

W. Somerset Maugham: The Man and the Writer

A New Perspective

Prof. Kamal K Roy
Retired Professor of English
University of North Bengal.

Abstract

This paper attempts to present Maugham, the man and the writer, as far as possible, in his own terms. Its thesis is that Maugham is, in contrast to his current critical image, essentially a philosophical novelist. His long writing career is an uninterrupted pilgrimage for the grail of a better substitute for his discarded Christianity. All his intellectual departures and arrivals such as materialism/naturalism, subjective idealism/aestheticism, absolute idealism/mysticism are so many stages in his career-long quest. Himself a schizoid, he images man as a harmony of complementary opposites, the artist as a bundle of incompatibles. As for his homosexuality, a tacitly acknowledged evil, it relates to his mysticism, and contributes to his artistic originality. Near-total critical indifference to Maugham's abiding philosophical preoccupation is perhaps one of the main reasons for his present modest stock.

Keywords: Multiple personality, Schizoid, Homosexuality, Materialism, Idealism, Mysticism.

Nothing is consistent, nothing is fixed or certain in my life. By turns I resemble and differ, there is no living creature so foreign to me that I cannot be sure of approaching. — Andre Gide, *Journals 1889—1049*

[...] man never has lived and cannot live without a philosophy of life. — Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession, The Gospel in Brief and What I Believe*

[...] the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material. — T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*

Faith in reason is the trust that the ultimate natures of things lie together in a harmony which excludes mere arbitrariness. --- A.N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*

Section One: A Schizoid

Every creative person is, according to Jung, *per se* a divided being; he is at once “a human being with a personal life” and “an impersonal creative process” (*Modern Man* 194). What, however, is peculiar to Maugham is that it is not the exigencies of art but the wounds of life that fracture his self. There is an almost critical consensus that the orphan Maugham is a classic instance of the deprived child. Morgan very aptly calls the trauma of his mother’s death to the boy Maugham his “original wound” (9), Calder equally aptly “a devastation” (*Willie* 8). Morgan then suggests “a connection between Maugham’s decision to be a writer and the death of his mother” (45), Calder between “the death of Edith Maugham” and “Maugham’s homosexual temperament” (*Willie* 11). The psychiatrist Laing thinks that “loss of the mother, at a certain stage, threatens the individual with loss of his self” (*Divided Self* 116). Maugham too holds that the death of his mother has caused him a permanent wound. Such has been its cumulative effect that “I have never quite lost the sense that my living life was a mirage in which I did this and that because that was how it fell out, but which, even while I was playing my part in it, I could look at from a distance and know for the mirage it was” (*Summing Up* 182). The mother’s traumatic death that disintegrates his self and derealizes his life most likely orientates him in course of time towards mysticism as well. Be that as it may, the sudden transfer of the hitherto cosseted boy from the cosmopolitan, luxurious, loving ambience of his parental home in Paris to that of the provincial, unloving vicarage of his stern uncle in Whitstable must have simply unhinged him. Exposed to life’s grim reality, and that too in his most impressionable years, he has every reason to look upon himself as fate’s chosen victim. No less damaging is his boyhood bilingualism. The mature Maugham is not exactly the average Englishman. It is all because of his birth in France which has “enabled me to learn French and English simultaneously and thus instilled into me two modes of life, two liberties, two points of view” (*Selected Prefaces* 79). This doubleness has prevented him from developing a strong sense of belonging and hence a secure sense of self-identity. His stammer too has affected his overall personality. A bar to easy and spontaneous communication with his fellows and a cause of humiliation, it turns him into a shy, self-conscious introvert.

The first climacteric of Maugham's youth is his loss of faith during his heuristic pilgrimage in Germany (1890-1892). His intellect cocks a snook at God; his instinct cowers at the thought of the Devil. The long-term effect of his instinct-intellect polarity is that his determined effort to resolve it generates the spiritual dynamic that sustains his creativity for over five decades. Nevertheless a note of wistfulness marks his confession on the issue: "It may be that my heart, having found rest nowhere, had some deep ancestral craving for God and immortality which my reason would have no truck with" (*SU* 182). Unsurprisingly the twenty-two year old Maugham's multiple personality precipitates his identity crisis, tellingly captured in one of the few giveaways in *A Writer's Notebook*: "There are times when I look over the various parts of my character with perplexity. I recognize that I am made up of several persons and that the person which at the moment has the upper hand will inevitably give place to another. But which is the real me? All of them or none"(17)? Maugham's relentless search for the authentic self has thus a personal urgency behind it. A plausible answer to Maugham's anxious query is that his very awareness of his several fragmentary, fleeting selves argues the existence of a focal self, implicated in and yet transcendent to them all. Maugham's split self, however, can both amuse and anguish him. The young Maugham's puckish self makes fun of his meditative self's preoccupation with such ultimates as life's meaningfulness or otherwise and God's existence or nonexistence: "He raged, a twopenny-halfpenny Prometheus, as unquiet thoughts gnawed at his heart, while he strove to pierce the mystery of life" (*WN* 56). This capacity of Maugham to look at himself from the outside is the source of his humour and of his tolerance.

Maybe Maugham's polarity spawns some of his peculiarities such as his flair for clinical self-scrutiny. It is shown at its best when, with his characteristic cool, he registers the minutiae of what might have been his last moment. As the victim of a boat accident, Maugham was trying desperately to keep afloat: "I suppose the struggle was so severe that there was no time for any emotion, and even when I felt my strength going and thought that in a moment or two I should have to give up, I am not conscious that I had any feeling of fear or even distress at the thought of death by drowning" (*WN* 163). This tendency on Maugham's part to split himself into subject and object and to deploy the one to anatomize the other may erode spontaneity, but it certainly conduces to insight. It is by exploiting his duality that Maugham has "caught anything of the

precious quality in circumstances which in others would have seemed to me instinct with its fine flower” (*Chinese Screen* 59). An intensely private person, Maugham confesses to being by nature both suspicious and secretive. No wonder his own nephew and a homosexual writer at that, Robin Maugham avers that “I never understood him” (213). His further claim that very few of Maugham’s friends ever pierced the layers of morbid shyness caused by the misery of his youth is borne out by Noel Coward, another homosexual writer. Coward, indebted to Maugham “for nearly fifty years of kindness and hospitality”, admits that “I cannot truthfully say that I really knew him intimately” (Foreword to Garson Kanin’s *Remembering Maugham* n. pg). As an analyst of his own life and personality, barring of course his tabooed homosexuality, Maugham outrivals his biographers. It redounds to his candour to admit unflinchingly that “I am either too self-centred, or too diffident, or too reserved, or too shy to be able to be on confidential terms with anyone I know at all well” (*Vagrant Mood* 196). Given to peering into the depths of other selves as much as into his own, Maugham delights in exposing “the discrepancies of human nature” and “the disparity between appearance and reality”. Humour, he insists, teaches tolerance. The humorist understands and so forgives (*SU* 39-40). The least censorious of writers, Maugham can with remarkable ease slip into the skin of characters of all shades, and think their thoughts and feel their feelings. Even his worst detractors concede him unusual powers of observation, though they mistake his tolerance for his amorality. It is to his multiple personality, the source of his insight and of his sympathy, that Maugham owes his success in creating a host of living characters. Naturally the writer, as Maugham conceives him, “is not one man but many. It is because he is many that he can create many and the measure of his greatness is the number of selves that he comprises” (*SU* 135).

Maugham’s proffered reasons for not being “a social person” range from his lack of “facility for games”, his inhibitive stammer, his “instinctive shrinking from my fellow men” to his incapacity to “forget myself”. A compulsive loner, he always returns from his occasional spells of globe-trotting and socialities “to my books and my company with relief” (*SU* 53). As is his practice, Maugham transfers his own character trait to the artist. Accordingly he concludes that the artist is “a lone wolf. His way is solitary” (*WN* 267). The solitary Maugham is literally a book addict. He retreats into the haven of books from life’s stress and strain. He also engages in

the exploration of the great literature of the past just to enrich his self. If he has not “felt some of the fundamental emotions of normal men” (*SU* 46), it is more likely because he is a self-divided introvert than because he is a homosexual. In any case, Maugham’s artist partakes of life only with part of him. He never feels “the common emotions of men with his whole being, for ... he is an observer as well as an actor” (*SU* 136).

Antinomic to the very core of his being, Maugham keeps on swinging from one pole of his personality to the other. His one ambition is to become a successful writer, his other to become a whole man. He courts life experience for professional reasons; he also savours it for its own sake. That is why he is determined to live a rich, variegated private life as a man of the world (*SU* 53). Intent on living life to the full, he accords equal importance to flesh and spirit. Evidently he lives out to perfection his idea of the writer who seeks “to prevent himself from becoming one-sided. He never gets the opportunity to grow into a self-consistent coherent creature” (*SU* 135). Maugham’s one self hungers for life, his other recoils from it. Apart from the convivial and recluse Maugham, there is, however, a third Maugham, haunted by a mystic vision that beckons him on to a supernal city. The city he sees in his sleep leaves him a trifle puzzled because

I know vaguely what the men are in those cities of mystics, the manner of them and the peace they offer to the tortured heart; but what kind of men they are in this city of mine and why it is that all those others on the road so passionately seek it, I do not know. I only know that it imports me urgently to go there, and that when at last I slip through its gates, happiness awaits me. (*WN* 191)

Maugham’s existential and creative contradictions intermingle. Morgan has sampled some of them with all their paradoxical flavour: his profound love for his mother contrasts with his low opinion of women; his married state with his homosexuality; his low opinion of the human species with his high tolerance of human frailty (615). As the prince of the antinomies, Maugham, as cameoed above, approximates to Laing’s image of a “schizoid”:

Such a person is not able to experience himself 'together with' others or 'at home in' the world, but, on the contrary, he experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation; moreover, he does not experience himself as a complete person but rather as 'split' in various ways, perhaps as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body, as two or more selves, and so on. (*Divided Self* 17)

Section Two: A Philosophical Novelist

The novelist Maugham's polarity is simply amazing; he is self-contradiction itself. He declares, as a starter, to be "devoid of the pedagogic interest" (*SU* 7), to "have always eschewed the prophetic role" (*SU* 84) and to "have never been a propagandist" (*SU* 127). Quite consistent with these disclaimers is his habitually modest claim that "I have had some story to tell and it has interested me to tell it. To me it has been a sufficient object in itself" (*SU* 130). In pointed contrast to this, however, is his counterclaim that "there is no such thing as a 'mere' story. When he writes a story, the author,[...], willy-nilly offers a criticism of life" (*Points of View* 174). This volte-face extends to the novelist as well. Accordingly Maugham asserts that "to describe a novelist as a mere storyteller is to dismiss him with contumely", and that "there is no such creature". Since the novelist offers "a criticism of life", he is, concludes Maugham, very much "a moralist" (*Ten Novels* 19). Contradictions would seem, on his own testimony, to have marked his actual practice of novel-writing. "I have always worked", generalizes Maugham, "from the living model" (*SU* 40). But he seems to recommend the converse as a better option: "Biographies and reminiscences, technical works, will give you often an intimate detail, a telling touch, a revealing hint, that you might never have got from a living model" (*SU* 55). Maugham does not approve of the "writers who claim from the reader an effort to understand their meaning" (*SU* 18). Still he enjoins the novelist "to prevent the reader from finding him out" (*Writer's Point of View* 13) and the writer not to "explain over-much" (*WN* 276). For all that, he conceives the reader as a coauthor since "you only get out of a book what you put into it" (*WN* 279). And now to conclude

with what is virtually a teaser: “Unless a novelist makes you believe in him he is done, and yet if he is entirely believable he may very well be dull” (WN 257).

To extricate Maugham from the veritable thicket of confusion as presented above is to identify the kind of novelist he is. As a neophyte writer, the twenty-two-year-old Maugham records in his *Writer’s Notebook* under the year 1896 his literary credo: “My object is to find a rule of conduct for the average man under the normal conditions of the present day” (23). First he tentatively suggests that “the writer, with whatever subject he deals, displays the code of morals of his own age” (WN 14). Later he emphatically declares that the artist “creates his own values” (SU 112). Granted that every artist is as a matter of course a moralist, even then the young Maugham’s ethical project has about it an air of special urgency, for his recent apostasy requires him to find out a viable substitute. The extent of his ethical obsession is evident from his self-portrait at the age of twenty-two:

I wander about alone, forever asking myself the same questions:
What is the meaning of life? Has it any object or end? Is there such
a thing as morality? How ought one to conduct himself in life?
What guide is there? Is there one road better than another? And a
hundred more of the same sort. (WN 26)

To conduct his value quest with a semblance of competence requires a thorough grounding in philosophy. Fortunately Maugham has the required philosophical bent of mind.

Such is the young Maugham’s intellectual sensitivity that “[a] fresh idea dawns upon me and I feel myself uplifted from the workaday world to the blue empyrean of the spirit” (WN 17). Ideas mean so much to him that he gets into the habit of starting “the day with a perusal of a few pages of a metaphysical work” (*Gentleman in the Parlour* 100). His occasional holidays from his otherwise strict writing schedule do not, however, interrupt his compulsive philosophical studies. He goes, for instance, on his long Malaya journey, armed with a copy of Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality* (*Gentleman* 101) and with the intention of reaching some conclusions about “errors and evil, space, time, chance and mutability” (*Gentleman* 34). This enthusiasm for philosophy,

evident from his teens, survives well into his seventies. He records on his seventieth birthday that everything he once held dear has receded into irrelevance except “one subject with which I can still occupy myself with my old excitement, and that is philosophy” (WN 286).

The young Maugham sets about readying himself for his ethical undertaking with zeal and discipline. Initiated in his teens into the charm of philosophy by Kuno Fischer at Heidelberg, he moves from the exploration of both ancient and modern philosophical classics to the systematic study of “Ethics” (SU 148) and then of “epistemology” (SU 153). Such is his passion for “metaphysics” (WN 122) that he extols it as irresistible and inexhaustible, great and uplifting, inspiring and consoling. Treating as it does of the universe, of God and immortality, of the nature of reason and purpose of life (SU 141), metaphysics must have, to enthuse him so much, touched a sensitive chord in his being. Presumably though his projected philosophical treatise aborts, his metaphysical passion remains unabated. This is evidenced by Maugham’s idea of the desiderated “good novel” which has no room for any issues that are purely local and ephemeral. It should have “a widely interesting theme” and “of enduring interest” (*Ten Novels* 14). Thus circumscribed, it can stake only “the great issues of life” out as its province. “The novelist has the right”, Maugham explicitly claims, “to deal with those great topics which are of concern to every human being, the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the meaning and value of life” (*Ten Novels* 15-16). Maugham thus turns the novelist for all practical purposes into a surrogate metaphysician. His own mature novels from *Of Human Bondage* onwards are metaphysical and mystical in nature.

More than a devoted student of philosophy, Maugham is also an eclectic system-builder. It is as an eighteen-year-old atheist medical student that he enters in the autumn of 1892 the world of late-nineteenth-century science, dominated by materialism. The tyro’s reaction to science, not as a mass of disconnected information but as a set of ideas, underlines his propensity for systematic thinking. The first ever “rule of conduct” he formulates on the basis of his growing “familiarity with certain principles” (SU 42) is of course a materialist one. A system with the youthful Maugham, however, is not a straitjacket but a springboard. An entry in *A Writer’s Notebook* under the year 1896 shows him engaged in hammering out a second system:

Now after nearly two years in which I have occupied myself in looking for some rule, in which I have asked myself what is the reason, the aim, the object of life, I just begin to have a vague notion of what I take to be the truth. Answers to all these questions are slowly forming themselves in my mind; but at present everything is confused. I have collected a mass of facts, ideas, experience, but I cannot yet arrange them into any system or order them in a definite pattern. (*WN* 25)

Evidently it is not a ragbag but a systematic philosophy that he is after. What was still inchoate in 1896 crystallizes out two years later. Accordingly Maugham claims that “[b]y the time I was twenty-four I had constructed a complete system of philosophy. It rested on two principles: The Relativity of Things and the Circumferentiality of Man” (*SU* 148). That is Maugham’s way of indicating his passage from materialism/naturalism to subjective idealism and aestheticism. What keeps on changing is Maugham’s intellectual position but not his passion for a system. As he progresses from subjective to absolute idealism, he leaves behind the idea of man as a self-enclosed monad for the idea of man as an integral part of the cosmos as such. He further envisages the entire universe as a system of interlocking events where everything “combines to cause every one of our actions” (*SU* 166). This belief in the interconnectedness of things marks Maugham out as a monist. For the monists, explains Ewing,

have commonly thought that two different things could only be related if they formed a unity so that they could not ultimately be separated.[...]Some have inferred that, since everything is related in some way to everything else, the universe as it stands must be regarded as a very closely knit unity. (*Fundamental Questions* 209)

Maugham’s empirical streak serves as a brake on the idealist’s potential excesses, and keeps his feet firmly on the ground. He gathers various ideas, but accepts only those that pass the test of his lived experience and of his knowledge of the world. His successive systems reflect his ever widening and deepening vision. They grow one out of the other in a process of progressive

refinement and comprehensiveness. Their shared nucleus, however, is his steadfast anti-intellectualism, which also informs his contemplated philosophical project. His gleanings for this treatise

satisfied not only my mind but, what I could not but think more important than my mind, the whole body of my instincts, feelings and deep-rooted prejudices, the prejudices that are so intimate a part of one that they can hardly be distinguished from instincts; and out of them make a system that would be valid for me and enable me to pursue the course of my life. (*SU* 151)

As his monism, so Maugham's holism perfectly coordinates with absolute idealism, which pivots on the "conception of an *organic whole*", and predicates "the ethical criterion" on "life as a whole" (Ewing, *Idealism* 430). With oneness or unity as his consuming passion, Maugham naturally looks "for a system of philosophy as coherent and self-contained as Bradley's, in which one part hung necessarily on another" (*SU* 151). Maugham gives up for lack of time the plan of writing out his projected philosophical treatise. Ivor Brown mistakenly thinks that "Maugham abandoned his attempt to formulate a philosophical system that would be valid for him and enable him to pursue the course of his life with clearly defined principles" (25).

There is no major doctrinal difference between absolute/objective idealism and mysticism. All the difference between them practically reduces to that between theory and practice, between abstract speculation and immediate experience. As momentous in its implications for his life and art is Maugham's mystical experience as was his loss of faith. Recent critical literature has totally buried the mystic Maugham under the homosexual, who therefore needs to be disinterred. He has been a frequent subject of the preternatural experience called ecstasy. It is an educated guess that he is vouchsafed, during his first ever visit to Egypt in January-March of 1906, the ecstasy he very sensitively renders in *The Summing Up*:

Indeed, I have myself had on one occasion an experience that I could only describe in the words the mystics have used to describe

their ecstasy. I was sitting in one of the deserted mosques near Cairo when suddenly I felt myself rapt as Ignatius of Loyola was rapt when he sat by the river at Manresa. I had an overwhelming sense of the power and import of the universe, and an intimate, a shattering sense of communion with it. I could almost bring myself to say that I felt the presence of God. (*SU* 160)

Similarly he has, during his India tour in 1938, another experience of ecstasy, which is triggered by the very sight of the famed Taj Mahal:

[...]I was overcome by its beauty. I recognized that this was the authentic thrill of art and tried to examine myself while it was still vivid. I can understand that when people say something takes their breath away it is not an idle metaphor. I really did feel shortness of breath. I had a queer, delightful feeling in my heart, as though it were dilated. I felt surprise and joy and, I think, a sense of liberation: ... (*WN* 230)

His delicate sensitivity to beauty occasions his ecstasy so often that he would seem to have been a habitual ecstatic: "Indeed on occasion, looking at certain pictures or statues, listening to certain music, I have had an emotion so strong that I could only describe it in the same words as those the mystics use to describe the union with God". What with his secular triggers for and his secular mode of attaining ecstasy, Maugham feels justified in thoroughly secularizing mysticism. What is more, he stubbornly refuses to subordinate secular mysticism to religious: "That is why I have thought that this sense of communion with a larger reality is not only the privilege of the religious, but may be reached by other paths than prayer and fasting" (*SU* 177-178). It is as well that Maugham universalizes mysticism by conceiving everybody as a potential mystic: "If the mystical experience is a liberating sense of community with what for want of a better word we name reality, and this you can call as you will the Absolute or God, then at some time we are all in greater or less degree mystics" (*Don Fernando* 125).

Spurred on by his own mystical experience, Maugham reads widely in the mystical literature of the world just a fragment of which he shares with the reader. He has in his collection the complete fifteen-volume set of Baring-Gould's *Lives of the Saints*. On occasion he dips into them to satisfy his curiosity of the moment. In addition, "I have read the autobiography of St. Theresa and the lives, written by those who knew them, of St. Francis of Assisi, of Catherine of Siena, and of Ignatius of Loyola" (*Points of View* 56). No less keen is his interest in Eastern mysticism. Despite his avowed modesty, his knowledge of the subject, for a lay Westerner, is almost thorough:

What I know about it, I have read in books. The most important of these are Sir Charles Elliot's *Hinduism and Buddhism*; Radhakrishnan's *History of Indian Philosophy* and his translation of the Upanishads; Krishnaswami Iyer's *Vedanta, or the Science of Reality*; *Brahma-Knowledge* by Professor Barnett; and Sankara's *Vivekachudamani*. (*Points of View* 61)

It needs to be stressed that his interest in Vedantism is more than academic. He feels at one time so drawn to it that he toys with the idea of making it his personal philosophy: "Faced with it, [the ultimate mystery], awed by the greatness of the universe and malcontent with what the philosophers told me, and what with the saints, I have sometimes gone back, beyond Mohammed, Jesus and Buddha, beyond the gods of Greece, Jehovah and Baal, to the Brahma of Upanisads" (*SU* 160). A measure of his absorption into Vedantism is his unrealized plan to visit India for a second time in order to write a life of Sankara who fascinates him. On top of this, the catalogue of Maugham's personal library, gifted to his alma mater, King's School, Canterbury, details a large number of other titles on Eastern and Western mysticism. More importantly, it informs that Maugham has annotated William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* and Bertrand Russell's *Mysticism and Logic* (*Books Given by WSM*, 23-24) In view of all this, Meyers's *ipse dixit* that Maugham "didn't have a mystical bone in his body" (230) seems quite astounding. Meyers typifies near-total critical indifference to Maugham's obsessive philosophical concern. The result is that no attempt has been made until now to distinguish

between the different phases of Maugham's long philosophical evolution. It is as if *Liza of Lambeth* and *The Razor's Edge* reflected the same philosophical position. Whatever Maugham's artistic originality, it inheres in the main in his mystical vision which remains altogether unexplored.

Maugham's passion for "system" in philosophy has its exact parallels in his similar passion for "pattern" in life and "form" in art. A natural sense of tidiness prompts him even in his very youth to design a pattern for his life (SU 30). Since "I have gone my way, following the course I had mapped out for myself, and trying with my works to fill out the pattern I looked for" (SU 132), the pattern of his life and of his art are substantially the same. The creation of his life-pattern, however, requires a good deal of intellectual scouting. As a matter of fact, it demands cogent answers to some of the fundamental questions of philosophy. Hence his arduous philosophical preparation. He rightly stresses the philosophical underpinning of his life-pattern. It requires him to know something about the general structure of the universe, whether there is an afterlife, whether he is a free agent or not, and finally whether life has any meaning or he must give it one (SU 145). It is the same yearning for unity that motivates him to devise a "system" in philosophy, to impose a "pattern" on life and to cultivate "form" in art. With the implicit belief in life's disorder at the back of his mind, he defines "a plot" as "merely the pattern on which the story is arranged" (SU 130). Hence he would have the author fix upon "his material a willful shape" (SU 124) and the novelist draw "a pattern" (*Vagrant Mood* 204). Maugham's devotion to "system", "pattern" and "form" both presupposes and promotes his intellectual consistency, his artistic integrity.

Maugham's lifelong quest is for an all-inclusive unifying vision, which subsumes his pursuit of "system", "pattern" and "form". Since his deliverance on this vitall issue figures in somebody else's memoirs, it needs to be quoted at length:

Rhythm, I suppose, is the ... major element in the organization of the universe. ... Consider that almost every object is rhythmic in the sense that it is a repetition of a...pattern. ... From this, it's only a short...bridge to form. One might say that a non-rhythmic thing

is lacking in form. All the words surrounding this idea...mean the same thing in the end, don't they? Rhythm. Form. Tempo. Pace. Organization. Balance. Form. That, I suppose has been the major preoccupation of my life. Form. (Quoted in Garson Kanin 14)

This is as close as Maugham ever comes to directly enunciating the essentially dialectical framework within which he studies everything from the cosmos to man. In his vision of the primordial cosmic rhythm, “the two forces of cosmical attraction and repulsion balanced so that the universe remained for untold ages in a state of perfect equilibrium” (*SU* 157). Man as a microcosm, Maugham seems to think, epitomizes the macrocosm. In any case, strong opposites cohere in his image of man: “Selfishness and kindness, idealism and sensuality, vanity, shyness, disinterestedness, courage, laziness, nervousness, obstinacy, and diffidence, they can all exist in a single person and form a plausible harmony” (*SU* 41). Maugham “has labored with the utmost sincerity”, insists Aldington, “to discover what he really does think and feel, what sort of things he really wishes to do” (*Somerset Maugham* 12). Maugham himself, however, disclaims any originality for his philosophical ideas (*SU* 152). His affinity with Schopenhauer on the point under discussion is striking. Thus Schopenhauer on rhythm, to begin with: “*Rhythm* is in time what *symmetry* is in space, namely the division into equal parts corresponding to one another, and first into larger parts that are again divisible into smaller parts subordinate to the former” (*The World as Will* 2: 453). As Maugham’s, so Schopenhauer’s definition of rhythm may do duty for that of dialectic, antinomy or polarity. Maugham’s universal principle is not substantially different from Schopenhauer’s “*polarity*”. It is the “sundering of a force into two qualitatively different and opposite activities striving for reunion”. What is more, it “is a fundamental type of almost all the phenomena of nature, from the magnet and the crystal up to man” (*WWR* I: 143-144). What both Maugham and Schopenhauer are suggesting here is that since the same absolute manifests itself through everything, the same principle works everywhere. This belief in the oneness of the entire universe and of all life forms is the central tenet of both absolute idealism and of mysticism.

Section Three: A Homosexual Mystic

Just like his polarity, Maugham's homosexuality too deeply impacts his life and art. Soon after his death, Robin Maugham makes public as far back as 1966 Maugham's homosexuality. He claims to reproduce Maugham's very words that "I tried to persuade myself that I was three-quarters normal and that only a quarter of me was queer – whereas really it was the other way round" (201). So Maugham's homosexuality is by now old hat: it has lost whatever shock value it once had. Nevertheless it continues to bulk so large especially in his recent biographies that it almost sidetracks his art. The irony is that the critics themselves fail to trace the impact of Maugham's sexual proclivity upon his art. Thus Morgan concedes that Maugham "avoided dealing with homosexuality in his work, with two exceptions". He further adds that "there was in his fiction no major (or minor) homosexual character" (39). "Reading Maugham's fiction", confesses Ivor Brown, "gives no impression that the author was in fact abnormal" (76). Calder's considered view is that "[a] complete re-reading and revision of Maugham will not therefore uncover a canon of homosexual works" (*Willie* 237). The theoretically-grounded Holden's denial is more emphatic: "Homosexuality does not provide overt thematic content for any of Maugham's fiction" (8). Logic demands that "if Maugham's homosexuality had damaged his reputation" (Hastings 497), its excessive detailing should have been avoided.

Unlike others, Meyers thinks of Maugham's homosexuality as an unmitigated evil. First it forces Maugham "to become reticent and secretive, to repress a vital part of his life" (34). He then presumes Maugham to have a troubled conscience on the score that "homosexuality was an artistic handicap"(220). The facts, however, challenge Meyers's thesis. Crediting Maugham with the creation of vibrant women characters and the nuanced exploration of their erotic emotions, Marlow thinks he is like "a gynecologist who has the rare ability to, as it were, 'become' his patients" (163). Hastings too attributes Maugham's exceptional empathy with women to "his own divided sexuality", which gives "him a kind of double vision, a deeper insight into the feminine psyche" (78). Robin Maugham sees an analogue of the conflict between Maugham's intellect and his instinct in the struggle between his sexual repression and his artistic expression: "I believe that if he hadn't been tortured by desires which in his heart he despised, he wouldn't have written as he did, and he wouldn't have written as excitedly" (quoted in Meyers 106).

Capping all is Maugham's own glowing tribute to the memory of Gerald Haxton, the secret love of his life, the alleged wrecker of his marriage, the acknowledged facilitator of his art:

Without him I should never have written those stories which did so much for my reputation in the world of letters & it was he who helped me to get out of the commonplace life of the ordinary humdrum writer & put me in the way of gaining that wider experience of life which has made me what I am today.
(Maugham's letter to Ellen Doubleday quoted in Hastings 476)

Besides contributing to his creativity, Maugham's homosexuality takes on a new significance in his theory of art and originality, of evil and mysticism.

For all his pessimism, Schopenhauer strikes a positive note when he states that "everywhere in nature a remedy, or at any rate a compensation, is given for every evil" (*WWR II*: 463). As a believer in the ultimate unity or oneness of things, Maugham too assigns evil a mitigating role, especially in the realm of art. "It is not always the most worthy men", observes Maugham at his provocative best, "who write the best books" (*Books and You* 41). He singles out Emerson to support his remark: "Perhaps he would have been a better writer if he had not been quite so good a man" (*Books and You* 90). Notorious for his "moral character", Poe is Maugham's counterexample. "Poe wrote", in Maugham's view, "the most beautiful poetry that has ever been written in America" (*Books and You* 91-92). Maugham thus implies a radical discontinuity in an artist between the man and the creator, between his life and his art. That he reiterates the same idea elsewhere confirms that it is not his passing whim but his firm conviction: "For unfortunately talent and originality do not always attend nobility of character" (*Selected Prefaces* 29). He presents Dostoevsky as the prime exemplar of his thesis: "It was not the good in Dostoevsky, it was the bad that was the source of the startling originality which made him one of the supreme novelists of the world" (*Ten Novels* 278).

Maugham's unargued assertion about the causal relation between the immorality and originality of the artist may be explained thus. Good thrives on self-effacement which

encourages passivity, evil on self-assertion which demands activity. Good puts a premium on simplicity, evil on ingenuity. There is only one way of being good. The resultant sameness invests it with it an air of insipidity. Conversely there are as many ways of being evil as there are evil-doers. Another name for the exciting diversity associated with evil is originality or novelty. Rugged individualists as they are, both the immoralist and the artist live and operate beyond the pale of coercive social morality, which fosters conformity. The foregoing is just a lead-up to the clincher that follows. What clinches Maugham's thesis are the real-life examples he piles up. As in his image of man, so in his portrait of the artist, Maugham juxtaposes strong contraries. Thus "Beethoven's idealism" coexists with "his meanness of spirit", "Wagner's heavenly rapture with his selfishness and dishonesty", "Cervantes' moral obliquity with his tenderness and magnanimity" (SU 135). Obviously, as the constituents of an individual with interdependent parts and whole, the coexisting good and evil complement rather than exclude each other. Maugham begins with the proposition that "the composer of the quintet in the Meistersinger was dishonest in money matters and treacherous to those who had benefited him". From this he concludes that "it may be that he could not have had great qualities if he had not also had great failings" (SU 42). The monist Maugham has to accommodate in his scheme of things good and evil, as all other opposites, as the integral parts of a single whole. Interestingly Russell too generalizes that "[i]t is difficult to think of any instance of a poet who was 'good' at the times when he was writing good poetry" (*Sceptical Essays* 78).

It is now time to come straight to Maugham's theory about the artists' sexual non-conformity as a factor in their creative originality. Instead of expounding it directly, Maugham manages to insinuate it into his studies of three as diverse subjects as the painter El Greco and the novelists Herman Melville and Emily Bronte. He, however, generalizes a trifle tangentially that "those who possess an aesthetic sense of unusual delicacy diverge sexually from the norm to an extreme and often pathological degree" (SU 176-177). Now to return to Maugham's case studies beginning with El Greco. "In the case of El Greco", Morgan somewhat misleadingly comments, "he is writing from the viewpoint of a heterosexual author who belittles homosexuality" (40). Maugham does not openly denounce homosexuality even though he always writes on it from the point of view of a heterosexual. This is because "in the depth of every

homosexual there is an anti-homosexual” (Proust, *By Way of Saint-Beuve* 163). For this reason, Maugham conflates homosexuality with immorality, and feels guilty for his own sexual nonconformity. Interestingly in none of Maugham’s three cases is there any incontrovertible evidence of homosexuality, however persuasive his own arguments. Hence there is a lurking suspicion that he uses his subjects as a peg to hang on them his ingenious thesis. In the case of El Greco, Maugham begins by citing Pacheco’s testimony that “he was a great philosopher, very witty in his speech, personal, profound, with an original answer to everything” (*Don Fernando* 115). Struck by the painter’s singularity, he wonders “whether what I see in El Greco’s work of tortured fantasy and sinister strangeness is not due to such a sexual abnormality as this” (*Don Fernando* 116). Finally he rounds off his portrait of El Greco by projecting him, not as convention does, as a religious but as a secular mystic:

If mysticism is that state that renders you conscious of depths of truth unknown to the intellect, revealing like “glimpses of forgotten dreams” a greater significance in life and union with some larger reality, then I think you can hardly fail to find it in El Greco’s painting. (*Don Fernando* 124)

In El Greco Maugham thus aligns homosexuality with originality and mysticism. Nietzsche would certainly bless his enterprise. For he firmly believes that “[t]he degree and nature of a man’s sexuality extends to the highest altitudes of his spirit” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 453).

Maugham brings together for the first time in *Books and You* (1940) three such diverse novelists as the American Melville, the British Emily Bronte and the Russian Dostoevsky on the grounds of their shared uniqueness: “There is nothing in fiction that remotely resembles the novels of Dostoevsky except the *Wuthering Heights* of our Emily Bronte and Melville’s *Moby Dick*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* is the most tremendous of all Dostoevsky’s works” (*Books and You* 58). This is actually a dry run for Maugham’s more mature thesis enunciated fourteen years later in *Ten Novels and Their Authors*. Maugham envisages in this book the mainstream European novel, originating with the Greek Longus and flowing up to the French Falubert, as something of a monolith with only minor variations along the way. Its direct purpose has been to

amuse by a succession of scenes presented from nature, and by a thread of emotional narrative. Both in terms of their intention and of their effect on the reader, "Moby Dick, Wuthering Heights and The Brothers Karamazov" and "the novels of Joyce and Kafka" (*Ten Novels* 198) constitute a distinct group of their own with originality, intensity and power as their hallmark.

Maugham is struck by Melville's "transformation" from an "apparently normal young man into the savage", pessimistic author of *Pierre*, from the "undistinguished writer of *Typee* into the darkly, imaginative, powerful, inspired and eloquent author of *Moby Dick*". He conceives Melville as "a repressed homosexual", and concludes that "a sexual frustration occasioned the change in him" (*Ten Novels* 210,214). In a nutshell, Maugham's thesis is that Melville's repressed, frustrated homosexual instinct releases his explosive creative instinct but only for a brief spell. It then extinguishes altogether his creative spark rather prematurely. Maugham's ultimate image of Melville, formed on re-reading *Moby Dick*, is that of "a man endowed by nature with a great gift blighted by an evil genius" (*Ten Novels* 225). Significantly Melville's vision of life, as Maugham extracts it from *Moby Dick*, is pronouncedly metaphysical-mystical: "There is a throb, a mystery, a foreboding, a passion, a sense of the horror and terror of life, of the inevitableness of destiny and of the power of evil, which take you by the throat. You are left shattered, but strangely uplifted" (*Books and You* 98). Maugham unhesitatingly hails *Moby Dick* as a great book and Melville as El Greco's kindred spirit.

Maugham first portrays Emily Bronte as a hermaphrodite. He then suggests that she embodies her masculine self in Heathcliff, her feminine in Catherine. Excessively shy and self-repressive, and so forced to repress it, Emily Bronte has to seek in her art alone an outlet for her fierce emotion. Maugham says the same of Charlotte Bronte. "The two sisters", Maugham holds, "constructed them [Rochester and Heathcliff] to satisfy their urgent, thwarted desires for sexual satisfaction" (*Ten Novels* 256). The nineteen-year-old Emily writes her love poems while teaching at a girls' school at Law Hill. From her emotionally charged love poems, Maugham infers that "they pointed very clearly to her having fallen in love, to her love having been repulsed, and then to her having been bitterly hurt". Since her encounter with a man there is almost improbable, "it is likely enough that she fell in love with one or other of the mistresses, or

with one of the girls. It was the only love of her life” (*Ten Novels* 257, 258). It is the fire of Emily’s frustrated lesbian love that ignites the creation of *Wuthering Heights*. A mark of the novel’s “astonishing originality” is that it does not reflect its age either in its technique, in its theme or in its moral vision. Its extraordinariness as a love novel lies in that “the lovers remain chaste” (*Ten Novels* 247, 254). It is Emily Bronte’s mysticism that interests Maugham greatly. A genuine mystic, she has written a number of mystical poems. What is more, her mysticism derives not from her reading but from her personal experience. In her famous mystical poem “The Prisoner”, she uses, Maugham claims, “almost the very words that the mystics use when they describe the anguish felt of the return from union with the Infinite” (*Ten Novels* 257).

In the case of El Greco, Melville and Emily Bronte, it is their alleged homosexuality that accounts for their originality. The heterosexual Dostoevsky has instead a number of glaring failings such as excessive conceit, jealousy, suspiciousness, masochism and complete lack of willpower, his equivalent of the trio’s homosexuality. Anyway Maugham’s observation about Dostoevsky applies to them as well: “It was not the good in Dostoevsky, it was the bad that was the source of the startling originality which made him one of the supreme novelists of the world” (*Ten Novels* 278). Expectedly Maugham admires Dostoevsky’s metaphysical-mystical life vision. He remarks of *The Brothers Karamazov* that “[i]t has a theme of profound significance. Many critics have said that this was the quest of God; I, for my part, should have said it was the problem of evil” (*Ten Novels* 288). El Greco is Maugham’s touchstone of mysticism. Maugham likens the incomparable *Wuthering Heights* “only to one of those great pictures of El Greco” (*Ten Novels* 258). The similarity between El Greco and Dostoevsky, however, runs much deeper. Extremely emotional, violently passionate, both wrestle with the problem of making the invisible visible:

Both give the effect of having walked in unknown ways of the spirit in countries where men do not breathe the air of common day. Both are tortured by the desire to express some tremendous secret, which they divine with some sense other than our five

senses and which they struggle in vain to convey by use of them.

(WN 131)

The thesis that an artist's immorality or homosexuality gives a fillip to his originality and induces him to mysticism that Maugham assiduously develops over the decades must have a personal application.

Section Four: The Dialectic between Life and Art

What Maugham's homosexuality and his mysticism bring to the fore is the relation between his life and his art. He claims to "have put the whole of my life into my books" (SU 6) and to have carried out "in my own life certain actions which I made the characters of my invention do" (SU 30). His art feeds on his life in other ways too. It is the writer's lived experience, the experience that bears the impress of his body and mind, ultimately of his whole personality, that serves as his raw material. That is why verbal art is, Maugham argues, necessarily autobiographical: "Most of what one writes is to a greater or lesser degree autobiographical, not the actual incidents always, but always the emotions" (Maugham's letter to Violet Hunt, excerpted in Hastings 93). In the case of a novelist, the autobiographical basis of his art extends further. Maugham reasons that a novelist succeeds in creating living characters only when he fleshes out his own potential selves. It follows then that by studying the novelist's most successful and sympathetic characters, "you should be able to get a more complete idea of his nature than any biography can give you" (WN 279). Maugham pushes this argument to its logical extreme, invokes the romantic or expressive theory of art, and pictures the novelist as a compulsive, albeit oblique, autobiographer: "Whatever he [the novelist] writes is the expression of his personality and it is the manifestation of his innate instincts, his feelings and his experiences" (*Ten Novels* 8-9). This inevitably leads to Maugham's theory of art as purgation. A writer can use his painful experience as material for his art, and by "writing it he can overcome it" (SU 111). This intimacy between life and art justifies Maugham's prescription that "to know what sort of a person the author was adds to one's understanding and appreciation of his work" (*Ten Novels* 20). Identity between the man and the writer is, however, one term of Maugham's dialectic; dichotomy between them is the other.

An artist's art invariably preys on his life. His creative instinct is an inexorable force which makes him dead to everything else outside his art, and so turns him into a virtual monomaniac. Accordingly Maugham generalizes that the artists "succumb to an influence they do not realize and life slips through their fingers unlived" (Preface, *Collected Plays I*: xviii). So ruthless is Maugham's own artistic devotion that he allows nothing to stand between him and his work. Naturally he places the artist's work above his happiness. The act of creation is so absorbing, so exhilarating that any idea of returning to the human activities of everyday life strikes an artist as a terrible comedown, and so fills him with dismay. Speaking for himself as for his compeers, Maugham says: "Most authors, when engaged on a work of fiction, are so absorbed in it that they can think of nothing else, and when they give up for the day exhausted, look upon the rest of it with impatience as so much time lost till next day they can set to work again" (*Points of View* 22). What wonder then that Maugham should have confessed that "I have always enjoyed writing," but "I have never enjoyed living" (cited in Kanin 165).

The self the polypsychic artist enshrines in his art may have its very antagonist lurking within him. That is why however sincere he may be in his creative emotion, "there is someone else within him who is capable of cocking a snook at its exercise" (*SU* 136). The difference between the author's man-self and his artist-self is at its maximum in the case of sublimation. As Maugham explains it: "Every creative writer's work is, to some extent at least, a sublimation of instincts, desires, day-dreams ... which for one cause or another he had repressed, and by giving them literary expression he is freed of the compulsion to give them the further release of action" (*Ten Novels* 307). Maugham's explanation of the yawning gulf between an author's life and his art has its close parallel in Kierkegaard's. Being a poet means, thinks Kierkegaard, "having one's own personal life, one's reality in quite different categories from those of one's poetic work, it means being related to the ideal in imagination only, so that one's own personal life is more or less a satire on poetry and on oneself" (153). Maugham uses Dostoevsky to dramatize the distance between a writer's life and his art:

I can think of no one in whom the dichotomy between the man and
the writer has been greater than it was in Dostoevsky. It probably

exists in all creative artists, but it is more conspicuous in authors than in others because their medium is words, and the contradiction between their behavior and their communication is more shocking. (*Ten Novels* 278).

It is worth noting in this context that Maugham stresses the polarity between life and art in the case of Melville, Emily Bronte and Dostoevsky whom he groups together as his favourites. By implication, what is true of his spiritual affinities is true of him as well.

The artist's polypsychism brings into sharp focus the question of his real self. Maugham has implicitly answered this question in his portrait of Burke as a divided self: "In his study he was no longer the reckless punter, the shameless sponge, the unscrupulous place-hunter ... the dishonest advocate ... In his study he was the high-minded man whom his friends loved and honoured for his nobility of spirit, his greatness and his magnanimity" (*Vagrant Mood* 141). Maugham is more forthright when he claims of Goethe that "[h]e was his true self only when he wrote poetry" (*Points of View* 50). Likewise Proust too asserts that "the writer's true self is manifested in his books alone" (*By Way of Saint-Beuve* 81). Maugham's intense aversion to his biography admits of many explanations. A literary biography is normally premised on the man-writer identity which is unacceptable to Maugham. He lives his real life not within the public world of society but within the private world of his self. It is for this reason that Pico Iyer challenges the efficacy of Maugham's biographical criticism:

To use the life to understand the work, ..., is to try to explain the larger self by the smaller; to use the work to shed light on the life is to begin to understand how a figure who looked buttoned up and unfeeling at the dinner table could write books that hold readers with their openness and warmth. (72)

As a matter of fact, Maugham himself uses *Moby Dick* as a clue to understanding Melville the man, and thereby recants his cherished recipe for novel-reading:

I have said, and said again, that in order to get a real insight into a great novel you must know what there is to be known about the man who wrote it. I have an idea that in the case of Melville something like the contrary obtains. When one reads, and re-reads, *Moby Dick*, it seems to me that one gets a more convincing, a more definite, impression of the man than from anything one may learn of his life and circumstances; [...]. (*Ten Novels* 225)

Echoing Maugham, one may say that immersion in his major novels alone would offer a glimpse of his essential self. His homosexuality would then seem his husk, his mysticism his kernel.

Section V: An Underrated Writer

At the end of this overview, the question that demands to be answered is whether Maugham has received his just deserts. His own answer may serve as a piquant starter: “In my twenties the critics said I was brutal, in my thirties they said I was flippant, in my forties they said I was cynical, in my fifties they said I was competent, and now in my sixties they say I am superficial” (*SU* 132). The reasons for Maugham’s pique are still there. True, he has been receiving, particularly since his death, steadily increasing critical attention. A couple of examples would show how Maugham continues to be misunderstood and underestimated as ever. Beverly Nichols refuses to grant Maugham even a consistent philosophy: “It is a dramatist’s philosophy...There is no basic rhythm to the thought” (105). More devastating is Raphael. He discerns a thinness of “metaphysical and symbolical allusion” in Maugham, and so pronounces that “[h]e was too clear to be great” (99). Maugham is too sophisticated to indulge in literary exhibitionism. He would like the writer to have “a distinguished and varied culture”, but not to put “its elements into his work” (*WN* 217). Another critic snipes at both Maugham and Maugham scholarship, and demands that Maugham’s seriousness “is something that should be shown, not asserted” (“Just Visiting” 67). Calder acutely diagnoses the shortcomings of current Maugham studies, and prescribes the remedies: “At this stage of Maugham criticism ... the need is not for another general survey, but more specialized examinations of particular patterns, techniques,

devices, and ideas” (Rev. of *The Pattern of Maugham* 189). Contrary to Calder’s prescription, it is the Maugham biographers who have been in recent years upstaging the Maugham critics.

The irony is that Maugham himself laments his contemporaries’ lack of seriousness: “Nobody dares tackle great subjects and the heresy has become orthodox that subject is of no consequence” (*Don Fernando* 123). It is for its “extreme triviality” (*SU* 129) that he dismisses the stream-of-consciousness novel as meretricious. As for his own seriousness, he decides to retire as a dramatist, right at the height of his power and popularity, simply because he refuses to tailor his themes to suit the conventions of contemporary theatre: “The fashion of today prevents any reference on the stage to the great subjects of human life and the most profound thoughts of human beings” (*Collected Plays III*: xii). Persistent misunderstanding and underestimate exasperate him so much that he throws for the nonce his wonted modesty to the winds, and flaunts his seriousness:

Though my literary friends do not, I am sorry to say, look upon me as a member of the intelligentsia, I very much enjoy the conversation of cultured persons and I think (perhaps mistakenly) that I can adequately hold my own with them. Indeed sometimes I gently lead them down the garden path of mysticism and when I talk to them of Denis the Areopagite and Fray Luis de Leon, throwing in Samkaracharia for good measure, I often have them grasping for breath like speckled trout on a river bank. (*Vagrant Mood* 239-240)

Now a couple of examples to show how much depth there is, beneath their surface simplicity, in Maugham’s mature novels. With the consummate skill of an accomplished storyteller, he slips in the core idea of mysticism in *Of Human Bondage*, the most autobiographical of his novels: “It was a mystical city in which the imagination faltered like one who steps out of the light into darkness; the soul walked naked to and fro, knowing the unknowable, and conscious strangely of experience, intimate but inexpressible, of the absolute” (670). How demanding a writer Maugham is would appear from the following apparently simple

sentence from *Cakes and Ale*, which in fact encapsulates the quintessence of absolute idealism and mysticism: “I had an impression that the real man, to his death unknown and lonely, was a wraith that went a silent way unseen between the writer of his books and the man who led his life, and smiled with ironical detachment at the two puppets that the world took for Edward Driffield” (224). Despite his manifest seriousness, Maugham’s entrenched critical image as a popular entertainer provokes him ultimately to challenge his critics: “The critic I am waiting for is the one who will explain why, with all my faults, I have been read for so many years by so many people” (Maugham’s letter cited in Morgan 586). As he has answered almost all questions about himself, he also responds to his challenge, indirectly though. Trying to pinpoint what contributes most to a novelist’s greatness, he concludes that

The four greatest novelists the world has ever known, Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, wrote their respective languages very indifferently. It proves that if you can tell stories, create character, devise incidents, and if you have sincerity and passion, it doesn’t matter a damn how you write. (WN 255)

Maugham’s twofold strategy here is to gloss over his weakness and to highlight his strength. If the four named novelists can achieve greatness despite their indifferent style, Maugham’s plain style, his detractors’ invariable target, cannot be a serious handicap. As for the other requisites for greatness that Maugham specifies, he has them in abundance. All in all, Maugham’s title to greatness may be debated but not his title to seriousness. He himself is what he exhorts the writer to be: “playful and serious at the same time” (WN 209). Unfortunately his playfulness has been appreciated to the near-total exclusion of his seriousness. To be fair to him, the balance needs to be redressed.

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