

**THE
MAXIMS
OF MARTIN
TRAUBEN=
RITTER**

**METAMBESEN
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*Plucked from the Maxims – though Reflections would be a truer title – of
Martin Traubenritter, 1835-1913, Viennese journalist, music critic and
genial misanthrope. Translated from the second edition,
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1.

There is a quaint English expression – when they scribble some note or memorandum, they say that they're *writing something down*. Writing should always be writing down, all the way down.

2.

Poets are always trying to be rivers, shapely and shallow. Be ocean instead, broad and very deep. And don't forget the salt.

3.

'Don Giovanni' stopped at my table at the Café Sperl where I usually sit, near the front, but with my back to the billiards room. He looked at me with something like pity, or pity mixed (as it in fact usually is) with contempt, and said: "Traubi, old friend, don't you realize that monogamy, having only one wife or one lover, is like trying to write a novel using only one word?" I answered meekly (as I usually do, meekness shortens conversations, a good thing) "Hans," I said, "but what if you actually knew that word, and spoke it, and all the rest is understood?"

4.

Not wine but mind. Wilder, and far more dangerous.

5.

Nietzsche prayed for madness and delirium. I pray for sanity. We mean the same thing.

6.

We look at children playing in a world of things, sensations, perceptions. We try to teach them language. Language estranges them from what is to be known. Do we do it because we envy their total immersion in this actual world? Or do we yearn to give them language so they can talk to us, tell us, remind us of what we lost, forgot? And the cost to them of such messages we receive, it's terrible but scarcely noticed in the busyness of things: the loss of their own immersion.

7.

Language is the real baptism – the enrolment of the newborn into a world made up almost entirely of conventions – religion is not the only religion, alas.

8.

Once you start you can't stop. Procreation works that way. The small planets of the psychic world are snatched into human wombs and soon become children. And we treat them as we were treated. Generation after generation we avenge ourselves on them. This vendetta that never ends.

9.

This gentle clack of billiard balls on the green felt behind me makes me think of the endless rolling and occasional collisions of asteroids, spread out along the ecliptic mostly, or rogues in free space tumbling along rebel orbits of their own. We pass unscathed through their geometries. Or do we? Do those bodies too (as the ancients surmised about the canonical planets) cast influences our way, subtle shifts of love and aversion and indifference, so that by them also our moods (those vagrant beasts who live our lives for us) are shaped?

10.

Long ago, in the very late Middle Ages, an ancestor of mine was a page, a *knecht*, to a noble knight who bore on his shield the image of a cluster of blue grapes. This knight often competed in tourneys, where they naturally called him the Knight of the Grapes, *Traubenritter*. I do not know the family name of that knight, but his nickname became the family name of his servant, my ancestor. So we are the Traubenritters now, and no one knows anymore the noble family we so unintentionally displaced. I think it no disgrace to be a descendant of servants; we came no closer to killing than polishing a cuirass or a sword, or holding the knight's steed's bridle while our master chatted with a pretty girl alas dead now five hundred years.

11.

The sound of people laughing worries me. It wouldn't be so bad if they were laughing at me—then at least I could share the joke. But their laughter makes me wonder what it's covering up. Laughter hides. And I'll never know what they're hiding, and—this is the sad part—because they're busy laughing, they'll never know either.

12.

The big picture is always cheap.

13.

It makes no sense to discuss religion or politics, Religion and politics feed on opinion, controversy, commentaries. Starve the brutes!

14.

Truth depends.

15.

If one part of your dream seems to make sense, ignore it. The nonsensical parts are where the truffle hides. Snout down to get it. Those who don't care for truffles may just lie there and enjoy the dream. Or if it's unpleasant, enjoy waking up. Besides, there are people who are allergic to truth.

16.

This is one of the few cafés in this district of the city that have troubled to install a telephone apparatus. The management is very proud of it. It sits prominently on a pedestal of its own near the arch that leads from the small room to the long room. I have never seen anyone use it; I have never heard it ring. How proud they are of it—it even has a number. It is splendid and still unused. Just like language.

17.

Coming out of the Art History Museum and looking at all the people walking about, I wonder whether Exaltation (of the sort just provided to me by the masterworks within) is not actually the opposite of Beauty, that ever-changing sparkling thing I see all round me in trees and evening light and tramcars passing. And people, people. Aesthetics is a poor excuse for beauty.

18.

Beethoven died before I was born. It is a grief to me that I didn't get to share the city and the world with him even for a year or two. But I was born in this other country called Afterwards.

19.

They shook their heads when I was born and sighed Too late, too late. But as I grew and looked around me and saw what had been and what was now, I found myself crying out Too soon, too soon! I belong to the future.

Where all the words of human speech are headed anyhow. I will go with them. I will be born again. Perhaps as you.

20.

The human senses are very peculiar things. If we sit and listen to the cheerful voices of women chattering, no one even notices that we hear. If we look over and watch them, enjoying their sprightliness and beauty, perhaps, then people notice, we are staring, we are not very civil, it is rude to stare. But not illegal. If however we get up from our table and walk over to theirs, and begin to touch them with our hands, then in an instant commotion, managers shouting, the police appear, we are dragged away to the madhouse, guilty of a crime of the senses. Using the wrong senses to apprehend. What a civilization we have coaxed ourselves to inhabit! The physiologists assure us that the eye is just a highly specialized kind of skin. And our hands must be content with that.

21.

The devil can only tempt us with what is already our own.

22.

When I was five years old, my father lifted me up so I could stand on the corner of a freight car of a train stopped to take on water at some town in Styria—I forget which, and he is dead. He took a picture of me. You can see the neck of the watertower behind me. I understand from that photo that I am still that child, still standing there, still waiting for the train to start moving again, going out into the big world. How brave I am! Maybe it will someday even bring me to where I am.

23.

Music lets me see their faces, Sometimes it lets me see your face.

24.

What was that music of the spheres of which the ancients spoke? We hear it better in our days, the million voices speaking round me in the city.

25.

Hone the edge of it. The edge is where the other lives. The edge is where you kiss.

26.

Nequitia est quae tamen non sinit esse senem, says Ovid. Still, that naughtiness is what keeps you from getting old. In the poem he is addressing the God of Indecency, who is certainly older than all the rest of us.

27.

Dear Ovid. The poet, any poet, makes it up as he goes along. And it turns out to be true.

28.

I close my eyes to see you better.

29.

A couple walks by, idles at the corner, passes on. She is pregnant, visibly but not extremely, she is smiling that little smile they have. I smile at them though they don't stare into the café. I realize that I have as definite, precise, an understanding of the afterlife, of what will happen to me after death, heaven, purifying fire, hell – as that fetus in the womb has of the life it will endure after birth, the streets of Vienna, the taxation schedules, the daily paper he will read every night as he grows old. Christ, the poor thing doesn't even know its name.

30.

They say Mahler has died. I am sad, my mind fills with snatches of his music, some I can identify, some not, it all blends together. Maybe it's not all even his. It feels like him. All the keys and rhythms and phrases mixed together, just like life. *Ever and ever the distances pale blue...* I saw him once, outside, on the street, standing with a shoulder against one of the rough columns in front of the opera house – all by himself, as if he had been posed there for a portrait of The Director of the Opera. But there was no photographer. Nobody else, just Mahler, and me passing by.

31.

And the church bells. They must be maddening for those who hate God or hate religion. I love the bells, love waking to their baritone clamor. They're so certain, so definite. The morning angelus before light, wakes me, and then I pace my breath to the clatter of horses four floors down, wheeling around the little circle where the cabs wait. I think this noise, this waking, these quiet streets that will be busy in two hours, I suspect this is my religion.

32.

Religion. My mother was strange. We went to Mass every Sunday and Day of Obligation, properly dressed, reverent. Yet my mother had, to my father's unending annoyance, insisted on naming me Martin. That's a Protestant name, a Prussian name, he explained over and over, before and after the name was affixed to me forever in the baptismal font of the church Zum Guten Hirten . My mother eventually found in an encyclopedia reference to a Saint Martin who came along later than Luther. She showed the image of this saint to my father and to me. He appeared to be a black African.

33.

Yet from time to time, on autumn afternoons when I was allowed to go shopping with my mother, just the two of us, when we were far from home, walking down an unfamiliar street in the Mariahilf district, or sitting in that old tea shop in the Prater, with me sipping my favorite, the sweet, faintly loathsome elderberry juice, she would look at me in a strange way and say, Remember, we're Jewish. I looked back at her pale, pale face framed with the fur of her huge collar, trying to understand. She never said more than that. Why didn't I ask? I still don't know what she meant. Or what I am.

34.

I do not drink alcohol. Being a teetotaler is by far the safest and easiest, let alone cheapest, way of annoying people. It always makes them uncomfortable, as if I owned or claimed some privilege. Their little discomfort is enough to make me feel a little less uncomfortable—thus leveling out our field of play. They can amuse themselves at my expense, harmlessly. I am amused when they pretend my family name is *Trinkenwasser* [drinkwater].

35.

I never speak ill of wine, never mock drunkards or count the glasses my friends quaff, but I can feel their inner quailing at an imputation I am not in fact delivering. Some friends, more at ease with themselves, tend to pity me for my eccentric misfortune (for, when quizzed as I sometimes am, I pretend that I abstain for medical reasons—today a kidney, tomorrow a liver, blood pressure, whatever comes to mind). This pity again is, as the physicists say, homeostatic—restores the proper balance between them and me. Me who would rather not have to dine in company at all.

36.

Eating with people is a horror we are trained to accept, like war. Eating with others must have begun as a form of truce—everybody eating together so nobody can sneak around and snatch your food. Everybody

eats together, keeps an eye on the other, talks to disarm any silent speculation from which larcenous thought might arise in fellow diners. Eat, talk, drink, eat, talk, drink. Revolting.

37.

The worst conception ever promoted in human history is monotheism.

38.

From monotheism two competing nightmares arose: first religious tyranny (which soon passed into caesarism and government tyranny in general, then atheism. Which is worse? The contempt for rationality in the pope's declaration of his own infallibility, or the cold fleeing contempt for other people's spiritual intimations that is exhibited by the ardent atheist?

39.

Monotheism begat and was begotten by monarchy, and when the people's anger sweeps away the monarch, what's left behind is the faceless monarchy of the state. Remember *ne Bog i ne Tsar*, how right the 'Nebuchadnezzar' brethren were, take away God and you take away the King. We must take it one step further. But how?

40.

Monotheism is the first stage of atheism. All the true and vivid gods and goddesses of natural process and song and awareness are banished, replaced by a vague abstraction given some glorious name. Later that too is easily swept away and we're to be left with a silent, dead world, nothing in it except what can be measured. It is a cold mercantile world, where nothing is loved for what it is in itself, but only for its utility in transaction; not what it is, but what it's worth.

41.

So the true and still living enemy of both monotheism and the state is paganism. We must live as pagans again, or still, if we would be free. And want to live in a living world of otherness and process and unselfishness and all-connectedness. Paganism coheres. The pagan reveres each and every thing for its difference, its properties. The pagan lives in reverence.

42.

The most effective, enduring, ennobling attitude in the world is reverence. Be reverent if you would be wise. Or loved.

43.

Reverence was the last thing I learned. It should have been the first. Now I revere everyone and everything.

44.

Without reverence, you cannot really know an object or animal or process, let alone a human person.

45.

The skin is the quietest mouth.

46.

The skin is the shyest mouth, too, but always tells the truth.

47.

My father's brother, Karl-Friedrich, was a prominent surgeon in Graz. Once I was taken to the operating theater to watch my uncle at his work. The procedure in question involved thoracic surgery of some sort – I recall that the ribs were laid bare. That's all I took in before I looked away. I

felt not so much revulsion or shock as a simple, persuasive feeling, one that has never left me: this is wrong. Not the surgery or the venturing into the unknown interior of the body, but the very notion that there are bones and blood and gristle and pulpy organs inside us. That is wrong. There is nothing inside us. We are only shape and contour, grace and thought. Or the only thing inside us is language.

48.

You can't tell till you sing them if they're songs or not.

49.

Sometimes what I first thought was music turns out to be bees from the hillsides south of town here the rich farmers live. Or little airplanes, cranky birds with four wings, they snarl through the sky, no beaks to satisfy their hunger.

50.

Art is the science of edges. Of conferring a human shape on natural process. Of giving things an unnatural but satisfying ending. Framing one part of a continuous everything. Art contains. Art completes [*vollendet*]. Art ends [*endet*].

51.

All music is continuous climax. It is always ending what came before. Beethoven.

52.

What I learned in the museum: staircases go up and down. But paintings only go in and in, never out. The out is up to us. We have to bring it with us.

53.

In the museum, there is a picture Canaletto painted two hundred years ago of the view from the window near which the painting now hangs. Is this the genius of art or the cunning of curators? It is part of the joy of museums that we can never quite decide.

54.

How to share everything you know, everything you've learned, everything you surmise about reality — and do it without ego. Even anonymous publication doesn't abolish the smug ego satisfaction of I-have-something-to-say. How just to give it away, as it is, from no one, and into no one's hands?

55.

Angelophobia? Fear of messengers. Fear of the morning papers. My day is my own until my eye falls on those huge sinister freshly-printed sheets full of words, big words and little words, big words like battle, war, strike, Persia, Sarajevo, Brazil. Suddenly I am everywhere and nowhere, a frightened child, hands trembling as I try to pick up my coffee.

56.

You have to know just enough to listen.

57.

Life is a quotation. Life is a quotation, and I forget the rest of it.

58.

Who is this man? Does he have no wife, no children, no lamp glowing in the second story window, no cat? He looks at himself in the mirror and thinks: I have all these things. And the lamp in my sitting room window has a lovely pale mauve lampshade on it, it cheers people passing by the in the street. But all this is no answer. Perhaps there is no real question.

59.

Deceit? I laugh when I'm with friends. When I'm alone I'm somber. Somber and happy and good.

60.

Writing performed under a teacher's encouragement is just the purring of a stroked cat.

61.

Listening to music is conversation with the dead.

62.

You can never unhear something once heard. The senses have no forgetting built in.

63.

A concertgoer is a walking graveyard.

64.

Melody = a sequence of tones you have heard before. Somewhere, somehow. Maybe in the future.

65.

Having an enemy is not the terrible thing. The terrible thing is to become an enemy. And the worst of all is to let yourself become your enemy's enemy.

66.

Never talk to people unless they're actually present. The famous *sagesse de l'escalier* is idiot babbling.

67.

It takes a long time for some music to learn to hear us.

68.

A savage from the far islands, visiting one of our cities, would be astonished by the number of doors. Every room, and some more than one. Why, he would ask, why so many doors? Because it is so hard to learn to use a door, we have to practice constantly, as if on a difficult stringed instrument. It is so hard to learn when to enter a house, an office, a room. And when to leave.

69.

Virtue is the power to cause pleasure.

70.

Sometimes I wonder about truth—so many murders are committed finding it, so many more defending it when found.

71.

The only responsibility I acknowledge is this: to make people happy as you encounter them.

72.

I read books in half a dozen languages, but can speak only my native language, and even that with some reluctance. I have busy eyes, but lazy ears.

73.

We cherish memories because memories make us authentic. This really happened, we think, really happened to me. I remember, therefore I am.

74.

We need some other index of our authenticity. Or maybe none at all. Maybe memories are forged evidence of an absent deed.

75.

It is dangerous to get too close to the world of plants. Fruits and vegetables have been dangerous from the beginning – Eve’s sin was not disobeying but eating, eating anything from the plant world. Our ancestors worshipped trees and mistletoe out of fear, not admiration. They knew, and we to our peril have forgotten, that all over the world, and all the time, the plants are *thinking*. And before this thinking we are mute, powerless. Their thinking is the actual weather of time and world. This earth is the planet of plants. Animals are accidents, and we the least of them.

76.

You don’t have to speculate about spirit when you have a pen in your hand. The inkwell gleams in winter sunlight. Do the right thing.

77.

Today I heard Schubert’s sonata for the arpeggione. As I listened, I came to understand that the heart is mostly hurry, and music tries to keep the heart home.

78.

Theology should be a subdivision of Ontology, not the other way round.

79.

Regard any conversation as an interrogation by the magistrate or the police. Everything you say they’ll remember and try to use. Not necessarily against you.

80.

Regard every word you speak or write as public. Language by its nature is inherently social, public, free. What anyone says belongs to everyone, anyone who hears or reads it. There is no private place in language. And perhaps we should be thankful for that.

81.

When I was traveling to see Lake Balaton someone spoke to me in Magyar. I didn't understand a word of what he said. But I knew that he was speaking, and what's more, was speaking to me. And that is enough. Or almost enough.

82.

Reading Hafiz I found I had no idea what he was in love with – girl, boy, angel, the spirit— only that he was in love, so much in love – the way we hear in Mozart *die Liebe, die Liebe!* and nothing more said. What more is there to say?

83.

Omar is Homer with the silly [*blödsinnig*] stories left out.

84.

It dulls the brain and confuses the heart to dwell on counterfactual conditions. There is no answer to 'What would you do if....' because there is no question.

85.

A physician suggests we should write down our dreams every morning. But all of us transcribe our dreams every single day, and call it living.

86.

Ninety percent of human action is nervous response to the divine silence inside us. Every second we flee from the Garden of Eden, past the sleeping angel at the gate.

87.

If you sit quietly long enough you'll look down and notice the unconscious mind busy at its work, shifting among the shadows of images.

88.

It's not a lie if it gives someone pleasure.

89.

No matter how true it is, it's a lie if it gives only you pleasure.

90.

Things are closer to the other side the more they touch you right here.

91.

Grammar *is* second nature.

92.

Sometimes we hear words with our mouths.

93.

Music annoys us towards truth.

94.

Walking is a way of thinking.

95.

We fall in love with uncertainty.

96.

The decisive repels.

97.

In every Catholic church is displayed the image of a bleeding tortured man. Whatever Jesus was or is or isn't, the crucifix shows us a man murdered by the State. Why don't we see?

98.

The sea is history without us.

99.

Hassan of Basra said Touch is toxic. Perhaps after all he was right. After all, or before all? Shall we close the eyes of the skin to the feel of the other? Safest is hearing, we're told, seeing (Dante reminds us) is dangerous, touch is fatal. The skin cannot forget anything, anyone, it has ever 'seen.'

100.

Dreams are flowers on the tree of night.