William Somerset Maugham and the Nobel Prize

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Abstract
This article provides an analysis of the Swedish reception and Nobel Prize nominations of William Somerset Maugham. Its purpose is firstly to present a largely unknown aspect of the reception of his work through an assessment of reviews published in Swedish newspapers from 1908 to 1965. These years cover Maugham's first mention in a Swedish context until the year of his death. Secondly, it will offer an explanation as to why he ultimately did not receive the Nobel Prize, although he was held in high esteem by members of the Swedish Academy, who wrote several reviews of his work. It is probable that this was because of his fame and success rather than for any aesthetic, moral or even political reasons. All these conclusions are derived from an analysis of original documents, including letters and protocols from the archives of the Swedish Academy. The article begins with a brief description of the criteria for the Nobel Prize in Literature and how they were applied at the time of Maugham's nominations, followed by a discussion of his reception by Swedish critics; the final section concerns the Nobel Prize nominations themselves.

Keywords: Swedish Academy; Nobel Prize in literature; W. Somerset Maugham; Sweden; reception studies; Anders Österling; Gustaf Hellström; Georg Svensson

Introduction

In 1959, William Somerset Maugham received a visit from a Swedish reporter at his home, the Villa La Mauresque in Cap Ferrat, France. The reporter, Manne Berggren, interviewed Maugham for *Sveriges Radio*, the Swedish national radio broadcaster. He began with a vivid description of the beauty and grandeur of Maugham's home, especially the many rare paintings and exotic objects that Maugham had brought back from his many travels in Asia (Sveriges Radio 1959). Even the appearance of the author himself received a detailed description: "Maugham strides in [wearing] Manchester trousers, blazer and scarf with a sharply cut profile. He is not tall; on the contrary" (Sveriges Radio 1959). He then proceeded with the usual questions; among other things, he asked him: "In your opinion, Sir, what is your best work of art, *Of Human Bondage*?" (Sveriges Radio 1959). Surprisingly, Maugham did not actually choose this novel, his masterpiece, but another one: "Well, everyone seems to think that *Of Human Bondage* is my most important

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novel. It's not the one I like best; I like best a much shorter novel called *Cakes and Ale*. I do not know what it's called in Sweden?" (Sveriges Radio 1959).

Towards the end of the interview, Berggren approached a more interesting subject: the Nobel Prize in literature. He asked Maugham: "As for the Nobel Prize and Nobel Prize winners, any opinion?" Maugham answered in an evasive manner; he only said: "Well, I think that Camus was an excellent choice. He got it last year?" and then continued: "And then, so far as Doctor Zhivago is concerned, if the Russians had wanted to give a book an advertisement they couldn't have done better" (Sveriges Radio 1959). He did not so much as suggest a personal interest in the great prize, which he nevertheless wished to receive (Meyers 2004: 307). It is probable that Maugham did not want to embarrass himself by publicly stating it. We will never know for certain, but the fact nevertheless remains that the matter of Maugham and the Nobel Prize has been neglected.

The two central Maugham biographies by Jeffrey Meyers (2004) and Selina Hastings (2009) barely consider the subject. In the latter, the Nobel Prize is not mentioned at all and the former contains the erroneous information that Klaus W. Jonas proposed Maugham for the prize but that he was rejected because "the Swedish critics adamantly replied that 'Maugham's writing did not fall under the criteria for the prize and there was not the slightest chance that he would ever get it'" (Meyers 2004: 307). Although it may well be possible that Jonas in some way tried to nominate Maugham, there is, however, nothing in the archives of the Swedish Academy to suggest this. It is furthermore very unlikely that Maugham would have been thus rejected by the Swedish critics. It is not only a fact that Maugham was a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature, but also that he had made an impression on the members of the Swedish Academy during his lifetime. There are several documents from the archives of the Swedish Academy, including reports and letters, and literary reviews from the 1930s and 1950s, that indicate this and in particular that the impression of Maugham in the Nobel Prize context was ambiguous. It is nevertheless regrettably a subject which has remained largely unknown in an international context, which is, however,

not very surprising: the sources, apart from the interview that I quoted above, are exclusively written in Swedish.[1]

I have examined these sources, which I will describe in the following pages. I intend to show how a number of influential members of the Swedish Academy and other important Swedish critics of the era regarded Maugham, and how their opinion affected his position as a Nobel Prize candidate. I have also been able to contact individuals with particularly unique connections regarding Maugham and the Nobel Prize, primarily the relatives of some of the nominators, in order to find an explanation, beyond the nomination letter, for why they chose to propose Maugham.

I leave it to the reader to decide whether Maugham was a candidate worthy of the Nobel Prize or not, and whether the assessments of Maugham were fair or unfair; I am not going to discuss this. These notions are of a very subjective nature, which do not really concern the actual historical importance of Maugham; regardless of whether one considers him a "second-rate" novelist or a master, Maugham was nevertheless an important author during his lifetime, who continues to be read and studied today.

Nobel Prize nominations are, moreover, an important topic which does not only concern the reception of those authors who were nominated. It is also a unique aspect of a secretive, yet notorious form of literary criticism, which ultimately has a more and less canonical effect. It is, however, difficult to analyse, partly due to the vast amount of documents and their availability, which is why the canonical importance of the Nobel Prize often tends to be acknowledged but not further analysed. This is, for example, the case with Bourdieu (1996: 61, 155, 370). Therefore, focusing on the nominations and reception of a single author becomes a sort of middle way to identify the mechanisms behind the Nobel Prize.

Before I proceed with the discussion of Maugham's reception and nominations, a brief description of the era in which Maugham was nominated is necessary, namely a summary of the criteria which at the time dominated the evaluation work of the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy.

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[1] All quotations from Swedish sources have been translated by the author.

As for the procedure of the Nobel Prize in Literature, from nomination to award or rejection (the latter being the usual result), the stages of a nomination, which have changed very little since the first Prize (1901), are as follows. The Swedish Academy receives proposals by letter from individuals with the right to nominate from all around the world (Allén, Espmark 2006: 12-14). They include university professors in Linguistics and Literature, chairpersons of important national writing associations, members of national academies with a similar national importance to the Swedish Academy and previous laureates of the Nobel Prize in Literature (Allén, Espmark 2006: 12-14). In addition, members of the Swedish Academy have the right to propose candidates. In this case, the proposals do not have to be submitted in written form; they are just added to the list. After the Swedish Academy has received the proposals (before their deadline, which is usually by the end of January), a list of all the valid candidates is drawn up by the members of the so called "Nobel committee" of the Swedish Academy (Allén, Espmark 2006: 12-14). This is a group within the academy which consists of a handful of members who have the task of evaluating the prize candidates before these are presented to the whole academy, which consists of eighteen members. What the committee essentially does is to shorten the list to a small number during the following months of the year, until they have either one or a couple of candidates who they then propose for the Nobel Prize to the academy after the summer (Allén, Espmark 2006: 12-14). It is thus not the committee that decides on a Nobel Prize; this is done by the academy as a whole during the fall, shortly before the laureate is announced (Allén, Espmark 2006: 12-14). The committee nevertheless does have a decisive influence; it has only seldom occurred in the history of the Nobel Prize for Literature that the academy has rejected the proposals of the committee. The evaluations are documented by protocols and in some cases by special reports on the candidates that are produced by the committee.[2] To some extent, they are also preserved in the correspondence of the members of the academy.

[2] The special reports usually consist of biographical information about the author followed by an assessment of his/her literary work. They vary in length and structure, depending on the available sources, reputation and language of the author and the availability of his/her work. The Swedish Academy may order custom made translations if this is required (Allén, Espmark: 14). It is, however, unknown how often this was the case.

In the case of Maugham, a special report about him was written in 1955 by the Swedish literary critic and publisher Georg Svensson, known for his special competence in English literature. Maugham is, however, barely mentioned in the correspondence between the committee members during the period from the 1930s to the 1960s. I know this for a fact, as I have examined most of it. The only thing I was able to find in the private correspondence was among the personal letters of the literary critic Fredrik Böök, a member of the Nobel committee (1929-1950), to his wife. He wrote to her that he had read "a comedy" by Maugham aloud as a pronunciation exercise (he had travelled to London in 1930 to attend an English course) (Böök 1930a). He did not mention the name of the play nor his impression of Maugham. It is therefore only the reviews of his colleagues that offer some insight, apart from the final judgment of the committee, which was added to protocol.[3]

The Prize Criteria of the Nobel Committee

In order to understand the evaluation of the members of the Nobel committee, one has to consider the vague criteria on which they are obliged to judge the candidates (Espmark 2001: 8).[4] Alfred Nobel did not deliver any exact definitions in his will about what he intended; he merely wrote that the major part of his financial assets were to be used for a prize to be founded premiering "those who, during the preceding year, have conferred the greatest benefit to humankind" (Nobel 1895). This is the main criterion on which all Nobel prizes are judged. The instructions for the five prize categories are more or less vague, although they are comparatively clear regarding the scientific prizes as opposed to literature, where a "person who, in the field of literature, produced the most outstanding work in an idealistic direction" is supposed to be chosen (Nobel 1895). This vagueness has thus enabled the Swedish Academy to interpret the criteria very freely, as what one considers to be an "idealistic direction" or not is relative. The interpretation of the

[3] The length of the protocols of the committee varies. They used to be very detailed until the early 1920s but became more concise from then onwards (Svensén 2001: XXVII).

[4] A more detailed description of the Nobel Prize criteria, selection process and Alfred Nobel's will in English translation are available on the website of the Nobel Prize foundation: www.nobelprize.org.

criteria is, furthermore, affected by the obvious fact that the members of the Swedish Academy also change over time; each generation has their own values (Espmark 2001: 7, 33, 221).

Alfred Nobel's ideals were deeply influenced by the romantic idealism of Shelley, and Nobel considered himself a social democrat (Carlberg 2019: 479). He was sceptical towards the conservative and Christian morals of his time. He was, however, not against religion or morals as such; he did not reject Christianity, but he rejected the church as an organisation. Nobel firmly believed that the natural sciences could be used to improve the conditions of humankind. He also believed that literature had a role in this mission. He believed that literature should not merely depict the world and the conditions of man as they are, but that it should depict things as they *should* be (Carlberg 2019: 163-165). In very broad terms: Nobel wanted literature to play a role as a spiritual means of bringing humankind closer together. This has, *in summa*, also been the ideal which the Swedish Academy has striven to accomplish, although with different values from those of Nobel. It is fair to say that the values of the Swedish Academy throughout the history of the prize have been more conservative than Nobel would perhaps have wished (Espmark 2001: 8). It would nevertheless be pure speculation to try to guess what he would have thought about the decisions of the Swedish Academy.

In any case, the first era of the Nobel Prize in literature was dominated by the devout Christian poet, critic and permanent secretary of the Academy, Carl David af Wirsén (chairman of the Nobel committee 1901-1912). The evaluations and discussions of the committee during his era were thus deeply concerned with considerations of moral and Christian aspects (Espmark 2001: 15-40). Candidates who were too candid and blunt in their style, who were politically radical or atheistic or whose ideas did not correspond with the teachings of the Lutheran Church of Sweden were at a disadvantage (Espmark 2001: 15-40). Nobel's ideals were, in other words, interpreted from the point of view of Christian idealism (Espmark 2001: 15-40). As for aesthetic form, prose, preferably of a realistic kind and with an idealistic undertone, was privileged. A scientifically orientated naturalism was, on the other hand, out of the question; it was generally perceived as incompatible with an "idealistic tendency". Authors who applied a naturalistic tone were regarded as being as "cold" as their tone and thus as malignant as the misery or cruelty they portrayed. This notion was essentially retained

during the decades to come. This is, for example, evident from the examples of Émile Zola (nominated in 1901 and 1902) and Ernst Jünger (nominated several times from 1956 onwards). In the case of Zola, "the lack of spirit" and supposed heavy cynicism in his naturalism was used as the reason "that he could hardly be considered for a [Nobel] prize" (Svensén 2001: 8). And in the case of Jünger, his seemingly unsentimental writing style was judged to be "cold" and the author thus "ideally far away from the humanitarian thought" which characterizes the Nobel Prize (Protocol of the Nobel Committee 1956). The application of the "idealistic" criterion from a Christian perspective was however not long-lasting; although it persisted under the tenure of Wirsén's successor as chairman of the Committee, the historian and politician Harald Hjärne (Chariman 1913-1921), it lost its importance after his time, in the committees led by Per Hallström (1921-1946) and Anders Österling (1946-1970). Other criteria nevertheless endured (Espmark 2001: 92, 120-121). These included a critical stance towards authors who were considered to be either too superficial or too frivolous. "Popular" authors were, however, not scorned. In fact, they were preferred over authors who were considered exclusive. Authors who wrote for a wide audience were regarded as more suitable laureates; their popularity was considered to be more in line with the intentions of the prize, that is, they were considered to have made a broader impact through their work. It was, for example, in this "popular" spirit, alongside other factors, that Sinclair Lewis, John Galsworthy and Pearl Buck were awarded the prize during the 1930s and that, while they were ultimately rejected, Arnold Bennett (1926) and Margaret Mitchell (1938) were considered serious candidates, both receiving considerable praise in the special reports written by Hallström. Hallström particularly acknowledged their ability to depict people with compassion (Hallström 1926a; 1938). The fact that they did not win was primarily because the above-mentioned candidates, and also Bernard Shaw, were considered more accomplished (Hallström 1921; 1926b). It was also in a sense because of this "populist" spirit that James Joyce, although he was never nominated, was read without enthusiasm by some members of the Nobel Committee. Österling wrote in 1934, after having characterized *Ulysses* as "extremely hard to read", that: "For my part, I have in intervals of a couple of years made sincere efforts to get through the work, but life is short and in total I have probably not read more than about a third of it,

which nevertheless includes the most important parts, according to the apologists" (Österling 1934). Fredrik Böök was more sardonic. For him *Ulysses* was "terrible" and constituted "a heroic attempt to create something completely unreadable" (Böök 1930b). He even went so far as to claim that it had few "possibilities to create a new school". In other words, he completely underestimated its importance. After the Second World War, the committee became more open towards avant-garde authors, who would previously have been judged as too "exclusive". The Prizes to T.S. Eliot (1948) and William Faulkner (1949) are two of the most obvious examples of this change.

Maugham was not nominated during the "populist" era. There are nevertheless reasons to believe that he would have been considered as a serious candidate had he been nominated, especially during the late 1930s. A selection of the Swedish reviews of his works suggests this.

The Swedish Reception of W. Somerset Maugham 1908-1965

Somerset Maugham enjoyed a largely positive reputation among Swedish literary critics during the decades preceding his nominations. To a certain degree this stands in contrast to his contemporary British reception, which was characterised by an immense popularity among the general reading public and a low appreciation among critics and the literary elite because of his fame, success and plain style (Hastings 2009: 368-370, 401). This disparity is not that obvious in Sweden, where it was not only his plays that were widely popular; many of them were performed at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, the national stage of Sweden.[5] But even Maugham himself was mentioned in all sorts of reviews, surveys and gossip. It would be too extensive to cover everything within the boundaries of this article. I will therefore primarily concentrate on a few with relevance to his Nobel Prize nominations, namely those reviews written by two members of the Swedish Academy: Anders Österling, who I mentioned above, wrote six extensive reviews on Maugham for *Stockholms-Tidningen,* and Gustaf Hellström, who, although he did not serve within the Nobel Committee, was an influential

[5] According to the digital archive of the Royal Dramatic Theatre, "Rollboken", the following plays were performed during 1909-1958: *Lady Frederick* (1909), *The Circle* (1922), *Our Betters* (1926), *The Breadwinner* (1931 and 1954), *Sheppey* (1935) and *The Unattainable* (1958).

member of the Academy, especially when it came to the evaluation of English literature. He produced the special report on William Faulkner that convinced the committee to propose him for the Nobel Prize (Hellström 1950). He was also well acquainted within this field, having worked as the London correspondent of *Dagens Nyheter* for approximately ten years over different periods between 1907 and 1935 (Levander 1994). He wrote several reviews on Maugham's work and thereby described its evolution during and after these years. I will not, however, begin with either one of them, since neither of them was the first to mention Maugham in a Swedish context; this was done by Elin Brandell, who wrote the first literary review of Maugham in Sweden, under the pseudonym "Regan", in 1908.

Brandell was at the time in London, where she had seen the plays *Lady Frederick, Jack Straw, The Explorer* and *Mrs Dot*. She had enjoyed them; she thought them amusing and technically good, but her general impression of their author was critical, primarily because she considered him superficial: "He does not create interesting characters" and "does not have anything to say to humanity whatsoever" (Brandell 1908). However, "he seems to have been born with the ability to create theatre plays […] and he knows the art of writing a pointy dialogue without exhausting either himself or his audience with superfluous brainwork" (Brandell 1908).

Hellström, who in the same year was the second Swedish critic to comment upon Maugham in a general survey of the current state of theatre in London, was of a similar opinion (Hellström 1908; 1909). He acknowledged Maugham as a talented novelist and playwright, but criticised him for being superficial with no apparent will or intention other than to entertain, as he saw it. Accordingly, he praised *Lady Frederick* as a well-crafted play with "brilliant lines", and acknowledged Maugham's capacity of observation: "He knows how every one of his men and women looks internally and he also draws them with the same dutiful thoroughness" (Hellström 1908). This was, however, "nearly everything that can be said to his advantage" (Hellström 1908).

This assessment would change little during the years to come (1938-1946). It was primarily Hellström's tone that would become less critical. He would, for example, revise the notion that Maugham was superficial by implying that Maugham would hide the deeper emotions of his

characters under the cloak of a seemingly trivial dialogue. Hellström wrote, in total, seven extensive reviews of Maugham's work.

The first of them was a combined review of *Theatre* and *The Summing Up*, in which he effectively summarised his own opinions of Maugham (Hellström 1938). He acknowledged, for example, that Maugham seemed strangely underestimated by English literary critics, in contrast with his wide success as a playwright and novelist. He explained this by noting that Maugham was not a typical English writer; he lacked the typical English humour and was not unjustly considered a cynic, according to Hellström. This he saw as primarily due to the many French influences on Maugham's work and worldview. He thus asserted that Maugham was considered more French than British. He nevertheless praised the novel as amusing and the autobiography as interesting. The second review was of *Christmas Holiday* (1939) and it was critical; he labelled the novel as technically weak and did not see any point to it (Hellström 1939).

During the 1940s, he reviewed *Strictly Personal*, *Cakes and Ale*, *The Razor's Edge* and *Of Human Bondage*. It is interesting to note here the fact that neither *Of Human Bondage* nor *Cakes and Ale* received any attention from Swedish literary critics during the years following their release; they remained largely unnoticed until the publication of their Swedish translations (Hellström 1943; 1946).

Hellström praised *Of Human Bondage* (1943) as Maugham's best novel and he rightly predicted that it would receive a place as one of the most important English novels of the century. What he particularly enjoyed was the frankness and objectivity with which Maugham told of Philip Carey's tragic struggle with his environment and unrequited love. He was also positive in his assessment of *Cakes and Ale* (Hellström 1946). After having summarised the debate which it had stirred up concerning its interpretation as a roman à clef about Thomas Hardy and Hugh Walpole, he recalled that he had enjoyed the novel upon its release in 1930. It had, according to him, kept its "freshness" due to the "simple and unworried" first-person narration of the novel (Hellström 1946).

Hellström's remaining reviews of *Strictly Personal* (1942) and *The Razor's Edge* (1945) have essentially the same character—they only differ in the summaries of their respective content. His final comment (1946) is not a review; it is an essay about the purpose of the novel as an art form. He wrote it after having read a Swedish summary of

Maugham's address, *Of Human Bondage With a Digression on the Art of Fiction*, held on the occasion when Maugham donated the original manuscript of *Of Human Bondage* to the Library of Congress. Maugham had therein voiced his often-stated opinion that the primary objective of the novelist is to entertain, not to preach and not to teach (Maugham 1954). Hellström was apparently surprised by this notion, which he rejected and considered strangely flippant, emanating from Maugham, due to his experience and knowledge of the history of the novel as an art form.

So, in summary, it is obvious that Hellström did not regard Maugham as a second-rate author, although he remained ambivalent towards him. Let us now take a closer look at the impressions of his colleague, Anders Österling.

The available sources suggest that Österling first familiarised himself with Maugham's work during the 1920s. He mentioned him for the first time in 1924, in an essay on Paul Gauguin's travel account of Tahiti, *Noa Noa*, in which he commented on *The Moon and Sixpence* (Österling 1924). It is obvious from his comments that he held an ambivalent opinion of Maugham; he described him as a "versatile author" but also implied that he considered him a poor depicter: "It would have demanded a braver psychologist than Maugham to fully visualise such an individual" (Österling 1924). With this, he meant that he was dissatisfied with the portrait of Gauguin; Österling clearly disliked the manner in which Maugham had based Charles Strickland on him. He regarded it as an "un-English venture" to "direct a masked pamphlet against a man who is dead and unable to defend his legacy" (Österling 1924).

During the 1930s, Österling saw the Swedish stage adaptions for the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm of *The Sacred Flame*, *The Bread-Winner* and *Sheppey*. He did not, however, write any specific reviews about them. Instead, he commented on them in some of his annual summaries of the repertoire. *The Sacred Flame* did not impress him; its theme of humanitarian duty versus the commitments of love seemed to him "all too much arranged by a man of theatre, who wets his thumb and feels how the wind blows" (Österling 1930). He was better disposed towards *The Bread-Winner*, which he labelled "a first-class find" and "bitingly sharp" in its satire (Österling 1931). *Sheppey* was mentioned without comment (Österling 1935).

His general impression of Maugham, however, would become a primarily positive one. Like Hellström, Österling would, starting from his review of *The Summing Up,* revise his initial impression of Maugham as a superficial playwright, and instead regard him with high esteem as a talented artist and an intelligent man (Österling 1938). Although he initially found him emotionally cold and cynical, he nevertheless acknowledged that he respected his intellectual abilities: "one does not encounter such an independent and uncompromising logical thinker every day" (Österling 1938). He would also excuse Maugham's apparent cynicism as sound judgment, which he even considered "elegant" (Österling 1938).

In contrast to Hellström, Österling never questioned or implied any lack of purpose in Maugham's work. He would also focus more extensively on its philosophical dimensions, which Hellström had rather dismissed. This cannot be said of Österling; in a section of the review, which was later published with some minor revisions as a preface to the Swedish edition of Maugham's memoir, he wrote that Maugham "surprises" with "his philosophical interests" (Österling 1951). He was clearly impressed by them:

> [Maugham] asserts that […] philosophers in general do not embrace their views because reason leads them there, but because their temperament forces the one or the other opinion upon them, which means that universal truth does not exist but only a truth that suits the personality of the individual. […] [W]hen he in this manner allows the different schools to march past in the discussion of Spinoza and Hume, Kant and Schopenhauer, it becomes apparent that he is an eager traveller even on the ocean of theoretical questions, and it cannot […] be claimed that he […] satisfies himself with banal conclusions or […] truisms. (Österling 1951)

During the Second World War, by which time Österling was serving as the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, he also commented on *Strictly Personal* in a review, which is no more and no less than a summary with an enthusiastic undertone (Österling 1942). He also reviewed *Of Human Bondage* and, despite the minor criticism that he thought the novel slightly too packed with unlikely events, he was impressed: "Beside Melville's *Moby Dick*" he called the novel "certainly the most valuable" that had been translated into Swedish in the past years

(Österling 1944).[6] Moreover, he did not predict that it would become a classic, but already regarded it as such: it had an "acknowledged position within the great line of tradition from Meredith and Hardy" (Österling 1944).

The rest of his reviews are essentially a consolidation of his admiration for Maugham. The review of *The Razor's Edge* began with a recall of that reverence he had developed seven years before, when he read *The Summing Up:* "[N]o one could read that book without increased respect for his intellectual qualities and independent position" (Österling 1945). Now, according to Österling, *The Razor's Edge* affirmed his position in its own way. He also drew a connection to Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*; one of the characters of the novel, Isabel, reminded him of characters that one would encounter there. On *Cakes and Ale* he wrote that it was "written with the lightest hand and still with supremely secure, psychological art" (Österling 1946a). Moreover, he considered Maugham's historical novel on Machiavelli, *Then and Now,* as an interesting intermezzo (Österling 1946b). He was surprised by the theme of the novel and although he rightly noted that Maugham did not consider the philosophical and political dimensions particularly profoundly, which one would expect in a work about Machiavelli, he still considered it a well-told story. To Österling, it was yet another example of his remarkable talent for storytelling.

It was then nearly a decade before Österling wrote anything about Maugham again. This time it was his last published reflection on him. It was a review of Klaus W. Jonas' anthology with essays on Maugham, *The Maugham Enigma,* which is essentially proof that Österling considered Maugham unfairly underestimated (Österling 1954). The tone is almost that of an obituary; he summarised Maugham's life and work in a fashion which suggests that he most probably did not expect him to live much longer (Maugham had just turned 80). More striking, however, is the defensiveness in his tone: Österling criticised the notions of Maugham's alleged cynicism and triviality as a storyteller. He was particularly sceptical of the idea of some critics that Maugham was a "second-rate" writer:

[6] The works by Maugham that have been translated into Swedish are listed in chronological order in the Appendix.

> Maugham has described himself as a good second class [bridge] player. His critics have apparently claimed that his literary rank could be described as such. However, the question is not resolved that easily. When in his old age he dealt with his inner state in *A Summing Up* [sic], it was an achievement that impressed through its intellectual honesty and its far more than shallow overview of the several problems of the profession [of the author, P.T.]. And now […] one is certainly inclined not only to see the phenomenon of success in him but also a man who to a rare extent has done what is right with his gifts, a fascinating storyteller who unites the grip of Aladdin with the temperament of Nureddin. (Österling 1954)

It is thus evident that Österling held Maugham in high esteem. He had initially been critical but had later changed his opinion. As shown above, this was particularly due to his impression of Maugham's memoir. We shall shortly proceed to the nominations, but first some words on the general reception of Maugham by other contemporary Swedish critics.

Their reception was similar to both Hellström's and Österling's; it would therefore be redundant to describe them all in detail, as they do not add anything significant to what I have already described (Attorps 1943, 1945, 1948, 1949, 1951, 1957, 1961; Bernholm 1946; Bjarne 1934; Frykman 1952; Harrie 1941; Håkanson 1948, 1949; Holmberg 1932; Kjellberg 1951; Kamras 1943; Landquist 1933; Tingsten 1951). It could nevertheless be noted that Maugham was generally praised as a talented storyteller and occasionally criticised for being too trivial. The critique was, however, mostly very mild. It was only the polemical literary critic Sven Stolpe who voiced a decidedly negative opinion. He considered Maugham a fraud ("You are a humbug, Mr. Maugham!"), who, according to him, did not really know very much about the things he described (Stolpe 1956). He based this conclusion on what he perceived as unsatisfactory depictions of the sea and sailing in *The Narrow Corner*. It is, however, evident that the primary reason for his dislike was Maugham's worldview. A quote from the novel, which suggested a superiority of Indian philosophy over Western thought, he flippantly dismissed as "stupidity" (Stolpe 1956).

The impressions of one young critic at the time stand out. Per Wästberg, a present-day member of the Swedish Academy and the Nobel Committee, who at the time was 24 years old, interviewed Maugham in 1958 in London. An interesting detail in his subsequent article in *Dagens Nyheter*, which in general terms could be summarised as a sympathetic and insightful portrait of the author, is Wästberg's remark that Maugham was "happy that Camus had received the Nobel Prize" (Wästberg 1958).

Had Wästberg perhaps asked Maugham a similar question to the one from Berggren?

I asked Wästberg personally if he had indeed done so. Unfortunately, he could not recall exactly why Camus had been mentioned, but he nevertheless told me that he believed that it was due to Camus' notoriety at the time (Wästberg 2020). More interestingly, he also told me that he remembered that Georg Svensson, who had published several anthologies of Maugham's short stories in Swedish translation through the prestigious Bonnier publishing house, would have been happy to see a Nobel Prize for Maugham and that Sigfrid Siwertz, a member of the committee, was "one of [Maugham's] advocates" within the academy. This is probable; Siwertz had written favourable prefaces to the Swedish translations of *The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Narrow Corner*. Wästberg nevertheless told me that he doubted that Maugham "was ever close to a Nobel Prize", as he was "probably seen as too much of an entertainer, although *The Razor's Edge* was a sort of pseudo-Buddhist hippy novel and *Cakes and Ale* a roman à clef with depth", as he helpfully wrote to me. Before I comment on this, let us proceed to the nominations.

Maugham's Nobel Prize Nominations

In 1955, Geoffrey Bullough, Professor of English at King's College London, was the first to nominate Maugham. He also proposed Aldous Huxley. Maugham was, however, his first choice. In both cases, he referred to their life contributions to literature and he explained his order of preference in the following manner:

> Because of his age and distinction I suggest Somerset Maugham as a Nobel Prize Winner for the year. If it should be thought that the fact that his work is probably finished puts Maugham out of the running, then I suggest Aldous Huxley, who is still producing work which contributes to our knowledge of human nature. I know neither of these gentlemen personally. (Bullough 1955)

His more specific motivation for proposing Maugham was:

> Mr. Maugham has an international reputation, and many of his works have been translated into several languages. In England he has only recently had the recognition he deserves, for he has lived abroad and his novels are written in a cool, ironic style unusual in a British author, but he carries the tradition of Flaubert and de Maupassant. In the theatre he was one of the mainstays of the drama in the first

> quarter of the present century, and his influence is still found in the theatre, although he has ceased to write plays. His attitude has always been liberal, and he has done much to help the English to break away from their insularity of outlook and their Victorian narrowness of morality. He is also a good literary critic, as his *Writer's Notebook* (1949) and his recent collection of essays show. Mr. Maugham is now an old man, and it may be that this will be the last opportunity to recognise his merit by so distinguished an award as the Nobel Prize. (Bullough 1955)

Georg Svensson produced a report about Maugham for the Nobel committee (Österling, Siwertz and Hjalmar Gullberg). He kept it brief and general; he did not go into any particular detail on any of the novels, plays or short stories (Svensson 1955). Instead, he gave a general and ambiguous description of Maugham's reputation and style, because, as he himself admitted, he was not sure how to describe his own feelings towards Maugham. They were nevertheless very positive; similar to Österling, he regarded Maugham as a highly intelligent, rational person, based on his impression of *The Summing Up*, and an amusing storyteller and playwright of the first rank. He was, however, more critical in terms of technique; he criticised Maugham's style for lacking lyrical qualities; he neither considered Maugham to be particularly original in any category, nor did he regard him as an author destined for a place in the history of literature. He made this point through certain comparisons: as a playwright, he compared him (positively) with Bernard Shaw and (negatively) with Noël Coward (Svensson 1955). As a novelist, he correctly identified the influence of Guy de Maupassant and argued, similarly to Hellström, that *Cakes and Ale* was Maugham's "best book", which to an extent had surpassed the works of Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh; neither one of them had produced anything "wittier", according to Svensson (1955). *Of Human Bondage*, on the other hand, he considered a "far from original" coming of age story, but did not reject it entirely; he "acknowledged the sympathetic seriousness and profound engagement" of the novel (Svensson 1955). In concluding his report, pondering the question of whether Maugham was worthy of the Nobel Prize or not, he was diplomatic. The only problem in giving the Prize to Maugham, as he saw it, was the fact that the author had more or less finished his writing career. Moreover, he regarded him as inferior to other Anglo-Saxon authors who had never received the Nobel Prize, namely Hardy, Conrad, Joyce and D. H. Lawrence (Svensson 1955). He nevertheless stated that it would not be "a blot in the protocol" to give the prize to Maugham if the Swedish Academy should want to

"emphasise the justification of the intelligent, cultivated entertainment literature" (Svensson 1955). In other words, he was indeed positive towards a Nobel Prize for Maugham, although he certainly expressed it in a very restrained manner.

The committee did ultimately not consider Maugham for the prize. Instead, it focused primarily on Halldór Laxness, who was more and less unanimously supported by all of the members; Österling wanted to propose a shared prize between Laxness and another Icelandic author, Gunnar Gunnarsson, or, as an alternative to the Icelanders, Österling proposed Eugène Baie or Juan Ramón Jiménez (Protocol of the Nobel Committee 1955). This line was supported by Siwertz. Hjalmar Gullberg, on the other hand, proposed giving the prize to Laxness alone.

Nevertheless, Maugham did not receive a particularly negative assessment despite his rejection; nothing sceptical regarding his position as an author was added to protocol. They did not state that he did not deserve the prize, only that he did not need it, as they thought his general acclamation was enough of a reward. Svensson had indeed noted in his report that Maugham's books "were probably more spread across the whole globe than any other author's" (Svensson 1955). He was, in other words, too "popular" and "successful" for the prize:

> Without in any respect underestimating this extraordinarily talented and successful author, who during his long career has left behind many unquestionable masterpieces, the committee asserts that an award in a case such as this, where the overwhelming favour of the public is a full enough tribute to his talent and reputation, would lack purpose. (Protocol of the Nobel Committee 1955)

Ultimately, Laxness was chosen "for his vivid epic power which has renewed the great narrative art of Iceland" (Nobel Media AB2020).

In 1959, Robert Niklaus, a Professor of French at the University of Exeter, proposed Maugham. The nomination letter was short; Niklaus referred only to Maugham's production, which he listed without any comment. He nevertheless concluded: "I should be pleased to furnish you with further information should it be required" (Niklaus 1959). The position of the committee (Österling, Siwertz and Eyvind Johnson) was not revised (Protocol of the Nobel Committee 1959). Instead, the majority of the Committee, including Österling, proposed Karen Blixen. Eyvind Johnson, however, had a different preference; he wanted to choose an Italian author with the argument that Italian authors, compared

to Scandinavian authors, had been disadvantaged; there had, according to him, been too few Italians who had received the prize (Protocol of the Nobel Committee 1959). Accordingly, he proposed the following candidates in the following order: Salvatore Quasimodo, Ignazio Silone, Alberto Moravia and Giuseppe Ungaretti. Ultimately it was Johnson's proposal which acquired the majority of votes; Quasimodo received the prize "for his lyrical poetry, which with classical fire expresses the tragic experience of life in our own times" (Nobel Media AB 2020).

In 1961, Maugham was nominated by Karel van het Reve, the eminent Dutch scholar of Russian literature who, as a Professor of Russian at the University of Leiden, had the right to nominate. He highly admired Maugham, whom he often mentioned in his writings. Accordingly, he motivated his proposal:

> Thinking on an international scale I would mention without any hesitation the English author WILLIAM SOMERSET MAUGHAM, born 1874. He has excelled in many fields: his novels, plays, essays, short stories and memoirs belong to the best the English language has produced, and will live long after many of his contemporaries, now famous, will be forgotten. It would astonish future generations if Maugham were to die without having received the Nobel prize. His works are well known; I will not sum them up. He lives, if I am not mistaken, somewhere in the South of France. (van het Reve 1961)

Once again, the committee (still composed of Österling, Siwertz and Johnson) stuck to their position. The renowned Yugoslav author Ivo Andrić was instead unanimously proposed and ultimately chosen "for the epic force with which he has traced themes and depicted human destinies drawn from the history of his country" (Nobel Media AB 2020).

In the following years, 1962, 1964 and 1965, Maugham was nominated by Richard Broxton Onians, Professor of Latin at the University of London. He nominated Maugham "on account of his great contributions to literature, [and] his many fine novels […], his brilliant plays […], his short stories […], his charming books of travel […] and his autobiographical [books]" (Onians 1962).

Apart from his obvious aesthetic admiration of his work, John Onians—the son of Richard Broxton Onians—believes that political sympathies could also have played a small role in his proposal (Onians 2020). Onians suggests that Maugham's background as an agent in Russia just shortly before the revolution, as well as his writings during

the Second World War, evoked his father's sympathies, as he was very preoccupied with the communist and Nazi threats.

In 1964, Maugham was also nominated by Geoffrey Moore, a Professor of American Literature at the University of Hull, "for his contribution to the art of story-telling in English" (Moore 1964).

Besides Onians (1965), the last person to propose Maugham was Jean-Albert Bédé, a Professor of French at Columbia University, New York. Bedé began the nomination letter with a polite explanation that he had been unable to nominate sooner, because he was currently visiting Professor at the University of London. Although he wrote that "[c]e retard, à mon grand regret, m'empêchera de motiver, avec la réflexion et dans tout le détail désirables, le choix que Je fais de Mr. Somerset Maugham," he nevertheless founded his nomination on the following grounds:

> Eussé-Je plus de temps à ma disposition, cependant, Je croirais superflue, voire assez absurde, de présenter longuement la personnalité et l'oeuvre de Mr. Maugham. L'une et l'autre ont dès longtemps acquis un rayonnement universel; l'une et l'autre sont assurées de survivre, et rien ne manque à la gloire de Mr. Maugham, si ce n'est précisément, l'attribution du Prix Nobel. Il est certes concevable que l'Académie Suédoise hésite à couronner un écrivain dont l'âge a fermé la carrière et dont l'oeuvre appartient tout entière au passé. Si, en revanche, la sagesse paraissait recommander qu'on fit alterner les candidats qui promettent encore et ceux qui ont déjà engagé leur moisson, Je ne vois personne, dans la seconde catégorie, dont les titres se puissent comparer à ceux de Mr. Maugham. (Bédé 1965)

Maugham was again not among the preferences of the committee, which during these years in addition to Österling, Siwertz and Johnson also included Henry Olsson, Erik Lindegren and Karl Ragnar Gierow. In 1962, it was John Steinbeck who was ultimately awarded the prize "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humour and keen social perception" (Nobel Media AB 2020). In 1964 the award went to Jean-Paul Sartre, "for his work which, rich in ideas and filled with the spirit of freedom and the quest for truth, has exerted a far-reaching influence on our age" (Nobel Media AB 2020). And in 1965, the year of Maugham's death, it was Mikhail Sholokhov who was selected, "for the artistic power and integrity with which, in his epic of the Don, he has given expression to a historic phase in the life of the Russian people" (Nobel Media AB 2020).

Conclusions

Maugham was indeed never close to being awarded a Nobel Prize, as Wästberg correctly supposed. It is, however, not at all evident that he was declined because his work was considered to be too trivial, or because he was seen as too much of a storyteller. This concurs neither with the reception of the members of the Academy nor with the final judgement of the committee, which is remarkably positive in its tone. Despite some initial criticism, none of the members who voiced their opinion of him considered him mediocre or "second-rate", the epithet which, regrettably, is so often used to describe his work, partly due to a false quotation ascribed to Maugham himself (Blackburn, Arsov 2016).[7] On the contrary, not only did they acknowledge him as a distinguished author and consider his work enjoyable to read, but they also regarded him as a remarkable man with sound ethic and aesthetic convictions; they were not only intrigued by his personality, his extraordinary life, his experience, his exquisite knowledge of literature and philosophy and his lucid style, but they were also impressed by his idealistic opinions on the meaning and purpose of art which he describes in *The Summing Up*. What Maugham wrote there, including his opinion that art "must teach men humility, tolerance, wisdom and magnanimity" (Maugham 1938: 310), resembled the literary ideal which Nobel had in mind and the general conviction of the members of the Swedish Academy, who were all in their different ways ethical and aesthetic idealists (Segerstedt 1992: 461). This is the probable reason for the respectful treatment Maugham received at the hands of the Swedish critics. But despite this, Maugham's success and popularity worked against him as a Nobel Prize candidate in the sense that he was considered to have achieved all the fame, recognition and wealth that any author could strive for and therefore that he did not need a Nobel Prize. Maugham was, in other words, not rejected because he was considered too bad an author or too trivial; he was rejected on economic rather than aesthetic, moral or even political grounds. It must also be acknowledged that Maugham was nominated quite late in his life. Apparently, no one had thought to nominate him during the peak of his literary career. This could be regarded as indicative of his contemporary reputation, that no one with the right to

[7] Daniel Blackburn and Alexander Arsov show through compelling evidence that Maugham probably never uttered the famous quote that he belonged to "the very front row of the second rate".

propose candidates had thought him worthy of a nomination, but it could also be purely coincidental. In any case, this does not say anything about his quality as a writer or about his worthiness for the prize. Nobody ever nominated James Joyce, Virginia Woolf or Katherine Mansfield, authors who would have deserved the Nobel prize just as much as Maugham.

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Appendix

The following works by Maugham have been translated into Swedish. The list is in chronological order with the original title first followed by the Swedish title, year of publication in Sweden, publishing house and translator. Only first editions are listed.

On a Chinese Screen: *Kinesiska miniatyrer*. 1923. Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand. Translated by Ragnhild Haglund.

The Trembling of a Leaf: *Ett darrande blad. Små historier från Söderhavsöarna*. 1924. Stockholm: Geber. Translated by Sigfrid Lindström.

The Painted Veil: *Kitty*. 1925. Stockholm: Geber. Translated by Thorsten Wilhelm Törngren.

The Casaurina Tree: *Trollträdet. Sex noveller*. 1927. Stockholm: Geber. Translated by Thorsten Wilhelm Törngren.

The Moon and Sixpence: *Månen och silverslanten*. 1932. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Pauline Sandler.

The Narrow Corner: *Bortom all ära och redlighet*. 1933. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Louis Renner.

For Service Rendered: *För berömliga gärningar*. 1936. Stockholm: Radiotjänst. Translated by Rudolf Wendbladh.

The Magician: Magikern. 1937. Stockholm: Saxon & Lindström. Translated by Axel Essén.

Theatre: *Teater*. 1938. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Louis Renner.

Christmas Holiday: *En jul i Paris*. 1939. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Louis Renner.

Strictly Personal: *Strängt personligt*. 1942. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Lisbeth and Louis Renner.

Of Human Bondage: *Människans slaveri*. 1943. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Lisbeth and Louis Renner.

The Razor's Edge: Den vassa eggen. 1945. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Nils Holmberg.

The Explorer: *Intermezzo i urskogen*. 1946. Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand. Translated by Josef Almqvist.

Cakes and Ale, or, The Skeleton in the Cupboard: *Honung och malört*. 1946. Stockholm: Forum. Translated by Gerd Osten.

Then and Now: *Då och nu*. 1946. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Nils Holmberg.

[Collection of Maugham's short stories]: *W. Somerset Maughams noveller*. 1948. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Nils Holmberg.

Mrs Craddock: *Mrs Craddocks äktenskap*. 1948. Stockholm: B. Wahlström. Translated by Karl-Gustaf Collander.

The Letter: *Brevet*. 1949. Stockholm: Sveriges radio. Translated by Gustaf Linden.

Liza of Lambeth: *Gatans melodi*. 1949. Stockholm: B. Wahlström. Translated by Mårten Edlund.

Catalina: Catalina. En romantisk berättelse. 1949. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Nils Holmberg.

The Merry-Go-Round: *Kärlekens karusell*. 1950. Stockholm: B. Wahlström. Translated by Alvar Zacke.

The Summing Up: *Sammanfattning*. 1951. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Sonja Bergvall.

[Collection of Maugham's short stories]: *Omständigheternas makt. En novellantologi*. 1951. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Nils Holmberg.

The Making of a Saint: *Glödande liv. Historisk roman*. 1951. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Josef Almqvist.

[Collection of Maugham's short stories including *Ashenden* and *Cosmopolitans*]: *Öst och väst*. 1953. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Thorsten W. Törngren, Ragnhild Haglund and Nils Holmberg.

[Collection of Maugham's short stories]: *Mina favoritnoveller*. 1954. Stockholm: 1954. Translated by Nils Holmberg.

The Hero: *Hjälten*. 1956. Stockholm: B. Wahlström. Translated by Aslög Davidson.

[Collection of Maugham's novels including *Up at the Villa*]: *Fyra världar*. 1956. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Nils Holmberg and Louis Renner.

The Bishop's Apron: *Med alla medel*. 1957. Stockholm: B. Wahlström. Translated by Holger Norelius.

Don Fernando: *Don Fernando*. 1958. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Nils Holmberg.

The Gentleman in the Parlour: *Herrn i rökrummet. En berättelse om en resa från Rangoon till Haiphong*. 1960. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Nils Holmberg.

[Collection of Maugham's short stories]: *Fotspår i djungeln och andra noveller*. 1960. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Nils Holmberg.

[Collection of Maugham's short stories]: *Inte bara för nöjes skull. Noveller*. 1967. Stockholm: Bonnier. Translated by Nils Holmberg.