

The Alien Observer

The Pattern of Maugham: A Critical Portrait, by Anthony Curtis, *New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, Inc., 1974. 278 pp. \$10.95.*

MR. CURTIS' ANALYSIS of Somerset Maugham's writings is subtitled "A Critical Portrait"; it would be better described as "An Appreciative Celebration." It is refreshing to read literary criticism today that is neither written in academic technical jargon nor more concerned with the patristic quarrels of other critics than with the gospel of the author it is supposed to discuss. Nevertheless, despite his happy insights and his easy readability, Mr. Curtis does go too far in the other direction, so that Maugham's very real, if limited, literary achievement is in danger of being buried beneath two memorial mounds—the one of detailed accounts of minor works, the other of an excess of laudatory adjectives more appropriate to publishers' encomiums.

Mr. Curtis is well aware that Maugham is not among the greatest and rightly still

thinks it worth while to establish exactly how good he was within the second class. He is also aware of the unevenness of Maugham's work within the many fields of literature he mastered, yet his determination to span the whole of the master's work tends to disguise the pattern of Maugham's achievement. It may be that the "pattern" of his title refers to the famous Persian rug fragment that the drunken Cronshaw gives to Philip in *Of Human Bondage* as a key to life's meaning and which declares, in fact, that there is none. But even if this is more than one of the many ambiguous answers hidden under Maugham's apparent clarity, it undoubtedly refers only to Maugham's philosophy and not at all to his art, about which he had exact and definite ideas to the point of dogmatism.

The most central feature of Maugham's writing, the feature which gives some of it a claim to more than talent and technique, is his constant awareness of genius, of the highest achievements in literature, his desperate sense that he was divorced from it as he was divorced from human passion. No one was less content with the shallowness of his work than Maugham himself. And this discontent with his limitations gives to his best work—to many of his short stories, to one or two of his novels—echoes of something more poignant, more universal than the extraordinary acuteness of his bystander's view of human beings and the assured technique which he so admirably acquired and maintained. Mr. Curtis knows that his hero had these supreme moments, but he is too busy telling us all about everything that Maugham wrote to proclaim his few triumphs loudly enough.

Maugham's limitations as a writer spring from the fact that he was a visitor everywhere. Mr. Curtis remarks that his "knowledge of English life had for years been confined to the view from the penthouse suite of the Dorchester Hotel," so that he was not well fitted to write about England during World War II; but the man who shut himself away from common life in the Villa

Mauresque was not part of any sort of community. His isolation was emotional, not literal. Although in the early years fashionable London had received him, and later on he travelled very much, he remained a bad mixer, inhibited by his stammer, his shyness, and perhaps his homosexuality. It was his friend Gerald Haxton who talked to people, while Maugham listened and made notes. The detachment given by such an approach has its advantages, but it debarred Maugham effectively from deep knowledge of the people about whom he wrote.

Several critics have compared Maugham to Kipling. A comparison of Kipling's genius with Maugham's fine talent is instructive and points to a conclusion probably unacceptable to Mr. Curtis. For him some considerable part of Maugham's excellence reposes in his mastery and defense of traditional techniques in fiction, his aloofness from the experiments of Joyce or Mrs. Woolf. But to be an experimentalist in the fashion of the time is one thing, to find a need constantly to explore different angles of vision, different modes of expression, is quite another. It is this unmodish pioneer quality that makes Kipling's work extraordinary; it is Maugham's willingness to produce in 1915 a novel, *Of Human Bondage*, that smacks of Thackeray brushed by contact with Gissing and George Moore that makes him, in the last resort, sadly ordinary.

In his rather naïve determination to write clear narrative in plain, good English, Maugham, in fact, submitted to the fundamental falsity of believing that there was some separation between form and content. He sought in *The Moon and Sixpence* to understand the nature of artistic genius, and in *The Razor's Edge* to comprehend religious mysticism, but he tried to do so without bursting the elegant, immaculate shell of his plain English prose and his well ordered narrative. As a result, they seem now his only pretentious work, because writing dangerous and adventurous thought demands risking all one's acquired

technical mastery, which, of course, has nothing to do with allegiance for or against the contemporary *avant garde*.

One of the virtues of Mr. Curtis' book is that it sets Maugham's work in the social context of the author's rapidly changing England. Where Maugham is best, he is dealing with three peculiarly Edwardian concepts of man: the "genius," the gentleman, and the cad—endlessly representing and reexamining them in subtle and oblique relation to his own autobiography, and observing above all their tragi-comic dissolution in the post-Imperial England of the 1920's and 1930's. The same is true of his Edwardian women: the brittle literary society lady, and the golden Kentish (or otherwise native) whore. These types, which were once dismissed as quaint anachronisms, are now of increasing historical interest, telling us much about the new distortions in present English society. For this reason these parts of Maugham's work will find their own honored place, especially in classic stories like "Rain," "The Yellow Streak," and "The Poet."

Mr. Curtis, in a memorable closing salutation, feels that such elevation is unnecessary:

I have ascended the North Face of Henry James, and the Annapurna of Proust, and I have been greatly exhilarated by the conquest of these great mountains, planting here and there many puny flags of understanding. . . . But I cannot live there permanently. I come back to the open, green, cultivated lowlands of Maugham.

Indeed, Maugham's hills and gentle inclinations are not comparable with the James Range, and are hardly visible from Mount Dostoevsky. Whatever his limitations, Maugham was a very skilful storyteller who will continue to give pleasure to his readers for a long time, particularly through his short stories. His admirers should regard that a tribute, not a slight.

Reviewed by GABRIEL GERSH