

*The Saturday Review
of Literature*

The Perfect Trifler

LOUIS KRONENBERGER

WE SHALL shortly celebrate a notable occasion: Sir Max Beerbohm's seventy-fifth birthday. But a not unnotable one is already at hand: Sir Max's first book in nearly twenty years. And if one would survey the career of a distinguished writer, a book, I think, provides a sounder starting point than a birthday. To find oneself criticized in the very act of being congratulated must be a pretty dampening experience—much as though a writer should discover, on opening a beautifully wrapped birthday present, that someone had sent him a grammar.

The new book,* furthermore, though it unfortunately does not crown Sir Max's career, considerably illuminates it. It reveals, quite as much as anything he has ever written, the kind of writer he is, and the kind of man. Indeed, it pretty sharply reveals that he is seventy-five. This is not because it shows an old man's infirmities, but because it overflows with an old man's recollections, an old man's harking back to the loves and landmarks of his youth. Max,† God knows, has never not been a period writer. But always, in reading him before, one felt not so much a gulf between past and present as that Max had made time stand still—that Victoria, or at any rate Edward VII, had not ceased to reign, and world wars not been fought or waistcoats changed fashion. Max was still, somehow, a dandy of the Nineties, a worldling of the Nineteen-Hundreds; reading him, we saw him framed eternally against a background of fin-de-siècle Piccadilly, as Keats's youth is young forever on his Grecian urn. When, in an essay on Strachey a year or two back, Max protested—with as much

fervor as an urban Tory would permit himself—against the Century of the Common Man, what surprised you was not that he saw red at (and in) the phrase, but that he should ever have heard of it. He had seemed out of earshot of it by at least a generation.

But now we find that Max has not been living, placidly oblivious of the present, in a fin-de-siècle dream. He is too constantly jarred by the present not to be most uncomfortably aware of it. All the things Max loves—elegance, urbanity, a quill-pen leisureliness, the pleasure to be had of little things, the noiseless flick and delayed smart of irony—are not much valued in our day. All the things he hates—noise, speed, garishness, ugliness, Americanization—are ubiquitous and, as he might say, regnant. Again and again he can only shudder at what he sees, and sigh for what has vanished. But the sigh is really far more significant than the shudder. For one feels it is not so much that the present

is all wrong for Sir Max—though of course it is—as that the past is all-important. Each of his complaints is fundamentally a comparison. One suspects that Max was already retrospective in his cradle, and downright reminiscent in his crib. And now Max is really, however ironically, the elderly gentleman who sits in his Tory club-window shaking his head at everything he observes in the street. Very often he is soundly protesting against vulgarity; but surely sometimes he is protesting against life. Yet this is not just Max turned elderly—he has always been someone who preferred a way of life to life itself.

ON THE literary side, "Mainly on the Air" is pretty slight, even for its author; much of it having been composed, as the book's title indicates, for BBC broadcasts. Yet I have found a second reading of the book more satisfying than a first: one starts off keenly disappointed because so little comes even close to Max's best; then gratefully accepts these pieces for what they are—still rather bright, still unmistakably Beerbohm. Their very titles supply their text—"London Revisited," "Music Halls of My Youth," "The Top Hat," "Advertisements," "Speed." But the best thing in the book, the thing most in the old, happy, essayist vein is "Fenestralia," where Max considers the role that windows have played in literature and history. It is a true carved cherrystone, and not from a sour cherry. Possibly the next best thing in the book, the amusing "T. Fenning Dodsworth," is not quite a stranger; it was published, in this country at least, as part of "A Variety of Things." But we may look upon it, surely, as one more link with the past.

And the past is most of all the Nineties. The Nineties stamped Max and sent him forth as their most engaging ambassador. It does not matter in the end that what Max wrote in the Nineties is very far from his best work. It is simply that as the



—Bohun Lynch.

"One suspects that Max [Beerbohm] was already retrospective in his cradle and downright reminiscent in his crib."

*MAINLY ON THE AIR. By Max Beerbohm. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1947. 142 pp. \$2.

† Alone among writers, he was universally referred to by his first name. Yet the "Max" never denoted familiarity or even, primarily, affection; it was a kind of badge of his uniqueness. One referred to him by his first name much as one does to a king—which may be why it now comes hard to demote him to a knight.

child of esthetic dandyism he never—however often he chose to treat it with a smile—ceased to cling to it. It was his achievement to commemorate an attitude by lightly mocking it, and to emerge from a period of much ill-fated trifling as the perfect trifier.

“THE perfect trifier” may seem a slighting way to describe the man who has conceivably written the finest familiar essays in the English language. But I think the phrase fairly suggests, on the most honorable terms, the scale of Sir Max’s work and its quite unregrettable lack of “significance.” For it does lack significance, in the sense that Peacock and Congreve, not to speak of Rabelais or Molière, possess it. Max—though he once confessed himself “no book lover”—is palpably, impenitently bookish. Very likely, as he has often declared, he turns to books only when he is unable to be with people. It does not matter. Sir Max is as literary as a quotation from Horace. It is never life itself, only the cultivated, the artistic, the aristocratic life, that he savors or satirizes; and when he savors it is not to make converts, any more than when he satirizes it is really to protest. His work exists simply to give pleasure of the most delicate kind—simply to distil all that we mean by temperament into something characterized by all that we mean by style.

His sheer spoofing aside, most of Sir Max’s work may be summed up as the manipulation of a personality.

He began manipulating it when it was not yet formed, and when his style, whatever its merits, was still a little absurd. He began impudently; not with the callow impudence of youth, but as a precocious and sort of parthenogenic man of the world. The art that reveals art came before its most celebrated opposite, if indeed the opposite ever quite came at all; the fun in Max lies not in wondering about his dexterity but in watching it. He is acrobat, not conjurer. At the start, however, he was not entirely deft: in “The Works” and “More” the cleverness is fatiguing, the personality obtrusive, the matter quite often thin. (Even something successful like “Diminuendo” or “An Infamous Brigade” is rather a jeu d’esprit than a true essay.) Just as Maltby, in “Seven Men,” sat up all night breaking in his new suits in rotation, so was Max, much earlier, breaking in his mannerisms and effects.

What is cardinal to the manipulation of a personality is a completely expressive style; and that, despite an instinctive finesse, came late. Max’s style, being mannered, never needed perfect naturalness; but it did need perfect ease. And as late as “Yet Again” and “Zuleika Dobson” there is too often a slight strain in the writing, as there is a slight stretching in the contents. It was the many years that separate “Yet Again” from “And Even Now” that brought perfection. Finally everything came right: the proportions, the tone, the touch that is both intimate and re-

served, the unexhibitionistic wit, and the Tory point of view that is worn, not as in too young a man, outrageously; nor defiantly, as in too insecure a one. Above all, the personality has found a prose that exactly suits it. It is a personality raised out of life into art, and one that while seeming to confide continues to elude one. There is the pleasantest sort of frankness; the greatest willingness to confess to all one’s prejudices, predilections, oddities. But is this Max Beerbohm—or is it merely Max being sly? Has he told the truth or had his little joke; revealed a man or trumped one up? Is this autobiography or art, or both?

IT IS, at any rate, something remarkably engaging. For a certain kind of reader, the small habits and hankerings of this blameless exquisite can be as fascinating as all the demonic and outrageous and unsanctified adventures of a Byron or Jack London. That, whether or not it projects a real person, is proof of real personality. Perhaps in the factual sense we have never been given the true Max Beerbohm. Artistically it makes no difference—though it is my own guess that Max has usually been altogether candid, exploiting the worldling’s knowledge that the truth is the last thing people ever believe.

But beyond the question of fact or fabrication lies the effect of personality through style; the juggling, so to speak, of the first person singular. It is probably the most ticklish problem that can confront a writer. Many very distinguished writers—Thomas Mann is perhaps the latest—have failed abysmally in talking about themselves. There is the Scylla of egotism, which must be skirted without crashing against the Charybdis of mousiness. There is the danger of striking a pose, which must again not be circumvented at the cost of a priggish earnestness. Moreover, a writer using the first person must seem neither too familiar nor too aloof; neither smug, again, nor obsequious. There is finally the peril, the besetting peril for the familiar essayist, of coyness. And though Max escapes all the other pitfalls, at times even he becomes rather coy. Yet the redeeming thing is that he does not become so oftener, particularly as his style can be very irritating. Even his mature style trades too freely in inversions, in Latinisms and archaisms, in double negatives, in “do but” and “averse from” and “belike” and “how great soever”—becoming precious, conspicuous, waxen; and I suppose one is riled the more from knowing that Max indulges in all

(Continued on page 41)



—From “Art in Our Time.”

“At the Moulin Rouge: The Dance,” by Toulouse-Lautrec.

Literary Fiesta in Mexico

ELIZABETH ANN McMURRAY

FOR a Texas bookseller with little knowledge of the European book market, to whom the length and breadth of bookselling has been New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Dallas, seven days in Mexico City are a permanent cure for the vicious disease, complacency, which attacks booksellers first, then publishers.

There are 103 bookshops with telephones in Mexico City. For a bookseller on a postman's holiday that means a lot of stops if only the best known and more important stores are on the list to visit. For every shop with an Ericsson or a Mexicana telephone or both there are two more without telephones which are still legitimate, recognized bookstores—stocking books, talking books, selling old and new books, and taking special orders. That gives Mexico City a rough total of over three hundred bookshops, and that is a conservative count. When every third bookseller admits to being a publisher, the picture begins to indicate that, next to churches and romance, books are most important in Mexico City.

These bookstores are not just stalls with a few books and a great lethargy on the part of the operators. Many have magnificent stocks of very old books with Madrid, Barcelona, and Seville imprints; fine examples of very early printing in this hemisphere; books on rag paper which for all their three hundred years are in a fine state of preservation; books bound in vellum; rare books on architecture, art, and history; all books which would be sought and treasured by librarians of American colleges, universities, and museums. To be set down in a city with over three hundred bookstores and one hundred libraries is what a visiting gringo bookseller prays for, but when this same city is playing host to a National Book Fair, it's too good to be true. I was jubilant at seeing books heralded from a monument 250 feet high, the monument of the Revolution, which dominates that entire section of the city and is visible for miles in every direction. There were 105 displays in the entire fair, with books emphasized in all of them. The fair, in its fifth year now, is actually supported by the publishers and booksellers who pay for their space. The stands are built at government expense and rented in small three- or large nine-metre spaces. Additional charge is made for preferred position. The ornamental part of the exposition



is paid for by the government and varies in its elaborateness from year to year.

President Alemán officially opened this year's fair on April 22 with cabinet members, writers, artists, and intellectuals in attendance. More than half a million people had inspected the book displays when the fair closed the middle of May.

Most governmental departments had large buildings housing impressive, well-lighted shows. The Department of Public Education had a double-barreled attraction which was running up good daily attendance totals. The Alfabetización movement, which is really "Learn to Read and Write and Teach a Neighbor," was being carried forward in a school room with blackboards, school desks, maps, and pictures. Here the Department of Education in its great literacy drive was taking the names and addresses of the Mexicans who wanted to learn to read and write. From the information thus obtained the department is able to bring together available teachers with ambitious students. Half the desks were in constant use as mature mothers and fathers and young men and women filled out the blanks for Alfabetización.

THERE were movies in the other part of the Department of Education building and an ever-changing audience poured in to see news of public education in pictures. The graphic display in the foyer also emphasized the expansion of the school system in the entire nation. Effective

charts and stunning photographic murals showed clearly the great strides made in education in Mexico in the past twenty-five years.

Each booth was colorful, dramatic, and eye-catching. No matter how fundamental and practical the facts, the displays of government departments were all presented with a theatrical twist, mirrors, music, and free literature. The Secretary of Communications and Public Works had miniature models of modern trains, roads, and bridges; topographic maps; teletype machines in action. These models were especially popular with the Mexicans, old and young, and at all times crowds stood studying the moving spectacle.

Prominently exhibited in all of the commercial bookstore arrangements at the fair were the fine publications of Fondo de Cultura Económica, one of the most influential publishing houses in all Mexico. It is headed by Daniel Cosío Villegas, who is president of Cámara Mexicana del Libro, similar to our American Booksellers Association, and a member of the executive council of the organization of Latin American publishers and booksellers.

The Fondo de Cultura Económica has a funny history [said Señor Villegas as he sat in his spacious second-floor office on Panuco Street]. We are not a commercial firm, but a non-profit institution organized to make available to Mexican students books for outside reading in the field of economics. In 1920 before we had a school of economics in Mexico five of us went away to study. We returned in 1928 to establish a School of Economics in the University of Mexico, using the methods we found being used successfully in the United States and in England. We were especially impressed with your use of outside reading but we soon found our students could not use American or English books for such work. We literally established a publishing house in order to have books in Spanish for our students.

The catalogue of the Fondo de Cultura Económica is as imposing as that of any solid, long-established textbook firm in the United States. Their projected library of Americana is of great significance and importance and is being carefully worked out under the direction of Camila Henríquez Ureña, on leave from Vassar College. The plan is to cover the five periods of Latin American history and the resultant literary production and to reprint with introductions the outstanding examples from each period. The scope of this project is great and the results will interest scholars and teachers of Spanish all over the world.

(Continued on page 34)