## XLVIII. A Student of the Drama

W. Somerset Maugham

He sent in a neat card of the correct shape and size, deeply bordered in black, upon which under his name was printed Professor of Comparative Modern Literature. He turned out to be a young man, small, with tiny elegant hands, with a larger nose than you see as a rule in the Chinese and gold rimmed spectacles. Though it was a warm day he was dressed, in European clothes, in a suit of heavy tweed. He seemed a trifle shy. He spoke in a high falsetto, as though his voice had never broken, and those shrill notes gave I know not what feeling of unreality to his conversation. He had studied in Geneva and in Paris, Berlin and Vienna, and he expressed himself fluently in English, French, and German.

It appeared that he lectured on the drama and he had lately written, in French, a work on the Chinese theatre. His studies abroad had left him with a surprising enthusiasm for Scribe, and this was the model he proposed for the regeneration of the Chinese drama. It was curious to hear him demand that the drama should be exciting. He was asking for the pièce bien faite, the scène  à faire, the curtain, the unexpected, the dramatic. The Chinese theatre, with its elaborate symbolism, has been what we are always crying for, the theatre of ideas; and apparently it has been perishing of dullness. It is true that ideas do not grow on every gooseberry bush, they need novelty to make them appetising, and when they are stale they stink as badly as stale fish.

But then, remembering the description on the card, I asked my friend what books, English and French, he recommended his students to read in order to familiarise themselves with the current literature of the day. He hesitated a little.

“I really don’t know,” he said at last, “you see, that’s not my branch, I only have to do with drama; but if you’re interested I’ll ask my colleague who lectures on European fiction to call on you.”

“I beg your pardon,” I said.

“Have you read Les Avariés?” he asked. “I think that is the finest play that has been produced in Europe since Scribe.”

“Do you?” I said politely.

“Yes, you see our students are greatly interested in sociological questions.”

It is my misfortune that I am not, and so as deftly as I could I led the conversation to Chinese philosophy which I was desultorily reading. I mentioned Chuang-Tzu. The professor’s jaw fell.

“He lived a very long time ago,” he said, perplexed.

“So did Aristotle,” I murmured pleasantly.

“I have never studied the philosophers,” he said, “but of course we have at our university a professor of Chinese philosophy and if you are interested in that I will ask him to come and call on you.”

It is useless to argue with a pedagogue, as the Spirit of the Ocean (somewhat portentously to my mind) remarked to the Spirit of the River and I resigned myself to discuss the drama. My professor was interested in its technique and indeed was preparing a course of lectures on the subject, which he seemed to think both complicated and abstruse. He flattered me by asking me what were the secrets of the craft.

“I know only two,” I answered. “One is to have common-sense and the other is to stick to the point.”

“Does it require no more than that to write a play?” he inquired with a shade of dismay in his tone.

“You want a certain knack,” I allowed, “but no more than to play billiards.”

“They lecture on the technique of the drama in all the important universities of America,” said he.

“The Americans are an extremely practical people,” I answered. “I believe that Harvard is instituting a chair to instruct grandmothers how to suck eggs.”

“I do not think I quite understand you.”

“If you can’t write a play no one can teach  you and if you can it’s as easy as falling off a log.”

Here his face expressed a lively perplexity, but I think only because he could not make up his mind whether this operation came within the province of the professor of physics or within that of the professor of applied mechanics.

“But if it is so easy to write a play why do dramatists take so long about it?”

“They didn’t, you know. Lope de la Vega and Shakespeare and a hundred others wrote copiously and with ease. Some modern playwrights have been perfectly illiterate men and have found it an almost insuperable difficulty to put two sentences together. A celebrated English dramatist once showed me a manuscript and I saw that he had written the question: will you have sugar in your tea, five times before he could put it in this form. A novelist would starve if he could not on the whole say what he wanted to without any beating about the bush.”

“You would not call Ibsen an illiterate man and yet it is well known that he took two years to write a play.”

“It is obvious that Ibsen found a prodigious difficulty in thinking of a plot. He racked his brain furiously, month after month, and at last in despair used the very same that he had used before.”

“What do you mean?” the professor cried, his voice rising to a shrill scream. “I do not understand you at all.”

“Have you not noticed that Ibsen uses the same plot over and over again? A number of people are living in a closed and stuffy room, then some one comes (from the mountains or from over the sea) and flings the window open; everyone gets a cold in the head and the curtain falls.”

I thought it just possible that the shadow of a smile might lighten for a moment the professor’s grave face, but he knit his brows and gazed for two minutes into space. Then he rose.

“I will peruse the works of Henrik Ibsen once more with that point of view in mind,” he said.

I did not omit before he left to put him the question which one earnest student of the drama always puts another when peradventure they meet. I asked him, namely, what he thought was the future of the theatre. I had an idea that he said, oh hell, but on reflection I believe his exclamation must have been, ô ciel! He sighed, he shook his head, he threw up his elegant hands; he looked the picture of dejection. It was certainly a comfort to find that all thoughtful people considered the drama’s state in China no less desperate than all thoughtful people consider it in England.