

## Experiences of the Soul

On William Somerset Maugham's Far Eastern Writings

W. Somerset Maugham,  
from an original portrait by  
Graham Sutherland, 1978.

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**W**illiam Somerset Maugham is probably one of the most commercially successful but least critically appreciated writers of the twentieth century. If today he is remembered mostly for his 1915 masterpiece *Of Human Bondage* and a few other outstanding novels, back in his time readers looked upon him as the cantor of the decadence of the British Raj, particularly in the Malay archipelago. Although he was in Malaya for only six months in 1921 and four months in 1925, he managed to write two collections of short stories—*The Casuarina Tree* (1926) and *Ah King* (1933)—that played a huge role in shaping the Western imaginary of the East,

just as Rudyard Kipling had done for India. His literary engagement with Asia and the Pacific was not limited to Malaya. In 1916–17, he travelled to Hawai'i, Tahiti, and other islands in the Pacific, which he then used as the backdrop for several short stories collected in *The Trembling of a Leaf* (1921), as well as the novels *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) and *The Narrow Corner* (1932). In the second half of 1919 he visited a China in turmoil, an experience he drew on when writing *On a Chinese Screen* (1922), a semi-forgotten collection of sketches that in his words constituted 'not a book, but the material for a book', and *The Painted Veil* (1925), a novel of adultery and revenge set

between Hong Kong and the mainland. In 1922, he undertook an adventurous journey in Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, which he then described in the travelogue *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, released in 1930. Finally, in 1944 he published the novel *The Razor's Edge*, part of which was set in India, where he travelled in 1938.

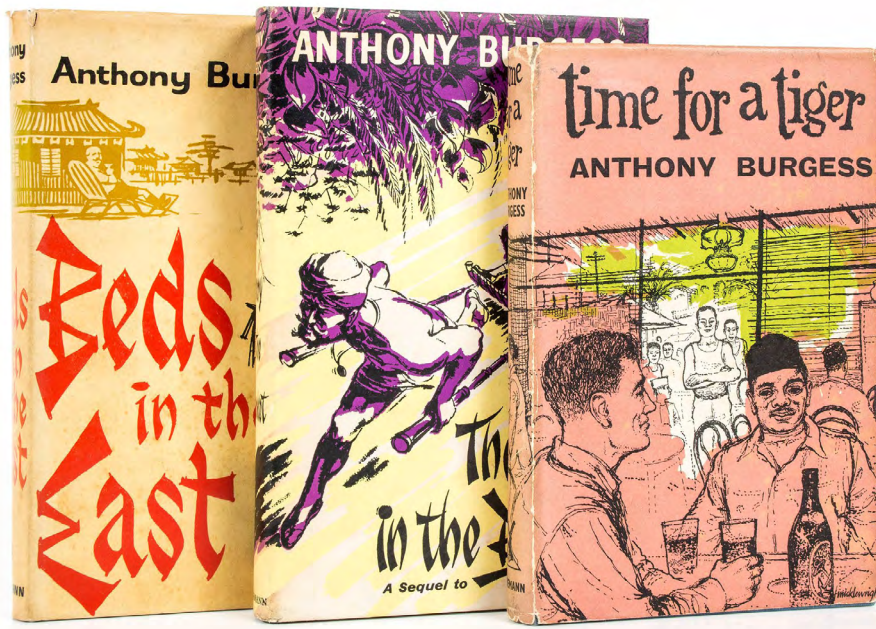
As it often happens when an established author dares to write about foreign context that they have visited but are not particularly familiar with, his writings were highly controversial. While readers loved his Far Eastern tales and travelogues, opinions among British colonial administrators, settlers, and scholars were more mixed. One criticism was that he did not indulge the Orientalist gaze of the public, showing very little interest in the local populations and focussing instead on the inner worlds of the foreigners living in remote outposts of the Empire. For instance, when, in 1937, Philip Fogarty, then Commissioner in charge of the Shan States, was trying to convince Maurice Collis to visit this forgotten corner of the British Empire and write a book to showcase the achievements of the colonial administration in the area, he explained how he should pitch the idea to his publishers in these terms: 'Look here. Put it like this to them. Say the Shan States are fresh ground. And it's a literal fact, what's ever been written about them? Somerset Maugham went down one road there on mules ten years ago, but he's not interested in Asiatics. While you—well, that's your particular line' (Collis 1938, 20).

Another criticism was that his tales and travelogues did not have an explicit political dimension, quite unlike the writings of George Orwell (1903–50), who was working as a policeman in Burma in the early 1920s, just as Maugham was travelling through the country. While George Orwell's stay in Burma resulted in the masterpiece *Burmese Days* (1934) and several essays highly critical of British rule—to understand the critical verve of his work one just has to think of passages like 'Mr. Macgregor stiffened at the word "nigger", which is

discountenanced in India. He had no prejudice against Orientals; indeed, he was deeply fond of them. Provided they were given no freedom he thought them the most charming people alive. It always pained him to see them wantonly insulted' (Orwell 1974, 30)—Maugham only wrote a couple of travelogues that were largely composed of his own existential and literary musings, and a handful of short stories set on rubber estates and remote outstations. In these, he largely limited himself to the description of the lowly passions of the British side of colonial society—their loneliness, boredom, drunkenness, lust, and madness. As Maugham's biographer Selina Hastings (2009, 295–96) wrote: 'Orwell portrayed the colonial oppressors at worst vicious, at best stupid and dull: a dull people, "cherishing and fortifying their dullness behind a quarter of a million bayonets". He clearly foresaw the end of Empire, while Maugham appeared not so much unaware of as indifferent to the subject.'

## **Burgess's Hit Job**

The strongest indictment of Maugham's writings on the Far East comes from Anthony Burgess (1917–93), another heavyweight of contemporary British literature. Burgess spent five years in the 1950s as a teacher and education officer in the British Colonial Service in Malaya, gaining fluency in written and spoken Malay language and authoring no less than three novels set in the country, the so-called *The Malayan Trilogy* (2000). Given his deep emotional attachment to Malaya, it is not surprising to discover that Burgess considered Maugham little more than an interloper. While in an obituary he praised Maugham's collections of Malayan stories as containing some of the finest examples of writing in English, with a 'width of observation [that] was something new in English fiction, as was the willingness to explore moral regions then regarded as taboo' (Burgess 1965, cited in



An old edition of Anthony Burgess's *Malayan Trilogy*.

Hastings 2009, 329), in an introduction that he wrote in 1969 for a new edition of these same stories that he himself had prepared, he was much more dismissive:

He stayed in no one place very long, but he usually managed to absorb something of the atmosphere of each town, village or rubber estate he visited, and he always made quick contact with the local residents. These residents were invariably Europeans—planters, colonial officials, businessmen, or just men living in exile to escape from trouble or sadness at home—and there is little evidence that Maugham gained, or wished to gain, any direct knowledge of the lives and customs of the native peoples of the East. This must be disappointing to present-day Malay and Indian and Chinese and Eurasian readers of his stories, but we have to remember that (apart from the fact that Maugham had no time to learn Malay or Chinese or

Tamil) the Western attitude to the Far East was very different in Maugham's time from what it is today. (1969, xv)

Burgess's animosity towards Maugham fully emerged one decade later, when he published *Earthly Powers* (1980), a novel in which the main character—81-year-old writer Kenneth Toomey looking back at his life—is nothing but a barely hidden parody of the deceased writer. In fact, it has recently come to light that in earlier drafts of the book the main character was named Kenneth Markham Toomey, a name much closer to Maugham's, and that the author changed it at a very late stage of writing, probably not to offend the nephew of the deceased writer, whom Burgess had recently met and befriended (Biswell 2012). While undoubtedly a minor masterpiece, *Earthly Powers* was a castigation of Maugham for both his bubbling private life—the memorable opening line read: 'It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was

in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me'—and his inability to overcome his reputation as a second-rate, commercial writer. The novel even includes a few chapters set in the East. It is here that Burgess brings to light what he really thinks about Maugham's fame as a cantor of colonial Malaya and, more broadly, the East. A dialogue between Toomey and his agent sets the general tone:

[Agent:] 'Now the next thing is a travel book. Becoming very popular with the world opening up again. Scribner's man Jeffrey's was here, we had lunch, he paid of course, he was keen on that. That would be jest fahn ah gayess. He insisted on taking me to the Lucullus, Wembley. The British Empire, he was very struck with the British Empire. India, Ceylon, the Federated Malay States. Now then, here's my idea. You do that, and you also do some so to speak travel stories. Memsahibs committing adultery, planters' wives murdering their Chinese lovers, district officers going down with DTs.'

[Toomey:] 'A rather limited image of the British Empire.'

[Agent:] 'Well, out east, you know. Eard the heast a-cawwing. You know *Collier's*? I don't mean those dirty poetic men in D. H. Lawrence, I mean the magazine. Thought you did. One thousand dollars per story. They'll arrange a contract for twenty stories, half and half for foreign rights, then perhaps another twenty if all goes well. Really short ones, two and a half of their pages with a big illustration—you know the sort of thing, the memsahib in her camisole threatening a leering muscular coolie with a broken gin bottle. Anyway, it's two birds. You end up with two books, one throwing harsh tropical light on the other. Toomey's East. *Damn and blast*.' That was the cigarette. (Burgess 1980, 211)

Toomey/Maugham, we are told, is in it just for the money, his writing nothing more than a heist aimed at taking advantage of the gullibility of the public. The sarcasm becomes even more explicit a few pages later, when the character is in Singapore and engages in a striking act of dissociation from his real-life alter ego, which, incidentally, is also the only occasion in which Maugham is explicitly cited in the book: 'Singapore duly smelt of boiling dishrags and catpiss. I stayed at the Raffles Hotel which Willie Maugham, under their later notepaper heading, was to laud as breathing all the mystery of the fabled East. The mystery lay perhaps in the provenance of the meat for the curries' (Burgess 1980, 230).

The criticism becomes slightly more articulate with the introduction of Philip, a young British doctor with whom Toomey falls in love, reciprocated. Philip happens to be in Malaya because he felt the urge to heed the 'call of the East' after reading a book by Joseph Conrad, but is now disillusioned. When he tells Toomey about this, Philip is sarcastic: 'I take it you'll be writing about the East now. And then some medical student will read you and say ah adventure and go for an interview in Great Smith Street. A big responsibility.' 'So it's not like Conrad.' 'Conrad left out the hookworm and the malaria and the yaws' (Burgess 1980, 235). To make his point clear, when the following day dawns, Philip takes Toomey to his hospital, where they visit the ward of patients with deformities due to tropical diseases. When Toomey cannot stand the sight and is about to vomit, the doctor quips:

'Can't blame you. Let's go and have some coffee. With a nip of Beehive if you like.' Out on the lawn I retched emptily. 'I suppose I shouldn't,' Philip said. 'It wasn't fair. But I couldn't have you going back burbling about paradise. Tell England, as they say' (Burgess 1980, 244).

Allowing himself plausible deniability by not naming him explicitly, through the character of Toomey, Anthony Burgess





The Vintage edition of some of William Somerset Maugham's books.

manages to assassinate Maugham's character. Not only is the writer denied agency—after all, he produces his tales only for money upon the suggestion of his agent—but he is also described as completely unaware of the reality he purports to portray. So much for Burgess's praise of Maugham as the author of some of the finest examples of writing in English.

## Flights of Fancy

It is undeniable that Maugham's fascination with the East was prone to flights of fancy and had a strong Orientalist flavour. If we skim through his oeuvre, we discover that traces of this attraction can be found from his early

works, which long predate his trips to Asia and the Pacific. Some of the earliest examples are in *The Magician*, a short novel published in 1908 in which Maugham experiments with the topic of the supernatural through the eyes of Oliver Haddo, a character based on notorious occultist Alesteir Crowley. Just like many of his contemporaries, Maugham saw the occult as indissolubly linked to the East. These are the words with which the young writer describes the moment when Margaret, a young woman with an artistic temperament, is seduced by Haddo thanks to his magical powers:

[Oliver Haddo] began to talk with that low voice of his that thrilled her [Margaret] with a curious magic. He spoke not of pictures now, nor of books, but of life. He told her of strange Eastern places where no infidel had been, and her sensitive fancy was aflame with the honeyed fervour of his phrase. He spoke of the dawn upon sleeping desolate cities, and the moonlit nights of the desert, of the sunsets with their splendour, and of the crowded streets at noon. The beauty of the East rose before her. He told her of many-coloured webs and of silken carpets, the glittering steel of armour damascened, and of barbaric, priceless gems. The splendour of the East blinded her eyes. He spoke of frankincense and myrrh and aloes, of heavy perfumes of the scent-merchants, and drowsy odours of the Syrian gardens. The fragrance of the East filled her nostrils. And all these things were transformed by the power of his words till life itself seemed offered to her, a life of infinite vivacity, a life of freedom, a life of supernatural knowledge. (Maugham 2000c, 113)

This passage is a perfect example of Orientalist writing. The opulent, exuberant, and mysterious Oliver Haddo comes to embody the fabled East, which seduces Margaret, an innocent maiden who would otherwise be destined to an ordinary, boring bourgeois life as the wife of a famous surgeon. In the book,

Maugham let it be understood that Haddo does really have magical powers, but one cannot avoid thinking how much stronger and more relatable the writer's message might have been if the 'magician' had managed to seduce the girl simply using the leverage of her fascination with the East.

A few years later, in *Of Human Bondage* (1915), the protagonist Philip Carey, a young student of medicine clearly modelled on Maugham himself, dreams of travelling to the East as soon as his training is over: 'As soon as I've got through my hospital appointments, I shall get a ship; I want to go to the East—the Malay Archipelago, Siam, China, and all that sort of thing—and then I shall take odd jobs. Something always comes along—cholera duty in India and things like that. I want to go from place to place. I want to see the world. The only way a poor man can do that is by going in for the medical' (Maugham 2000d, 356). This is how Carey/Maugham imagined the East: 'He wanted to go to the East; and his fancy was rich with pictures of Bangkok and Shanghai, and the ports of Japan: he pictured to himself palm-trees and skies blue and hot, dark-skinned people, pagodas; the scents of the Orient intoxicated his nostrils. His heart beat with passionate desire for the beauty and the strangeness of the world' (Maugham 2000d, 537). Although the dream of Asia appears only in these two passages in the whole novel, Philip's story in *Of Human Bondage* can also be read as a tale of fascination with the exotic, which leads him to live in an imaginary future and let the present flow by. In this disgruntlement with the ordinariness of bourgeois life, Philip's character presents significant assonances with those of Margaret in *The Magician*. However, while Margaret succumbs to her tragic destiny, Philip never visits the East and, in the final pages of the book, we find him giving up for good on this dream to start a family. This decision to set aside his *wanderlust* and settle down in England assumes the character of an epiphany:



A Collection of 11 works of William Somerset Maugham from the 1920s to the 1940s. From the Library of Christian Heuer (sothebys.com).

What did he care for Spain and its cities, Cordova, Toledo, León; what to him were the pagodas of Burma and the lagoons of South Sea Islands? America was here and now. It seemed to him that all his life he had followed the ideals that other people, by their words or their writings, had instilled into him, and never the desires of his own heart. Always his course had been swayed by what he thought he should do and never by what he wanted with his whole soul to do. (Maugham 2000d, 699)

If we consider how Maugham's later writings played a fundamental role in shaping the imaginary of the East among the Western public and pushing innumerable people to 'live by the

[his] ideals'—something that clearly bothered Anthony Burgess—this passage assumes a tone of clairvoyant self-deprecation.

The fascination of the East plays a fundamental role even in Maugham's following masterpiece, *The Moon and Sixpence*, which he published in 1919, on the eve of his journey to China. This novel tells the story of an artist named Charles Strickland—a fictional character clearly inspired by Paul Gauguin—who finds his fulfilment as both painter and human being in Tahiti. The imaginary to which Maugham resorts in this book is still informed by Orientalism. For instance, we are told that '[t]he Pacific is more desolate than other seas; its spaces seem more vast, and the most ordinary journey upon it has somehow the feeling of

an adventure. The air you breathe is an elixir which prepares you for the unexpected. Nor is it vouchsafed to man in the flesh to know aught that more nearly suggests the golden realms of fancy than the approach to Tahiti' (Maugham 1999, 156–57). In some ways, Strickland's existential trajectory is exactly the opposite of that of Philip Carey. Unlike Philip's carefully planned but never executed trip, Strickland travels to the East without any plan and, when he arrives in Tahiti, settles down in a hut in the jungle. It is there that, before meeting a tragic death, he realises his artistic aspirations on the walls of his hut. Unfortunately, nobody will know about his accomplishments as after his demise the place is set on fire upon his request.

What all these early writings have in common is that they describe the fascination that a legendary East exerts on Western characters. In these novels, Maugham presents the East as an exciting alternative for bourgeois characters disgruntled with their life prospects, an idealised Other where they believe they have a chance to find fulfilment. While, as we will see, the travelogues and short stories that he wrote in the 1920s and 1930s in the wake of his first journeys to the East are more complex, there is curiously a recrudescence of the Orientalist imaginary in *The Razor's Edge*, his 1944 novel. In it, we meet Larry Darrell, a middle-class American on a spiritual quest to find meaning in his life, travelling to India and encountering a series of individuals who awaken his curiosity towards Hinduism. In particular, he is astonished to meet a local politician, the Oxford-educated minister of finance in one of the smaller northern states of the country, who tells him that in one year, when he reaches the age of 50, he is 'going to resign his profitable position, dispose of his property to his wife and children, and go out into the world as a wandering mendicant' (Maugham 2000f, 287)—all of this with the support of his friends and colleagues, who in all this see something totally natural. Through these meetings, Larry eventually lands in an ashram in southern India, where he has the first mystical experience of his life. While this

sounds very clichéd, one cannot but be amazed by Maugham's clairvoyance in anticipating cultural trends that would take hold in the West only two decades later.

## Challenging Orientalist Tropes

While not devoid of merit, the criticisms of Somerset Maugham as an inveterate Orientalist painting an idealised picture of the East while completely disregarding the local population and the politics involved in the British Raj are ungenerous. After his first trips to Asia in the early 1920s, Maugham clearly realised the fancifulness of his conception of the East as a 'mysterious' and untouched Other, and became much less prone to those flights of fancy that appeared in his early writings. In particular, in his Asian travelogues it is possible to discern a dawning awareness of how he had succumbed to the Orientalist imaginary of the East. As he wrote in *The Gentlemen in the Parlour* (2001b, 8):

Though I have travelled much I am a bad traveller. The good traveller has the gift of surprise. He is perpetually interested by the differences he finds between what he knows at home and what he sees abroad. If he has a keen sense of the absurd he finds constant matter for laughter in the fact that the people among whom he is do not wear the same clothes as he does, and he can never get over his astonishment that men may eat with chop-sticks instead of forks or write with a brush instead of with a pen. Since everything is strange to him he notices everything, and according to his humour can be amusing or instructive. But I take things for granted so quickly that I cease to see anything unusual in my new surroundings.



In *On a Chinese Screen*, he recounts a meeting with a certain Dr Macalister, a medical missionary who had come to China 30 years earlier. His account provides a sobering indictment of any Orientalist fantasy:

'I often laugh when I think of my first impressions of China,' he said. 'I came out expecting to undergo hardships and privations. My first shock was the steamer with ten-course dinners and first-class accommodation. There wasn't much hardship in that, but I said to myself: Wait till you get to China. Well, at Shanghai I was met by some friends and I stayed in a fine house and was waited on by fine servants and I ate fine food. Shanghai, I said, the plague spot of the East. It'll be different in the interior. At last I reached here. I was to stay with the head of the mission till my own quarters were ready. He lived in a large compound. He had a very nice house with American furniture in it and I slept in a better bed than I'd ever slept in. He was very fond of his garden and he grew all kinds of vegetables in it. We had salads just like the salads we had in America and fruit, all kinds of fruit; he kept a cow and we had fresh milk and butter. I thought I'd never eaten so much and so well in my life. You did nothing for yourself. If you wanted a glass of water you called a boy and he brought it for you.' (Maugham 2000e, 48–49)

If it is true that in his writings Maugham chose not to focus on 'Asiatic' characters, this was arguably not because he lacked interest, but rather an act of humility based on his explicit admission to be unable to portray realistically a personality rooted in a context totally alien to him. He was fully aware of his limitations in imagining the Other, and never hid it. As

he explained in a letter that he wrote in 1951: 'I felt that all the depictions that had been made of either Chinese, Indians, or Malays were merely superficial impressions combined with a lot of conventional prejudices. It is very nearly impossible for an English author to create a French character so that French readers would accept him as real. How much more difficult then would it be for an English writer to create a Chinese the Chinese would accept as plausible' (cited in Hastings 2009, 324–25). This is consistent with Maugham's general attitude towards creative writing. His stories always have a semi-autobiographical component—in most novels, he even inserts a fictionalised version of himself as a narrator—and over and over again in his writings he emphasises how he feels uncomfortable using characters that stray from his familiar milieu. In *The Razor's Edge*, he even felt the need to justify his choice to use American characters:

It is very difficult to know people and I don't think one can ever really know any but one's own countrymen. For men and women are not only themselves, they are also the region in which they were born, the city apartment or the farm in which they learnt to walk, the games they played as children, the old wives' tales they overheard, the food they ate, the schools they attended, the sports they followed, the poets they read, and the God they believed in. It is all these things that have made them what they are, and these are the things that you can't come to know by hearsay, you can only know them if you have lived them. You can only know them if you are them. And because you cannot know persons of a nation foreign to you except from observation, it is difficult to give them credibility in the pages of a book. (Maugham 2000f, 2–3)

If he had such qualms in describing a character hailing from a culture with which he had such affinities, one can easily understand why in his writings on the Far East he chose

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[1] I wish to thank Annie Ren for bringing this episode to my attention.

to focus on British characters. In one of those rare instances in which he attempted to give voice to a Chinese intellectual, the result indeed left much to be desired.<sup>1</sup> In a sketch entitled 'A Student of the Drama' included in *On a Chinese Screen* (Maugham 1955, 118–20), Maugham describes how during his trip to China he encountered a young Chinese lecturer on the art of the drama, a young man who had studied in Europe, could express himself fluently in English, French, and German, and had written a book in French on the Chinese theatre. Unfortunately, the portrait of this scholar that emerges from these pages is far from flattering. When asked what books he recommended his students read in order to learn about the literature of the day, the man could not respond as his narrow interests did not extend beyond the art of drama; his literary tastes appeared very questionable; and his approach to the art of the drama was over-intellectual and mechanistic. When he insisted that Maugham—who was a master of the genre—reveal to him the secrets of his craft, the writer simply shrugged his questions off: 'If you can't write a play no one can teach you, and if you can it's easy it's as falling off a log.'

While Maugham did not mention the name of the scholar, four decades later the son of the man came forward and published an essay in which he provided some additional context to the meeting (Soong 1974). It turned out that the 'student of the drama' was Sung Ch'un Fang (1892–1938), an influential scholar who had played a fundamental role in introducing Western drama in China while also advocating for the preservation of a 'national' theatre on the grounds that European and American cultural imports could undermine traditional values and lead to social corruption (Chen 2001, 852). His son, an accomplished scholar himself, remembered how 30 years earlier his father had strongly encouraged him to read the works of Somerset Maugham along with those of Oscar Wilde and how, one day, he had found a copy of *On a Chinese Screen* on a shelf in his father's office, with a pencil mark against the chapter 'A Student of the Drama'. Only years

later, after his father's death, he learned that his father had indeed met Somerset Maugham and he was the one portrayed in the essay. He was also told that his father had felt that 'at many points Maugham had made deliberate exaggerations with a rather unfair attitude' (Soong 1974, 84). From that, he proceeded to dissect Maugham's account of the meeting, providing necessary context to explain the nuances of his father's point of view that had been lost in the fictional portrayal. Without animosity, he then concluded with a reflection on how Maugham's work might have served a political agenda:

In talking about my father and [another Chinese intellectual], Maugham might just as well be reflecting what some western intellectuals thought about China: that the country, mysterious and lovely as she was, should aim to preserve its existent cultural tradition and virtues, instead of blindly following the steps of European and American countries in pursuit of scientific achievements and mechanization. They thought that China was still closing its gates on foreigners. They completely ignored the direction of world trends and China's own urgent need for modernization. (Soong 1974, 90)

Indeed, while on the surface apparently apolitical, Maugham's writing on Asia was in fact very political. Although Sung Ch'un Fang's son limited himself to musing on the relevance of Maugham's writings for debates on Chinese politics, there is a broader point to be made here about the writer's depiction of the most remote corners of the Raj, providing a most powerful indictment of the provincially, narrowly, wastefully, and pointlessly of colonial society. As I mentioned above, Maugham's colonial characters are often drunk and depressed, pathetic and morally bankrupt, which hardly portrays an edifying picture of the British colonial enterprise. For instance, in 'God's Truth', one of the sketches in *On a Chinese Screen*, we find one Mr Birch, an envoy

of the British American Tobacco Company stationed in a little town in inner China. It was a place with ‘only two or three streets of shops’, which he knew by heart, and ‘interminable winding alleys which presented a monotonous expanse of wall broken only by solid closed doors. These were the Chinese houses and these were as impenetrable to one of his colour as the life which surrounded him’ (Maugham 2000e, 53). Birch was very homesick—we are told that he had not spoken to another white person in three months—so when a missionary who was passing by refuses his hospitality he completely loses it and attacks the man. ‘Birch seized the missionary’s let and jerked it out of the stirrup; the missionary nearly fell off and he clung in a somewhat undignified fashion to the pony’s mane. Then he half-slipped, half-tumbled to the ground’ (Maugham 2000e, 54). Two Chinese men on a cart presumably carrying the missionary’s belongings witness the whole scene ‘with indolent curiosity’, but are not given a voice. The missionary threatens to report Birch to his chief, leaving Birch alone and at that point ‘anger left him and a sob broke unwillingly from his lips’ (Maugham 2000e, 55).

This is only one variation in the broad gallery of colonial characters that appear in Maugham’s pages. Portraits such as this did not earn Maugham any friends in colonial society. Just like George Orwell incurred the extreme displeasure of members of the British administration in Burma after the publication of *Burmese Days*, Maugham similarly became persona non grata in Malaya. His biographer Selina Hastings (2009, 279) reports that a member of the Malayan Civil Service wrote that Maugham’s passage ‘was clearly marked by a trail of angry people. The indignation aroused by his play, *The Letter* [a story of adultery and murder set in colonial society] ... was still being voiced in emotional terms when I came by. It was also charged against him that he abused hospitality by ferreting out the family skeletons of his hosts and putting them into his books.’ To this Maugham responded with a postscript

that he added to the American edition of *The Casuarina Tree*, one of the collections of short stories that drew from his trips in Malaya:

Some of the smaller communities in the countries washed by the China Sea are very sensitive, and their members are much agitated if, in a work of fiction, a hint is given that the circumstances of their lives are not always such as would meet the approval of the suburban circles in which contentedly dwell their cousins and their aunts ... Living, with all the East about them, as narrowly as in a market-town, they have the market-town’s faults and foibles; and seem to take a malicious pleasure in looking for the originals of the characters, especially if they are mean, foolish or vicious, which the author has chosen for the persons of his stories. (Cited in Hastings 2009, 279)

While the immediate display of anger might indeed have been related to Maugham bringing to light some ‘skeletons in the closet’, it is impossible to deny how the portrayal of colonial society that emerges from Maugham’s writing is generally unflattering and might lead readers to question the British colonial endeavour.

However, the greatest merit of Maugham’s writing is in how he challenged Orientalist tropes that had asserted themselves in European literature over the years, in particular through the influence of giants like Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad. In particular, Maugham more than anybody else dispelled the myth of the East as a dark and silent jungle, filled with unspeakable threats. This imaginary is far from unique to Anglophone literature. We find it, for instance, also in Italy in the books of Emilio Salgari, who, although he had never set foot in Asia himself, wrote an extremely popular series of books about the adventures of a group of rebel pirates fighting against the British and Dutch colonial powers from their base in Malaysia. Significantly, the first book in

the series was entitled *The Mystery of the Black Jungle* (1895). It is exactly these kinds of tropes that Maugham explicitly challenges in his short stories and travelogues from the Far East, and there is no doubt that it is a conscious effort. In a short story titled ‘Before the Party’—the tale of an alcoholic husband murdered by his wife—that was included in his 1926 collection *The Casuarina Tree*, he wrote:

Next day they went up stream in a prahu. From the novels she had read she expected the rivers of Borneo to be dark and strangely sinister, but the sky was blue, dappled with little white clouds, and the green of the mangroves and the nipahs, washed by the flowing water, glistened in the sun. On each side stretched the pathless jungle, and in the distance, silhouetted against the sky, was the rugged outline of a mountain. The air in the early morning was fresh and buoyant. She seemed to enter upon a friendly, fertile land, and she had a sense of spacious freedom. They watched the banks for monkeys sitting on the branches of the tangled trees, and once Harold pointed out something that looked like a log and said it was a crocodile. (Maugham 2000a, 160)

Similar words recur in another story in the same collection, ‘The Force of Circumstance’, in which newlywed Doris, who only recently arrived in Malaysia to join her husband, discovers with horror that he has already fathered several children with a local woman:

Of course she had read novels about the Malay Archipelago and she had formed an impression of a sombre land with great ominous rivers and a silent, impenetrable jungle. When the little coasting steamer set them down at the mouth of the river, where a large boat, manned by a dozen Dyaks, was waiting to take them to the station, her breath was taken away by the beauty, friendly rather than awe-inspiring,

of the scene. It had a gaiety, like the joyful singing of birds in the trees, which she had never expected. (Maugham 2000a, 253)

And yet again, in ‘Neil Macadam’, a short story included in the 1933 collection *Ah King* that tells the tragic tale of the seduction of a young British assistant curator by the Russian wife of his boss, we find this discrepancy between the imagined East narrated by Conrad and the reality.

Now they were steaming up the river. At the mouth was a straggling fishermen’s village standing on piles in the water; on the bank grew thickly nipah palm and the tortured mangrove; beyond stretched the dense green of the virgin forest. In the distance, darkly silhouetted against the blue sky, was the rugged outline of a mountain. Neil, his heart beating with the excitement that possessed him, devoured the scene with eager eyes. He was surprised. He knew his Conrad almost by heart and he was expecting a land of brooding mystery. He was not prepared for the blue milky sky. Little white clouds on the horizon, like sailing boats becalmed, shone in the sun. The green trees of the forest glittered in the brilliant light. Here and there, on the banks, were Malay houses with thatched roofs, and they nestled cosily among fruit trees. Natives in dug-outs rowed, standing, up the river. Neil had no feeling of being shut in, nor in that radiant morning, of gloom, but of space and freedom. The country offered him a gracious welcome. (Maugham 2000a, 190)

In writing these lines, it is almost as if Maugham was attempting to assuage the concerns that Philip, the young doctor in Burgess’s *Earthly Power*, would express to his literary alter ego Toomey decades later. Generally speaking, it is undeniable that Maugham’s vision of the East is very different from that of Kipling and Conrad. In his writings, the East appears bright and warm, which



contrasts even more with the inner darkness of the foreign characters who populate his pages, almost all of whom cannot adapt to the life in the East. It might be possible to argue that in these depictions Maugham simply swapped one form of Orientalism with another, but his focus on the psychology of the foreigner in the colonial setting represents a fundamental departure from his predecessors. It is in this gaze into the inner dimension of ordinary people engaged in the colonial enterprise that his everlasting legacy lies.

## Experiences of the Soul

In conclusion, what should we make of William Somerset Maugham's writings on the Far East? Should we discard them as a mere Orientalist fantasy by a representative of the British colonial class, or does his work contain deeper insights into the colonial experience? In his depictions of Asia, especially in the early writings that precede his travels, Maugham indeed tended to portray an idealised image of the East that often deployed tropes typical of Orientalist writing. However, while he never really abandoned the idea of the East as an idealised Other, in the oeuvres that he produced after his earliest journeys to Asia and the Pacific, his approach became increasingly complex. Not only did he begin criticising the imaginary of the East as a dark and threatening place that had been promoted by the likes of Kipling and Conrad, but he also shifted his gaze to the inner life of members of British colonial society stranded in the farthest corners of the Empire.

If we follow Edward Said's (2003, 123) lead and consider Orientalism as a 'systematic discipline of *accumulation*' that 'far from ... being exclusively an intellectual or theoretical feature ... tends fatally towards the systematic accumulation of human beings and territories', then Maugham's writings definitely do not fit the bill. While lacking the openly critical verve of George Orwell, his stories on the

Far East do not present an idealised view of colonial rule—quite the opposite. By depicting misfit, adulterous, drunk, and murderous British subjects hardly at ease in their foreign context, Maugham actually undermined the myth of racial superiority that underpinned the British colonial endeavour. It is exactly in this depiction of the moral bankruptcy of British colonial society at a time when the Empire was already in full decline that the value of Maugham's writings on the Far East resides. It is true that he did not even attempt to give a voice to local people—and managed to upset at least one of the 'Asiatics' he portrayed in his books—but this, I believe, should be interpreted as a display of humility on his part rather than a form of contempt. As a passerby in the Far East, he simply felt out of his depth in dealing with the complexities of local societies and preferred to focus on the maladies of the categories he knew best, i.e. British officials, businessmen, and adventurers.

In one of the sketches included in *On a Chinese Screen*, Maugham recounts a meeting with a man who had travelled far and wide, working his way from London to South America and from there to Tahiti and eventually China. He had led an incredibly adventurous life, and had written a couple of dozen articles on his experiences. Still, Maugham found him extremely dull and insipid: 'I sought to discern how the variety of his experience had affected him; but though he was full of anecdote, a jovial, friendly creature, willing to talk at length of all he had seen, I could not discover that any of his adventures had intimately touched him ... The oddities of life amused him. He had an insatiable curiosity. But I think his experiences were merely of the body and were never translated into experiences of the soul. Perhaps that is why at bottom you felt he was commonplace' (Maugham 2020e, 7). The opposite could be said of Maugham: he might not have had that much experience of the body, but his Far Eastern writings show that he definitely was not lacking experience of the soul. ■

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