

BOOKS

Two Witty Women

ONE might argue from their writings that women are the less guilty and guilt-ridden sex. Anyway, women who write do write out of a more innocent, perhaps because limited, experience, than men. Certainly in these two books, by witty, intelligent, and travelled women, a male reader feels that in each case part of the charm is that the writer is only on the fringe of the guilt-ridden, promiscuous, café-and pub-crawling world of men.

With all her real understanding and sophistication, Miss McCarthy in Venice reminds me a bit of Daisy Miller in the Colosseum at Rome, remaining on the outside edge of so much fever and corruption. Her essay* is informed, bright, at times brilliant. It contains an enormous amount packed into a very short space, and if the publishers, so lavish in every other respect, had troubled to provide it with an index, it would be extremely useful. Each of Miss McCarthy's paragraphs is a portmanteau literally crammed with facts, names, lists, quotations. One makes a mental reservation to look back to something she has said about St. Mark's or the Doge's Palace and then, a few pages on, discovers one is in a kind of Hampton Court Maze of thick new leaves, and cannot find one's way back to the berries that delighted an hour ago.

It is difficult to say why this book is slightly disappointing. The reason, I think, is that, although she has looked at a great many things and has responded to them intently, sincerely, and with an independent judgment, her eye is not profoundly touched, it remains virginal. Often too—the Daisy Miller touch—the moral shock of Venice comes between her and the object observed. For instance: "The Venetians are enthusiastic restorers. The paintings of the Doge's Palace have been worked on by gangs of restorers ever since the eighteenth century. That is perhaps why, at least to my eyes, they look so verveless. . . ." She lists some exceptions to vervelessness, but one of them is not Tintoretto's *Mercury and the Three Graces*, illustrated, as it happens, in colour, on the page opposite this remark.

* *Venice Observed*. By MARY MCCARTHY. Zwemmer. £4 10s.

"St. Mark's as a whole, unless seen from a distance or at twilight, is not beautiful." Perhaps this is true, but it is the kind of observation that is not of real value unless one sees how many questions it raises, and is prepared to press them. The question of the "beauty" of St. Mark's, like that of the Taj Mahal, is irrelevant. The point about St. Mark's is that like the Taj, or like the entwined figures of the winds in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, or like the opening phrase of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, it creates an undisputed image which impresses itself unforgettably on the mind.

The difficulty is perhaps simply that of writing about painting, which one has to do with Venice. Miss McCarthy's great virtue is that she really works at things and forms her own judgment about them. This is always stimulating, but sometimes her brave brevity of comment cuts her off too short. "Canaletto and Guardi are the last, one might say, of the Venetian mirror-makers." It is more important, perhaps, to remember that Guardi is one of the first (in every sense) of modern painters.

Miss McCarthy is at her very best writing about the present-day Venice to which she responds warmly and immediately: her lodgings, her landlady, cats and gold-fish: a deeply ironic passage in which she compares (at the expense of E. V. Lucas) the reactions of Lucas in *A Wanderer in Venice* with those of André Maurel in his *Quinze Jours à Venise* to the pathetic lace workers of Burano, is the most moving passage in the book. *Venice Observed* is wonderfully illustrated and produced. My criticisms here do not prevent my recording that this is a delightful volume to possess: beautiful in itself, stimulating, and leading in a great many directions, not only to Venice, but to other books about Venice.

MISS Macaulay, like Miss McCarthy, combines remarkable sophistication with remarkable innocence. Nevertheless, *The Towers of Trebizond** is a song of experience, a remark-

* *The Towers of Trebizond*. By ROSE MACAULAY. Collins. 13s. 6d.

able interweaving of happiness with sadness, encyclopædic knowledge with wisdom.

So much has been written about this book already that I need not attempt more than to add what I consider to be a few impressions. Reviewers have been puzzled to discover a genre in which to place Miss Macaulay's novel. Is this account of a group of eccentrics who set out with a camel to explore the possibilities of a proposed Anglican mission to Turkey a picaresque novel, or is it after all a romance with a (perhaps unsuccessful) tragic ending?

Myself, I think it is one of those curious works that does not fit into a category. I would describe it as an essay on life, sin, happiness, travel, and knowledge, illustrated partly out of the author's fantastic invention, and more deeply out of her own experience.

Some readers have been diverted by the satire on bishops, Anglicans, etc., into thinking it was an attack on the Church. This is, of course, quite wrong. What should be added to my account of it as an essay, is that *The Towers of Trebizond* has some elements of a religious tract. It is a tract not for logicians nor for reformers but for those who wish to embrace a secret: "It's no good your asking me anything. I haven't got the answers. Go and ask the Bishop. Actually, I'm pretty sleepy. But you've left out most of it. You should read some of the liturgies and missals. Especially the Greek. Sophia, divine wisdom, *O Sapientia, fortiter sauviterque diponens omnia, veni ad docendum nos.* And light. *O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae et sol iustitiae, veni et illumina sedentes in tenebris et umbra mortis.*"

Happiness will keep breaking in, is Miss Macaulay's view of life, evidently the reward of her immensely courageous and sustained innocence. Her philosophy of travel is, simply, that every day you see something new and you learn something which becomes part of your happiness. This might seem naïve were it not accompanied by such personal sophistication, and such formidable knowledge. Like the later poetry of Yeats, Miss Macaulay's book does make one reflect that it is quite possible, and, indeed, very prudent, to be happy, and that for those whom fate does not condemn to real suffering, unhappiness is an exercise in self-pity.

Where Miss Macaulay's book seems odd today is that she does not believe much in examining deep-rooted psychological causes. Such applied introspection gets in the way of seeing things and people, and reading books, she seems to feel. Sin is not so much to her an interior characteristic as an external rock on which one founders (though, of course, one has a tendency to this kind of ship-wreck). Thus the adultery which forms so much a theme of this novel has its own kind of sunlit innocence, the death of Vere, with

whom it is committed, is purely accidental, and it is only after this death that the heroine discovers why the adultery was sinful. It is as though sin is a trick lost in a game played (perhaps in all innocence) with God. But she also learns that God was right and she was wrong.

The style in which Miss Macaulay's heroine records her impressions is perhaps a bit too

simple-minded. This may put off readers with a fastidiousness that does not see beyond the fastidious. I think that this curious, fresh, happy book, so lovable in its faith that life can still be enjoyed and even be made into a potent good, will be read by many people for whom it will come as an intimate discovery, for many years to come.

Stephen Spender

THE MAGGOT AND THE CHINAMAN

"Y'see, when the Chinese want to prepare a very rare dish they bury a fish in a tin box. Presently all the lil' maggots peep out and start to eat. Presently no fish. Only maggots.... Well, when they've finished the fish, Chris, they start on each other."

"Cheerful thought, old man."

"The little ones eat the tiny ones. The middle-sized ones eat the little ones. The big ones the middle-sized ones. Then the big ones eat each other. Then there are two and then one and where there was a fish there is now one huge, successful maggot. Rare dish.... 'N when there's only one maggot left the Chinese dig it up—"

"Snap out of it, Pete. How the hell do the Chinese know when to dig it up?"

"They know. They got X-ray eyes. Have you ever heard a spade knocking on the side of a tin box, Chris? Boom! Boom! just like thunder."

"CHRIS" is Christopher Martin, *alias* Pincher Martin,* temporary Lieutenant, R.N.V.R., peace-time juvenile lead in second-rate repertory. Also, a second-rate man. In military and naval circles *Pincher* attaches itself to Martin as inevitably as *Dusty* does to Miller, *Nobby* to Clark: but the nickname could not be happier; Martin is the essential grabber, of parts, scenes, main chances, and especially of other men's wives. In fact, a very successful maggot: but his ship is torpedoed, he finds himself washed up on a nasty, naked, North Atlantic rock (presumably, Rockall), and hears the Chinaman's spade beginning to knock.

Mr. Golding has wished to write what must inevitably be called a new Robinson Crusoe, but one in which individual solitary man is stripped to a much starker nakedness than was Defoe's desire or intention. This is true in the physical sense: Martin has no purling streams or groves of coconuts, only a gale-lashed half-acre of

mussel, anemone, seaweed, and granite. Without rescue, he cannot survive more than a few days at most. It is also true in the moral sense: Crusoe possessed a personally interested God beneath whose ever-watching eye he moved about his daily tasks of carpentry or fishing, and to whom he turned to pray at night. Death, he trusted, if it were to come, would bring him into his God's presence. But Martin has no creed beyond that of the necessity of self-preservation, and the death he fights is only a Chinese darkness, an ultimate snuffing-out. Stripped of all human comfort or contact, he is reduced to the will-to-survive and to the intelligence that serves that will—the intelligence that is also the only thing that separates him from the lower animal and vegetable life he shares his rock with. The material this intelligence has to work with is fantastically limited and impoverished, a few shells, weeds, and stones; but part of the interest and excitement of *Pincher Martin* lies in watching how ingeniously the castaway deploys these petty resources. Martin is not at all a nice man, but he is a brave and clever one, and if these qualities were sufficient would deserve not to perish.

Tour-de-force is another word difficult to avoid in discussion of this book. Mr. Golding has evidently been fascinated by the magnitude of the technical problems he has set himself: how to keep up suspense, "dynamic," with a cast of one and no change of scenery. I am put in mind, on all sorts of occasions, of the first sentence that reverberated from the hollow confines of *The Unquiet Grave*: "The more books we read, the sooner we perceive that the only function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece." It is a hard saying, perhaps too hard, for it excludes the unmasterly but nevertheless entertaining writer, who has surely fulfilled a function even if in spite of himself; but I think a just one. A criterion at the very highest level, it is obviously only the rare and outstanding writer who deserves the compliment of being judged by

* *Pincher Martin*. By WILLIAM GOLDING. Faber. 15s.