

The Perfection Box

BY G. B. STERN

WITH a divine sense of geographical irrelevance, we had been reading George Moore's "Conversations in Ebury Street" up at our little Hebridean Hotel during Christmas; and it must have been because of this, that our own conversation swerved into a literary argument. Not, as far as George Moore is concerned, that he could ever serve as a model for any conversation or argument on the give-and-take, fifty-fifty basis; there are two lines in the early part of "Conversations in Ebury Street" at which I never cease marveling:

After a pause during which Mr. Husband was kind enough to wait for me to collect my thoughts, I said . . .

Mr. Husband, when he goes to heaven, will not be awarded a further halo; he has one already for conspicuous chivalry towards one not in need of it.

We found ourselves at the eternally interesting question of who were the giants in literature of the last fifty years or so. Does George Moore qualify as a giant? Does egoism disqualify an author from gianthood? and which little Jack among us shall dare to run him through with our little sword?

On the other hand, should he not instead go into the Perfection Box?

The Perfection Box explains itself in the title. We have only recently acquired it, and nothing could be more convenient when, metaphorically, one is having a thorough clean-up among writers. It is like suddenly being presented with a shoe-suitcase to add to your luggage, where before you had only an ordinary suitcase, and the shoes were crammed in haphazard with the rest of your things.

Who, then, goes into this shining neatly lined receptacle? The first answer provides the greatest problem: Jane Austen? Of course; usher her into the Perfection Box; who so worthy?

But then cries of angry dissent: "Jane Austen should go among the giants!" For why should the giants have all those loose lumbering rugged characteristics which appertain to mere size? Why should they stride about and be craggy?

Tolstoy, we are aware without argu-

ment, can be put on the giant heap; and we can pile up with Dostoevsky and Balzac, Dickens and Thackeray, Zola (Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes), Hardy, Meredith (more wrangling at this point: "No, *no*. Yes."), Walt Whitman, Yeats, Shaw, Wells. A dog-fight over Bennett: Remember "The Old Wives' Tale"? And the usual question: Is one great epic novel enough? If it is, that at once gathers in Emily Brontë, and throws out Charlotte. And so back to Jane Austen.

One side hotly contests that "giant" can only be defined in the sense of "genius." Try to eliminate the Rabelaisian association. In that case, the other side replies, we need not require a Perfection Box at all.

"But my dear man—" (or my-dear-woman) "—if you can perceive no more intelligent distinction than what divides big bearded men with leonine untidy manes of hair, from small ladies with shapely delicate wit—"

The ensuing clamor then proved how sadly we fail to come up to the standards of Mr. Husband.

A curious point of view was put forward, that when an author's work shows passion, he or she gets automatically registered in the giant class. "Jane Austen," remarked a certain critic, making the most colossal misstatement of his career, "Jane Austen has no passion to give us. Perfection, yes; passion, no."

No passion? But perhaps this superficially judging person has never read "Sense and Sensibility"; has forgotten Marianne's agony when Willoughby was false to her? Within its own formula of exquisitely plaited technique, it trembles with the very passion of King Lear disappointed of his daughters.

Jane Austen really is the only writer who can leave us with the ultimate satisfaction of knowing that she belongs fully and triumphantly to both the Giants and the Box. Yet if, forsaking the giants, she ultimately went into the Perfection Box, obviously she would fill up too much



Sarah Orne Jewett

of the space; practically all the space there is; for who could we slip in round the sides?

Stevenson? A lull in dispute while it was affectionately settled that he is not quite great enough to join the giants on their mountain-peak (and who would have known it better than he?) and that to reckon him as Perfection was an invitation to the Wrong Box. He belongs to that amiable cluster of writers whom we love a little better than their works.

Max Beerbohm. Lewis Carroll. Marcel Proust. Kenneth Grahame. There we start with the right type of applicant. None of them bestrides the narrow earth like a colossus, yet genius cannot be denied. Here are more to join them: Saki and P. G. Wodehouse, Neil Lyons and perhaps Stella Benson. I anticipate argument over Stella Benson. E. M. Forster; Sylvia Townsend Warner; Evelyn Waugh. Argument becomes impolite and a little hysterical. Somebody interrupts with a lusty bellow demanding that Chesterton be thrust among the giants. And someone else says Kipling. And someone else says that Kipling only excelled at short stories, which means the Perfection Box for him and (casually) for Chekhov. "But Chekhov was a *giant*!" And we are back again where we were, with another half-hour sped away and nothing settled. But the interlude has given us a new basis on which to build the following definition: that a man can count as a giant if only *enough* of his work is in that class and on that scale. But to go into the Perfection Box, all he creates must be equally good; you may not win a way into the Perfection Box, leaving a scatter of unworthy performance behind you on the

floor; the whole of your output must tuck in together.

Take Max. Has he ever written one line which is not as witty and immaculate and fastidious and elegantly dandified as his every other line? Perfection and more perfection and yet again perfection and even now perfection. But most critics, talking of "War and Peace," will insist on the terrific, the overwhelming conception of the first half, saying: "The rest isn't as good."

Or Kenneth Grahame: "The Wind in the Willows"; "The Golden Age"; "Dream Days"; a short story in the Yellow Book: "The Headswoman." No more, and not a speck or flaw on any of them.

And P. G. Wodehouse. With all our swaggering broadmindedness, it would look pretty silly to have him striding from mountain peak to mountain peak between Dostoevsky and Hardy. But he, too, is among that little immortal group who walk so lightly and with such ease that they never seem to lurch off the chalk-line. Some of us may prefer Bertie Wooster to Psmith; a large congregation shouts for Jeeves; and there are even those, though I am not among them, who have a weakness for Ukridge. But I believe I have never yet heard anyone say: "This time it isn't a good Wodehouse."

We are, I must once again confess it, a little inclined to be influenced by physical appearance when separating the giants from their smaller but more perfect species; and our reluctance to call Jane Austen a giant can be matched by a strong feeling that if Browning for instance, or Tennyson or Carlyle, those three picturesque musketeers, dark and hairy, tobacco-stained and broad-shouldered, their cloaks stormily flung about them, had happened to be master-craftsmen in the cobweb style, spinning their gleaming threads into a dapper pattern, we would still feel they were a trifle too disorderly and a bit too much of an outsize for the Perfection Box; whereas Barrie, physically of elfin size and neatness, we might easily beckon to step inside without an unbiassed examination as to whether perhaps he may not after all belong to the giants.

No, I think not. There are boundaries to what he can achieve; and even a five-mile limit is enough to send you off the mountains and into the box. Within his self-imposed radius, he has a twinkling consistency and a chuckling success. Certainly we could point out, say one page in "Mary Rose," half a page in "Dear

Brutus," a bitter moment or two in "The Will," which could flash him at once out of the Box and into the Giant group. But by far the greater part of his achievement renders him supremely eligible to dart through that invisible aperture . . . which has a deplorable tendency every moment to become more and more like a little arched doorway, rose-entwined, into the House We Built for Wendy, and less and less like the self-respecting shoe-suitcase which it was before we began to mention Barrie.

It is clear that a short period of astringency is indicated; and so let me recommend the inclusion of Sarah Orne Jewett and Logan Pearsall Smith: a very perfect couple for the Perfection Box. Sarah Orne Jewett, in case this may be your first introduction, might well be called the New England Mrs. Gaskell; except that her true stories of life in the state of Maine between (roughly) 1860 and 1900 give out a pungent salty tang which is more to my own taste than the lavender of "Cranford." Her observation

of the samples and simples of human nature directly surrounding her, is caustic and honest and humorous; and of the actual writing of these essays and sketches collected into two volumes called "The Country of the Pointed Firs" and "The Only Rose," one can say in that rather puzzled voice which we have sometimes heard in praise of this or that person: "I don't know what it is: they're not exactly handsome and not a bit smart, but they have such style! I expect it's

the way they carry themselves." I am enamored, there is no doubt, of the way in which Sarah Orne Jewett carries herself. Let her, therefore, carry herself right into the Perfection Box.

Her escort, Logan Pearsall Smith (we have not quite shaken off the temptation to be slightly Barrie-ish in the way we assemble this company) might well, were it not for Max, be King of the Perfection Box. Were it not for Max and Walter de la Mare, that fine filigree watch-maker among writers.

And should we decide to elect none of these three because they are equally flawless, it is a thrilling if eccentric discovery that the crown might go, after due consideration, to Walt Disney. Anyone who objects that he is a producer of films and not an author, will be met by the reminder that he creates characters where no characters were before; whereas many so-called authors have done less, few could be said to have done more.

Well Written Melodrama

SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN. By John Sanford. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1939. \$2.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

FALLING immediately into the category of the hard-boiled novel, using verbiage as raw but as natural as the speech of ordinary Americans of the soil, Mr. Sanford's work is further distinguished by a genuinely poetic gift for descriptive language. In fact, in the latter part of the book he breaks into actual free verse, to explain Tom Paulhan's desire to be cut off from "the long tradition of trespass."

Paulhan is a foot-loose man who turns up exhausted and babbling of his past, and of a certain dancer in a "cheap joint," to sleep in the barn of Aaron Platt, where, at the frosty-morning opening of the story, Aaron disgustedly finds him. Paulhan is involved with Aaron's own past, which at once begins to unfold through various narrative devices, one being the testimony of Aaron at a future coroner's hearing, which the reader gradually comes to see approaching because Aaron, in deep resentment and anger, will leave Paulhan to die of hunger on his property. The plot turns on the legal question as to whether a man may be indicted for murder for so leaving another to die; but the real story lies in Platt's background, involving the tyranny of his father—a monstrous bully—and Paulhan's background, involving Grace Tennent, the girl he marries. Aaron has had a terribly hard time all his life while Tom has been a congenital rolling stone. The story begins with the final clash between the two men and weaves backward to explain the reasons. This explanation draws in subordinate characters; Rose, of the summer camp, who had designs on Tom; that remarkable character, the "Widder" of the community; and various local men.

The structure, you will perceive, has its points of originality; and even when the detail seems somewhat extraneous, such is the vividness of Mr. Sanford's writing that it is never uninteresting. But the plot is rather too neat. One feels in general that the author is too fond of artifice at times. And the danger of "fine writing" is not always resisted.

In spite of all this, and even though matters concerning prophylaxis become rather intrusive (for which a free burlesque of the Song of Solomon does not exactly compensate), the story electrifyingly leaps along and is eminently readable. Here is a younger writer of undeniable talent, the most promising feature of whose work is a sometimes superb originality of language. The tough-guy talk, a number of other young writers can do as well as he. This is his third or fourth book, but he still may, very possibly, "go places."



Caricature by Bohan Lynch

Max Beerbohm: "Perfection and more perfection and yet again perfection" . . .