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### NATIONAL BANALITIES.

(From our London correspondent.)

In a recent number of the *Saturday Review* Mr. Max Beerbohm discusses with something of his accustomed charm the possibilities of pantomime as it might be, after touching on the inanity of pantomime as it is. He dismisses, with commendable leniency, the suggestions of the *Morning Post* for the cultivation in pantomime of the spirit of Aristophanes by means of a combination of talents; he shrewdly scents the political rather than the literary mind behind the suggestion; and, incidentally, he laments the inability of the English public to appreciate satire. It is here, we imagine, that Mr. Beerbohm comes into contact with a very real weakness. For our own part, we should be reluctant to believe that the union of satire with poetry (which is the basis of Mr. Beerbohm's conception of ideal pantomime) is possible only in Mr. G. K. Chesterton or Mr. Hilaire Belloc (who appear to be Mr. Beerbohm's last beacons of hope). Until the contrary has been proved to us beyond a doubt, we shall continue to believe, perhaps foolishly and superfluously, in the possible cosmopolitanism of English temperaments. Now, cosmopolitanism is no less than the mixture of satire and poetry implies: the true humourist sees from without; if you give him in addition feeling, sympathy, pathos, you make him capable of many things not exclusive of ideal pantomime. And he must be cosmopolitan as well as English: cosmopolitanism pure and simple is intellectually alert but emotionally colourless; an English temperament undefiled is *ex hypothesi* pro-English and unspeakably dull. The combination, however, is possible and eminently desirable; but it is possible and desirable in individual cases, not nationally. Such cultivated temperaments are for the exceptional Englishman, and do not at all fit the English public. Mr. Beerbohm complains that the English public is unlike the Athenian public in its intellectual slothfulness or obtuseness; he holds that it would not care for, or at least would not understand, satire on its public men because it does not know them and is not interested in them. This is true, but the case could scarcely be otherwise. The English public is not, like the Athenian democracy, a narrow slave-owning community whose primary occupations are political. In England men are "in the swim" or not "in the swim" according to circumstances largely beyond their control: in Athens one was either a citizen or not a citizen, and the distinction was complete. Modern English patriotism, except at a crisis, is a question of taxes: you pay them, and are patriotic or not according to the degree of your grumbling. Similarly, political life is professional

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life, and lay political enthusiasm may almost invariably be resolved, on analysis, into a claim for the redressing of a grievance. The keynote of Athenian life at its highest, and the arch-hypocrisy of Athenian life at its lowest, was the good of the State: the keynote of English life, politically, socially, and morally is "Mind your own business." It is not a bad motto, but we cannot expect it to produce the Athenian's critical temperament or his political zeal.

We do not grudge Mr. Beerbohm his sense of disappointment in the English public, but we should have thought that to so experienced a critic the poetic stimulus in pantomime would have appeared an equally amusing and impossible proposition. It is credible that the Englishman is the phlegmatic, melancholy, leaden-spirited, absurdly pompous creature whom Continental caricaturists love to picture; the English public as a whole is very different. It is not keen-witted, it is not mirthful, it is not light; but it is profoundly and amazingly and ludicrously sentimental. Women who will break a whisky-bottle on the jaw-bone of their husbands, men who will trample on their wives sit choking with emotion as some contemptibly unreal stage-lover is whining sheer nonsense to the minx he is supposed to love; selfish little counter-skippers, callous phalanxes of shop-girls will swallow tears over some abandoned woman's unavailing sacrifices; and the leisured classes, when they are not flirting, spend two-thirds of their leisure in gleaning sickly sentimentalities from novels that should never have been written. Has Mr. Beerbohm been allowing himself to believe that this sort of emotion contains the seeds of poetic appreciation?

The truth is, as Mr. Beerbohm admits, that pantomime is an essentially English achievement, something for which the English genius is responsible. No doubt Englishmen may be found to detract from its excellences, but pantomime audiences continue undiminished. It is not entirely that the children like it, or that most pantomime audiences are composed of a majority of children: on the contrary, much of the dialogue, most of the

jokes, and some of the spectacles are aimed at older tastes and not untainted natures. Will the audience that accepts this kind of pantomime be induced to accept a satirico-poetic creation designed on more cultivated lines? How can it be induced to accept it? What substitute will be offered for the raucous-voiced comedian who plays old women's parts? What substitute will be offered for the peculiarly carnal attraction of principal boy, principal girl, and chorus? You may, it is true, write a poetic play around some legend or fairy-tale, but you would not adhere to pantomime by adhering to the name. Pantomime, as it exists today, is primarily intended for grown men and women, or at all events for growing young men and young women; and only here and there is a sop of sorts thrown to the children (who, after all, enjoy a play like "Peter Pan" more than any pantomime). In actual pantomime there is no satire and no poetry: introduce them, and you kill the pantomime. The public wants dazzling light and garish colours and loud voices raised in spasmodic harmonies; puns, plentiful and so bad that one need not think about them; a goodly portion of sentimentality; a living, corporeal chorus of flesh and blood; and, above all, no breach of formal morality. Is there not a Censor?

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