

MAURICE BARING'S BOOKS

IN his *Round the World in Any Number of Days* Maurice Baring says that 'The most precious of all books are those which seem to do the work for you. You don't have to bother; you are not aware that you are reading'. His list includes Tolstoy, Trollope, and that most lovable of writers, William De Morgan; to them we might add his own name and work. The easiest and friendliest author of our generation, and one of the most distinguished, has gone, now that he is dead; he can be matched in certain qualities, surpassed in some, but there is—there always will be—only one Maurice Baring. His peculiar charm almost eludes analysis, and analysis appears an absurdly pedantic word to use in talking of one who so deprecated pedantry; but one tries to describe his quality for the mere pleasure of writing about it.

His style is like good manners, unobtrusive, almost unnoticeable, but, like good manners, enjoyable and, also like good manners, part of himself, neither a pose nor an acquisition. In catholicity of taste and culture he can hardly have been matched among the most scholarly writers of his generation; in this, indeed, he would seem to belong to a more suave and lettered age than ours. But he could never have 'played the sedulous ape' unless out of Puckish criticism, as in his delicious drolleries *Dead Letters* and *Lost Diaries*, which are so often exactly what the celebrities concerned ought to have said or written.

But in his novels he employs a simple style, full of short sentences, brief statements, almost baldly-stated facts. He begins most of them with a little packet of biographical details that would be invaluable for an obituary, or for the editor of *Who's Who*, or as one might begin a fairy tale with a precise account of the hero's parentage.

'Lord and Lady Hengrave had a house in London and a house in the country. The London house was in Portman Square, a gloomy building originally Adam in style, but entirely redecorated in the reign of William IV'. The first chapter of 'C' is devoted to an account of his parents, their character and background; so that when, with chapter two, we find C. himself, he is set so firmly within a family, a society, a tradition, that the work has been done for us; we read on through the long narrative almost unaware that we are reading, that these are shadow-folk, puppets in a show. It is a little like reading a bundle of letters concerning people we have known, or perhaps friends of our friends, with a living voice interpolating comments and explanations; a little like enjoying a long talk and gossip and

reminiscence that continue from one evening to another until the tale has been told, our questions and surmises answered, our guesses confirmed.

The style is unobtrusive, almost impalpable; it would be difficult to quote special passages from his prose; unless, of course, one lifted an entire 'dead letter' or 'lost diary'. He would be the despair of an anthologist or of a seeker after vivid flowers of description. One could not quote any one memorable description of Rome or Paris; but one has lived in Rome with Blanche and in Paris with C., and has a memory of these places in which they still live as if one had known them in the flesh, or through the recollection of living friends.

One of his special gifts is the creation of atmosphere; it is quite unmistakable, quite real. One lives in his books, as in Trollope's or Tolstoy's. This achievement is due in great measure to his artistic self-abnegation; to that faculty of withdrawal, as if he had given life to his characters and could leave them to act their parts themselves.

This withdrawal must not obscure his subtlety of insight; he sees so much perhaps because he withdraws, makes the reader see and imagine he sees, without being told. It happens like that in really good talk and reminiscence; the narrator gives some facts; one listens, comments a little; then suddenly all the pieces fit together. There is a flash of complete realisation, and one knows the whole story—what has been, what will be—closely linked together.

There is something almost priestly in Maurice Baring's art as a novelist, shown partly in this observant detachment. He rarely becomes emotional about his characters; rarely asks in words for our pity, or admiration, or condemnation. But with detachment he has also a compassion more profound and pure than can be found in any contemporary writer. Compassion is not an emotion; it is a virtue of the will and mind and soul, and is free from weakness or self-indulgence or condescension. His compassion for Blanche, for C., for Christopher, for any of his people who by their own or others' error are heartbroken, is something beyond mere pity for their misfortune and grief. He is neither ruthless nor sentimental; both are inartistic, and both are unchristian, while Maurice Baring was a true artist whose art was completely Christian.

His detachment is balanced by this compassion and also by his moral judgment, which does not mean that he pauses at intervals to deliver a well-thought-out sermon, or that he presents definitely good or definitely bad characters, of whom the former attain happiness while the latter come to misery and shame. (A nice melodramatic phrase, that!) This balance, too, sets him apart from most contemporaries. Detachment itself is a common quality today; the

novelist no longer asks his readers to like or dislike his characters. The tendency is to find all types interesting (though rather as types than as living individuals) and to consider both sin and goodness as matter for study.

The Victorian novelist often dealt with sin, but, like the preacher described by President Coolidge, 'he was against it'; the villain was unmistakably bad, meant to be detested, and he came in the end to misery and shame. (Phrase repeated without apology, because it suits a reference to Victorian novels.) The heroine was completely good; though the best novels, like Trollope's, allow her little whims and ripples of temper or pride or even folly. The charm of the older novel is that it satisfies our emotions; we most heartily like and dislike, respect or scorn the people who act the story; even adopt their contemporary point of view, so that in reading Trollope, for instance, one becomes so Victorian as to blame Lily Dale for not marrying John Eames in the end, because it is so much better and tidier for a woman to make a suitable marriage than to 'lead apes in hell'.

The limitation of the older novelist (though it is less apparent in Trollope than in any others, for he too has the quality of detachment, and can understand and make us understand, if not forgive, his cads and scoundrels), is in making too marked a distinction between good and bad, and in discarding the bad without scruple or interest when they have sufficiently complicated the plot. Maurice Baring's achievement is in creating a multitude of people (really creating them, for they become part of our memory), a few of them near-saints, a few utter sinners, most of them streaked and interwoven with qualities of varying merit; in making them true and comprehensible both in their goodness and in their weakness, never in words condemning the worst of them or asking for our condemnation; yet in making as clear as day the difference between good and evil, in showing how error and sin must be expiated, in maintaining the immense significance of every human act because human beings are free in will and responsible for every choice of deed they make.

There are few more convincing portraits of an utterly bad woman than Leila in 'C'; yet she is never described as bad, except in that final, devastating phrase by one of C's friends: 'Illa Lesbia'—which opens upon depth beyond depth of squalor.

Blanche is enchanting and piteous; a figure of sad legend. But she knows, and her creator knows, and the reader knows that her sorrow is expiating an error. The expiation may appear far greater than the offence, but it is no vain burden for it is in essence purgatorial. Blanche, suffering the final blow, reflects: 'No; there is nothing unjust about it. It is quite right and I shall bear it'. And then she

prays that she may not in her grief make others unhappy, 'to be saved from herself for what remained of her life, not to cause further unhappiness. . . . And it was then the wound caused by the whole situation seemed to pierce her soul, and as it pierced it, it healed it. The poison suddenly left it, the venom disappeared. . . . She made the supreme act of self-sacrifice'.

There is a like acceptance of sacrifice in *Passing By* and in *Daphne Adeane*. In each case one particular type of hope of earthly happiness is deliberately, and after an agonised struggle, rejected because it is seen to be corrupted by selfishness and guilt. In *The Lonely Lady of Dulwyck* the lady accepts a punishment out of all proportion to her fault because she is unsparing in self-blame. C. and Christopher are tragic figures because they do not fully and consciously accept and offer the sacrifice of their failures. They do not, as these women do, make an oblation of self and of suffering. But they too have been purged; they have done penance; their story is not ended with their death. It is this sense of a divine pattern far greater than our conception into which failure and grief are as closely interwoven as joy and fulfilment that saves Maurice Baring from the charge of pessimism. Without it, he might have been another Hardy; for he had the deep pagan melancholy and fatalism in his mind, and only catholic faith and hope can change them.

That is one of the profoundest and most fascinating of the contrasts in his complex though apparently simple genius. Another is between the intense and enduring happiness of his own childhood, the perfect love and sympathy that nurtured him, and the coldness, worldliness, incomprehension that thwart his heroes, C. and Christopher most notably. *The Coat Without Seam* is almost unbearably sad. Indeed, the only approach to a happy ending occurs in *Darby and Joan* where the lovers come together at last after long separation and misunderstanding. Yet in all the sadness there is never bitterness; the end is not futility. The pattern will be completed and will be beautiful, and it is of God's design. The full tune is not yet played or the perfect harmony adjusted. In Hardy's novels slight error or wilfulness—not grievous sin—may be impelled by fate to bring about catastrophe. Poor Tess is only one of the playthings of malignant Immortals. But in Maurice Baring's books the same errant humanity, whatever disasters it may incur by its own fault, is in the hands of God who neither mocks nor is mocked.

Then, of course, there is the contrast between the compassionate, contemplative, priest-like artist and the most delightful and accomplished jester of our age. His *Diminutive Dramas*, *Dead Letters* and *Lost Diaries* are so particularly his own that they can hardly be com-

pared with any other achievement. Probably those tales *En Marge des Vieux Livres* by Jules Lemaitre come nearest them in their blending of fantasy, scholarship and truth. On this side Maurice Baring is another Saki; that Saki himself did not lack the grave compassion, the profound insight, may be guessed from *The Unbearable Bassington*. But in Maurice Baring the two sides, the apparently contrasting qualities, are equally developed.

He was, of course, a poet so accomplished and graceful that the depth of his vision, the sincerity of his passion, are in some danger of being overlooked; for the little graces sometimes draw our eyes from the great virtues. But by virtue of his poetry, he achieves balance, unity, fulfilment; for his style, even at its most simple, its driest, is that of a poet.

One cannot properly appreciate his novels without a joy in his frivolities; without love of his poetry; without remembrance of his life as recorded in that most delightful and satisfying of autobiographies *The Puppet Show of Memory*. One might find there the source and foundation of all his achievement, in two statements:

I will end this chapter, for it was the end of a chapter of life, the happiest and most wonderful chapter of all. New gates were opened; but the gate on the fairyland of childhood was shut, and for ever afterwards one could only look through the bars, but never more be a free and lawful citizen of that enchanted country, where life was like a fairy-tale that seemed almost too good to be true, and yet so endlessly long and so infinitely happy that it seemed as if it might last for ever.

It remained all the more enchanted for his refusal to play the Peter Pan game. He did not need that illusion; for the Kingdom whose spell is more compelling and enduring than that of the most enchanting memories of childhood was within him. The other statement is:

On the eve of Candlemas, 1909, I was received into the Catholic Church, by Father Sebastian Bowden, at the Brompton Oratory; the only action in my life which I am quite certain I have never regretted.

He found and never lost the Kingdom; in it he found again what to so many remains the land of lost content, of enchanted childhood, of perpetual innocence. As a citizen of that Kingdom his vision looks beyond his tragic consciousness; for all its sadness his work may be fitly summed up as a Divine Comedy.

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