

THE FICTION OF W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM:  
FROM POWER TO CRAFTSMANSHIP

By

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Scope and Contents of Thesis:

A study of W. Somerset Maugham as a writer of fiction;  
in particular, an attempt to explain how he lost in power  
and gained in technique in those works that follow  
Of Human Bondage.

# I

## INTRODUCTION

According to A Writer's Notebook,<sup>1</sup> Somerset Maugham has at last decided to write no more. His output has been tremendous. His publications include twenty-one novels, ten volumes of short stories, three of travel and reflection, four of criticism, two which are largely autobiographical, and three anthologies with critical comments. Twenty-four of his plays have been produced and published. Twenty-five of his works have been translated into from one to eight foreign languages. Twelve films have been made from his fiction.<sup>2</sup>

He has been not only prolific but also widely read. For example, C. E. M. Joad<sup>3</sup> declares that Maugham is the only "standard" writer alive; that is, Joad can rely on his readers to have read some at least of Maugham's fiction. In

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<sup>1</sup>W. S. Maugham, A Writer's Notebook, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1949, p. 364.

<sup>2</sup>These figures are from Klaus H. Jonas, A Bibliography of the Writings of W. Somerset Maugham, South Hadley, Mass.: Mount Holyoke College, 1950.

<sup>3</sup>C. E. M. Joad, Guide to Modern Thought, 1948 ed.; London: Pan, 1943, pp. 323-4.

"The Diary of Fred Bason" (Time Magazine, Jan. 1, 1951, pp. 51-52) the Cockney book-seller Bason states that his good friend "Willie" Maugham has always been his best-selling novelist. Maugham is read, moreover, by the discriminating as well as by the masses.

His popularity covers a very considerable period of time. For almost fifty years he has been well known, first as a dramatist and then as a writer of fiction. Many authors have had far greater acclaim - but for a shorter space of time. The present generation has shown an increasing tendency to neglect his contemporaries, Wells, Conrad, Kipling, Bennett, Galsworthy, and D. H. Lawrence; even some authors younger than Maugham, for example, Aldous Huxley, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Dos Passos, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, are not nearly as popular as they once were. Through various literary fads and fluctuating standards, Maugham has gone his own, relatively traditional way, publishing book after book; virtually every one, from Of Human Bondage<sup>1</sup> (1915) to Creatures of Circumstance (1947) is still comparatively popular.

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<sup>1</sup>Jonas (op. cit., pp. 6-7) lists 16 editions of Of Human Bondage in English, two in Swedish and Italian, and one in Danish, French, German, and Spanish. The last English edition is by Wm. Heinemann in 1947, the last foreign one by A. Mondari, Milan, in 1945. Creatures of Circumstance boasts two American, one British and one Danish edition.

But popularity does not necessarily mean a favorable verdict from the discerning. Over the years the critics have generally admired his technique, but disapproved of his attitude. Although a few, like Richard Ward, find in Maugham "pity and tolerance",<sup>1</sup> most follow the lead of Mary Colum, who blames him for his "bland contempt for humanity" and his "acid irony".<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Cowley says Maugham has "no sympathy for his characters" and is "patronizing, smugly and insultingly tolerant towards mankind in general"<sup>3</sup> and Pelham Edgar describes Cakes and Ale as "brilliant but uncomfortable".<sup>4</sup> In one way or another, the critics imply that Maugham's writing is detached, external, lacking in warmth and passion. But all (except Ward) make exception for Of Human Bondage (1915); although it is over-long and ill constructed it has a power, an ability to absorb the reader and move him, that is unique in Maugham's fiction. It is recognized as a modern classic.

The end of this paper is to attempt to account for

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Ward, William Somerset Maugham, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1937.

<sup>2</sup>"A History of a Writer's Mind", Forum, May 1938, p. 278.

<sup>3</sup>"Angry Author's Complaint", The New Republic, August 1934, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup>The Art of the Novel, New York: Macmillan, 1933, p. 276.

the paradox of consistent success and consistent failure in Maugham's fiction. Why, on the one hand, do so many, critical and uncritical alike, continue to read his books? Why, on the other, have the critics denied him greatness? Why is the tone of Of Human Bondage so different from the rest of his work?

Obviously, his craft of fiction, his highly praised technique, also deserves investigation. For it is his skill as a teller of tales that has won and kept his readers.

At various times, in various works, Maugham has set down or implied many of his theories about the writing of fiction. Moreover, his discussions have dealt not only with his own work but with that of a great many other writers. He has made comparisons and contrasts and has rendered verdicts which provide us with a further insight into his own point of view.

The most comprehensive source is The Summing Up (1938). Books and You (1940), Great Novelists and Their Novels (1948), and his critical comments in three anthologies<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Traveller's Library, ed. W. S. Maugham, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1933;  
The Greatest Stories of All Times, ed. W. S. Maugham, Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City, 1943;  
Introduction to Modern English and American Literature, ed. W. S. Maugham, Philadelphia: Blakiston, 1943.

usually restate the ideas of The Summing Up, but occasionally amplify them or provide new ones. The prefaces to some of his novels and volumes of short stories are in the same category. Projections of himself in his fiction, (for example, Philip Carey, Willie Ashenden, "I", and Mr. Maugham) will occasionally be used when their statements seem to be pure Maugham. And finally, the last few pages of A Writer's Notebook (1949) are important in that they contain a final summation on the meaning of life and the relative importance of art in general and his own in particular.

His attitude is mainly dealt with in chapter II, "The Creative Instinct", and chapter VI, "The Meaning of Life and the Purpose of Art". Chapters III, "His Style", IV, "The Raw Materials", and V, "His Stories", are primarily concerned with his craft as a writer of fiction.

## II

### THE CREATIVE INSTINCT

When a man decides to adopt one of the arts as a profession, he runs two great risks: one is that the world will never agree that what he produces is art; the other is that the world may agree, but only after so many years that he will have grown old, perhaps even died, before recognition is accorded him. In both cases his life brings only poverty and humiliation.

There are very few really great men in any profession; but most professions provide a decent living for those who are merely good or fair. Not so the creative arts; either one succeeds and reaches the top or one fails and is nowhere. For the mediocre (which takes in most of mankind) virtually any profession offers more money and security than the arts. Yet every large city has its community of painters, sculptors, composers, and writers. Most of them are unknown and will remain so. If they earn any money at all, it comes from irksome hack work. As a rule they are clever and talented above the average; they would be far better off financially if they were using their brains and talents at teaching or in the



commercial fields.

One wonders why so many persist in such a hazardous calling. The answer seems to be that they cannot do otherwise. Art means more to them than humdrum security. The creative urge is overpowerful. The ordinary outlets for this urge, such as conversation, lovemaking, letters to friends and to the editor, amateurish "dabs and doodles", are not sufficient. Many of these would-be artists are pitiable. Their talent is small and their ideas, so vital to themselves, leave the world unmoved; for, of the many who are called, but few are chosen. Nevertheless, all these people with the artistic impulse must express what is within them whether the world listens or not.

Somerset Maugham is aware of this force which drives men into the arts. In Great Novelists and Their Novels he has selected what he regards as the "ten best novels of the world". Of their authors he says (p. 239):

They all had the creative instinct strongly developed, and they all had a passion for writing. . . . It was not only the business of their lives but a need as exigent as hunger and thirst.

Some of his own characters have such an instinct and passion. Strickland leaves his home and family, loses both his business and his position of respectability, because, as he puts it, "I've got to paint".<sup>1</sup> Philip Carey<sup>2</sup> is for a time caught

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<sup>1</sup>The Moon and Sixpence, 19th printing; New York: Bantam, 1919, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup>Of Human Bondage, Garden City, New York: Sundial, 1915.

by the urge to create; eventually, after many failures, he leaves his artist friends who struggle on, poor and unrecognized, trapped by an instinct far stronger than common sense. In the short story, "The Alien Corn",<sup>1</sup> a Jewish boy, wealthy, handsome, and socially accepted, blows his brains out because he learns that he can never be a first rate pianist.

Maugham has seen the creative instinct at work. The question is, has he got it himself? And if so, to what degree?

The instinct is unquestionably there. He says,

I have never quite got over my astonishment at being a writer; there seems no reason for my having become one except an irresistible inclination, and I do not know why such an inclination should have arisen in me.

In addition to natural inclination, another reason why Maugham took up writing is suggested in his essay on Arnold Bennett.

Everyone knows that Arnold was afflicted with a very bad stammer: it was painful to watch the struggle he had sometimes to get the words out. It was torture to him. Few realized the exhaustion it caused him to speak. What to most men was as easy as breathing to him was a constant strain. . . . Few knew the humiliation it exposed him to, the ridicule it excited in many, the impatience it aroused, the awkwardness of feeling that it made people find him tiresome. . . . It may be that except for the stammer which forced him to introspection Arnold would never have become a writer. [Traveller's Library, p. 580.]

Like Bennett, Maugham, as a young man, must have known

<sup>1</sup>East and West, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1934, pp. 740-778.

<sup>2</sup>W. Somerset Maugham, The Summing Up, First Penguin Edition; New York: Penguin, 1938, p. 9.

the humiliations of a stammer. When he writes of himself he says little about it; but he suggests how wretched this impediment made him in Of Human Bondage where he converts it into Philip's club foot. In the course of his life he has mastered it sufficiently to enable him to talk to people at parties, over the bridge table, and in the ship's lounge. But it is not unlikely that Maugham too began writing partly because his stammer made conversation difficult.

In any case, there had been no artists, poets, or writers among his ancestors. His family had practised law for over a hundred years. His formal education at King's School, Canterbury, had been vaguely pointed at either the Anglican ministry, the civil service, or law. But in his seventeenth year he left King's School to go to Heidelberg, where he studied German and philosophy, and, significantly, did his first bit of creative writing, a play in German called "Schiffbruechig".

In 1892, after a year in Germany, he decided to study medicine and entered St. Thomas's Hospital in London. He graduated in 1898 as a Member of the Royal College of Physicians. He never practised. In his first year as a student he had begun keeping a notebook. The wards and the waiting rooms of the hospital and the slums of London were providing him with material for his first novel, Liza of Lambeth. It was published in 1897, a year before his graduation.

Although it received favorable reviews, it by no means enriched its author. The publisher, Fisher Unwin, gave Maugham no royalties until a very considerable number of copies had been sold. In 1898 the young writer was surprised and disconcerted at receiving only twenty pounds in royalties for a book that was still selling well. Nevertheless, the success of Liza, such as it was, was sufficient to make Maugham decide to forsake the security of doctoring and take up the hazardous profession of writing.

Since that time he has lived by his pen. His first ten years as a writer, he confesses, were lean ones. Seven novels and a volume of short stories were published, but they brought him little money. He thought that plays might be more profitable. His first ones (ca. 1900), written for the Stage Society, were sombre, ending in "gloom, despair, and death".<sup>1</sup> They brought him but small financial return and the recognition of a mere handful of the theatre-going public. Then, in 1907, he submitted a comedy, Lady Frederick, to the Court Theatre. It played for almost a year, and before it closed, three more of his plays were running in large London theatres. Other plays followed, ten in seven years, and the public accepted them with enthusiasm.

One may infer that since then he has never lacked the

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<sup>1</sup>The Summing Up, p. 78.

money to live "in comfort" and gratify his "whims".<sup>1</sup> By 1911 he was in a position to buy a fashionable house in Mayfair. He has spent years of his life abroad, travelling in leisurely comfort. In 1928 he bought an estate, the Villa Mauresque, at St. Jean, Cap Ferrat, in the French Riviera. In 1940 he lost it to the Germans. The loss must have been considerable but it was by no means crippling. For six years he was able to spend the spring and the fall at the Ritz Carlton in New York, and the summer at Edgartown, Martha's Vineyard. Each winter he was the guest of Nelson B. Doubleday at the latter's plantation in South Carolina. His annual award to the Somerset Maugham Prize Trust Fund and a considerable sum donated to the Association of English Writers (four hundred pounds to each recipient) indicate not only a generous interest in letters but also a comfortable income.

It is true that he has written a great many books and that most of them have made money, as he hoped they would. Yet he has written only three, all novels, that he did not wish to write. Two were written in the early part of his career when he was short of money. They were novelizations of plays that he had failed to get produced. He wrote the one because he had to have enough money to carry him through

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<sup>1</sup>  
A Writer's Notebook, p. 359.

the next year and the other to enable him to court a young lady with very expensive tastes. "For long they lay on my conscience like a discreditable action," he recalls. "I would have given much to suppress them."<sup>1</sup> But his qualms were unnecessary, for the public soon forgot them. The third, The Hour Before the Dawn (1942), is scarcely to his discredit. It was a war novel assigned to him by the British Government. It is well constructed and readable and fulfills the requirement in its examples of British pluck and resourcefulness and in its implied warning regarding both German aliens and impractical pacifists. But it did not spring from within him and he found it "a weariness to do".<sup>2</sup> The others, he implies, wrote themselves within him, and he experienced a pleasant feeling of liberation when he had finally set them down on paper. Their style, wit, and humorous irony suggest that he has enjoyed writing them. Moreover, not all of them have been aimed at the popular market. Andalusia, The Gentleman in the Parlour, Don Fernando, Strictly Personal, France at War, and The Summing Up were obviously written primarily for himself and must have been a kind of luxury for himself and his publishers.

He has had, to use his own phrase, "a passion for

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<sup>1</sup>The Summing Up, p. 118.

<sup>2</sup>A Writer's Notebook, p. 355.

writing".<sup>1</sup> In 1938, at the age of sixty-four, he wrote The Summing Up; its title implied that its elderly author believed his writing days were over. They were not. Since then he has produced six novels, two volumes of short stories, and four non-fiction works. In A Writer's Notebook (p. 356) he says goodbye to writing in 1944 and again (p. 364) in 1949. It is extremely unlikely that he has been short of money at least in the last decade or two. Much of his fiction has remained popular long after it was published. Some of his plays, particularly Rain and The Circle, are still being produced. Hollywood must have paid him well for two versions of Rain (1927 and 1932), two of Of Human Bondage (1929 and 1944), two of The Letter (1929 and 1940), The Painted Veil (1934), Ashenden (1938), The Moon and Sixpence (1941), Christmas Holiday (1943), The Hour Before the Dawn (1944), and The Razor's Edge (1946).<sup>2</sup> He has been writing, for some years at least, because he likes to.

He may not yet have finished. According to Time Magazine (Oct. 9, 1950) Maugham said to a group of Manhattan reporters,

If I think of an occasional little piece I will write it. When you have written for a great many years, it's a habit you get into and rather hard to break, and if I don't sit down at my writing table each morning, I don't know exactly what to do with myself.

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<sup>1</sup>The Summing Up, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>Jonas, A Bibliography of Maugham, pp. 83-4.

The creative instinct in Maugham has not, perhaps, been of the highest order. It has seldom overcome a strong practicality which is also part of his nature. He has always "played it safe". Before he committed himself to writing he made certain that he had another career, medicine, to fall back upon. At the beginning of his career he wished to be a dramatist, and he wrote novels because he believed that he had a better chance of being acted if he first made a name for himself in fiction.<sup>1</sup> He has been able to afford such "luxury" works as have been mentioned simply because he has produced book after book with a strong appeal for the popular market. Only once did he take a chance. In 1913 he was a successful playwright whose forte was the comedy of manners; he refused all contracts for future plays for the next two years in order to try his hand at a serious novel which had long been crying out within him to be written.<sup>2</sup> The result was Of Human Bondage, which, ironically enough, proved to be his greatest work and among his most remunerative.

His urge to create, then, has probably been tempered by his desire for popularity and the money that attends it. Looking back at his early struggle for these, he writes (The Summing Up, p. 81) "I had no notion of living on a crust in

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<sup>1</sup> The Summing Up, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 134.



a garret if I could help it. I had found out that money was like a sixth sense without which you could not make much of the other five."

He defends his somewhat businesslike attitude in Great Novelists and Their Novels<sup>1</sup> by letting us infer that he is in company that is not necessarily bad.

Dr. Johnson, who said that no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money, wrote one of the minor masterpieces of English literature to get enough to pay for his mother's funeral. Balzac and Dickens wrote without shame for money.

There is a frankness about Maugham's commercial aims that is disarming. He freely admits what so many blame him for; and that is an effective way of dealing with criticism.

However, there is no reason to object to an author's making money by his fiction so long as the desire to do this does not keep him from saying what is in his heart. It is only when his eye for the market leads him to distort his conception of truth that severe criticism is warranted. Maugham is not guilty on this count. As we shall see in a later chapter, he has observed in life, despite its tremendous variety, certain prevailing tendencies in human nature, certain forces that shape our ends. They are often not pleasant to contemplate, but he sets them down, again and again, for our consideration.

Although blunt outbursts of morality are few, he has

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<sup>1</sup>W. S. Maugham, Great Novelists and Their Novels, Toronto: Winston, 1948, p. 235.

applied a subtle but acid corrective to certain attitudes and certain groups, including the literary critics who could hurt the sale of his books. In his works of fiction he has won and held a huge audience without ever flattering or catering to it. Although he has seldom treated controversial subjects of the day, he has avoided them not out of fear of losing a section of his readers but for reasons which will be given later. We can surely take him at his word when he says at the conclusion of the film Quartet, "I think I have learned a little something about human nature, and I have tried to tell others what I knew as truthfully and honestly as I could."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>W. Somerset Maugham, Quartet, New York: Avon, 1949, p. 189.

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### III

#### HIS STYLE

The critics are generally in agreement that Maugham has an excellent command of language. For example, H. E. Bates writes, "The spare, sere detachment of his prose may . . . be safely offered as a sound foundation course in commercial literary craftsmanship"<sup>1</sup> and Walter O'Hearn says, "Maugham's style is both distinguished and lucid. His meaning is so evident, so strongly and simply expressed, that a mission-trained savage would follow it. Yet I defy any critic to scowl at it".<sup>2</sup>

Such a style was not native to Maugham, he acquired it by tremendous industry over a period of many years. His first notes, which he started making in 1892, show him trying to acquire polish, economy, and wit through the coining of epigrams and paradoxes. During the next decade he studied outstanding prose stylists and tried to write as they did.

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<sup>1</sup>H. E. Bates, The Modern Short Story, Toronto: Thos. Nelson, 1941, p. 141.

<sup>2</sup>"De Senectute", Commonweal, Sept. 16, 1949, 50:554.

The exuberant prose of Pater and Ruskin, then at a height of fashion, first attracted him. He admired florid passages in Oscar Wilde's Salome. He studied precious stones at the British Museum and from them made such jewelled phrases as, "An azure more profound than the rich enamel of an old French jewel", and "In the sun the wet leaves glistened like emeralds, meretricious stones which might fitly deck the pompous depravity of a royal courtesan", and "The manifold colours of the jasper".<sup>1</sup> He read Milton and The Song of Solomon "with laborious zeal"<sup>2</sup> and tried to write down from memory sections of Jeremy Taylor's Holy Dying. As an exercise in this ostentatious prose style he wrote Andalusia.<sup>3</sup> It has little in common with his later writing. Its tone is extravagant and sentimental, its style bombastic and turgid. Sometimes, however, it is simple, direct, and not without charm; then it seems more sincere as though young Maugham forgot "style" and lost himself in a subject that was dear to him.

Such ornamentation soon proved foreign to his nature, however, and he turned next to a very different kind of prose, that of the Augustan Age of English Literature. He felt much

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<sup>1</sup> A Writer's Notebook, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> The Land of the Blessed Virgin: Sketches and Impressions in Andalusia, London: Heinemann, 1905.

more at home in "the natural, discreet, and pointed prose"<sup>1</sup> of Swift. As before, he copied passages and then tried to write them down from memory. He tried altering the words or their order in the sentence and found that he could not even match, much less improve upon, those of Swift. In Addison he saw easy elegance and tried to acquire it. He saw the value of conciseness and of precision. He tried to pare his sentences to the bone, scoring out adjectives and other qualifying epithets and trying to replace them with the exact term.

Before very long he realized that, although his writing was improving, it was also becoming artificial and lacking in vitality. What had been natural and unaffected at the beginning of the Eighteenth Century was no longer so at the beginning of this one. He saw that he must bring his words and phrases up to date. Since then he has not hesitated

to use the common phrases of the day, knowing that their vogue was ephemeral, or slang, though aware that in ten years it might be incomprehensible, if they gave vividness and actuality. If the style has a classical form it can support the discreet use of a phraseology that has only a local and temporary aptness. I would sooner a writer were vulgar than mincing; for life is vulgar, and it is life he seeks. [The Summing Up, p. 31.]

He observed also that a novelist's style must change with his matter for if it remains uniform it gives an impress-

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<sup>1</sup>The Summing Up, p. 18.

ion of artificiality. Thus he must be "colloquial when he reports dialogue, rapid when he narrates action, and restrained or impassioned (according to his idiosyncrasy) when he describes emotion"<sup>1</sup> As Clifton Fadiman observes, "[Maugham] has evolved a style adequate to anything he wishes to say."<sup>2</sup>

As Maugham studied his models and tried to adapt them to himself and his day, he took stock of his own gifts. Within his limitations he saw in himself a power of observation, a clarity of mind, and a lively awareness of the sound of a word. He decided (The Summing Up, p. 21) to aim at lucidity, simplicity, and euphony, in that order of importance.

His first step in acquiring lucidity was to investigate what made for obscurity. He decided that it was sometimes due to negligence; the author had not bothered to learn to think or write clearly. Some writers, on the other hand, were wilfully obscure; they fancied their ideas too profound to be expressed clearly to every reader, or else they wrote for an elect few, desiring to exclude the vulgar public.

His own style has never been either negligent or pretentious. He has always been at pains to make his meaning clear. His sentences and paragraphs are in their proper places, each growing from the preceding one. He uses balance

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<sup>1</sup>W. Somerset Maugham, "On Reading Burke", Cornhill, Winter, 1950-51, 985:37.

<sup>2</sup>Clifton Fadiman, ed., Reading I've Liked, New York: Simon, Schuster, 1941, p. 170.

and antithesis to good effect. He can, for clarity's sake, pile detail upon detail, instance upon instance.

Sometimes he overdoes the detail and wearies the reader. The passage which follows is from The Razor's Edge:<sup>1</sup>

Gray's conversation was composed of clichés. However shopworn, he expressed them with the obvious conviction that he was the first person to think of them. He never went to bed but hit the hay, where he slept the sleep of the just; if it rained it rained to beat the band and to the very end Paris to him was Gay Paree... .

"Gosh it'll be great to get into harness again," he said. "I'm feeling my oats already."

"Is it all settled then?"

"I haven't signed on the dotted line yet, but it's on ice. The fella I'm going in with was a roommate of mine at college, and he's a good scout, and I'm dead sure he wouldn't hand me a lemon. But as soon as we get to New York I'll fly down to Texas to give the outfit the onceover, and you bet I'll keep my eyes peeled for a nigger in the woodpile before I cough up any of Isobel's dough."

"Gray's a very good businessman you know," she said.

"I wasn't raised in a barn," he smiled.

Technically, this passage is a tour de force. It reveals an acute ear and an extraordinary memory for colloquial speech. One admires the fact that the novelist, an elderly Englishman, has at his command so many examples of Mid-Western clichés. But one is overwhelmed at such a concentrated barrage of them; artistically the proportion is

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<sup>1</sup>W. S. Maugham, The Razor's Edge, 22nd edition; New York: Pocket, 1944, p. 340.



bad. Furthermore one's credulity is strained, for no Gray Maturin could have poured out so many hackneyed phrases in so little space; at least he does so nowhere else in the narrative.

On other occasions also, Maugham may appear, to some readers, lucid to the point of exasperation. The reader is invited to examine a four-page character sketch of Lord Mountdrago in the story of that name in The Mixture as Before.<sup>1</sup> The sketch is well done, in a sense; that is, it moves in logical sequence from aspect to aspect of the virtues and then of the vices of Mountdrago; the pattern is clearly evident, and each sentence is phrased with precision and economy. But one is overwhelmed by the number of instances that spring from Maugham's teeming brain. One feels impatient, too, because the author has left too little to inference. The sentences may have a pleasing subtlety in their implications, and the words may be apt in their connotations; but the overall effect is made numbing by too much restatement. This criticism may be merely carping, however; Maugham's sense of proportion is usually good; and even if he is occasionally too clear, he is erring in the right direction.

Along with clarity, Maugham also tried for simplicity.

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<sup>1</sup>W. S. Maugham, The Mixture as Before, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1940, pp. 154-7.

As we have seen, his nature rebelled at "the jewelled phrase and the exotic epithet"<sup>1</sup>. The grand style could be used only with caution. Of Sir Thomas Browne he writes,

In the last chapter of *Hydriotaphia* the matter, which is the destiny of man, wonderfully fits the baroque splendour of the language . . . , but when he describes the finding of his urns in the same splendid manner, the effect (at least to my taste) is less happy. [The Summing Up, p. 23].

The grandiloquent, being spectacular, wins admiration and imitation; the simple is less obvious, does not in fact seem to be a style at all. But the former may be pretentious and inappropriate, whereas the latter, modest and unobtrusive, serves simply as the medium through which the author communicates to his readers. Thus the simplicity of Maugham's prose is not immediately apparent; it is the art that conceals itself.

Only on rare occasions does Maugham attempt the grand style and the purple passage. Sometimes such grandeurs of nature as the sun setting on tropical waters or the dense, menacing jungles of Malay are described in near-poetic language. When he feels that the poetic is called for he apparently is able to produce it. The contemplation of young love can make him lyrical, as when he tells of the sailor and the native girl in "Red", or of young Ashenden's first night with Rosie in Cakes and Ale.

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<sup>1</sup>The Summing Up, p. 17.

But, as Maugham admits, there is little poetry in his nature. He is not ecstatic and sentimental; he is matter-of-fact and rational; he sees things in the clear light of noonday. He usually regards the lyrical as being absurd or comical. Thus, in Cakes and Ale,<sup>1</sup> when Alroy Kear makes sniggering insinuations about the morals of Rosie Driff-ield, Ashenden defends her with poetic extravagance:

"She gave herself as naturally as the sun gives heat or the flowers their perfume. . . . It was absurd to be jealous over her. She was like a clear deep pool in a forest glade into which it's heavenly to plunge, but it is neither less cool nor less crystalline because a tramp and a gypsy and a gamekeeper have plunged into it before you."

But Kear is not touched by this outburst; he is merely amused. He laughs, saying, "It's comic to hear you so lyrical."

Maugham's early exercises in poetic prose have taught him enough to enable him to use it for his own purposes, and these are more often ironic than lyric. In Of Human Bondage Hayward, Cronshaw, and Thorpe Athelney all affect a rhetorical grandeur in their speech; so does Elliot Templeton in The Razor's Edge. The absurd splendour of their speech is in ironic contrast to the futility of their lives.

Along with clarity and simplicity, Maugham has also striven for euphony. He implies that its achievement enjoys

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<sup>1</sup>W. S. Maugham, Cakes and Ale, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1930, pp. 235-6.

only a limited appreciation, since a writer needs a sensitive ear to achieve this effect, and a reader to detect it. For his own part, he has found that,

English is a language of harsh consonants, and skill is needed to avoid the juxtaposition of sounds that offend the hearing. Some authors are insensible to this and will use a word ending with a consonant, or even a pair of them, and put beside it a word beginning with the same one or the same pair (a fast stream); they will use alliteration (always dangerous in prose) and will write words that rhyme (thus producing an unpleasant jingle), without any feeling of discomfort. "On Reading Burke", Cornhill, Winter, 1950-51, 985:32 .

His consideration of euphony also includes the length of words (he tries to avoid joining "a monstrous long adjective to a monstrous long noun"<sup>1</sup>), and their balanced or antithetical arrangement in the sentence (whereby the ear is pleased and the sense aided by the visible pattern<sup>2</sup>). He sees a great danger in euphony, however; the effect may be monotonous, may lull the reader into inattention or drive him to boredom by the soothing melody of its cadences.

Concerning the acquisition of a euphonious style, he concedes, "Of course no one could write at all if he bore these considerations in his conscious mind. The ear," he explains, "does the work."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Summing Up, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup>"On Reading Burke", p. 40.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

His apprenticeship was long and strenuous, but it resulted in a remarkable mastery of the written language. His style is more than lucid, simple, and euphonious. It is flexible; it can in turn be graceful and civilized, blunt and earthy, subtle and allusive, majestic, passionate or detached, or, indeed, whatever the situation calls for. It does not call attention to itself but serves simply as a medium for presenting incidents, scenes, people, and ideas. Of course, natural ability contributed much to the pleasing qualities of his style. He needed taste and discrimination in order to analyse model prose writers and adapt them to his own limitations, his own purposes, and his own personality. He says that he had a knack for writing dialogue; and talent as well as practice went into the making of dramatic conversation which is natural yet lively, never desultory but moving smoothly ahead, apt to the speaker, and characterizing as it goes. Nevertheless, whatever his natural abilities, he worked fantastically hard to improve upon them and acquire others.

The question arises, did he work so much at style that he lost sight of other values? Just what relative importance did he give to style? He answers thus:

One fusses about style. One tries to write better. One takes pains to be simple, clear and succinct. One aims at rhythm and balance. One reads a sentence aloud to see that it sounds well. . . . The fact remains that the four greatest novelists the world has ever known, Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoi and Dostoievsky, wrote their respective languages very indifferently. It proves that if you can

tell stories, create character, devise incidents, and if you have sincerity and passion, it doesn't matter a damn how you write. All the same it's better to write well than ill. [A Writer's Notebook, p. 321].

#### IV

#### THE RAW MATERIALS

The two general sources of knowledge are reading and experience. The writer calls on these to provide him with the background for his stories. Maugham has seen fit to devote a great deal of time and effort towards acquiring such a background.

He has always been a voracious reader. While a student at St. Thomas's Hospital he went systematically through English, French, Italian, and Latin literature. He has since then perused that of Germany, Spain, Russia, Scandinavia, and America. An examination of the contents of his anthologies shows that he is well acquainted with contemporary fiction. He has read the great philosophers from Plato to Russell and Whitehead, and has probed into Yogi thought.

He has naturally put much of this reading to use in his stories. It was the basis for the development of his style. Undoubtedly it broadened his outlook. His studies in philosophy, for example, resulted in the religious and philosophical overtones of such novels as The Painted Veil, The Narrow Corner, and The Razor's Edge. Occasionally his reading

provided him with a story: a play of Calderon, El Medico de su Honra,<sup>1</sup> suggested the short story, "A Point of Honour", in Creatures of Circumstance. The Prince, by Machiavelli, and a play of his, Mandragola, gave Maugham the idea for Then and Now.<sup>2</sup> And, as he frequently states, the stories of de Maupassant served him as models in plotting a tale.

Although occasionally he quotes a line or two from the great writers, his fiction is, nevertheless, by no means as bookish as such a background might have made it. He never inserts scholarly material in order to make an impression, but only if the situation warrants it. He states his feelings on the matter in A Writer's Notebook (p. 274),

The writer should have a distinguished and varied culture, but he probably errs when he puts its elements into his work. It is a sign of naiveté to put into a novel your views on evolution, the sonatas of Beethoven, or Karl Marx's Das Kapital.

Most of his raw material comes not from reading but from his own experience. His years as a medical student gave him background for Liza of Lambeth and Of Human Bondage; they also gave him some of the physician's specialized knowledge of human nature under the strain of illness. His boyhood at Whitstable and at Canterbury school gave him setting and characters for Of Human Bondage, The Explorer, Mrs. Craddock,

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<sup>1</sup>W. S. Maugham, Don Fernando, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1935, p. 175.

<sup>2</sup>A Writer's Notebook, p. 355.



and Cakes and Ale. His service as a secret agent in the Great War resulted in Ashenden, his journeys to the Orient inspired several novels and short stories, his career as a dramatist gave rise to Theatre, and so on.

Few people have travelled as much as he. He went abroad partly because (The Summing Up, p. 63) "[He] thought it was necessary to get the experience without which [he] could not write." As a young man and later as an intelligence agent he spent much time in Western Europe and even journeyed across Russia, from Vladivostock to Moscow. Since 1928 he has owned a villa at Cap Ferrat, on the French Riviera. In 1916, he visited the Hawaiian and Samoan Islands and Tahiti; in 1920, China; in 1921, the Federated Malay States, Indo-China and China; in 1922, Australia, the Malay Archipelago, and Java; in 1923, Malay, Borneo and the Shan States; in 1924, Central and South America; in 1937, India. Each visit lasted about six months. During the last war he spent several years in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

He has travelled, he says (The Summing Up, p. 143) in liners, tramps and schooners, by train, by car, by chair, on horseback and on foot. When he could he travelled in comfort. Nevertheless, in his efforts to get unusual material, he did, at times, suffer discomfort and danger; he narrow-

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<sup>1</sup>  
Jonas (A Bibliography of Maugham, xvi) received this information in a letter from Maugham, dated April 16, 1947.

depicts are likely to find few inaccuracies.

In an article, "Write About What You Know"<sup>1</sup> he stresses the importance of accuracy. Although a writer cannot have first hand knowledge of everything, Maugham asserts, his only safety is to find out everything he can about the subjects he proposes to treat. Otherwise he will fall into ludicrous errors; his readers will not believe him and will drop his work.

Except for one early attempt, The Explorer (1907), which is set in darkest Africa, where Maugham had never been, he has written about what he knows. Thus his material not only has an intrinsic interest but also gives the appearance of truth even to his most fantastic tales.

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<sup>1</sup> Good Housekeeping, Nov. '43, p. 47.

V

HIS STORIES

One of Maugham's greatest gifts is his ability to invent stories. He says (The Summing Up, p. 7) that he has always had more stories in his head than he ever had time to write. They have been suggested to him by the people he has met. "I am almost inclined to say that I could not spend an hour in anyone's company without getting the material to write at least a readable story about him."<sup>1</sup> In 1940, Maugham was one of hundreds of refugees fleeing the Riviera before the approaching German armies; on a dirty, over-crowded vessel moving slowly and uncertainly through dangerous waters, he entertained those who cared to listen with stories he had stored up in his mind but never written. When they were exhausted, he invented more.<sup>2</sup>

Some stories, for example "The Facts of Life", "The Kite", "The Letter", "The Book-Bag", "Footprints in the Jungle", were related to him and he "had only to make them probable, coherent and dramatic". Most, however, were invented, "by

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<sup>1</sup> The Summing Up, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> W. Somerset Maugham, Strictly Personal, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1941, pp. 176-7.

the accident of [his] happening upon persons here and there, who in themselves or from something [he] heard about them suggested a theme that seemed suitable for a story".<sup>1</sup>

The structure of most of his stories is simple and traditional; he begins at the beginning and works through to the end. Sometimes, however, he writes what the Germans call a Rahmengesichte, a story within the frame of another story. The frame of "Honolulu" is there just to make possible a surprise twist at the end of the tale. In "Before the Party", however, the frame serves not only to provide an ironic contrast between the widow and her family but also to tighten up the story, which covers some years.

Framework and flashback play a greater part in his novels than in his short stories. His early ones, Liza of Lambeth, Mrs. Craddock, The Explorer, and Of Human Bondage, follow the natural time sequence from beginning to end. This naturalistic approach, unfortunately, may have the tedium of life itself and the relentlessness of the calendar. With The Moon and Sixpence (1919) Maugham adopts a freer, more flexible method of dealing with time: two biographies of Charles Strickland, vastly different in tone, cause Maugham to look back and recount his own memories of the great artist. Many novelists have used this device; it makes the story seem briefer and more compact. Its readers feel secure, for the author

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<sup>1</sup>East and West, pp. xv-xvi.

has seen the story through to the end, knows where he is going, and will not grope and wander on the way; of course, the readers are entertaining a naive illusion, but the author does not care so long as he is securing their confidence. Maugham uses this device again in Cakes and Ale and The Razor's Edge.

Most of Maugham's other novels since The Moon and Sixpence seem compact because the time of the action is limited. That of both The Painted Veil and The Narrow Corner, for instance, is limited to a few months, that of Christmas Holiday and Up at a Villa to a few days; the necessary background from previous years is gracefully inserted at appropriate places in the narration.

Being of a logical, orderly turn of mind, he dislikes the shapeless, inconclusive fiction that gives just a mood, an atmosphere, or a slice of life. Many of his introductions to stories contain comments on the best exponents of this type, Chekhov and Katherine Mansfield; their stories are contrasted with those of de Maupassant, his favorite model. He believes (Quartet, p. 170) that the reader of a short story wants first of all, anecdote. The stories he likes can be told (Greatest Stories of All Time, p. xviii) "over the dinner table or in the ship's smoking room and [can] hold the attention of the listeners".

He likes a story with a point. It should have a beginning, a middle, and an end; and the end should be the natural

consequence of the beginning. Writing plays further developed his natural bent for pattern. It taught him to build steadily towards the climax he had in mind and then to come rapidly to the close. In East and West he shows that he is aware of the disadvantages of this method (p. xx):

It gives a tightness of effect that is disconcerting. You feel that life does not dovetail into its various parts with such neatness. In life stories straggle, they begin nowhere and tail off without a point . . .

But, he counters, the story teller of the de Maupassant tradition aims at a formal pattern.

He arranges life to suit his purposes. He follows a design in his mind, leaving out this and changing that . . . It may be that life slips through his fingers; then he has failed; it may be that he sometimes seems so artificial that you cannot believe him . . . When he succeeds he has forced you for a time to accept his view of the universe and has given you the pleasure of following the pattern he has drawn on the surface of chaos.

Maugham's stories are complete units, leaving no questions unanswered. As he has foreseen, you may not always believe him. Sometimes he has dared to use material which invites skepticism, for instance, the voodooism in "P & O" and "Honolulu", the parallel dreams in "Lord Mountdrago", the miracles of The Razor's Edge and Catalina. Sometimes the pattern he imposes on his material, a pattern designed towards a surprise twist of irony, seems contrived and incredible. In the main, however, one believes as one reads because the narration moves swiftly, the background is convincing in detail, and the motivation of character is carefully explored.

For greater verisimilitude Maugham often tells his

stories in the first person; readers usually find more life and actuality in a story so related. Moreover they feel themselves on more intimate terms with the author. But sometimes this method imposes a strain on the reader's credulity, for how can the writer report those scenes at which he could not have been present? Maugham overcomes this difficulty by having someone else report them to him. He thus preserves the direct contact of the first-person method and overcomes a problem that attends it.

In Maugham's first-person stories the character "I" is very much like Maugham himself. Some readers object when the author intrudes between them and his story, but Maugham believes the author's personality is all-important in his work. "In the final analysis," he says (Great Novelists and Their Novels, p. 235) "all the author has to give you is himself." Or, as he states elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> "I shall never grow tired of asserting that it is the artist's personality, and that alone, which gives a work of art its enduring significance." It is easy to find projections of Maugham in his fiction; he is "I", he is Ashenden, he is Mr. Maugham, he is Dr. Saunders, George Moon, Waddington, Domingo. Whatever his name, this Maughamlike individual is seldom directly involved in the action; he rather observes from a ringside seat. He is a cultured, somewhat shy man. Though good-natured, he can

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction to The Viking Portable Dorothy Parker, New York: Viking, 1944, p. 17.

become annoyed at people who patronize him or push him about. He is quick to detect hypocrisy and affectation. People call him cynical, but he finds goodness in unexpected places. He is tolerant of the vices of others; he is kindly and helpful and, though reluctant to give advice, can be pressed into doing so.

Maugham claims that there is part of himself not just in these fictional counterparts but in every creature of his invention. An author is not one person, he implies, but many different persons.

If a character is to have life, it must be at least in some degree a representation of its creator. I do not believe that Shakespeare could have begotten Hamlet, Brutus and Iago if he had not been himself Iago, Brutus and Hamlet. [The Mixture as Before, p. vi.]

In The Summing Up (p. 162) he states, "The writer does not feel with, he feels in. It is not sympathy he has, that too often results in sentimentality; he has what the psychologists call empathy". If this is so it would account for Elliot Templeton's being more vivid than Larry Darrel, since Maugham appears closer in spirit to the cultured dilettante than to the saintly hero. It may be argued that Maugham "feels in" many of his liveliest creations. His own rule of conduct he formulated in Of Human Bondage: "Follow your inclinations with due regard to the policeman around the corner". Maugham's best characters are not bound in by the rules of polite society. Some, like Julia and Falterona, manage to live their own lives



and follow their inclinations with such circumspect skill that they remain in public favor; others like Strickland, Rosie, Captain Nichols, Sophie, and Simon were social outcasts but did not care so long as they were able to do what pleased them. Maugham obviously was fascinated by those people who, like himself, took chances and suffered hardships in order to mould their lives to their own liking. He admires their candid appraisal of themselves, their courage and resolution, their vitality. One senses that he created them with particular relish.

His characters are drawn from people he has met, but he insists that the end result is a creation. We can know but little of other people, and that little may be contradictory. The writer, however, takes what he wants from his originals, a few traits, a turn of mind, and therefrom constructs his characters. The end products may not be truthful likenesses; they need only be "plausible harmonies"<sup>1</sup> convenient for his purpose.

Two years ago, a man from Singapore visited Guelph. He described Maugham as an ingrate who had accepted the hospitality of many people in that area and then set them in unflattering roles in his stories. Maugham, however, claims to have done what he could to protect his originals.<sup>2</sup> He has

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<sup>1</sup>The Summing Up, pp. 149-152.

<sup>2</sup>East and West, p. xvii.

moved them to a different place, given them another means of livelihood, or set them in another class. He has not so often been able to change their appearance, for the "physical traits of a man influence his character and contrariwise his character is somewhat expressed in his appearance".<sup>1</sup> The end product may be so different from the original, he has found, that the author is accused of having drawn a certain person when he had in mind someone quite different. Indeed Maugham learned (The Summing Up, p. xvii) that the Resident in a district in Sarawak was much offended by the story, "The Outstation", thinking Maugham had him in mind, whereas the original was actually a British consul, long since dead, whom Maugham had met in Spain. The two men did not have a single trait in common.

It is generally conceded that Maugham is a master story teller. He has treated with considerable success the novel, the long short story (fifty pages), and the short short story (five pages). His stories are credible and they hold your interest. He builds surely and plausibly to the dramatic climax he has in mind. His characters are always well-rounded, believable, and often fascinating in their complexity. His dialogue is lively and dramatic serving both to give character to the speakers and advance the story; yet in the dialogue there is no evidence of strain and artificiality for

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<sup>1</sup>East and West, p. xvii.

it sounds like natural speech, the lines springing inevitably from those that went before.

He can take his readers into the many worlds that he has known, the theatre people of London, the wealthy and aristocratic of the Riviera, the thugs of the Paris Latin Quarter, the criminals of the Guiana penal colonies, the natives of the Orient and the Britishers who rule them; through his eyes we see them act and hear them talk, and we learn things about them that they themselves only half suspect.

The overtones that Maugham provides vary to some degree. Irony and satire are quite frequent; sometimes it seems that like Waddington (The Painted Veil, p. 96) he cannot tell a tragic story or one of heroism without making it faintly absurd. Flippancy sometimes predominates as in "The Verger" and sections of Ashenden. At other times the air is charged (not always convincingly) with naked passion, with the horrible, or the supernatural. And in certain stories religious and philosophic overtones are in evidence.

It may be argued that Maugham has written at three levels. Among his least satisfactory novels may be listed four that deal almost exclusively with illicit love and its frustration; they are Theatre, The Painted Veil, Up at a Villa, and Then and Now. They are neat but trivial and one cares little about the people in them. Catalina is an unsatisfactory curiosity; it breaks in two, the first part being

incredible or irreverent depending on one's faith, the second being skilful, third-class Maugham in the vein of Theatre. Many of his short stories, particularly in East and West, are overly sensational and melodramatic. Most of the rest are cleverly told but trivial.

In a second and considerably higher category may be listed Cakes and Ale, The Moon and Sixpence, The Narrow Corner, Christmas Holiday, and The Razor's Edge. In these Maugham is concerned with more important themes. He treats goodness in Rosie Driffield, Dirk Stroeve, Erik Christessen, and Charlie Mason. He reveals both the self-sacrifice and the ruthlessness of artistic genius in Strickland. He exposes artistic pretentiousness and humbug in both Cakes and Ale and The Moon and Sixpence. In Christmas Holiday is explored the mind of the criminal, of the prostitute, and of the would-be dictator. In The Razor's Edge we meet the first Maugham character who is good without being also rather stupid; in Larry Darrell we see a young man striving consciously for self knowledge and self-realization and achieving a measure of success. These stories are also distinguished by certain characters who are particularly lively, complex, and believable. Such are Rosie, Strickland, Simon Fenimore, Elliot Templeton and Captain Nichols. Certain of his short stories, for example "Rain", "Before the Party", "Jane", "Sanatorium", "The Alien Corn", "Princess September" and "The Nightingale", stand apart from the bulk of his short stories.

Somewhat apart from the rest of his fiction and, according to most critics, above it stands Of Human Bondage. It absorbs one in a way that is almost unique in Maugham's fiction. One cares very much what happens to Philip Carey; one suffers with him. The singular power in this early work and its disappearance from the fiction that follows will be discussed in the section that follows.

## VI

### THE MEANING OF LIFE AND THE PURPOSE OF ART

Maugham's aim as a writer has been to offer intelligent entertainment. He has never tired of pointing out that fiction must, first and last, entertain. It must have what he calls "readability", that quality that keeps one turning the pages despite outside distractions, fatigue, and the lateness of the hour.

This quality is achieved in two ways: one is through an exciting plot whose characters interest you sufficiently to make you care what happens to them; the other, which is rarer and not so certain of success, is through the author's being passionately absorbed in his task. The first way has usually been Maugham's. But he has had some experience with the second. He takes cognizance of it in his essay, "On Arnold Bennett" in Traveller's Library; Bennett and Proust even at their dullest, he decides, are readable because they are obviously completely absorbed in what they are doing. Only once does he admit to having been so absorbed in a task; that task was to write down Of Human Bondage. For more than ten years it had cried out to be written, it had plagued and haunted him. Finally he dropped the writing of plays, and

the fame and money that attended it. He spent two years ridding his memory of all its harrowing experiences by setting them down on paper. For once, he was commanded by his material, and he wrote a book which despite its length and technical weaknesses, became a modern classic. It is his most powerful work, and its power, its absorbing readability, comes not from craft but from passion.

Since then he has been in control of his work; deliberately he has searched for material, filed it in his notebooks, and written it when he so chose. This methodical, rational approach has also yielded readable fiction; but we turn the pages because a shrewd, skilled professional is deftly spinning a yarn which engrosses our curiosity.<sup>1</sup>

Long before Maugham wrote Of Human Bondage he had indicated that he did not wish to be completely absorbed in his work, to be controlled and commanded by it. He wanted not only to write but to live.

I wanted experience for its own sake. . . . I desired to feel the common pains and feel the common pleasures. . . . I saw no reason to subordinate the claims of the sense to the tempting lure of the spirit and I was determined to get whatever fulfilment I could out of social intercourse and human relations, out of food, drink, and fornication, luxury, sport, art, travel, and, as Henry James says, whatever. [The Summing Up, p. 63.]

Therefore he decided, probably about 1904, to make

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<sup>1</sup> According to E. M. Forster, this is the lowest form of appreciation. The Art of the Novel, Eighth impression; London: Arnold, 1927, pp. 40-62.

a pattern of his life. If he were to live fully, he would have to make some changes in himself. His health was poor, he stammered, he had no facility for games, he was in turn shy and arrogant. Moreover he was poor. He felt, in sum, insecure and insignificant.

His greatest need was for security and social prominence. Liza of Lambeth, Mrs. Craddock, and some gloomy plays had gained him but the condescending attention of a few critics and the Stage Society. He wanted to reach the great public. He discovered that he had wit and a flair for dialogue and he began to produce flippant comedies. The public took to them, and in 1907 four were running concurrently in London theatres. He bought a fashionable house in Mayfair. Meanwhile he was conquering his stammer, forcing himself to mingle with people, and learning to be tolerant, poised and agreeable. He was well on the way towards realizing his pattern of living.

But the changes which he was making in his nature had not gone deep enough. In 1913, at a peak in his career as a dramatist, he found himself more and more haunted by the "teeming memories" of his youth.

It all came back to me so pressingly, in my sleep, on my walks, when I was rehearsing plays, when I was at a party; it became such a burden to me that I made up my mind that I could only regain my peace by writing it all down in the form of a novel. The Summing Up, p. 134.

Refusing contracts for more plays, secluding himself, he set to work. Into the more than six hundred pages of his novel he poured his emotions with a warmth and candour that



he has never since approached. He comments (The Summing Up, p. 135),

[Of Human Bondage] did for me what I wanted . . . I found myself free forever from those pains and unhappy reflections. I put into it everything I then knew and having at last finished it prepared to make a fresh start.

The implication is that the experience of writing it was not thrilling but harrowing, and that never again would he permit himself to be so controlled by his material. He looked upon his need to write that novel as a weakness that must be purged from his nature if he were ever to reach his goal. But for that one lapse he has lived out the pattern he set himself. The changes that he proposed for his nature he has carried out so well that his later references to Of Human Bondage show that he is puzzled by its continued popularity. He seems unaware of its power and is confident (A Writer's Notebook, p. 354) that its technical deficiencies will soon cause it to drop out of sight. Since that book, warmth and intimacy have largely been absent from his work, or at least replaced by the synthetic intimacy of first person narration. Since then, his work has about it what Malcolm Cowley calls "coldness and externality".<sup>1</sup>

Maugham's answer to this charge is that his sympathies are limited. He pleads that he is not a social person, that he cannot get drunk and feel a great love for his fellow men,

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<sup>1</sup>"The Maugham Enigma", The New Republic, March 30, 1938, 94:228.

that the hysteria of the world repels him, and that he never feels more aloof than when he is in a crowd which has surrendered to a violent feeling of mirth or sorrow. He concludes (The Summing Up, p. 55):

And so, never having felt some of the fundamental emotions of normal men, it is impossible that my work should have the intimacy, the broad human touch and the animal serenity which the greatest writers alone can give.

But his sympathies were once broad enough for him to write a powerful novel in which the hero experiences "the fundamental emotions of normal men". The reader identifies himself with Philip Carey; shares his anger, frustration, and humiliation, his compassion for the pathetic crew of would-be artists; basks in the warmth of the Athelney family; indeed virtually grows up again as Philip grows up on the pages before him.

Possibly those changes that Maugham effected in his nature hardened his heart, disciplined him too severely. But behind those changes, behind that patterning of his life, there was a deeper reason than just to serve the claims of the flesh as well as those of the spirit. In 1938, he was to write:

I have sought to make a pattern of my life and from an early age tried to find out what were the elements I had to deal with . . . I wanted to make up my mind whether I had to consider only this life or a life to come. I wanted to know whether I was a free agent. . . . I wanted to know whether life had any meaning or whether it was I that must strive to give it one. [The Summing Up, p. 173.]

In Of Human Bondage he recorded his findings to date. The poet Cronshaw, before he died, had left Philip a grimy fragment of a Persian rug which, he said, contained the meaning of life. Some time later, as Philip pondered over the blind workings of fate in the lives of Cronshaw, Lawson, and other friends, the message in the rug became clear to him.

Life had no meaning . . . Life was insignificant and death without consequence . . . As the weaver elaborated his pattern for no end but the pleasure of his aesthetic sense, so might a man live his life, . . . that it made a pattern. There was as little need to do this as use. It was merely something he did for his own pleasure. [pp. 558-60.]

Maugham's point of view has remained essentially the same ever since. He has read widely and diligently in Western and Oriental philosophers, but none of their answers have satisfied him. In the final pages of The Summing Up and again in those of A Writer's Notebook, life is still without meaning. Goodness, which he admires in the former work, and elemental, instinctive courage, which he praises in the latter, are but extenuations of the meaningless suffering of man. How then is a man to live his life? The answer is given (The Summing Up, p. 219) by the Spanish mystic, Fray Luis de Leon, "Each should act in conformity with his nature and his business". Maugham enlarges upon this statement in a letter to Jonas (A Bibliography of Maugham, p. xvii): "Our business is right living. The problem of right living is complicated by the fact that there is no one code for everybody. One's job is to find out what is right

for oneself and to follow it." The pattern of his life has stemmed from, first, skepticism and finally, despair; it has moreover no significance to any one but Maugham himself.

Can this pessimism find assuagement in art? Maugham says no. Certainly not in art for its own sake; such art he calls (A Writer's Notebook, p. 366), "the opium of the intelligentsia". One can find this point of view much earlier in his fiction. Cronshaw says (Of Human Bondage, p. 201),

Art is a luxury. Men attach importance only to self-preservation and the propagation of their species. It is only when these instincts are satisfied that they consent to occupy themselves with the entertainment which is provided for them by writers, painters and poets.

And in Christmas Holiday (p. 26) Simon says to Charlie,

"Art's a lot of damned rot anyway. . . . Art! It's an amusing diversion for the idle rich."

"I should have thought . . .", [began Charlie].

"I know what you would have thought; you would have thought it gave a beauty, a meaning to existence; you would have thought it was a solace to the weary and heavy-laden, and an inspiration to a nobler, fuller life. Balls! . . . The people want dope, and it may be that art is the best form in which we can give it to them."

Of course Cronshaw and Simon are speaking in character, but their declarations parallel two of Maugham's essays in A Writer's Notebook.<sup>1</sup> Art, he maintains, is dope unless it leads to right action.

But right action is variable, and each must find out

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<sup>1</sup>A Writer's Notebook, pp. 260 and 365-6.

what is right for himself.

Thus Maugham has decided that his concept of right living, even if valid for himself, is not necessarily so for others. Therefore he is never didactic, never says "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not". He rather presents in fiction what he has seen of life. He is tolerant but not completely objective. We know as we read which people and which actions he approves of. There is frequently a perverseness about the stand he takes. He puts down the mighty from their seats and exalts those of low degree. He likes those who are generous and without pretense. He makes us rather fond of such promiscuous women as Rosie Driffield and Suzanne Rouvriier; whereas Neil McAdam, who refuses to make love to his best friend's wife, emerges as an inconsiderate prig. He admires those who have the courage of their convictions and the resolution to put them to practice. In "Before the Party", our sympathies are with a woman who murdered her husband as he lay in a drunken stupor. In "The Fall of Edward Barnard", our sympathies are not only with Edward, who forsook the prospect of a wealthy business and marriage with a beautiful socialite and who became a dry-goods clerk on a South Sea island and lived with a native girl; we also rather like his father-in-law, who lives there comfortably and voluptuously on stolen money. His characters have the complexities and inconsistencies of real people; in giving us the inside story about them, with all its extenuating details, he may teach us not to be over-

hasty either to praise or to blame.

He takes a stand, then, but intimates that we can take it or leave it, for it is likely of no consequence. He gives us what he has learned, on the chance that it may interest us. But he does not claim to have answers to our problems; these we must each work out for ourselves.

He is suspicious of propaganda in fiction. He looks with disfavour on novelists who, setting themselves up as politicians, sociologists, economists, scientists, and philosophers, attempt to solve current problems. In the first place, he says, their views are likely to be unsound since their knowledge in these fields can be but superficial. In the second place contemporary problems are also apt to be temporary ones, and books about them soon become unreadable.

It is, of course, more and more difficult for us to concern ourselves with the "lost generation" of Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway or with the "Okies" of Steinbeck. But, Maugham to the contrary, these writers had a knowledge of their subjects which was by no means superficial; and furthermore a book can be significant even if its interest wanes after a decade or two. If such a book is well done its short life is a brilliant one. Huxley's Brave New World and Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four may not be given much attention in the future, but their impact at the time of publication was tremendous. Even Maugham wrote one such book. Christmas Holiday is,

in part, concerned with a would-be dictator and contains a lucid exposition of the sinister motives behind totalitarianism. But this aspect of the story is overshadowed by a tale of lust, crime, murder, and fantastic expiation. Maugham is first and foremost a story teller.

If didacticism and propaganda should not be in fiction, when then are proper themes? Maugham answers (Great Novelists and Their Novels, p. 237), "They are the subjects of enduring interest to human beings, God, love and hate, death, money, ambition, envy, pride, good and evil. They deal with the passions and instincts and desires common to us all."

These are the subjects that his "Great Novelists" have treated; they are his subjects too. But how important are they to this man who has found his fellow men helpless before the force of circumstance, who has found life itself without meaning?

A novelist must preserve a childlike belief in the importance of things which common sense considers of no consequence. He must never entirely grow up. . . . It needs a peculiar turn of mind in a man of fifty to treat with great seriousness the passion of Edwin for Angelina. The novelist is dead in the man who has become aware of the triviality of human affairs. [A Writer's Notebook, p. 259.]

Thus Maugham has been faced with a dilemma: he has had to write about matters "of enduring interest to human beings", but "common sense" has taught him that such matters are "of no great consequence". Because of his creative instinct, he has wanted to write, has tried to keep the novel-

ist in him alive. His solution to the problem must have been to feign, or at least force within himself, an interest in "human affairs" despite their "triviality". Passion died of pessimism, and technical competence had to step into the breach. Therefore critics have called him a master craftsman but have qualified this praise with such adjectives as flip-pant, cynical, superficial, cold, and incompassionate.

It is now apparent that Maugham had found no meaning in life before he wrote Of Human Bondage. Why then has that book not the same deficiencies as his later work? The answer must be that it was his first attempt to arrange all that he had learned. The solutions he had evolved were momentous ones for him, were to govern his whole life. He had passed through agonies of spirit, and his first telling of them was naturally vivid and moving.

But when his pen had liberated his spirit of its agonies, he calmed down. Accepting his new, hopeless vision of life, he made the best of it, quietly, rationally, methodically. Warmth and enthusiasm were no longer possible. Again and again in his fiction is implied the same basic despair and negation; but the implication has lost its first exulting passion; it has become just matter of fact and ironically humorous to Maugham, and its reiteration stale and wearisome to the reader. As a Time review of A Writer's Notebook unkindly puts it ("Here and There", Oct. 31, 1949, 54:62), "It



is wearying, forty years later, to hear the same theme strummed on the same wet banjo".

## VII

### CONCLUSION

Within its limitations, this paper has endeavoured firstly to examine Maugham's craft of fiction. It has found much to admire. Maugham has described himself (The Summing Up, p. 57) as a "made writer". He has worked to improve his craft all his life. He has taught himself to say what he wishes to, in whatever way he chooses. In this sense, he has learned not one style but several, and his manner fits his matter, to use his own standard (Great Novelists and Their Novels, p. 7), "As a well-cut shoe fits a shapely foot". His simplicity is that of art that conceals itself. His stories are planned with care and told in a leisurely, conversational manner which almost conceals their splendid economy. Harrison Smith's tribute is that Maugham's is "certainly the most polished and superb craftsmanship of any living writer".<sup>1</sup> But he is more than a "made writer". He was born with a creative urge which has always been strong within him. Moreover no infinite capacity for taking pains could provide an aspiring writer with the stories that have

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<sup>1</sup>"Mysterious Mr. Maugham", Saturday Review of Literature, July 26, 1947, 30:11.

always been running through Maugham's head, or with his gift for natural yet revealing dialogue, or with his wry, ironic humour.

The other task undertaken here has been, in essence, to discover why Maugham has written nothing else as moving as Of Human Bondage. His talents have remained with him throughout his long literary career, and his craftsmanship has steadily improved. Nevertheless, apart from his one great work, discerning readers have accepted him only with considerable reservation.

Although he has been one of the highest paid writers alive, it is absurd to say that he has been just a top-drawer hack grinding out stories for the money they will bring in. Nor has he sacrificed integrity to gain popularity. He has written honestly, recording truth as he has seen it. His verdicts happen to have offended some people, but pleased, or at least interested, a great many others.

It is not true to say that Maugham lost his compassion for his fellow men, for how was he able to create living characters if he did not feel with and feel in them? He has given both advice and money to many a young writer. He has many friends. Thomas Costain describes him as "very kind and amiable".

It is not accurate to say that Maugham was so absorbed in craftsmanship that he lost sight of other values. He

kept them in sight and continued to appraise them and seek their realization. It is scarcely to his discredit that he wrote them down with more and more skill.

He lost his power to move his readers, not precisely when he lost all faith in the meaning of life, but when he reconciled himself to his loss. "The great flaw at the centre of Maugham's work", says Lionel Cochan in the Contemporary Review (Feb., 1950, p. 95), "is his acceptance of life as he saw it". In Of Human Bondage, he wrote down with passion and sincerity his unhappy vision of men and the hopeless, deluded lives they led. It never changed, and he wrote it again and again. But it had lost its impact for him; it no longer tortured his spirit nor did its liberating aspect retain its first flush of exaltation. It became matter of fact, and Maugham developed an infuriating, contemptuous pity for those poor deluded fools who could not see it. It also became a bit stale, no matter with what skill, with what subtle irony, it was implied.

The novelist in Maugham grew old while he was still comparatively young. In order to discover the meaning of life he had made a pattern of his own. When satisfied that life was meaningless, he directed the pattern towards "right living" for himself. Such a plan included writing, for creation was both a pleasure and a necessity to his nature; but literary output was only a part of living and had to be controlled and kept in its place. Even great art, his reflections

had revealed to him, was of little importance, and his own, he decided, was less than great. He respected it, as it was his profession, but had little faith in its importance.

He has been a teller of tales because stories were in his head and he enjoyed telling them. He has taken the trouble to learn his craft thoroughly. He has, by his own admission, never claimed to be more than an entertainer. But if readers want more than just diversion, he has given them himself, and the pattern he has made of his life, to take or to leave. During his long and varied life, he believes he has "learned a little something about human nature". It is there for the readers' inspection. His ideas, disconcerting or unacceptable though they may be, are honest and intelligent. Modest and civilized, he does not thrust them at you; they are but part of his general plan to interest and entertain you in your hours of leisure. You may ignore them if you will and yet be a reasonably contented reader. For in Maugham's bill of fare the story is always the main dish, and it is always well prepared.

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