

## Books and Things

ONE of the more futile processes that literary criticism sometimes goes in for consists in treating your subject as if he were your opponent in a game. Move by move you try to crowd him into a corner of that board which is, if you are duly ambitious, no narrower than the whole of representable life. Your hope seems to be that once you have pent him in he will be kind enough to stand and deliver his secret. Without obligation on your part.

You take, say, Mr. Max Beerbohm for your subject. Or Mr. Beerbohm as essayist. The rules of the game compel you to start as far as possible from the point you expect to bring up at. You begin by quoting William Blake: "Excess is the essential vivifying spirit, vital spark, embalming spice of the finest art." And then, since Blake is alien even now to men of the world, and since you intend your audience to be large, you get a man of the world to say the same thing for you in his own way; you quote Halifax: "Just enough of a good thing is always too little."

Why go on? The futility of the process is already clear, after no more than two quotations. And, if it is by quotation that you still insist on proceeding, has any one else described as well as Mr. Max Beerbohm has described the kind of writer that he is not? From the essay on Ouida, in *More*: "Art, in a writer, is not everything. Indeed, it implies a certain limitation. If a list of consciously artistic writers were drawn up, one would find that most of them were lacking in great force of intellect or of emotion; that their intellects were restricted, their emotions not very strong. Writers of enormous vitality never are artistic: they cannot pause, they must always be moving swiftly forward."

That Mr. Beerbohm thinks his vitality anything but enormous, that he denies to himself great force of emotion, that he is a consciously artistic writer—I speak advisedly in calling these deductions facile. But to speak advisedly need not be, and customarily is not, to talk sense. Are we much nearer to a likeness of Mr. Beerbohm when we have said that these things are true of him? We get nearer, a little nearer, when we've observed that he both knows these limitations for his and acts on the knowledge. In *Ichabod* (*Yet Again*) he invites us to share it: "Do not, reader, suspect that because I am choosing my words nicely, and playing with metaphor, and putting my commas in their proper places, my sorrow is not really and truly poignant. I write elaborately, for that is my habit, and habits are less easily broken than hearts." Readers who cannot accept this invitation had better let Mr. Beerbohm's essays alone. He uses in *Ichabod*, to express a sorrow he is playing with, the technique by which, elsewhere, he communicates a real emotion. He often, to transpose Archbishop Trench's words, supports a cause which he affects to betray.

That is one of the modes of irony; of irony, the only form of good breeding that makes other people uncomfortable; irony, which checks the milk of human kindness in its flow as a styptic checks the flow of blood; irony, to which Mr. Beerbohm himself has given its best nickname. In *A Letter That Was Not Written* (*And Even Now*) he describes his attempts to write an indignant protest to the *Times*. "Restraint was the prime effect to be aimed at." But the sentences would not come. At last he hit upon the right words to end with: "I sat down to a table and wrote out that conclusion, and then I worked back-

wards, keeping well in view the idea of 'restraint.' But that quality which is little sister to restraint, and is yet far more repulsive to the public mind than vehemence, emerged to misguide my pen. Irony, in fact, played the deuce." "Irony, little sister to restraint"! And confused, ever so obviously, in the public mind, with that other little sister, in Solomon's Song, who "hath no breasts." No milk, whether of human kindness or other, in irony.

But to resume the attempt which I seem to have drifted into making, to do Mr. Max Beerbohm in, as the haberdashers say, self-tones. Was he thinking of himself, I wonder, when he wrote, in *Yet Again*: "An exquisite talent like Whistler's, whether in painting or in writing, is always at its best on a small scale. On a large scale it strays and is distressed. Thus the *Ten o'Clock*, from which I took that passage about the evening mist and the riverside, does not leave me with a sense of artistic satisfaction. It lacks structure. It is not a roundly conceived whole: it is but a row of fragments." No, Mr. Beerbohm was not thinking of himself. He never, for all his self-knowledge, sees his talent as exquisite. How he does see it we may learn from the preface to Mr. Bohun Lynch's agreeable and unaffected book, *Max Beerbohm in Perspective* (New York: Knopf, \$3.50). "My gifts are small," he says in his letter to Mr. Lynch. "I've used them very well and discreetly, never straining them; and the result is that I've made a charming little reputation. But that reputation is a frail plant."

Oh no, his reputation is not frail. It has been, until the last two years or so, a plant of slow growth, but almost as long ago as fifteen years it had begun to put forth bright shoots of everlastingness. We all know now that his essays will endure because, among other reasons, they have what he denied to Mr. Whistler's *Ten o'Clock*. Don't they combine, as no other essayist has combined, ever, exquisiteness of detail with strictness of design? Indeed, his "admirable sureness of detail," not exquisiteness merely but sureness, "means," as an anonymous writer in Mr. Rothenstein's *Twenty-four Portraits* has wisely said, "an underlying constructive power which, although Mr. Beerbohm uses it for delicate enough ends, is one of the major qualities of literary art." His caprices, his bits of nonsense, are all so many cobweb bridges that carry him where he wishes to go, exactly. "Myself a fidgety and uninspired person," so he calls himself in "*Savonarola*" Brown, "unable to begin a piece of writing before I know just how it shall end." One imagines that the exquisite detail of his essays comes easily to Mr. Beerbohm, and that their beautiful structure is the reward, the high pay, of taking thought. "No fine work," he says in *Books Within Books* (*And Even Now*), "can be done without concentration and self-sacrifice and toil and doubt."

None of these things I have quoted helps us to understand the recent growth, so sudden and so long overdue, of Mr. Beerbohm's fame. With all the reasons given for this growth his earliest discoverers are not, I suppose, ill pleased. Unless the presence, in *And Even Now*, of William and Mary be one of these reasons? I have heard an almost intelligent person declare that William and Mary convinced her that "Max Beerbohm's heart was in the right place." You know what she meant, poor woman. Even in the old days, the days of *More*, you could find by looking closely a sleeve or two on which he was wearing his heart. But in each of these sleeves Mr. Beerbohm is also laughing.

P. L.

## The Beautiful and Damned

*The Beautiful and Damned*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald.  
New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. \$2.00.

I have a suspicion—which I should hate to have to defend with concrete evidence—that a lot of people in the kindly but cool October of life are pointing to Mr. Scott Fitzgerald as the interpreter of the “younger generation,” and are reading him as someone who understands what they do not quite understand nor altogether like, but which fascinates them as May will, I suppose, always fascinate October. They think of him, and at once their mouths are filled with such phrases as “these wild young people,” “flappers,” “petting parties,” and their heads with vague images of human beings younger than themselves—and therefore, though they do not know it, already alien—who seem to be a different race by reason of a decided tendency to eat all of life as it is served to them and save nothing for the ice-chest of after-years. They view with alarm this youth whose slogan seems to them to be Freedom is a Bonfire, Come and Jump into it; they recall the crude cruel frankness of our twenties, the young drinking or dancing couples going through the motions of pleasure with faces passionately meaningless; they ruefully, perhaps enviously, accept what they take to be Fitzgerald's testimony and say to themselves, a little too self-consciously perhaps, Blessed be the ugly, for they shall not live on the seamy side of Paradise.

As a member of a generation which here chooses to remain nameless, I insist that Mr. Fitzgerald is not a witness, and not an interpreter. His novel may have a contemporary ring and contemporary furniture, but his story is an old one. So many people have read it—or are going to—that there is not much use in tracing its outline. It is the familiar one of character eroded by idleness, and love by time. Its two chief personages, Anthony and Gloria, have to start with the double gift, or curse, of beauty and money. These gifts, plus intelligence and an insatiable thirst for today, are their undoing. They lack that inward pressure, that mysterious binding stuff which makes the difference between sand and rock, and like sand they cling to nothing, but are forever shifting. Their motto is the poplar's, All winds bend me, and its prayer their only hope: May good winds blow. Spoiled children of fair weather, they call down foul weather upon themselves. They try to obey Nietzsche's injunction to live dangerously, but succeed only in living disastrously.

It is a novel not of disillusion but of decay. What happens to the kind of people that Anthony and Gloria are has happened to the same kind of people over and over again, and in a lesser degree to millions of more ordinary people, ever since man began to stand up on his hind legs. In our foolish optimism, our pride and certainty in progress, we like to forget that disintegration is a competing and often victorious force. And so, when we see signs of something uncommonly like it in the young generation, we think it has never happened before. What counts in the story of the Beautiful and Damned has happened before millions of times, and has been written about, too. The setting changes, of course, but since Mr. Fitzgerald has described our modern setting with its prohibition parties and promiscuous kissing in such generous detail, we are apt to think that, because the scenery is startling, the play is a new one.

Let's leave the scenery and look at the characters. Mr. Fitzgerald starts to build up Anthony Patch with pages

which, while blazing with clever irony, do not give us a picture of him in three dimensions. Later we find him using that mixture of standing aside and telling us what he says and does and acting as his intimate psychological confidant, which often betrays the autobiographer. Within rather large limits Anthony is clear, but clear as a type rather than a person. The most telling accounts of him, while real, could also seem real of other persons quite different from him in other ways. Gloria, admirably sharp at first, deliquesces and loses her personality as Mr. Fitzgerald grows intimate with her, until toward the end we find her speaking very little like her earlier self, and far too much like him. She too, broadens into a person with too many characteristics which other characters could share with her and still be different. The treatment of the two of them leaves the curious impression that Mr. Fitzgerald was at first inside Anthony's soul and watched Gloria from without, and gradually exchanged these positions.

His treatment of the minor characters is much sharper and much more limited. They are made to live by their creator's uncanny talent for picking out their weak and foolish spot—but one spot only. They are pieces of cardboard, and on them is a bulls-eye which he never misses. To me they serve a highly useful purpose—they bring out perhaps the most important facet of Mr. Fitzgerald's mind. He hates to be bored; he loathes the obvious, the flat, the second-hand (the “immemorial” he calls it), and those who utter these things, beyond any thing in the world. And dull people who play constantly upon one dismal string of the ancient and obvious not only bore him, they rouse all the impatience in him to a high and eloquent pitch of irony.

This irony, this impatience, which is both robust and feverish, runs all through the book. It irrevocably tinges its sentiment, it is a sort of undertone or background. Mr. Fitzgerald has a very small allowance of tenderness, and even less of pity, but for every pint of them his mixture contains gallons of blistering hatred. He hates, to be sure, just the things that I do, but it is a perilous mood to maintain. Such a mood in him gives birth to innumerable asides, semi-epigrammatic descriptions of or slaps at the times we live in. Here is a brief sample:

In April war was declared with Germany. Wilson and his cabinet—a cabinet that in its lack of distinction was strangely reminiscent of the twelve apostles—let loose the carefully starved dogs of war, and the press began to whoop hysterically against the sinister morals, sinister philosophy, and sinister music produced by the Teutonic temperament. . . .

The book is alive with epigrams, so many that one half suspects that their origin is less in a perpetually ironic state of mind than in a facility and joy in turning them out. It is a lively and amusing talent but, infecting as it does many of the characters, it tends to epigrammania.

In emphasizing this smartness it would not be fair to lose sight of Mr. Fitzgerald's cleverness, and of something far more than that, of a real sincerity and vigor of mind. The mind of one who reacts to life rather than explores it, who observes life by a sort of revulsion, a restless mind in which what you at first take to be poison turns out to be irritation and what you take to be madness, insomnia. A mind knowing both bitterness and triumph, and keenly enjoying both. Decidedly a mind with edge—perhaps the edge of a saw. A curious combination of energy and weariness, eagerness and cruelty, suggesting fire without warmth.

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