SOMERSET MAUGHAM
AND POSTERITY

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W. Somerset Maugham is the dean of novelists writing in English at present. By which advertisement-like statement I mean that he is the one, the only one, who for more than a quarter of a century has had the admiration of an elite of highly cultivated, sophisticated readers and of a sufficient number of good fellow-writers, with increasing influence on the younger ones; and at the same time has given great pleasure to, made sense to, and affected the lives of, a million or more ordinary mortals. What else is dean-ship? It is not a matter of unanimity. Only, in the condition of modern culture, the small superior group in agreement or in coalition with the multitude is very apt to overrule or overwhelm any objection that may start up in medium intellectual circles. Evidently this is what has happened about Maugham, leaving perhaps a vague resentment in the minds of some of those who might be expected to mould (and indeed un mould) contemporary opinion, and are scarcely doing so in his case.

He has become the most controversial literary figure of our time as well as the most successful. As controversies go this has a certain distinction, in that nothing of miscellaneous thought is at issue, neither politics nor morals nor other ideology. It is all about literary art: whether he is a great artist in any way, or only an ordinary one; whether his career has been a true vocation, or a simple matter of ambition and energetic endeavor crowned with odd success; and whether his fiction is of a high category, or just a present plaything for the mind of a commonplace throng. Unfortunately the arguments pro and con have not been presented at full length or with sufficient clarity and conviction. I cannot think of another important man of letters about whom there is so little to read, of any interest. In both the praise and the blame a few conventional terms keep appearing, as in a kaleidoscope around and around; and in the last decade or so the blamers have shown more verve and self-assurance than the praisers. Our diligent book-reviewers, perhaps having written themselves dry about him long since, have reacted lassitudinously to the almost annual succession of his books. One or two of our noteworthy serious critics, offended in taste or dissatisfied in intellect, entirely lost their patience with this or that recent book, with a peculiar effect of trying to shame the rest of us out of our enjoyment.

As a rule perhaps one ought not to take cognizance of this kind of adverse opinion, or of the group-thinking and conversation of intellectuals which it may be taken to reflect. It cannot be replied to in any

This is the first in a series of critical articles in which distinguished contemporary writers will discuss fellow-craftsmen. Glenway Wescott is, of course, the author of Apartment in Athens.
detail without giving it emphasis and further circulation. But in the instance of Maugham at present it seems worthwhile because he is to be blamed for some of the confusion and the repetitiousness. The little forewords which he has contributed to various editions of his work, likewise his essay *On Style (After Reading Burke)* and the piece upon his sixty-fifth birthday and his brief address at the Library of Congress, are of particular interest in this connection.

WE MUST allow for a certain manner of the English gentleman, as it were a self-satisfying modesty. Furthermore, here and there, we may sense in his principles of literature a slight inflexibility, almost affectation; and he harps upon some of his preferences and theories. Sometimes this is his way of criticizing (without unkindly naming) fellow-writers whose reputations have appeared to him undeserved or unsound. All his life he has had to share the literary scene with various genius-types, forever boasting. This, I think, inclines him to the extreme of unpretentiousness. Others make a glamor of their pure artistry without producing much, all blow and no go. It may be this which has prompted him to set up as a principle, even a duty, that nonstop productivity which comes naturally to him, and which he so greatly enjoys. Now and then he seems to be suggesting that anyone who is not capable of it might as well give up literature; which would be a pity. Others talk all the time of their inspiration and dedication, message and messianic feeling. Very well, he will speak only of the profession of writing, the career, even the pursuit of a fortune. A man cannot live for half a century in a great constant limelight, sought after and indiscreetly questioned in society, meanwhile subject to changeable and illogical standards of the taste of the day, without developing some self-consciousness.

In all this various confidential expository writing he has presented himself, or one might say, typed himself, as having only a limited specific talent; as not knowing or thinking much about anything outside his field of professional dramaturgy and narration; as having no vision of the state of the world, no psychological science, no profundity; and as not admitting any intention in his writing except to entertain. "The purpose of art is to please." He should have been warned of the riskiness of over-simplification and understatement in an age of advertising.

For his least favorable critics have borrowed a good part of his representation of himself, even parroting certain phrases and epithets, belittlingly, and to the advantage of their preferred school of modern writing, whatever it may be. In their aggressiveness, his defense position has been turned around; as if it were some bit of Maginot Line with forces of the enemy established in it by mischance or by mistake. The confusion is great, *quid pro quo*; and those who disapprove of him come at one so, in the regular uniform of his thought turned inside out, and with the passwords—writing is a livelihood, fiction is a pastime, the mixture as before—that one often feels obliged to fight him too, before one can give him his due praise.

Some people of course are real believers in unpopularity, mistrusters of success; and the recently booming market for whatever bears Maugham's signature, and the adaptations of the motion-picture industry, and all the publicity and the publicizing, have made these people disrespectful. His detractors have him on their minds a good deal, and feel romantically about him in their way; they are anti-fans. In ordinary social intercourse one hears far more talk of any sort of relative failure on his part—when a given novel can be said to have fallen short of the standard set by some previous novel, or perhaps has sold a few hundred thousand copies less—than of the successes of other writers. I may seem sarcastic, but it is not my intention to suggest that the opponents to Maugham are all of a superficial or unreasonable spirit. Certainly they are not. Among my best friends there are three or four whose opinion of authors as a rule tallies with mine, whose cultivation and judgment I appreciate exceedingly, with whom I cannot have a civil conversation about this one author, so zealous or jealous have
they become, in their resolve not to have him overestimated.

But the poor criticism and the captious momentary talk have only increased Maugham's general celebrity, emphasized his unswerving strength of mind in his own way, and given further advertisement to his tranquil, uninfluenced, unceasing production. The fact is that the anti-Maugham party have not really been able to put up a candidate of their own for the specific position in contemporary letters—the combined artistic and popular position—which they are so impatient of his continuing to hold, decade after decade. All these years they seem never to have found themselves in agreement with the great public about any contemporary writer, nor succeeded in bringing the collectivity around to the style of writing they do care for.

II

Now here let me cast my vote with the majority, for Maugham, beginning with a general statement of admiration, a profession of faith. I believe that his best books, perhaps eight or ten volumes, are better than almost anyone's today, and will endure for posterity. Except for the extreme jeopardies facing Western civilization as a whole, I feel no uneasiness whatever about his having his sufficient fame in the outcome of the century; his share of what is called, in rather old-fashioned writers' parlance, immortality.

In the meantime a really considerable slump of his reputation is to be expected; something more than the restlessness against him in literary society and the carping of professional critics. It is normal, melancholy though it must be for any author who has lived to see it. Presently, a great many of those who for years have delighted in him above all other story-tellers will have had their fill, and they will forget to recommend, him to the younger generation. Already his imitators have somewhat coarsened and debased the forms and devices of his fiction, so that one looks upon certain of the beauties of it with a dull, dissipated eye; he no longer gets credit for uniqueness.

And meanwhile his successors, it is to be hoped—those who are not too idle or freakish or unfortunate—have been getting ready with some new type or types of literature to suit themselves, with departures from his way of writing, refutations of his way of thinking. In subject-matter especially there must always be some frontier opening up; new ruling passions in the ascendant, and up-to-date strengths of mind and weaknesses of character which Maugham in old age could not be expected to understand very well; which his perfected forms and practiced techniques would not suit if he did. Concepts of what is desirable in life, and what is hateful or insufferable, differing radically from those he has exemplified in a hundred various tales and indeed in his own life-story....

Do I make him seem older than he is in fact? In fact, if he were to live as long as, let us say, George Bernard Shaw or Maréchal Pétain, an infant born today might grow almost to manhood in the remainder of his lifetime. However, he is not one of those stubborn fighters against mortality, not a muscular, sanguine, egotistical man; and he has felt his age. Since he is still producing books, one after the other, and manifestly enjoying life, we might scarcely think of it except for his own reminders. When he was only sixty-four he gave it as one of his reasons for writing The Summing Up with no further postponement; and again and again he has returned to the solemn theme, the note of farewell. I think this is a trait of literary artists, perhaps of all artists; and as work of art does actually offer the possibility of a kind and degree of survival after death, it is apt to lead to some imagination of the time far ahead. My impression is that Mr. Maugham often wonders how posterity will regard his career and collected works, though I am sure he would never speak of it.

With praise of him by serious critics so insufficient in these last decades of his life (a mountain of clippings indeed, but more than half of it quibbling, unimpressed, or unenlightened) and the word-of-mouth of the intellectuals so little in unison, likely to make only a weak, jangled reverberation in the period to come, and no very remarkable record of
official or academic honors, for he has not been greatly indulged in this way either—what is going to lead the good reader of posterity to take the trouble of procuring his books and to try reading them? Curiosity, I suppose, above all. What made this man so beloved by the unliterary, unofficial, unacademic humanity of his time? and as it has been a crucial historic time, what can his popularity have signified, and what good or harm was there in it? So few contemporary men of letters have kept their public for three decades, with a continuous production and increasing sale of books the while; attention will be attracted to him by this. He will be part of a history lesson.

And when it comes to reading for pleasure or for any personal emotion or edification, he will not have, in (let us say) the middle of the twenty-first century, all the competition that appears at present. A quantity of literature, especially fiction, vanishes in thin air. Some of the work of famed contemporaries of his has already been shelved; and in almost all of it we can see the ephemeral and perishable elements. Any little random enumeration and review of them is suggestive of the relative soundness of his narrative art, indicative of its greater staying-power. In the various ways in which they have proved weak, he took the trouble to develop particular strength. The mistakes they made, the predilections they indulged in: these were what he most severely forbade himself and guarded against. I gather that in his formative years he studied everything they were doing; then considered, in his reading of all the still valid fiction of the past, every sort of parallel; and carried the lesson forward in speculation upon the future; and regularly applied it to his day's work—most earnestly desiring not to have written in vain.

Wells, for example, so hard-working and serious, so influential for many years, wrote like a newspaper; and since he rashly prophesied things in every volume, what he got right will seem platitudinous, and what he got wrong, absurd. At the other extreme, the truly artistic fiction of the period has been characterized by a certain remoteness of subject-matter, elusive and allusive; and obscured by linguistic innovations, a playing with words, like poetry. It is hard to foresee how so luxurious a fabric of writing will endure; there is not much precedent in literary history. Half the work of wonderful Joyce surely will revert to the universities, recondite crossword puzzles. Not a learned type of reader myself, I feel that the best novels of Ford Madox Ford and Maurice Baring might be appreciated if they were read at all; but they are likely to be overlooked, their careers in their lifetime having gone so modestly. As I remarked just now, there is more than the pecuniary advantage in having sold like hot cakes; readers long afterward wonder why. E. M. Forster will certainly last; only five novels, and (what a mystery it is) none at all since 1924!

Thus very naturally, with so little early twentieth-century literature that will still seem readable, the wondering future reader will turn to the wide shelf-ful of the collected works of Maugham; the one of all his generation the least like a genius, the one most emphatically disavowing any such pretension. Down out of the attic of literary history his narrative art will be brought, as though it were some piece of inherited furniture that had gone out of fashion for a time; comfortably functional, solidly constructed, with not much gilt on it but finely carved.

And the use and the enjoyment of reading him many years hence, I believe, will not be very different from our own at present—precisely because he has been sagacious and cautious in his handling of themes of the day which grow commonplace or obscure; because he has been content to write a pure prosaic prose without any remarkable invention of new ways of expressing things; because he has written a great amount, so as to constitute a distinct Maugham-world into which his readers can enter, of which they can learn the idiom and the implications, each volume helping them to understand the next, building up their response to the next; and because he has discovered and devised story after story worth telling for the story's sake, the one and only thing he has boasted of himself. The love of narration as such evidently is elemental and permanent in human nature.
If you have been following Maugham's own line about his work too ingeniously, or reading the current criticism with entire respect, you may have assumed that it is, if not altogether thoughtless, of a very limited intellectual interest. Now I will dispute this, and give you some illustration and analysis of the kind of thought I find in his fiction, or (as I suppose Mr. Maugham would prefer to have me say) the kind of meaning I read into it.

Without exaggeration! I maintain only that in all his best stories and novels there is an underlying, somewhat hidden significance, pervasive spiritual sense, and important moral counsel, and general view of life and vision of the present world—supplementary to that sole purpose of entertainment continually announced by him—which will repay whatever trouble of intellect you may take in your reading. You will be the wiser for it. Presumably he is not aware of all that he puts in a work of fiction; but I feel sure that he is always conscious of more than he cares to talk about.

In his lifetime he has had an extraordinary range of experience of the world, often in contact with great personages of his generation, sometimes concerned with historic events. Also year after year all sorts of persons, struck by the tolerant spirit and sagacity of his writing, have kept bringing him their report or confession of those extreme occurrences of private life in which modern human nature so often strangely manifests itself, unveils itself. He has a reading and speaking knowledge of five languages, and has read everything, including all the classics of religion and metaphysics, studiously. He is the most serious of men, seeking the general truth in all things, holding himself responsible for his every belief or disbelief, never fooling himself or others, thinking hard. It would be odd indeed if his production of books, even unpretentious stories, were as light-weight as the common estimation has it.

To be sure, he has a strict sense of the different literary forms, putting limitations upon his content in each of them accordingly. Not only The Summing Up but various other volumes of nonfiction have been somewhat in the vein of autobiography, therefore not appropriate for any display of intellect as an end in itself. In many a story he has made use of the first person singular; and then, quite as modestly as though it were reminiscence or truthful expository writing, he has allowed himself only that extent of thoughtfulness, intelligence rather than intellect, which could be referred to his own character, within plausible radius of himself. In a novel of course there is always something or other subject to interpretation in terms of economics and the social sciences, psychology and so on. But he has kept all this somewhat out of evidence, according to his dear tenets of simplicity and clarity; in any case kept it out of vocabulary.

Now some readers depend a great deal on verbal associations and style in general as indications of seriousness of thought: massive abstruse specialized words, and complicatedness and elaboration in other ways as well, and a mysterious solemnity. There is never anything like that in Maugham. He irately disapproves of it in others' work, even in the writing of technical philosophy and the accounts which scientists give of their research and speculation. Not long ago he took the matter up with certain eminent professors and a biologist or two in person, advocating a less self-indulgent style. In all his mature period his own way of expressing ideas has been direct and plain and pithy, somewhat in emulation of Dryden and Swift and their followers, but with constant observance of the rhythm of informal modern conversation and with some easy colloquialism.

If you are looking for the deep thoughtfulness in a story or a novel by Maugham, you cannot expect to have it underlined for you as such. You must use your head, in order not to mistake simplicity for insignificance; and you must learn to recognize his idea in that envelope of reality in which ideas do actually generate, in incident and in dialogue and in little sequences of cause and effect. Also you will need to read fairly slowly, pondering somewhat as you go along, and to bear it all in mind for some time afterward,
weighing it against your own experience and ideas and feelings. Otherwise Maugham is not the author for you, and may never be.

If, on the other hand, you are the more natural, easy-minded, unreasoning man, and what you want is the mere spinning of a yarn, now a kind of myth against some exotic background, now a pitiful or exciting bit of low life, to pass the time—with perhaps just a little inspiration or revelation incidentally adhering to your mind when this or that feature of the plot chances to correspond to some recollection or present preoccupation of your own—well, you have Maugham's explicit blessing. You are the reader he writes for, by his own account.

For my part, I like works of fiction to have meaning, the deeper and the more consequential the better; and unless I find this to my satisfaction, fiction-reading amuses me very little and leaves me discontented. The purest story-form can convey a greater and more accurate truth—as to human nature in its various manifestations and inhibitions, and general human fate of the day and age—than any abstract or generalized literature, dogma or dialectic or deduction of science. The actual perusal of a book is only a part of the literary experience. By mere mechanism of the mind, the time I pass in recalling and reflecting upon what I have read is greater than the time it takes to read. When, with no difficulty or superfluity or prolixity, I have been given something worth thinking about, I love the writing in question, and the writer; this is my chief reason for admiring Maugham.

The thought in Maugham's novels is mostly ethics, religion, or the psychology of creative endeavor. The Moon and Sixpence, for example, has to do with the strange compelling destiny of the artist ahead of his time, to whom moral defects, megalomania, may prove helpful in becoming great; as in the case of Gauguin. Cakes and Ale—which I once heard Mr. Maugham himself recommend as his own first choice of his novels—gives a picture of the literary life, with assorted types of men of letters, the celebrity and the young novice, the real creator and the parasitic literary journalist, and others; it also shows the essential goodness of a sexually loose woman, and her benign influence on the men around her. The Painted Veil is a portrayal of the unhappiness resulting from irresponsible adultery; the beneficial psychotherapeutic effect of doing good to others; and the appeal of Roman Catholicism when one is unhappy.

To be sure, none of this will greatly impress or entirely satisfy any true intellectual. It is not that absolute learnedness and virtuosity of mind which one has seen exercised in the recent fiction of (for example) Thomas Mann, almost as proudly and far-rangingly as in the eclectic philosophy of Santayana or the world-history of Toynbee. On the other hand, what Maugham has to offer is not frivolous matter; and the point of thinking, I take it, is not quantity of thought but rightness, relevance, and indeed helpfulness.

Christmas Holiday is unique in Maugham's fiction in that its theme is sociological and political, indeed international. It is the one of his fifteen-odd novels that has meant most to me personally. As you may recall, it is the tale of a happy-natured and fortunate English youngster holidaying in Paris, where he encounters and makes friends with a pathetic Russian-refugee prostitute, who confesses her identity—she is the wife of a notorious murderer—then little by little narrates their love and the circumstances of his evil deed.

Upon its first publication in 1939, so I have been told, the majority of Maugham's readers did not respond with their customary enthusiasm; as though determined to shut their eyes a few more months to what its entire plot and all its characterizations portended. Also those who wrote the criticisms of it missed its grave implications, not stopping to think. Which is no final matter; books of the greatest importance, even masterpieces, even classics, often have had to wait a while for their high rating and proper interpretation. For example, take the case of Stendhal.
Nineteen hundred and thirty-nine, the end of the great lull in modern history; the moment of awakening from the sweetest, most heedless sleep humanity ever indulged in! As of that date, Christmas Holiday has greater significance than any other contemporary novel, I think. Social significance! The phrase is outworn, I know, but here we have exactly what it was meant for.

Maugham in this slight volume, less than a hundred thousand words long, with his air of having nothing on his mind except his little characters—how they came together and what happened and what they said and how they felt—explains more of the human basis of fascism and nazism and communism than anyone else has done; the self-fascinated, intoxicated, insensible character of all that new leadership in Europe; the womanish passivity of the unhappy masses dependent on it and devoted to it; the Anglo-Saxon bewilderment in the matter, which still generally prevails; and the seeds of historic evil yet to come, not at all extirpated in World War II but rather multiplied and flung with greater profusion in no less receptive soil farther afield, even beyond Europe. Europe the starting point, the womb and the cradle, as in fact it has been for millenniums.

I remember that when it first appeared, and my friends were reading it and more or less enjoying it, and I spoke of its dread allegory and prophetic sense, a number of them said they had no idea what I was talking about. A year or so later I brought the subject up in conversation with Mr. Maugham. As a rule he dislikes listening to anyone's opinion of his writing. I think this is not just shyness but also a kind of contrariety. If you quibble with him he wants to fight back, even unfairly, haughtily. The least excess of praise, on the other hand, only stimulates in him that deep and painful discontent of the artist with everything he has done to date, which is one of the important nerve-centers of art. But upon this occasion he did not shut me up. I outlined all the significance of his book as it appeared to me; I alluded to the various disagreeing or obtuse readers.

Mr. Maugham said, "Certainly I had those things in the back of my mind while I was writing it. But if I had insisted on them I should have spoiled my story. It is not the business of a novelist to tell his readers what they are to think of his characters and his plot. If you want your work of fiction to be read, and you have some point that you wish to make, you must bring it in discreetly. Your reader may not take your meaning, or it may not interest him. You must let him read for his pleasure."

As to the labor of literature Mr. Maugham has said that he was greatly influenced by a fact about Darwin which, at an impressionable age, he read in some book or heard someone tell: Darwin never worked more than three hours a day. Reflecting upon which, the ambitious but reasonable youth came to the conclusion that if, at this rate of endeavor, biological science could be revolutionized and a great deal of the ideology and the ethics of the century altered, surely he could earn a sufficient living and make a name for himself as a playwright and story-teller and novelist with as little drudgery.

A willful man, he seems to have persisted in this as well as other plans of those early days. At his present time of life he rises from sleep at dawn or soon after; but he brings no manuscript or even notebook into his bedroom, and does not go to his writing room until he has read a while and breakfasted at leisure. Just before one o'clock he steps into the living room, ready for his cocktail and lunch; pleased with himself if the work has gone forward, clear in his conscience anyway. Approximately Darwin's three hours.

But in order not to set him up as a dangerous example to any ambitious but lazy literary youngster—and not to give aid and comfort to those of the intelligentsia who maintain that he has had it easy, and all his renown is but good luck—I will give a little more information. Listen to this, and try to imagine yourself working as he does. Week in and week out, year after year, in whatever circumstances—though surrounded by frivolity, though assailed by bothers and
anxieties, and touched upon occasion as all men are by exceeding affection or pity or self-pity or anger—regularly every morning he goes to his desk and labors at his writing. For months at a time he will not skip a day. One day I did see him in the living room before lunch, grumpily seated by the fireplace; he had a bad toothache, and even then he was engrossed in a heavy laborious tome, preparatory to the composition of something theological or historical.

Indeed in his middle life he made some voyage every year or so, notably to the Orient and around the South Seas, in what must have seemed a carefree manner. But think of the cargo of fiction he brought back upon each return voyage! He was not wasting his time. Today that spirit of travel for travel's sake (and story's sake) has calmed down in him. But I have observed that even in the city with details of publishing or other commitments of his career to attend to, also when he takes vacations in the summer or weekends with friends—except when actually in transit, in the train or in the plane—regularly almost every morning he goes to some desk or substitute table and works a while.

This is not drudgery, I know, but it is something that for my part I should find harder to endure and sustain: control; inner tension, and in fact, faith, and faith in oneself—and I dare say it is more to the purpose of literature in the long run than that way of pent-up ambition occasionally overflowing, rushing, making up for lost time, which gives one the feeling of being a genius, or that way of desperate engagement and deadline with stimulants and sedatives and hell to pay, which is the habit of so many contemporary authors.

Furthermore, in Maugham's case, the time he spends at his desk is only a part of the labor. All his stories and novels have been worked out in his mind before he ever takes his neat pen in hand. Someone has told him an incident of real life, perhaps no more than an impressive utterance or gesture at some crucial moment. That is the commencement, as it were the grain of sand in the bivalve. But real life never seems to him as good as imagination, at least not as good to write about. Therefore he ponders, and sometimes years pass before he is able to devise the fulfilment and change, the different ending, the superstructure of moral implication, which will make all the difference between reality and art. Then he begins searching for the bits and pieces of everyone he has ever known which can be moulded into fictitious beings capable of doing or experiencing whatever it is that he has to tell; adding subordinate episodes as they may enhance or clarify the main matter, and drawing all into one unit; regulating whatever faults of implausibility or contradiction may develop; and deciding upon the order of narration most natural to it, most effective for it. All this goes on in his head; not in Darwin's three hours but in the other twenty-one, when he rouses too early in the morning, when he sits by the fire, when he is taking short salubrious walks. . .

There is a touching page in his memoir of the beginning of World War II, Strictly Personal, bearing upon this matter of the advance preparation of his fiction. In the disaster of France he was in personal peril; the Germans having learned from his volume of stories entitled Ashenden that he had served as a secret agent in World War I, or something on that order. As he was escaping to England on a miserable coal-boat, seated with fellow-passengers on the deck—as a kindness to them, to pass the deadly tedium and to relieve their collective fear and shock and loss—he told them stories. He began with some which he was in the habit of telling, which he had learned to rely on to amuse people. But he ran through his repertory of these little set-pieces; and so he went on and gave his unhappy audience the benefit of certain plots and projects of fiction which he had borne in mind through the years, and never been willing to tell, lest the bloom of his own interest in them be worn off before they were ready to be written. The reason for his willingness, then and there, on the vessel of refuge, was the shadow of death hanging over them, enveloping them. They expected to encounter a submarine or perhaps a flight of predatory planes;
therefore the aging story-teller felt that he could spare some of his fondly hoarded material. Even in the event of a safe homecoming, he fancied, he would not live to cope with it all.

This must be the most interesting and individual aspect of his vocation of letters and his career; his planning and planning, major matters and minor matters alike; his constant looking ahead and budgeting every faculty and every opportunity, with due unflattering consideration of the probabilities for and against him; his sense of a significance and a form in the story of his life, beginning and middle and end, as definite as in the construction of any three-act play or short story or shapely short novel; and his constant thought of death, the indelible finis on the unfinished page.

Even in his reading of the works of other men, I have noticed that he keeps to a sort of schedule. Detective stories are to kill time when he is sleepless or in some pain. Novels that friends have sent him can be sufficiently perused, in kindness and out of curiosity, in half-hours of relaxation. Usually he devotes an hour in the afternoon or evening to re-reading one of the classics of fiction, Goethe, Fielding, Cervantes, and the rest; and he keeps certain volumes which mean a great deal to him on his night-table, against the difficult hour of daybreak.

As to the great old masters of fiction, remember that it has always been his hope and intention that the best of his books should entitle him to some place in their hierarchy of world-fame and centennial duration; though a modest place. His requirement of himself has never changed in the fifty or more years: perhaps not to be great, but to be good, according to the proposition of their greatness. They are the objects of his devotion, as it were the inspiring and interceding saints. Also each of them is exemplary to him in some particular of the art; and he still constantly turns to them when he has come upon any little problem of his own writing, to consider what solution one or the other may have found in a parallel case. When anything in his work in progress has reference to a learned or abstract matter, he researches tirelessly. He has been known to study as many as forty volumes for one short and easily readable chapter.

Naturally, as a fiction-writer, his principal research is just coming to know people, getting them to tell him what they have experienced, probing their minds, observing their emotions and their morals. In this he has been tireless, too; also patient and relentless, teasing and combative and kind—whatever the human instance may call for—and nothing that does not infringe upon the Darwinian hours seems to him too much trouble; not a detail of humanity is too small for his acute and impartial eye. Often as he goes out to dine he has a question ready to put to someone he expects to meet; the answer to which will fit into the morrow's page.

He is, as nearly as can be, a single-minded man. Some years ago he confided to a friend that, within his remembrance, he had never gone anywhere or cared to have any new person introduced to him—except for one of his diversions, bridge-playing, for example—or pursued a particular acquaintance with anyone, unless he had some idea of a function or utility for his literary art in so doing: some study of the narratable world up to date; or a search for types of humanity, in the way of a painter needing models to pose for him; or a glimpse into strange ways of living; or an experimental discussion of ideas important to him with reference to work coming up.

Naturally the friend, upon hearing this, felt a pang of self-consciousness, a little chill; but later on he remarked that of his observation over a period of years, he believed it to be true enough. In appreciation of his friendship in the time he spent in this country during World War II, let me say that I think it is no longer true. Every sort of ulterior motive and craft and documentary sense seems to have waned out of his various human interests. His kindness toward young people has a character of benign, humorous fatherliness, without any very intense urge to understand them. In society he seeks especially those who can tell him of philosophy
and religion. As the years pass the shadow of mortality grows no lighter or smaller, no, not in any man's life! Once in a while he recognizes new subject matter as such, when he hears of it or comes upon it, and points out to some young writer its interest and feasibility, and the proper way to handle it. But even more certainly than on the perilous refugee boat he reminds himself that there will not be time for it to rise and swell in his mind, to ripen for his neat final manuscript and printed best-selling page. He makes way for us, he leaves it to us, with his blessing; but also with a certain challenging, sardonic, mistrustful sense. He is easy to please but not easy to satisfy.

Let us not have, in praise of a man so realistic and judicious, any mixing of the classifications of men or any sentimentality. He is not a saint or a sage or a hero; only a true and greatly accomplished literary artist. But neither let us forget that art has its virtues, and they are rewarded in more ways than one. I remember that one day he came in from his writing room, visibly happy—with a light step, the strong downward expression of his mouth softened, his eyes in their delicate criss-cross wrinkles perfectly clear—and remarked, "I will tell you, as it may not have occurred to you, there is a particular drawback in the career of writing."

Upon our inquiring what the drawback was, he answered, "When you have finished the day's work, and you have to take your leisure and wait for your creative gift to be restored next morning, anything you can do in the remaining hours of the day seems a little pale and flat."

To have commenced literature half a century ago, and still, in spite of life—and by life I mean disillusionment and unlucky affections, increase of pain and worldly losses, shames and impertinences of human nature, along with horrible war and civil war, and the ruin of nations, and the failure of a whole structure of delectable usages—still to enjoy writing so much that nothing compares with it, and to write to the end, is a grand and enviable thing, and a spiritual thing. There are a number of good reasons for dedicating oneself to the art of writing; surely this is as good as any.

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To My Love

ROBERT HUFF

TO think the state should have allowed two such as you and me to lie together in one bed in all legality.

And more than that I marvel nights at all the things we feel: the rain, the leaves, the pauper's cry amid the ring of steel.

With conduct far too immature we're charged by prudent rules, for tears were meant for children's eyes and love reserved for fools.

How odd the state should have allowed two such as you and me to lie together in one bed in all legality.