, thereby asking to be cut down to size by means of a unifying narrative persona that came easy to Ervine but that Holroyd does not seem able to supply. The "authorized" biographer has inherited a one-size-fits-all mantle subject to prior use and perhaps implying more than anyone can definitely deliver. Although the critical response this time around has been as positive as any author could wish, it may in fact be attributable to the safety and conventionality of the treatment, as well as to materials more intrinsically interesting and familiar, and therefore more congenial. But I am as disinclined to give too much weight to today's immediate reaction as I have been to the reaction of twenty years past. The Strachey biography was a Dionysian orgy set off by some explosive conjunction of the planets, and it required both temporal and cultural space in order to domesticate a more properly "Wagnerian" appreciation. The Shaw biography is cerebral and Apollonian, admittedly the work of a first-order archival authority, and worthy of being the new standard reference. But while violating few sensibilities, as biographical literary art it thus far emanates from a harp imperfectly tuned and with strings that may not lend themselves to precision tightening.