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## *Somerset Maugham in Spain*

BY JAMES BOYD

DON FERNANDO, by W. Somerset Maugham. \$2.50. 6 x 8¼; 307 pp. New York: Doubleday, Doran.

A FEW months ago Ford Madox Ford gave himself and all other people of proper sensibilities the pleasure of bringing out a book in praise of the ancient and genial kingdom of Provence. And now in very different vein, Somerset Maugham reverts to the Golden Age of Spain and to his own Golden Age when he first visited Seville and, with much desultory study, revolved plans for a romance of the region's great days. Except that each book was written, one feels, for the writer's own contentment and release, there is little in common between the two. It could hardly be expected otherwise. Mr. Ford is a man who has never grown old. Mr. Maugham is a man who, if we may judge by *Of Human Bondage* was, whether through circumstance or his own fates, never young. It is all the more, then, a comment on the age that these two chief practitioners of writing, in temper so diverse, should almost simultaneously and with a nostalgia that stirs and at the same time saddens, revert to some form of the past.

Don Fernando is a stout and affable proprietor of a tavern in Seville and also of a small casual business in antiques, who gives, since the youth refuses obstinately to buy it, an old vellum-bound volume to his friend and tavern patron, a young Englishman named Somerset Maugham. The

volume turns out to be the life of Saint Ignatius. This leads to reflections on the Spiritual Exercises of the Jesuits and thence, by examples, comment, discussion, to the great days of Spain. There are from time to time summaries of lives of saints, of writers, and of painters, and these, as summaries do, seem to resist the greatest talent. It is of no importance. They are the slight, if somewhat wooden pegs, on which the writer hangs his wealth of insight and of knowledge.

We have in brief the curious life of Lope de Vega, the thoughts of Saint Theresa, the many aspects and the riddles of El Greco, details about Cervantes, including, with no undue emphasis, mention of a source of revenue not often cited by biographers, and much else, apparently miscellaneous, but all designed to illustrate and explain the Spirit of Spain in the days when she stood highest before the world. We see philosophers and saints, adventurers and mountebanks, proud, impecunious grandees and strolling players. We have a scene of tavern life, of the crowd at a play, and we gain some notion of Spanish cooking and of Spanish ideas of a practical joke. The contrasting elements of sixteenth century Spain are here and the contrasting elements in the Spaniard as a type.

But this *recherche du temps perdu* is in turn only secondary to Maugham's search for his own position, a search which, for the writer, for the thinking man today,

whether old or young, is not easy. Perhaps it never was. Yet one can feel, as Maugham does, that in the confident Victorian Age, in Spain's era of the Catholic faith, there were at least initial certitudes. Certainly *Don Fernando* is suffused and unified by the sense of faith, a faith Catholic and positive and rigid, and at the same time given a special potency and color by the one great pervasive quality of Spain. "No one can travel through the various paths of the Spanish scene in the sixteenth century without getting a frequent glimpse of that mysticism that seems to dwell only just below the threshold of consciousness in so many of these passionate men who, you would have thought, were completely immersed in the turmoil of the world. In Spain you are seldom long out of sight of the mountains. They rise before you, arid, gaunt and austere; blue on the far horizon, they seem to summon you to a new and magic world. The Sierra Nevada with its mantle of snow is remote and formidable, but in the dawn or at sunset shines with a coloured beauty not of this earth. And so mysticism, never very far away, unobtrusive but insistent, with its strange attraction that all the human in you resists, seems to haunt the shadows that darken the brilliant prospect. It is like a troubling, tragic and lovely theme that runs through a florid symphony. It is disconcerting and yet you cannot but attend to it."

As in this passage and often more strikingly, the writing in *Don Fernando* is deceptively simple in its style. As I read and note its effortless lucidity, its hidden music, combining to sustain with apparent facility, apparently simple statements which in truth carry the most complex and exciting implications, I reflect that never has such a pure technical virtuoso been more successful throughout his life in putting his talents, precisely when and how he wishes,

to the service of the good living and financial security which he is frank enough in prizing. Somerset Maugham has always been a born, if frigid, story teller — that goes without saying — but I wonder whether part of the secret of his success is not that the mass of his readers, such is the perfection of his style, simply have no conception of how good he is.

In *Don Fernando* this style is never more serviceable, more striking in its merits than in the reflections and comments which lie, like the illuminated high points of an airway, along the course of the book. Speaking most frequently of writing, of the writer's function, point of view, position, he has the wit to throw off searching epigrams, the courage, when required, to utter platitudes and, it must be added, the human fallibility to propound dogmas susceptible of contradiction even by himself. If at one moment he betrays the craftsman's slightly pedantic apprehensiveness of forces stronger than his predetermined plans, at another he recognizes that created character, after all, rather than scheme, is the touchstone of the writer's art. "But I was a little afraid of Augustin de Rojas," he says. "When a writer falls into the hands of so vivid a personality as this, he can never be sure he will not be led along paths he has no wish to tread. A fellow of this sort can very well take things into his own control and give occasion to a book quite different from that which the author had proposed to write." Ah, yes, we tell ourselves, that is just the sort of *contre-temps* which Mr. Pickwick visited on Dickens, and Don Quixote on Cervantes. And then, sure enough, we find Maugham saying, "If you chance to create a type he will go marching down the ages to the end of time. You gave him life and he holds you forever in the remembrances of men. It is the best fortune that can ever

happen to an author. Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, and Don Juan Tenorio are all three immortal."

These excursions of his into questions of writing are but part of the essential theme of the book, an intensely interesting part to any who like to take either their writing or their reading with the most sharp and savory sort of insight and reflection—in searching for them again, as well as for numberless other memorable passages, scattered as they are throughout the book, I was moved to regret that there was no table of contents in the 19th Century manner: "Chapter VI. George Borrow on Spanish—a young man in Grenada—the Spanish idiom—anecdote of King Louis XIV—the professional writer and the amateur—the first of the poor grandees."

But, if we except the most esoteric and futile circles, it is impossible to discuss writing without discussing man's life and his posture toward the universe. It is here that Maugham reaches the heart of what must have moved him to write *Don Fernando*. It is here that what he says so simply and so well is most universal, if most inconclusive, and to that degree most strikingly a symbol of the age.

Denouncing at one point the Whistler-Wilde art for art's sake fallacy, from which he had long since recanted, he points out that its theory was that the object of a work of art was to arouse the aesthetic emotion. But what is emotion, he asks, that results in nothing? The value of emotion is in its effects. Santa Theresa insisted on this over and over again. The ecstasy of union with the Godhead was precious only if it resulted in greater capacity for works. Great works, he concludes, enrich the soul so that it is capable of a nobler and more fruitful activity. Their effects are worthy deeds.

So far Maugham has carried us. We

stand with him now on the brink. What then? What are these worthy deeds? "Should you ask me," he confesses, "I should find it hard to reply. Provisionally at all events, I should be willing enough to accept the maxim of Fray Luis de Leon: 'The beauty of life,' he says, 'is nothing but this, that each should act in conformity with his nature and his business.'" Small wonder that Mr. Maugham's acceptance is provisional; the ills of life, too, are quite as apt to flow from men who insist on acting in conformity with their natures and their businesses. Worthy deeds and the beauty of life are the fruit of men acting in freedom and sustained by belief. To Mr. Maugham faiths of the past seem like blind alleys cut in a primeval jungle. So they may, and so they do to many of us nowadays.

If then, as he says, he has beliefs, not merely envy of beliefs of other days, having traveled so far through the history of his own thoughts and of those days, this was the place for him, not to turn back from the threshold with a casual reference of dismissal, but to state them. Whatever they are, if they are his and deeply held, they would have made the fitting ending to the book.

For as things are, barred by an age of irritable despair from roads to splendor, mankind, throughout most of the world called civilized, seeks solace in denial of the individual spirit in its blood and welcomes mere blind power, surrendering both freedom and belief. Or if, like Mr. Maugham, a few have the manhood to face the temper of the times, no answer seems to come to them; they end by seeking refuge in themselves or in some irrecoverable past as he has in his youth when the world lay before him and behind, close on every hand, lay the days when Spain bred saints and heroes.

*The New Fall Fiction*

BY FRANCES C. LAMONT ROBBINS

*Vein of Iron* by Ellen Glasgow (Harcourt, Brace, \$2.50). Ten or twelve years ago, when there were questions as to what contribution the South would make to the renaissance of American fiction, Ellen Glasgow said: "What the South needs now is blood and irony." She has, herself, given the South its most powerful, because its most intelligent irony; and in her new novel, she offers blood. Followed to its logical conclusion, the hopeless, denigrating attitude toward humanity which characterizes the contemporary school of fiction, would lead to the universal suicide of a race of worms. Miss Glasgow, in *Vein of Iron*, tapping the iron in her own soul, bears witness to man's kinship with God. Her Fincastles came from Scotland to the Valley of Virginia in Indian days, as leaders, pastors, scholars, rebels. Whether they lived by faith in predestination and a Presbyterian God, or by faith in free will and the God within themselves, they lived bravely and well. Circumstances had no final power over them. They bore unquestioning the burden of their own behavior. In *Vein of Iron*, the twentieth-century Fincastles are the indomitable grandmother; the scholarly humanist father, free thinker, then pacifist; the daughter, a modern woman except in her willingness to assume the responsibility for her acts, who lives through war, prosperity, and depression, a balanced, fearless spirit. The Fincastles can no more be broken and cast down than can "God's Mountain" which rises high behind their valley manse. The story, in its setting of contemporary life well understood, depends for interest upon no originality of plot. Its major characters are complemented and set-off by the

secondary ones; the "tidewater" mother, whose sweet fragility endeared her to the stalwart Fincastles, people who lived in remarkable emotional independence and to whom the clinging, delicate woman must have seemed always a child; the young husband, broken on the modern wheel; the background characters who make of Valley town and Tidewater city a microcosmic world. The firm, warm quality of Miss Glasgow's prose has never shown to better advantage than in this fine novel.

A woman of controlled sensibility, who has never needed to take care lest she be romantic, Miss Glasgow has, in *Vein of Iron*, foregone the delights of iron for the joys of a larger sympathy. Where she has sometimes been merely clever, she is, here, wise. She brings to her work that third element, rare in contemporary American fiction, which makes for permanence. In her, creative gift and literary talent, too infrequently found together in our modern novelists, are supplemented by a truly cultivated mind. It is a thing that the pure poet, mouthpiece for emotions and wisdom beyond his own, can do without. But we have few pure poets among our novelists today, and I believe that the emptiness of their minds accounts for the shallowness and lack of resonance in their work. Deep calleth to deep.

Taken as a whole, Ellen Glasgow's work has a truth which goes beyond realism; though she is a realist, she never descends to the realistic. Her highly cultivated intelligence, perfectly aware of the implications of modern life, is not deceived by the current visions, either of a new earth or of a new heaven. Her firm belief in the vein of iron in man holds her interest fast to the