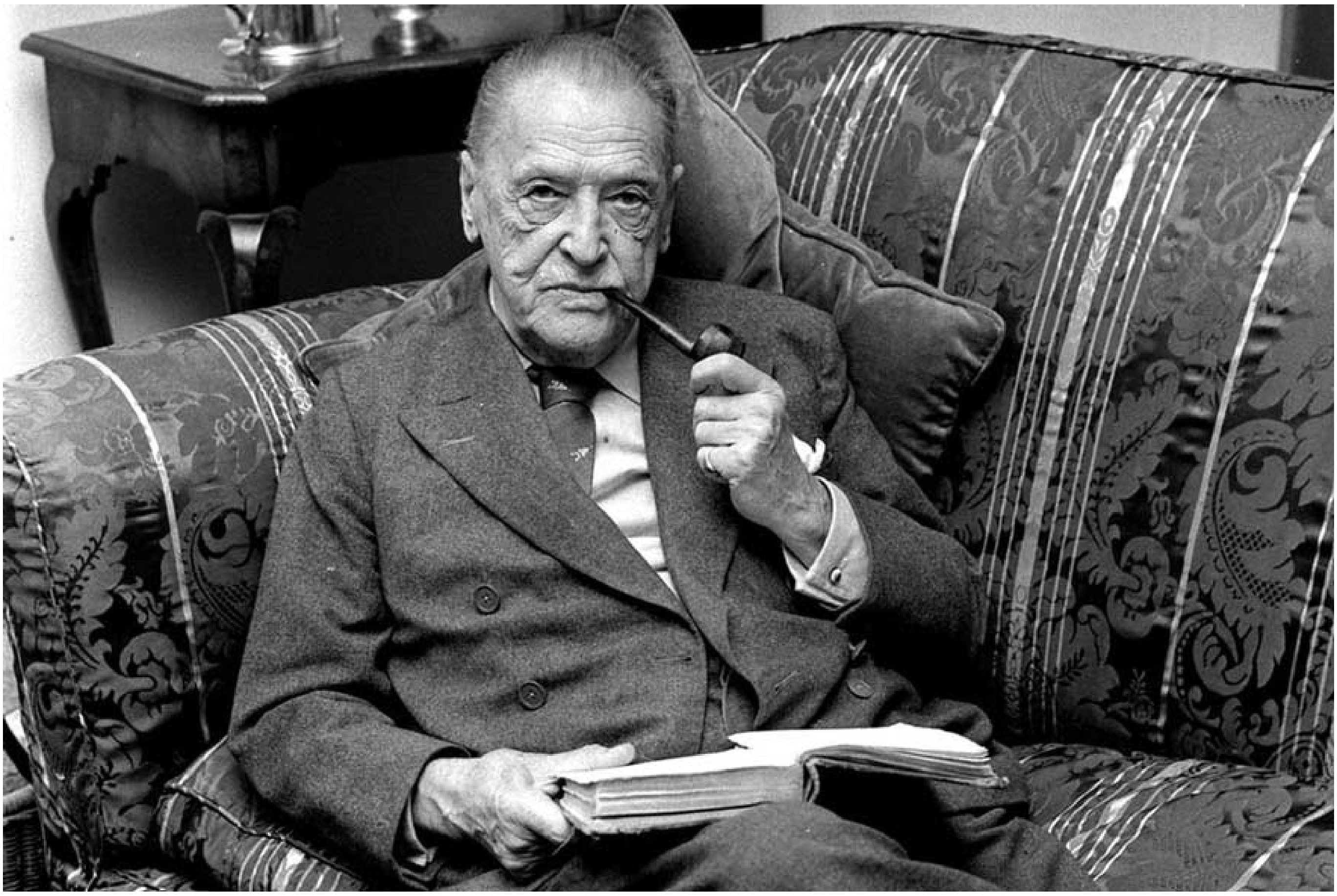
W. Somerset Maugham: the pleasures of a master

On Maugham's controversy.



by Theodore Dalrymple

A few months ago I went to dinner with an old friend, a retired professor of great distinction who suffered throughout his career from the vituperation of his academic colleagues who took a view of their chosen subject almost diametrically opposed to his own. Now that he has been proved right, and they have been proved wrong, they denigrate his work as having been nothing more than a statement of the obvious. It isn't only totalitarian dictators, it seems, who rewrite history.

My friend was reading when I arrived, but made guilty haste to put away the book as I entered the room. He could scarcely have been more embarrassed had he been caught perusing an album of pornographic postcards. Under the promise of total secrecy, he confessed that he had been reading the short stories of W. Somerset Maugham. In fact, I had already guessed as much: an habitué of secondhand bookshops, I can now judge a book by its cover pretty well and I recognized the volume from afar.

Secrecy was of course essential because admitting to an admiration for Maugham is to an intellectual what voyaging overseas once was to an orthodox Brahmin: it leads automatically to a loss of caste. If his academic enemies ever discovered that he had been reading the Master, let alone with enjoyment and appreciation, they would have additional reason to discount his life’s work.

I have met this extreme disdain for Maugham many times. For example, a second cousin of mine: during the Fifties and early Sixties she lived on the fringes of literary Paris, and was briefly the mistress of Richard Wright. She believed that Wright had been poisoned by the CIA, because he died suddenly after having been treated in the American Hospital in Paris for long undiagnosed amoebic dysentery. She was not at all pleased when I told her that the drug used for the treatment of amoebic dysentery in those days, emetine hydrochloride, was notoriously cardiotoxic. She wanted her former lover to have been murdered for political reasons.

I once mentioned to her en passant that I rather admired Maugham and would be happy if I wrote as well as he. I might as well have expressed a preference for Offenbach to Bach. I had said something that was, quite simply, inadmissible in polite company. I hadn’t claimed that Maugham was the greatest writer of the twentieth century, or that he was the superior of Thomas Mann, or anything remotely like that. I had merely said that I thought he was good: and that was bad. It led to a curling of the lip, and the implication that I was neither very bright nor possessed of sound judgment. The subject, being closed, was changed.

I don’t really understand why Maugham should be so vehemently despised. It is true of course that his plays now seem so stilted that they can hardly be staged, and that many of his novels are poor stuff. But as he himself remarked, only a mediocre writer is always at his best. And his best writing—the short stories, a few of the novels, his philosophical memoir, *The Summing Up*, which defies easy classification—will continue to find readers for at least a century or two. That is, after all, more than can be said for 999 out of 1000 people who take to the pen.

Even if he were a despicably bad writer, why should he evoke such contumely? No other writer known to me does so in quite the same fashion. A bad writer is best forgotten rather than hated or despised. If I had said to my cousin that I admired, say, E. Phillips Oppenheim, an infinitely less estimable writer than Maugham, her reaction would have been far weaker and probably non-existent. It is not even as if Maugham’s work had a baleful practical effect upon the world: as if, for example, Pol Pot or Idi Amin had been directly inspired by it or by the ideas it contained.

I do not find Maugham to have been so very negligible. Perhaps this is because something he wrote had a lasting effect on me: for certain words in *The Summing Up* burned themselves so deeply into my mind that they are with me always as I write: “I have never had much patience,” said Maugham,

> with the writers who claim from the reader an effort to understand their meaning. You have only to go to the great philosophers to see that it is possible to express with lucidity the most subtle reflections. . . . There are two sorts of obscurity you find in writers. One is due to negligence and the other to wilfulness. People often write obscurely because they have never taken the trouble to

> write clearly. . . . Another cause of obscurity is that the writer is himself not quite sure of his meaning. He has a vague impression of what he wants to say, but has not, either from a lack of mental power or from laziness, exactly formulated it in his mind and it is natural enough that he should not find a precise expression for a confused idea. . . . Some writers who do not think clearly are inclined to suppose that their thoughts have a significance greater than at first sight appears. . . . It is very easy to persuade oneself that a phrase that one does not quite understand may mean a great deal more than one realizes.

No doubt this insistence on clarity accounts in part for the flatness of his prose that becomes apparent if one reads too much of it at a time. Yet clarity is not intrinsically incompatible with the highest flights of poetry, and remains an intellectual virtue (the philosopher Karl Popper thought it a moral duty). But the demand for clarity makes intellectuals uneasy, for it renders originality so much more difficult to achieve. Clarity thus comes to be identified with superficiality and obscurity with profundity.

Superficiality is, of course, one of the chief charges laid against Maugham, the others being cynicism, misanthropy, and snobbery. I think people have tended to confuse his character in real life—or what was reportedly his character in real life—with what he actually wrote. If he was a sour, prune-faced man who was unreasonably outraged by the smallest breach of etiquette, and who was excessively worldly into the bargain, it must infallibly follow that his writing partook of the same or cognate qualities. But this is staggeringly wide of the mark.

I realized just how wide when I worked as a doctor in the Gilbert Islands. There I re-read his South Sea stories with the added interest of being present on the set, as it were. I was extremely proud of having deduced, on internal evidence alone, that one his most famous stories, “Rain,” had an important connexion with the very islands on which I worked. By the slight geographical information that Maugham gave, I deduced that Davidson, the medical missionary and one of the principal characters in the story, must have worked in the Gilbert Islands. But my brilliant literary deduction was quite unnecessary and superfluous, as I shall later relate.

The story, which takes place in 1916, concerns a group of passengers en route from Honolulu to Apia. An epidemic of measles breaks out and they are forced to stay for a couple of weeks in Pago Pago in American Samoa. The principal characters are Mr. and Mrs. Davidson, Dr. and Mrs. McPhail, and Sadie Thompson.

Davidson is a stern New England evangelical puritan with an unbending sense of duty and an unyielding horror of what he believes to be sin. His wife is of like mind. Dr. McPhail is a Scottish doctor travelling to the South Seas to recover from war wounds. Together with his wife, he acts as a kind of Greek chorus. The McPhails are weak but tolerant people, of no fixed convictions. Sadie Thompson is a prostitute fleeing from the law in Honolulu. She is brash, vulgar, and entirely sensual.

These disparate characters are forced together in a boarding house in Pago Pago, where Sadie Thompson immediately sets up shop, with loud music, parties, and gentlemen visitors. Davidson believes it is his duty not only to suppress vice wherever it may manifest itself but also to save Sadie Thompson’s soul. An epic struggle between them ensues. Davidson enlists the aid of the governor of the island, who knows that the missionaries are well-connected in Washington. Just as it appears that Davidson has won, he is found on the beach with his throat cut. Sadie Thompson has seduced him and he has killed himself.

I deduced that Davidson was a missionary in the Gilbert Islands from the information given in the story: the Davidsons’ islands were of low coral, widely separated, ten days’ journey north of Samoa. The Gilberts were the only islands that fitted this description, but my excitement at so momentous a deduction was hardly justified: for in *A Writer’s Notebook* (published in the year of my birth) which consists of Maugham’s edited jottings from 1892 to 1949, it was openly stated that the missionary upon whom Maugham based Davidson worked in the Gilberts.

It is well known, of course, that Maugham used real characters in his stories whom he did so little to disguise that the rubber-planters of Malaya threatened violence if he ever returned to the peninsula. Still, it comes as a shock to realize how much of “Rain” is reportage rather than fiction. In his notebooks written at the time of his journey to the South Seas, Maugham recorded his impression of the missionary’s wife:

> [She] was a little woman with her hair very elaborately done, with prominent blue eyes behind gold-rimmed pince-nez; her face was long, like a sheep’s, but she gave no impression of foolishness, rather of extreme alertness. She had the quick movements of a bird. The most noticeable thing about her was her voice, high, metallic and without inflection; it fell on the ear with a hard monotony, irritating the nerves like the clamour of a pneumatic drill.

This admirably economical character sketch was reproduced, with a very few minor changes, in the story itself; and the same is true of the sketch of the missionary himself and MacPhail the doctor. Moreover, Maugham did not even bother to change the name of his prostitute in his story. There was a prostitute on board the ship on which he himself sailed, and her name was Miss Thompson.

By ferreting around a little in the archives of the Gilbert Islands, I discovered a few more respects in which Maugham had cleaved closely to the most literal truth. Davidson and his wife explain their power to impose New England virtue on the Gilbert Islanders. Davidson controls membership of the church, and is able to expel backsliders. Dr. McPhail asks whether they mind being expelled, to which Davidson replies that it means virtual starvation for them, since they are unable thereafter to sell their copra or take part in fishing. “Tell him about Fred Ohlson,” interposes Mrs. Davidson.

Davidson describes how a Danish trader of that name had sold whisky in the islands, drunk a lot, and consorted with native women for years. Davidson gave him the chance to mend his ways, but he laughed at him. In two years, however, he was a broken man, reduced to begging Davidson for a ticket to Sydney. Mrs. Davidson described how he had changed physically in that period, from a big powerful man to an aged wreck. I discovered in the archives that there had been a Danish trader in the Gilbert Islands who departed suddenly after many years, and his name was Fred Ohlsen.

Mrs. Davidson describes the Davidson’s horror, when they first arrived in the islands, at the natives’ complete lack of a sense of their own sinfulness.

> At the beginning of our stay Mr. Davidson said in one of his reports: the inhabitants of these islands will never be thoroughly Christianised till every boy of more than ten years is made to wear a pair of trousers.

As I was leafing through some missionary reports of the 1890s, I came across the following statement: “The natives will never be Christianised until they are made to wear trousers.”

Mrs. Davidson is likewise horrified by the islander’s addiction to dancing. She says

> But the native dancing . . . is not only immoral in itself, but it distinctly leads to immorality. However, I’m thankful to God that we stamped it out, and I don’t think I’m wrong in saying that no one has danced in our district

> for eight years.

Caricature? The missionary reports of the time when the Davidsons arrived in the islands are full of eloquent denunciations of the native dancing. “We have nearly succeeded in putting it down,” said the report. “There had, unfortunately, been a recrudescence in one village.” And another report had these memorable words: “There has been no dancing in our district for eight years.”

There is more to a story than verisimilitude, of course: and “Rain” remains a story, not a newspaper article. Some people have objected that Maugham’s tales of exotic locations are too well-made, that they all have too neat an ending. The defense he would have made for himself (correctly, in my view) would have been that it is the function of the human intellect to impose order on the chaos of experience: that, indeed, is what we have brains for. To despise the well-made story is therefore implicitly to denigrate or deny the powers of the intellect.

But what of the charges that Maugham was superficial, callous, cynical, misanthropic, and snobbish? I do not see how they can possibly survive a reading of “Rain,” or indeed of his other stories. The reverse is rather the truth: the smooth prose is a thin veneer that covers otherwise exposed and very raw nerves, his own as well as his characters’.

In this story, Maugham clearly favors common human pleasure against the demands of a too rigid morality, or moralism. His dry condemnation of the suppression of the native dancing—a suppression that really did take place, be it remembered—means that he did not share the sense of providential cultural and moral superiority that fuelled colonialism. By implication, then, “Rain” is anticolonial, though not stridently so. Colonialism harms the natives by depriving them of their culture and traps the colonialist in the amber of self-importance and priggishness. It is well to remember that these were not views that were universal in 1916 when Maugham voyaged, or even in 1920 when he wrote the story. And it is well to remember also that there are plenty of Mrs. Davidsons among us today, though they direct their moral enthusiasms in other directions than the suppression of dancing.

Maugham sided with the prostitute rather than with the missionary (perhaps not surprisingly, since he modelled himself so much on Maupassant). This speaks well of his generosity of spirit, for Sadie Thompson's vulgar pleasures were clearly not his own, and differences in taste often preclude sympathy. Maugham admitted to finding it difficult to talk to people, and wearied of all human company after an hour or two, wishing to return to his books. But he did not conclude from this that his pleasures were morally superior to those of people who preferred "the sound of the gramophone, harsh and loud, wheezing out a syncopated tune." A cultivated man, bilingual in English and French, widely read in the German and Spanish classics, and with enough Russian to read Chekhov, he learned a tolerance for those of lesser culture. "From the standpoint of what eternity," he asked in the *The Book-bag*, "is it better to have read a thousand books than to have ploughed a million furrows?" Whatever else may be said about this attitude, it is certainly not snobbish.

But Maugham does not sentimentalize Sadie Thompson. On the contrary: when Davidson has killed himself, she cruelly flaunts herself in front of his widow, laughs in her face and spits. She savors her triumph and at once resumes the way of life from which Davidson had tried to dissuade her. She decidedly does not have a heart of gold. He is as narrow in her sympathies as Davidson was.

Nor does Maugham make Davidson wholly inestimable. He is a medical missionary and his wife describes how, when he receives a message that someone is ill on another island, he unhesitatingly sets out in a canoe to do whatever he can for the ill person, even if a storm is raging. Having myself been on short journeys by canoe in those parts, I can testify to the courage involved. Davidson’s faith in his god is so strong and absolute, however, that no objective danger can deter him from his duty. He is therefore no mere hypocrite, and if his methods are sometimes unscrupulous, he is so sure of his ends that he believes any means are justified to achieve them. In his own small sphere, Davidson typifies the disastrous human tendency—stronger in the twentieth century than in any other, perhaps—to let the belief in a salvationist ideal destroy common humanity.

But if Maugham depicts Davidson as an unattractive man, he does not invite us to gloat over his death as Sadie Thompson gloats over it. Quite the contrary: with a few deft descriptive touches, and with masterly understatement, Maugham gets us to imagine the truly titanic struggle in Davidson’s soul that precedes his suicide: the struggle between the deeply held religious convictions that gave meaning to his life and work on the one hand, and sheer biological lust on the other. It is precisely because Davidson’s convictions are so genuine that he kills himself: life after his lapse would be intolerable for him.

This is not cheap melodrama: it is real tragedy, and Maugham is inviting his readers to feel genuine compassion for a character whom he has set them up to dislike, and whom he dislikes himself. Resolutely antisentimental and realistic (there are no tearful reconciliation scenes between Sadie Thompson and Mrs. Davidson), Maugham is nevertheless demanding of the readers that they extend their emotional range, the very opposite of cynicism and misanthropy. In a brilliantly economical couple of lines, Maugham makes us feel deeply for the hitherto repulsive Mrs. Davidson. After Sadie Thompson laughed and spat at her:

> Mrs. Davidson cowered back, and two red spots rose suddenly to her cheeks. Then, covering up her face with her hands, she broke away and ran quickly up the stairs.

I don’t see how anybody could read these simple words (the brilliance is in their simplicity) without understanding the terrible maelstrom in Mrs. Davidson’s heart, and without feeling deep compassion for her.

“Rain” is a story which, while being enormously entertaining (Maugham is said to have earned over a million pre-war dollars from it), is also serious and profound. How do you make moral judgments while remaining tolerant? Clearly Maugham is not a complete relativist, otherwise he would have no standpoint from which to criticize the Davidsons. But it is also clear that he is opposed to a code of morality that imposes more upon man than he can bear. There is a dilemma here with which we still wrestle.

Time and again in his stories set in the South Seas and Malaya, Maugham achieves the same effects. He is able to create an unmistakable and unforgettable sense of place, and describe raw volcanic passion so vividly that the reader feels it as if it were his own, in the words of everyday speech. This is surely a considerable achievement.

Maugham was a highly intelligent, self-aware writer who knew what he was about. To call him shallow is itself shallow. In *The Summing Up*, Maugham reflects upon why it was that his meetings with expatriates in far-flung places was so important for him as a writer (and helps, incidentally, to explain why many other authors have found expatriate life an inspiration). The reflection itself could hardly have been better expressed:

> They [the expatriates] did not burn with a hard, gem-like flame, but with a hot, smoky, consuming fire. They had their own narrownesses. They had their prejudices. They were often dull and stupid. I did not care. . . . In civilized communities men’s idiosyncrasies are mitigated by the necessity of conforming to certain rules of behaviour. Culture is a mask that hides their faces. Here people showed themselves bare. These heterogeneous creatures

> thrown into life that had preserved a great deal of its primitiveness had never felt the need to adapt themselves to conventional standards. Their peculiarities had been given the opportunity to develop unchecked. They seemed to me nearer to the elementals than any of the people I had been living with for so long and my heart leapt towards them.

It was as I was writing this essay that I suddenly remembered a Protestant missionary I had known while I was in the Gilbert Islands. In many ways he was not unlike Davidson:

> [Y]ou felt his affability was a duty he imposed upon himself Christianly; he was by nature reserved. . . . He was very tall and thin, with long limbs loosely jointed; hollow cheeks and curiously high cheek bones; he had so cadaverous an air that it surprised you to notice how full and sensual were his lips.

Times had changed, of course, and Davidson's uncompromisingly high-minded puritanism was no longer in fashion. It was accepted that any flock was bound to stray. Nevertheless, the missionary held himself to the highest standards. He was upright, scrupulous, and inflexibly kind. He lived up to his ideals. Then he had a brief extramarital affair. Consumed by remorse, he died by falling from the window of a mental asylum back at home.

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