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Other places, other selves

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# Trading Places: Somerset Maugham's Tales From Abroad

Glenn Hooper

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- I
- 1 William Somerset Maugham was born on 25th January 1874 at the British Embassy in Paris. Author of numerous plays, novels, essays and travel literature, Maugham is probably best remembered for his short stories, particularly 'The Out Station', 'P & O', 'The Colonel's Lady', and many others. Although Maugham's literary conservatism led many critics to castigate him ('Class Two. Division One', wrote Lytton Strachey), and to dismiss his writings as either too journalistic, or too commercially successful to be seriously considered, many of his stories, particularly in their attention to ethnic and racial tension, provide a significantly graphic portrait of the ideology of empire. Whether in Tahiti or Honolulu, or indeed aboard the vessels that carried his characters from one location to another, Maugham consistently flavoured and peopled his stories with 'imperial' characters: plantation owners, petty officials, dissident adventurers, and the sort of determined missionaries that seemed to hold such interest for Maugham.
  - 2 In this paper I want to examine the stories of a writer who appeared to many as a quintessentially 'English' figure, but one who was born in France, albeit technically on British soil. A cosmopolitan writer, at ease within many cultures, Maugham married what he understood best to those themes which he knew would be of the utmost interest to his readers: exotic locations, stories of adventure and, frequently loss, among the 'high seas', and of lives that were filled with intense desires and animosities. While some of the stories gathered in collections such as *Cosmopolitans* are quite short, others stretch our idea of what constitutes a short story considerably; and although the subject matter for many of the stories varies - complete with a Maupassant-Poe formulation not suited to all tastes - the tales have a very topical flavour. It is this topicality - the representationalism, the pseudo-anthropological charge that Maugham

gives to his writing, and the very relevance that he has for students of empire - that I wish to discuss. Fallen from critical favour in recent years, I will argue that Maugham's writing needs to be re-examined within the context of colonial and postcolonial writing, and that his short stories, in particular, present one of the most detailed and evocative studies of end-of-era imperialism.

- 3 Maugham, as a French as well as an English speaking audience will be aware, was a prolific writer. He wrote forty-two books; which included travelogues, collections of essays, and autobiographical sketches, in addition to his twenty-seven plays, many of which were successful enough to have been turned into movies or else adapted for television. In terms of historical significance - when he wrote, the subjects he covered, the personal involvement he had with world events - Maugham was also impressive. A member of the British Intelligence, an inveterate traveller, an astute observer of artistic movements and personalities, he saw the Boer War, two World Wars and, in British terms at least, six monarchies come and go. Maugham died a few months short of ninety-two.
- 4 When I first saw details of the Angers 1997 Symposium, with its themes of Self and Other, as well as the whole battery of complex alliances and transgressions that frequently accompany movement of the sort implied by 'Other Places', I thought that Maugham would make an ideal choice. 'Other Places' were precisely the sorts of venues Maugham - and frequently Gerald Haxton, his secretary and lover - continually visited. Tahiti and Honolulu, Samoa, Wellington and Tonga, were on the Maugham-Haxton itinerary several times. Of course Maugham travelled much more extensively than this, travels that apparently furnished him with suitable subject matter for the novels, sketches and short stories that he was to continue to produce over the years. In addition, he inherited a personal as well as a cultural environment that had established, or was establishing, travel and migration as an almost natural course in the life of a writer. In Paul Fussell's *Abroad: British Literary Travelling between the Wars*, especially where he writes of "the vanguard of the British Literary diaspora, the great flight of writers from England in the 20's and 30's", the extent to which travel was a common experience, at least for a certain class and profession, is manifest (11). "This diaspora seems one of the signals of literary modernism", suggests Fussell, "as we can infer from virtually no modern writer's remaining where he's "supposed" to be except perhaps Proust - we think of Pound in London, Paris, and Italy; Eliot in London; Joyce in Trieste and Paris; Mann ultimately in the United States" (11). And in *The Summing Up*, a collection of part-autobiographical sketches first published in 1938, Maugham writes of the particular impression that his father, that distant and legalistic figure who worked for the British Embassy, had left on him at an early age :

My father, I do not know why unless he was drawn by some such restlessness for the unknown as has consumed his son, went to Paris and became solicitor to the British Embassy[...]. He was a great traveller for those days. He had been to Turkey, Greece and Asia Minor and in Morocco as far as Fez, which was a place few people then visited. He had a considerable library of travel books, and the apartment in the Avenue d'Antin was filled with the things he had brought back, Tanagra statuettes, Rhodes ware, and Turkish daggers in hilts of richly decorated silver (14).

- 5 If 'Other Places' seems like a natural enough critical departure for Maugham, then 'Other Selves' is a somewhat less easy idea with which to work. As most critical appreciations of Maugham will affirm, Maugham is less a composition of 'Selves' than a series of 'Masks'. His efforts at self-concealment were notorious, and largely successful.

Destroying large amounts of correspondence, diaries and casual jottings in his old age, Maugham's preoccupation with secrecy and the lengths to which he went to out-fox any possible biographical developments after his death, were extraordinary. The reasons for such concealment, of course, can be only speculative at this stage. Whether it was because of his homosexual liaisons, or because of the often fractious relationship which had developed between Maugham and the critical establishment, is not clear. Another possibility is that Maugham, that most conservative of writers, was pleased that the notion of the 'Self', a dubious enough term at the best of times, was under increasing modernist pressure, and that it had had its day as a useful metaphysical category. Hence his own, sometimes fluid, sometimes antagonistic, attitude towards the subject in many of his writings. Another option is, of course, to simply attribute Maugham's unease with the topic to the issue of travel itself. In Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*, the narrator, speaking of the cultural and literal traffic between India and England (and he uses precisely those terms), suggests that "Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (15). And later, "The word 'translation' comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across'. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men" (17). Perhaps the notion of another 'Place' giving rise to another 'Self' is exactly what Maugham believed also, although the sense that such translations are not always easily accommodated is more than developed in the course of several of his short stories.

- 6 Somerset Maugham published ten volumes of short stories during his long life. They have been gathered into many subsequent collected volumes, of course, but within these ten there are a few individual stories that I wish to offer very brief assessments of in terms of identity, self and selves, travel and place. The volumes I am concerned with cover the period from the beginning of the 1920s through to the early 1930s, although they are based on five journeys that Maugham and Haxton made between 1916 and 1926. Other volumes were published during this creatively busy period, but they lack the coherence or compatibility - geographical and thematic - which these particular stories have. Sometimes occasional tales dealing with what Maugham, and some of his critics, still refer to as 'The South Seas', may be found in other collections also - *Cosmopolitans* (1936) for example - but they are insufficient for a number of reasons that I do not have the space to expand upon here. The stories that I do wish to examine come, then, from four separate volumes: *The Trembling of a Leaf* (1921), *The Casaurina Tree* (1926), and *Ah King* (1933) - the texts that comprise the Malayan Trilogy in other words - plus a single story from *On a Chinese Screen* (1922).

## II

- 7 To travel is frequently to take on other identities and ideas. The shape-shifting nature of travel, its ability to strip people of beliefs and conventions, is something that many writers are only too aware of. Jonathan Raban, in *Coasting* for example, uses travel as a means of self-examination and discovery. He regards the Irish Sea, the English Channel, the North Sea, the various estuaries and water-ways, not just as circumnavigatory opportunities or routes, as means of discovery in the normal manner of things, but as an opportunity for self, sometimes, national or regional inquiry. When Somerset Maugham, in *The Trembling of a Leaf*, gathered together six, sometimes quite long, short

stories, he made his characters travel outwards. Departers, Exiles, Escapees of one sort or another, Maugham's fictional world is that of movement and transience. Travel is about flux, Maugham would seem to suggest, and whatever climatic or meteorological differences might exist between regions, the sort of flux that travel usually creates is of the metaphysical variety, the sort that has the power to change or alter us in very significant ways.

- 8 In the short story entitled 'Red', for example, Neilson - one of two characters who has gravitated to the tropics from an early age - declares that he first came to the South Seas for very specific reasons: "I came out to these islands for my health. My lungs were bad and they said I hadn't a year to live" he confides (109). But although attention is paid to the clarity of the air, the freshness of the climate, and the uncomplicated nature of the lifestyle, the potential for self-transformation looms large. Indeed, Neilson's previous life in Stockholm, at the University where he studied philosophy - his "past life" he describes it - has been abandoned in favour of a re-created self, one in which the East is seen as a place of respite and recuperation (110). By contrast the West is associated with illness - both physical and spiritual - a place that has to be escaped at all costs. But 'Red' is a curious story, and it is a wonder at times that Maugham is less critically well-received than he is, for in this particular tale the complex relationship between East and West is played out in terms of courtship and heterosexual love. A young man, who is described in a rather Wildean way as being "made like a Greek god, broad in the shoulders and thin in the flanks; he was like Apollo", arrives on an island whereupon he meets, and then falls in love with, an indigenous woman (112). After a short time, in which the relationship between the two is made the subject of a very charming rumination on the possibilities of inter-racial contact, he finds himself shanghaied and removed from the island, seemingly never to return. Neilson, the philosophical presence at the centre of the text, arrives shortly after the departure of this 'Red God', only to fall in love with the same woman who, not surprisingly, expresses little interest in him, saying that she is waiting for Red to return. Eventually, however, she relents, agrees to live with Neilson, but cannot bring herself to love him. And although they continue to cohabit, the relationship becomes sour and routine until Red, some thirty years later, reappears, prompting Neilson to break with his island past in exchange for a return to Europe.
- 9 Although the imperial vision in Maugham's stories is sometimes less overt than in the writings of others - the Maugham story seeming to employ the Orient as an exotic backdrop to a variety of settler concerns - several Orientalist representations persist. The sense of arrival and courtship, the conflicting emotions of loyalty and mastery, the manner in which the two men - from two different European communities - attempt or effect ownership of the indigenous woman, create an interesting tableau. However, where the political analogy of appropriation and ownership becomes problematic, is when one considers the nature in which this particular story of inter-racial love is presented. On the one hand the story might appear to indicate - because of the reciprocity that existed between the woman and Red, and because of the later infatuation of the woman by Neilson - that the narrator was, in fact, deconstructing notions of racial purity. However, at many points in the story Maugham points to the physicality of the characters, and to the sorts of racial differences that exist between them. Red, for example, is framed within a specifically polarized, some might say hierarchical, arrangement. According to the narrator, he has "that soft roundness that

Praxiteles gave him, and that suave, feminine grace which has in it something troubling and mysterious. His skin was dazzling white, milky, like satin; his skin was like a woman's" (112). Leaving aside the homoerotic element with which these lines seem to be equally occupied, this description is notable for the 'feminized' but, also for the aestheticised, nature of the physical body, an aestheticization that embraces a great deal more than epidermal perfection. To have the power to absorb or impress by one's whiteness, in other words, to be not just European but whiter than white, makes Red a symbol of political as well as physical authority. As I've already suggested, the sexual charge that Maugham brings to the text is also interesting; especially as it happens to operate on two, quite distinct, levels. If Red holds a homoerotic fascination for Maugham in terms of his physical appearance, then arguably he holds a lesbian fascination also, as a 'womanly' partner for Sally, the native woman ('his skin was like a woman's'). Either way, in refuting the possibility of a relationship with either man, the narrator retains the notion of racial homogeneity intact. The sexual self might be tempted to interrogate notions of racial propriety when abroad, but the ideology of empire, with its parameters and taboos, displays a strict code from which few can successfully escape.

- 10 In the short story entitled 'The Pool', the fourth story in the *Trembling* collection, something of the same subject arises. 'The Pool' is a longer, and in some ways more sophisticated tale in which a character called Lawson, described by the narrator as a 'gentleman', has married and settled in Samoa. Although Lawson has not travelled to Samoa for his health, he refers to his health as one of the principal reasons for remaining: "My lungs are a bit dicky. I couldn't stand an English winter now" he remarks (153). But what is even more interesting in this story than the usual Maugham association of the Orient with pleasure and escape, or with its potential to heal the physical or emotional malaise of its European visitors, is the way in which the reader is moved back and forth in terms of identifying the central character with a particular terrain. To begin with, Lawson regards Samoa not just as an idyllic place, full of carefree banter, long drinks, and trips to the hills with planters with whom he has become friendly, but as a corrective to the 'civilized' nature of Europe :

But the spot that entranced him was a pool a mile or two away from Apia to which in the evenings he often went to bathe. There was a little river that bubbled over the rocks in a swift stream, and then, after forming the deep pool, ran on, shallow and crystaline, past a ford made by the great stones where the natives came sometimes to bathe or to wash their clothes [...] At the hour when Lawson went, there was not a soul and he lingered for a long time, now floating idly in the water, now drying himself in the evening sun, enjoying the solitude and the friendly silence. He did not regret London then, nor the life that he had abandoned, for life as it was seemed complete and exquisite (154).

- 11 In these first moments, and motivated strongly of course by his love for a 'native' woman, Lawson makes a specific point of 'crossing over', of moving from London and a history of self with which he has become bored and a little antagonistic, to seeing in Samoa, and this woman with whom he has become infatuated, a new self, free of bonds, with which he might begin afresh. But as the relationship becomes routine - typical of many of Maugham's stories: initial happiness and self-discovery, followed by disappointment and loss - a sense of return is seen as necessary if the relationship is to survive. The story, as I have suggested, is significant in terms of the various issues the narrator evokes. For example, although the marriage signalled at an early point in the story actually takes place, the woman's issue of racial classification is deemed more

problematic in this instance than in many others. Described as a 'half-caste', she presents an already established confusion concerning identification and loyalty for the narrator, bringing the whole notion of racial purity and the sort of coherence sought by many of the settler communities of Maugham's stories, into question. As the relationship crumbles, then, Lawson feels that if he can get back to Europe with his wife, he can save the marriage: "At whatever cost he must get back to Europe," he says, "And when he went to see Ethel, frail and lovely in her bed, surrounded by native women, his determination was strengthened. If he took her away among his own people she would belong more completely to him (162)." But just as surely as Samoa could not provide Lawson with a new identity, neither could it change the manner and emotions of Ethel in Aberdeen, where they move for two years. The story concludes with the suicide of Lawson in the beautiful pool in which he first saw Ethel, weighted down with a rock, tied to his neck.

- 12 It seems to me that the sorts of questions that Maugham seems to pose, in several of his short stories then, concern whether it is possible to overcome one's social, national and, in some respects, racial inheritances, even when the ties of loyalty and persuasion might appear to be very obviously absent; or whether it really is an impossible task: whether the inhibitions of 'place' are forever there. In a collection of essays edited by M. Michael, entitled *Travellers Quest: Contributions towards a Philosophy of Travel*, the Swiss Traveller, Ella Maillart, suggests, "Yes, one also travels to escape from it all. But that is the great illusion, it cannot be done: it was always myself that I found at the end of the journey (118). " In some respects, although Maugham also appears excited by the possibilities of travel, escape, and the opportunities that it brings, he too, feels a certain unease about the outcome of travel, and certainly about the possibility of retreat from self. Perhaps he'd seen too many of these expatriate communities to feel that he knew something of the likely outcome. At the beginning of another story from this collection, entitled 'Honolulu', for example, he starts by saying: "The wise traveller travels only in imagination [...] the best journeys [are those] that you take at your own fireside, for then you lose none of your illusions (125-26)." Although it is probably best to not take this sentiment too seriously; after all, Maugham was himself a great risk-taker, hungry, even aggressive for power at certain junctures of his life, and, of course, someone who used the the disguise that travel provided - an excellent opportunity to develop his gay relationships for example - constantly.
- 13 If 'Other Selves' follows on from 'Other Places' - and I don't think it necessarily does, or rather not in the sort of metaphysically fluid way that it seems to suggest - then the Malayan Archipelago that Maugham continued to explore in the collection of stories published under the title of *The Casuarina Tree*, is explored with particular relish. The Resident of Borneo, Mr. Warburton, in 'The Outstation', for example, is an emphatically intractable 'Self'. Indeed, for Warburton, like so many colonial officials of the period, national identity, self, and self-respect, go hand in hand. Keen to maintain his old identity - for fear that a change in direction might bring some level of contamination and loss - Warburton manages to defy the environment to which he has given so many years service. The climate might suggest a move away from European, particularly formal European, dress for example, but Warburton's view is that to change is to give way, and ultimately to lose, a sense of self: "When you are dining in your own bungalow you will, of course, dress as you think fit", he says to his newly arrived subordinate, "but when you do me the pleasure of dining with me, perhaps you will come to the

conclusion that it is only polite to wear the costume usual in civilized society (270).” Unlike the early behaviour of Lawson in ‘The Pool’, for whom all change is to be welcomed, since it purifies and refreshes the self, Warburton clings desperately to another era and another place. Crossing boundaries and territories, that mobility of mind that conditions many of the characters of Maugham’s fiction, is strangely ineffective in this instance. And although we can see the character’s rhetorical efforts to cushion himself against the exotic ‘Otherness’ of Borneo as a typical enough response, much of the order that he tries to impose on his life and the landscape is as much an expression of denial as it is unacceptance: the *Times* newspapers that he has sent to him, for instance, and which he ceremoniously reads in chronological order, effectively shuts the Orient out. In this particular instance, then, we might say that Self and Place are entirely divorced, or perhaps split. Or, rather, the place in which the Self resides is seen as all surface, something to which questions of identity and loyalty and association are of little consequence.

14 ‘The Outstation’ is, of course, more than just a story about Warburton’s colonial mentality. It also charts the relationship between Warburton and Cooper, who interestingly enough is described as a ‘colonial’ - in this instance a reference to the fact that Cooper’s place of origin happens to be Barbados. The relationship between the two men becomes fraught, intensely demarcated, and ultimately fatal: Cooper, who is very much the embodiment of colonial authority, is eventually killed by an indigenous assassin. But there are some interesting moments in the text which give Maugham the opportunity to evaluate the exhaustion and weariness of the end-of-empire era. Indeed, Maugham makes a very interesting observation about Self and Place in the case of Warburton’s travels to England. Although England is associated with refinement and gentility, with a certain taste and standard, it is only in Borneo that England and English tastes can be properly preserved. Resident in Borneo but spiritually resident in England, Warburton inhabits a characteristically colonial world in which the exoticised, sometimes fetishised, landscapes of the Orient, with their historically arrested social and cultural milieux, are seen as preferable to England: “And when he returned to Borneo from his visits to England it was now with something like relief. His friends, like himself, were no longer young, and there was a new generation which looked upon him as a tiresome old man. It seemed to him that the England of today had lost a good deal of what he had loved in the England of his youth. But Borneo remained the same. It was home to him now (276).” What Maugham appears to be suggesting, then, is that it is only in Borneo that the type of England that Warburton knows can be nurtured. It is only in the tropics that the standards that he respects can be satisfactorily maintained. A little like the differences in tastes and judgement developed in Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson*, between those educated in the rhetoric of empire of the 1890s - the period of high imperialism - and those whose experiences are of the possibly more liberal teens and 1920s, Maugham sees the example of Warburton as emblematic of a whole class of colonial officials. It’s not that Warburton sees Borneo as Home in the normal sense of the word; it’s certainly not home to him in any aboriginal sense. Rather Borneo is the repository of all that he associates with the English ‘home’ of his early years and, ostensibly, with an idea of empire he has both internalised and learned to revere. Borneo is more English than England, it would appear, at least within the confines of the Bungalow and the Club.

15 John Whitehead, in his *Somerset Maugham: A Reappraisal*, suggests that Maugham “found in the Orient, besides the beauty and the romance he had expected, a new self (80).”



Whitehead believes that Maugham's travels allowed for a sense of discovery and renewal for the writer, providing him with the sort of material from which he might gain personal insights, in addition to a sense of the complexity of empire. However, the notion that Maugham displays significant tolerance for those individuals who exist on the margins of life - the 'half-castes', the colonial figures such as Cooper, or the variety of down-and-outs who find themselves washed up on the islands which he has visited, whom Anthony Curtis calls "the driftwood of humanity" - is not without its problems (95). True, Maugham reveals a willingness to navigate, sometimes intelligently, around the complex nature of cross-class or inter-racial relations. But the nature of these representations still raises questions. As we have seen, the dispossessed or peripheral about whom Maugham writes, are either sites of degeneration - and there is an unpleasant anthropological element to much of his discussions of 'half-caste' characters - or, like Cooper, individuals whose manners and ideas are seen as vulgar, and therefore unacceptable. Maugham is keenly aware of the damaging nature of the English class system, something that he considered at several points in his career, but a lurking notion that he found many of these characters personally unsatisfactory still persists.

- 16 In 'The Force of Circumstance', one of Maugham's best-remembered pieces dealing with inter-racial sex, the narrator interrogates the consequences of passing over and becoming 'Other' - as Maugham sees it - and the sense of loss that might be associated with such change. There are a few moments in the text when the predictable nature of the story interrupts what could have been an even more astute examination of the problems of identity, the challenges of transition and exchange, and how these might be more successfully accommodated. Indeed, Maugham's desire for catharsis, the whole obsessional working-out pattern of his tales, is brought very forcefully home in this instance. However, the story is also rich territory for the student of end-of-empire literature. Guy and Doris, a recently married couple, display a keen affection for one another in what is seen as an edenic environment. Doris has recently travelled out to Sembulu from England. Her sense of arrival, of discovery almost, is clearly defined:
- 17 "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. On each bank of the river were mangroves and nipa palms, and behind them the dense green of the forest. In the distance stretched blue mountains, range upon range, as far as the eye could see (247)." But the signals given very early in the story, and too obviously in my opinion, regarding Guy's previous life, flag a downturn in the relationship. An indigenous woman appears around the house, children of a mixed marriage are spotted by Doris at the edge of the compound, and Guy's attitude appears increasingly out of character. The issues that Maugham then raises are engagingly developed, particularly the sense of disgust and self-disgust that Doris experiences when confronted with Guy's amorous advances and the truth about his other family. But the real heart of the story, it seems to me, concerns the hybrid nature of Guy's identity: "He was born in Sembulu, where his father had served for thirty years under the second Sultan, and on leaving school he had entered the same service. He was devoted to the country. 'After all, England's a foreign land to me,' he told her. 'My home's Sembulu'" (243-44).

- 18 Unlike Resident Warburton in the 'Outstation' - and there's a nice touch of irony in that title of Resident - Guy's attachment to England is very much that of the hyphenated settler. Like the Anglo-Irish in Ireland who felt 'English in Ireland and Irish in England' - as Molly Keane once put it - Guy shares many of the cultural belief systems of Britain, but he has allowed himself to be corrupted by the lax and leisured, in this case sexual, nature of the tropics. If Warburton had to content himself with the discovery of an English Self in Borneo, then Guy had to discover a hybrid, Colonial Self in England. As with many of Maugham's stories, travel might infer some sort of, frequently uneven exchange, but often those truly alien, temptingly exotic, or incomprehensible moments come from within: "Towards sunset he came back and had two or three drinks, and then it was time to dress for dinner. There wasn't much use in dressing now; he might just as well be comfortable; he put on a loose native jacket and a sarong. That was what he had been accustomed to wear before Doris came. He was barefoot (266)."
- 19 The themes explored in 'Force of Circumstance' find echoes in several of Maugham's other tales. Although the short story entitled 'The Vessel of Wrath', from the *Ah King* collection of 1933, adopts a much more conservative, and in some ways even more sinister attitude towards sexual dissidence, Maugham opens his story on an upbeat note. By discussing how wonderfully detailed a handbook for travellers is the 'Yangtse Kiang Pilot', Maugham reveals the seductive nature of such texts, with their recitals of visual and olfactory pleasure :

These business-like books take you upon enchanted journeys of the spirit; and their matter-of-fact style, the admirable order, the concision with which the material is set before you, the stern sense of the practical that informs every line, cannot dim the poetry that, like the spice-laden breeze that assails your senses with a more than material languor when you approach some of those magic islands of the Eastern seas, blows with so sweet a fragrance through the printed pages. They tell you the anchorages and the landing places, what supplies you can get at each spot, and where you can get water; they tell you the lights and buoys, tides, winds and weather that you will find there. They give you brief information about the population and the trade. And it is strange when you think how sedately it is all set down, with no words wasted, that so much else is given you besides. What? Well, mystery and beauty, romance and the glamour of the unknown (813-14).

- 20 Mystery and romance are certainly much in evidence within the short stories of Somerset Maugham, as is duplicity, revenge, a great amount of bravado, and much foolishness. He writes of agents and agencies, of the sometimes hurried nature of colonial life, but of its predictability also; of the way in which it could entrance, but also disappoint. Throughout his stories, the Selves of many of his characters are in a shifting, uneasy state. And as for what exactly travel has done for many of them, the results of this, too, are sometimes confused. In the 'Vessel of Wrath', for example, the Self is seen as an essentially fluid category. As with many of Maugham's stories, the themes of religious mania and/or conversion, physical and moral degeneration, and latent homosexuality, provide the stimuli for an intense exploration of the realities of settler life. The Dutch Controleur, as he is significantly called, is a thirty year old man in whom supreme power has been vested, and in whom the narrator develops a rather curious interest. Dressed in brilliant white, in the uniform of colonial authority in public, but in the native sarong when in private, the controleur represents not just an interesting blend of colonial and indigene, of a figure perfectly at ease within both cultures, but someone who suggests sexual as well as ethnic transfer. Presented as a convenient enough method of adapting to the harshness of the climate, Maugham

manages to suggest in the case of the Controleur's dress both the pleasures of cross-dressing and autoeroticism. And not only that, but the pleasure of self-knowing, and of enjoying such behaviour also :

Mr. Gruyter was standing in front of a looking-glass. He had his trousers on and was admiring his smooth chest. He arched his back in order to throw it out and throw in his belly and with a good deal of satisfaction gave his breast three or four resounding slaps. It was a manly chest. When the boy brought the message he looked at his own eyes in the mirror and exchanged a slightly ironic smile with them (815).

- 21 And Ginger Ted, the rather wayward figure who also lives on the island, and who has a reputation for alcohol abuse, but mostly a reputation based on regular and unrestrained sexual contact with native women, brings an additional charge to the text. Indeed this particular story is as much about the sexual nature of these settler lives and, implicitly, of how their existences have been shaped by the sexual licence established as a result of colonial contact, as anything. The story develops much more than this, of course, with the whole missionising process and, more specifically, the role of established religion as a constitutive part of the imperial process, coming in for some consideration. Movement between islands, disease and contamination of the native population, incarceration and moral improvement; these were the sorts of themes which lent themselves so readily to the popular and apparently transparent fictions favoured by Somerset Maugham.

### III

- 22 Maugham was a figure who, in both his life and work, embodied many of the preoccupations - as well as the ideological and social tensions - of his era. Many of his short stories, as I have tried to indicate, deal with flux and transience, and with the difficulties of adapting to challenging environments. I'd like to finish this paper with a brief reference to a story from his *On a Chinese Screen* collection of 1922, called 'Mirage', because in addition to being a rather curious text in its own right, it seems to exemplify precisely these themes. The story is like many others, in fact a good deal less memorable. It tells of a character from England called Grosely who has spent most of his working life in China. We're given in the first pages much background detail concerning his early days as a medical student, and what brought him to the Orient in the first place. But the story really only picks up when, after years of very difficult saving and hard work, Grosely is able to travel back to the England he has adored, with the money he has accumulated. What happens when he eventually arrives, however, is perhaps not all that surprising. London has changed, nothing is where it should be, manners and tastes are apparently more sophisticated. Grosely hates it :

It was different from how he remembered it, there was much more traffic and he felt confused and a little at sea. He went to the Criterion and found there was no longer a bar where he had been used to lounge and drink. There was a restaurant in Leicester Square where he had been in the habit of dining when he was in funds, but he could not find it; he supposed it had been torn down (201).

- 23 What he next does is really quite interesting. He leaves England, his memories and perhaps part of his Self, for China. En route, he visits places like Singapore and Colombo. But at the last stopping place before China proper - Haiphong - he remains. He's only supposed to go ashore for forty-eight hours, but he stays, because for this

character at least a sense of self - partial and fluid though it may be - is so immediately tied to place: "I've never been so happy in my life. I often think I'll go on to Shanghai some day, but I don't suppose I ever shall. And God knows, I never want to see England again", he remarks to the narrator (204). Looking at life through the wreaths of opium smoke that he exhales several times a day, Grosely represents the partially disorientated traveller who has settled for flux rather than fixity, who finds the psychological and spatial indistinction of Haiphong something of a respite. Positioned between east and west, undecided where home actually is, Grosely seems to find the in-between existence of Haiphong not only agreeable, but something of an answer. In this story, at least, we find one of Maugham's characters finally settling for 'Neither Place, Other Selves', an indication perhaps of a deeply conservative attitude, but one brought about by the anxiety of travel and its ability to perplex and confuse our sense of Self. "Those last words of his revealed him to me", remarks the narrator :

I knew that on the threshold of China his courage had failed him. England had been such a terrible disappointment that now he was afraid to put China to the test too. If that failed him he had nothing. For years England had been like a mirage in the desert. But when he had yielded to the attraction, those shining pools and the palm trees and the green grass were nothing but the rolling sandy dunes. He had China, and so long as he never saw it again he kept it (203).

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## ABSTRACTS

Dans cet article, Glenn Hooper étudie les nouvelles d'un écrivain qui, bien que né en France, représente pour beaucoup l'anglais type par excellence. Figure cosmopolite à l'aise dans de nombreuses cultures, Maugham dépeint ce qu'il connaît le mieux. Cependant, en narrateur passionné, il ne cessa d'être motivé par ce qu'il vendait à ses lecteurs : des décors exotiques, des récits d'aventure avec des pertes fréquentes en "haute mer" et des vies remplies de désirs et d'animosités intenses. Les nouvelles de Maugham représentent l'une des études les plus détaillées et évocatrices de la fin de l'ère impérialiste et s'intéressent de près à l'identité

coloniale soumise à la mouvance, à l'angoisse du voyage, aux difficultés de l'adaptation.  
(Traduction Martine Rimbourg)

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