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Alec Waugh
"A Novelist on Novels"
March 7, 1960
Portland State College

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HOST: Ladies and gentlemen, tonight we are to hear the fourth lecture in the Portland State College series of 1959-1960. Let me welcome you on behalf of the college, and let me say immediately that because you are great readers of novels, you are to be particularly happy that you have come this evening, for our guest tonight, Mr. Alec Waugh, is both a distinguished and a successful novelist and essayist. We've had distinguished men and women on this platform, and we have had those who were merely successful. Well, I need not remind you that the combination is rare; rarer still, in this instance, because our speaker comes from a country that in the last nearly 300 years, has produced more novelists and more novels—notable—in literary history than perhaps any other country in the world. Moreover, his career spans a period as intensely interesting for its changes in literary forms as it has been violent in its political and social upheavals.

Mr. Waugh has written more than forty novels and collections of essays, and is known today almost as well in the United States, I daresay, as he is in his own country. He caught the attention of American readers during the mid-twenties with his story of London's postwar society, a novel called *Kept*. Four years ago, in 1956 that is, his *Island in the Sun* became a front-ranking bestseller. And I suspect that most of these listeners here have either read this novel or have seen the major production that Hollywood made from the book.

Mr. Waugh is the son of a well-known British publisher, one of the two scions of a famous literary family. He was educated at Sherborne and Sandhurst, served with the British forces during the latter years of World War I, was captured by the Germans and imprisoned, and as a prisoner, was inspired to write a somewhat autobiographical book entitled *The Prisoner of Mainz*. After the war was over, he joined his father's publishing firm, Chapman & Hall, as a literary advisor. But he soon discovered that desk work has its limitations, and his early successes as a novelist made it possible for him to begin a life of travel and adventure.

Since the late 1920s, he has, in fact, been traveling throughout the world a very great deal, traveling everywhere, everywhere, often enough to the most remote and exotic places and amongst all kinds of people. And these places and people have provided him with the scenes and characters for his fictions. Last year, may I say, he published two novels, *Love in the Caribbean* and *No House in It*. I believe I am correct, am I not, Mr. Waugh? And besides these, he found time to complete his *In Praise of Wine*, a short history of libations and spirits. Last year, too, amongst other countries, he travelled to Bangkok, Fiji, Honolulu, and Tangier. Taking his office, and, I rather imagine, his typewriter with him, writing from early morning until noon, and spending the remainder of his days getting about to cities and villages and visiting with friends and acquaintances that I am sure he has in very great abundance.

We are honored by his presence on our platform. Because we shall have a short question period following the lecture, you may wish to jot down some questions meanwhile. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Alec Waugh, who will speak to us on the subject "A Novelist on Novels." Mr. Waugh. [applause]

ALEC WAUGH: Ladies and gentlemen, it has been a very happy occasion for me to make my first visit to Oregon, and I was very flattered when I received your invitation to talk here this evening, but as I stand here now I am rather over-conscious, I won't say with a sense of trepidation, but of my own inadequacy. I think of all the august oratory that must have streamed towards you from this platform. And the trouble is... [coughs] I am not a very serious person. I am a storyteller and an entertainer, the direct descendant of those wandering minstrels who in the Middle Ages were classified as rogues and vagabonds. The stock of the status of the novelist may have gone up in recent years, and there are a number of novelists who seem to claim a position of a prophet, a leader, an advisor, one of the unacknowledged legislators of mankind, but I think when one comes to the last analysis, that our ancestor is Touchstone rather than Cassandra,¹ and I myself certainly think of myself and my brother storytellers not so much as leaders of men into action as the idle singers of an empty day.

¹ Waugh is referring to Touchstone, the jester in Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*.

I hope you will be patient with me this evening, and accept me for what I am. And, one point further: I would ask your indulgence; you may find that I talk very much much too much about the material side of writing, that I deal with it as a profession; that I almost treat it as though it were a trade rather than a calling. Perhaps that is so, and it's always advisable to anticipate criticism at the start by saying the worst thing one can about oneself. But if you know my upbringing, it isn't unnatural that I should think of literature this way.

As you've been told, I am the son of Arthur Waugh, the publisher and the critic. I was brought up in an atmosphere of professional writing. When my father came back from the office every evening, he had under his arm a new book, either a book that had been published by his own firm, Chapman & Hall, or that he had for review. The gossip that I heard over the dinner table dealt with authors and publishing. We lived in Hampstead, a few miles from the center of London, and very often over the weekend an author would come out to visit us and discuss his problems with my father. And when he went away, my father would sit and discuss him and say whether he was fulfilling the promise of his youth or not; how his stock stood on the literary [...]. I thought of literature as a means by which families were supported. After all, I was educated by it and the house I lived in was supported by it. And, I do take perhaps a rather material attitude towards writing.

But, because I do, I may be able to give you a different view of the writing of novels from which you have had from people who appear to take it more seriously; that I can take you behind the scenes and show you the writer's workshop. I can show you what it is to be a novelist and how a novelist himself thinks about his work. I can show you some of his problems, and by explaining his problems, I may make it easier for you to enjoy his work and be patient with his deficiencies, because a novelist does write his stories in the hope of entertaining an audience. He does not think of himself, or very few of us do, as a solid instructor. He regards himself as someone who is going to enliven your lighter hours, and if I could help you to enjoy the novel more, I shan't feel that I have wasted your time completely, even in this academic atmosphere.

I would like to talk about the problems of writing novels as they appear to the novelist himself. And I would like to take, as my corpse to be dissected, the novelist who has written three or four books which have had not very great success, but sufficient success for him to think that he can give up whatever his previous profession was, as a lawyer, a chartered accountant, a doctor—it's surprising how many novelists are doctors to begin with—and can start living entirely by his pen. It may seem that a man who finds himself in that position is a very fate-favored mortal. He is as free, on the surface, as anyone could hope to be. He can work when he likes, where he likes; he isn't under anyone's direct control; he has no immediate boss; if he has disagreements with his publisher, he can change his publisher and go to someone else. He can

choose the climate he likes. I myself love the sun early. I can leave England in October when it is getting grey, and I can go to Thailand in November for the two months when alone Thailand is a pleasant place to live in. When the heavy heats return, then I can move on to, Australia, say, where the summer is in its full bloom. A writer of novels is in a very fortunate position as regards freedom, and he also has other kinds of freedom too. He is given a freedom from the laws that bind the ordinary mortal, which must seem very tempting to those who are tied by those bonds.

The people who work in films are encouraged by their studios to appear to be leading highly romantic lives with their opposite numbers in the films. Without mentioning names, you always read that if two stars are acting in a film, they are desperately in love with each other, and wondering at what time they will go to Reno. That... the public likes to think that the public entertainers are leading lives as dramatic as those that they're showing on the films. A novelist isn't quite in that position, but he has a certain license that other people do not have.

Appearances in the bankruptcy and divorce courts, which might well ruin the reputation of a lawyer or a stockbroker or a politician, are, with him, regarded as occupational hazards. When I was in Bangkok, there was a trade commission that came out from Britain, and one of the members from this commission was enjoying the many amenities of Bangkok and was staying in nightclubs morning after morning up 'til nearly dawn. This caused very great indignation among the serious member of the British embassy. They said, "Here is this man, wasting the taxpayer's money, and what good will he be for his work the next morning?" On the rare occasions when they saw me in such localities, they said, "Ahh, getting copy for your next book, it's sure to be worth reading." [laughter]

A friend of mine who wrote a serial for an English paper was asked to send a photograph up to be published. He sent a present picture of himself in his garden with his wife and his children and some dogs, and the editor returned the photograph, saying, "I think our readers would prefer to think of you as unmarried." That is symptomatic of the kind of freedom that a writer has, but one of his great problems is this very freedom that he enjoys. He is, in fact, too free.

The first novelist I ever met, a man whom I don't think many of you are likely to remember, though I think my chairman may, was Ralph Strauss, and he gave me this advice, he said, "Never make a novelist the hero of a novel." He enlarged this view of his at considerable length. He said, "You cannot make your reader interested in your central character unless you make the reader realize that this character is a man of action. He has to be striving for something, fighting for something. He must have an object in view. He need not, in this 20th century, perform acts of derring-do. He need not go exploring the Amazon. If you have a buccaneer character, he needn't launch a frigate nowadays, he can as easily filter company. You can have

the directors of a board sitting 'round a tape machine watching the figures come through, wondering whether they're going to sell their stock or not. What is their duty to themselves and to their shareholders? You can make that as dramatic, in a way, as the 300 at Thermopylae. But they must... the hero of the novel must be a man of action, he must be striving for something. And the trouble about the novelist is, he looks a playboy.

Let me hasten to add, he's very far from being a playboy, in the extent that the writing of novels is extremely hard work. During the second war, I was rather too ancient for very active battle, in fact I was too ancient for any battle at all, I was what is called a "chair-borne warrior"; I was doing staff work. And for eight hours a day, six days of the week, I sat at a desk, and my friends said, "Well, now you will realize what real work is like." Well, I was very often tired, I was very often bored, but I never knew the drained exhaustion that comes to me, that came to me then, before, and has come to me since when I have been working hard on a novel for two or three months on end. The actual writing of a novel is extremely hard work, but it's very hard to persuade a reader that it is.

There has never been a novel, as far as I can think at the moment—I'm not sure about *Pendennis*, it's a long time since I read it—in which the hero is a novelist and which you are convinced he is a man who is working hard and striving for something.² Any talk about the arduous of composition sounds like high-falutin' nonsense. Let us take, for instance, the... how you would get a typical situation, one of the triangles of the novel: a clash between love and duty, between a career and love. That is one of the familiar triangles on which novels are built. Suppose one has a politician who is in that position. You might have a man of about forty, who has reached a critical point in his career, he is holding junior cabinet rank. He is about to introduce a bill into Parliament. He thinks it is very important for his career that this bill be made an act. He thinks it is important for the country that this bill should become an act. He identifies his own interests with his country's interests. And after all, that is where success does lie in politics: if you can identify your personal ambition with what you believe to be the country's welfare. It is easy, or it's not too difficult, to make a reader believe that a man who is in that position is a sympathetic character and that he is striving for something of importance.

If, at the very moment that his career is reaching a critical point, he falls in love unsuitably, then you have a dramatic situation. And if there was a scene, in which at five past six in the evening when he has a cabinet meeting at quarter to seven in Downing Street, he is trying to get a telephone call through to the object of his affections, and the number is engaged, you have a scene of crisis. He looks at the weather outside, there is a typical London fog; how long will it take him to get to Downing Street? He tries again and again, the number is engaged. And he

² *Pendennis*, a novel by William Makepeace Thackeray (1848).

feels that everything depends upon these next five minutes, and he's probably right, because in love there is a moment, there is a stage in which everything does turn on the next quarter of an hour. There is a psychological moment you get things said and you get things arranged, or you never do. If you miss it, it's gone forever. And he feels this is that moment, and there is the fog descending and Downing Street is... is it a quarter of an hour away or twenty minutes away; can he get this call through or will he wait to get this call through?

Well, that's a scene, it would be very hard not to make dramatic if you built it up fairly carefully, but now, try and think of a novelist in the similar position, in which he has a clash between his career and love. Suppose he has been, during London's season, pursuing a lady with his attentions and she has held him off in a way that said, "Wait a little, wait a little." And then when the summer ends, she says, "I'm going down to the Riviera for November. I should be in Monte Carlo. I should be alone there, it might not be a bad idea if you came along there." And she thinks, *Ahhh*. But then at the same time, he... something says to him that it is essential for his career that he should go to the West Indies to find material for a new novel. Well, there he sits, balancing Monte Carlo and love and the West Indies and the sunlight. That does seem a playboy's choice... [laughter] ...you could persuade... no man who goes to an office nine months, eleven months of the year, that this is a serious person worthy of his attention. It is... it seems flabby, futile, weak. You can't interest yourself in men to whom the alternatives are so pleasant.

And that is the problem about the novelist in many ways, that his life is too free and he's cut off from the real working world. He does not know how working... I mean by working, I don't mean people who take a pick and a shovel, I mean how people who go to offices, how they conduct their business. He knows, as a young man, what the life of his father is and his father's friends. He knows... he probably works a little bit in some business before he becomes a professional writer. But the moment he becomes a professional writer, he does lose touch with the ordinary run of life, and he's very conscious of this loss; he has not got the information he needs to write the kind of novel that he wants to write.

Now, a few weeks ago the PEN club in New York had a discussion on this point. They said, the subject was, "To what degree has love ceased to be an important factor in the modern novel?" I was one of the people on the panel, and I said to no degree has it ceased to be an important factor, and the reason I gave for it having ceased to be an important factor was that the average novelist does not know enough about life to get dramatic situations without bringing in love. And this is the example that I gave. If one was going to write a novel about a clash of interests between father and son—and father and son is one of the finest themes for a novel you could find—if one would want to show the clash of the new idea with the old idea, how

effective it would be if you could have a business in which it has been going well for many years but is beginning to go a little bit down perhaps; the father is certain that the way to carry it on is in the old system, slightly broadening it perhaps, but doing nothing drastic, and the son is convinced that the only way is to make some very radical change. Now, that is the kind of problem that as often as not does come up between father and son. But the average novelist—when I say the average, a novelist like myself—cannot, does not know enough about a business to be able to draw a convincing picture of the business which would give rise to a situation like this. And so if he is going to have a clash between father and son, he has to revert to the old situation of love, in which the son falls in love with a girl whom the father considers unsuitable, and that is the dramatic situation. The novelist is so often driven to write about love because he has not got enough material from other walks of life.

Success is often described as a damaging thing for a writer, not so much because money is the root of all evil, but because it cuts him away from the material which is his strength. Arnold Bennett is probably the very best example of that in literature. When he was writing about the Five Towns, he wrote magnificently because he wrote of what he knew in his veins, what is in his blood, his sinews. That is what he had known in his childhood and early years. When big success came, and he came up to London and he moved in a vivid and fashionable world, among very much more interesting people, very much more important people than he had known as a boy, he wrote nothing that was convincing; he described luxury yachts, smart hotels, and restaurants in the Riviera. His work became... it was like cut flowers; it had no roots in itself, and this particular problem is worrying the novelist all the time because he knows he's not getting the right material for his books.

I would say that the problems of the writer come under two main headings: one is the organization of his working life and the other is the actual writing of his books. And the organization of his working life is extremely difficult, because he's always looking for new material and afraid he is not getting it. There are times when he feels like quoting Keats' last sonnet, "When I have fears that I may cease to be before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain, and high-piled books, in charact'ry, hold like full garners the full-ripen'd grain." He feels that once or twice, but many many more times he has this feeling of being exhausted, written out, not knowing where the next subject is coming from.

The Arabs have said that there are only seven plots in the world, and that all stories are variations on those seven plots. Most of those, well, I think all those seven plots come in Shakespeare; there's mistaken identity, *Comedy of Errors*; there's star-crossed love, *Romeo and Juliet*; there is the issue between the fathers and the sons and fathers and children, and the father sacrificing himself for the children and the ingratitude of the children as *King Lear*.

There's jealousy, *Othello*; there's revenge, *Hamlet*. There's ambition that leads to crime, *Macbeth*; there is the disastrous love that ruins careers, the white implacable Aphrodite, *Antony and Cleopatra*. And only, there's only a certain number of those plots can a man enter imaginatively; there are some people who do not understand what jealousy is, there are other writers who do not know what intensive ambition is. Man is limited by his nature, by his upbringing, by his early experiences.

If you try, for instance, to explain to a South Sea Islander what snow is like, he has no idea what you are talking about, and if you were to try and tell an Eskimo about the sunlight, he probably might find it difficult too. If a person has good health, they can't imagine what bad health is like, nor can a person who is permanently ill understand the emotions of that man who opens the opera *Oklahoma* saying, "Oh, what a wonderful morning." They've never known what that is. We are all creatures of infinite limitations, and the writer is very conscious of this deficiency in himself. He has always this urge to find new material, and it gets him into a great many of his troubles. He... it lands him in debt more than anything else.

Debt is one of the occupational hazards of a writer. During the last few years I have been luckier than I have been before, but the dark days are not far distant, I don't suspect. But certainly up til four years ago, I had, as a writer, been in debt all my life. When I had been a soldier, which was ten years of my life, I was never in any debt at all. I knew I was getting forty pounds a month. I said to myself, "If I spend forty-five, then I shall only have thirty-five the following month, and if I spend forty-five again I shall only have twenty-five the month after." And it never seemed to me... it seemed to me insane to get into debt under those conditions. But as a writer, I was always in debt and for the best of reasons I think. I was always saying to myself, "I must get more experience so that I'll get more material for my books."

The kind of thing that a writer does is this; he will feel he's been writing too much about one locality, London for instance. He will say to himself, "I will go on a six week tour to Salon. During those six weeks I shall write six stories. I shall sell them to American magazines at \$1500 apiece, \$9000. The trip out there will cost me, on the whole \$2000, I made \$7000 on this." That's the way he argues to himself. [laughter] What happens is, he starts off on this trip; he doesn't write six stories, he writes five; he only sells two of them to the American magazines, he sells the other three rather poorly to English magazines; the trip cost him much more than he expected and the result of this trip is he's... his exchequer is worse than it was before.

Or, he may say to himself that he isn't meeting a sufficient variety of people, that he's always writing about the same people; and that is puzzling, because the people he's writing about are his friends and the friends of his friends, and he likes those friends and he wants to go on

seeing them. But he tells himself he must enlarge his material. So the kind of thing he will say to himself is, "Either I must know..." he might say, "I ought to know more of the beatniks..." or something like that, "...and the only way I imagine... unfortunately I'm trying very hard to meet some and I haven't had much luck yet, is to go to places that they frequent and then invite them to parties." Well, that would be fairly expensive because they might smash up one's furniture when they came to one's parties. [laughter]

Anyhow, that is... one might do that, or on the other hand, one might think it is time I moved to a different world and perhaps saw political people. Then, one would remember that one had met a certain politician at a lunch party and seemed to like each other, but in England we are very chary about giving invitations, we hold back a lot, as you have been told many times. And it would be quite improper for me to ring up this politician and say, "We had a good chat the other day, won't you come to lunch and let's have another talk." He would think, "Well, what's the back of this, what's he angling for?" The only way one could do it would be to wait, say, til an American novelist came over for a visit to England, such as John [...] or John O'Hara came over. Then one would think, "I would give a big party to John O'Hara or John [...]; then I could write to this politician and say, 'I'm having a party for John O'Hara, it would be very nice if you could come, and I think it would interest you and be very exciting for John.'" Then you find yourself launched into a very elaborate party and as likely as not, at the last moment the politician would have to go speak somewhere else. [laughter] And you are left with this big debt.

That is a kind of way in which a novelist is perpetually in debt, and the result of it is that he doesn't give as much time to his novels as he ought to. He has to finish his novels much quicker than he meant. He persuades himself that they are alright, when in point of fact they aren't ready. In... I did no writing at all during the war because I was in the Army, and when the war was over, I thought I had better try and find out what kind of a writer I had been, because I wanted to know what sort of a standard I set myself. So I hence sent out to myself in Baghdad, four or five of my novels, and it really was a considerable shock to me to find that they were much worse than I thought they were. The trouble had always been the same thing: that I hadn't given myself enough time to finish them. If I had given myself another two months I'd have seen another way of doing them, but as it was, it was scant work, though I hadn't thought so at the time, and mainly because I was perpetually in debt.

That is one of the problems of the writer, and at the same time you may say it's a vicious circle, this going into expense in order to get material, but it's a virtuous circle too, 'cause in this a writer is always renewing himself. He would die; I can think of a number of writers who seemed to have gradually withered away, who have only been able to write about their own family,

about their own friends, and each book has been more and more a pale reflection of the one before. And it is part of the writer... novelist's instinct to go out in this attempt to find new material. What makes a writer a novelist, rather than another kind of writer, a philosopher, or historian, or an essayist, is an avidity for life itself, for a need to mix with as many kinds of people as possible. It is, as I say, a virtuous rather than a vicious circle.

That is one of the main problems of a writer, the finding of material for his books. He also must get leisure in which to write them, and that is the easiest part of his problem. If he is leading an animated social life, he does not have time to find out what is really... what there is in his ideas. Ideas for stories spring out of one's self-conscious self when somebody gets an idea and one does not realize how much there... the idea must come out of some root inside oneself, and if one goes somewhere quietly and works on it and broods on it, then those roots have a chance to flower. I have always been looking for quiet, out of the way places where I can get work done. I go very often to the South of France out of the season, or I go to the MacDowell colony in New Hampshire, which is one of the finest places I know to get work done. There are a good many such places in this country; there is Yaddo, [...], I've forgotten the name in California. But it is very essential, if one is going to get the most out of one's themes, is to give oneself a routine for several weeks or months of eventlessness; nothing much happening day to day, no worries. One ought not to have financial worries at those times, it's essential to have just enough to see one over from day to day without going into any extravagance, and then one can allow these roots to produce the fruit and flower that they should.

Now, that may not seem a very difficult problem in the sense that it seems a very pleasant problem really; the writer hunts for material, and then he goes away quietly and produces it. But the organization of his life is a three-pronged fork. He has not only to get the material and to find the leisure in which to work, but he has to organize this pattern in terms of the human beings whose lives are involved with his, and that means, of course, the opposite sex. And that is a constant problem for the novelist. And I would say right away, that as matrimonial timber, the novelist is the world's worst bet upon the market. It is not that he is a person more volatile, more flighty, more... I won't say immoral, but irresponsible than other people, but the organization of his life is so very difficult. The other day I saw in the paper that Françoise Sagan's marriage had broken up. It had not broken up because she had married someone several years older than herself, but because her time schedule and his didn't work. She liked to dance til half past four in the morning and he was a publisher; he had to be at his office by nine, he had to keep fit so he went horseback riding at seven-thirty. They never saw each other at all. And that is one of the great problems of the writer, is how to organize any kind of domestic life. It is not for me, I suppose, to tell you ladies of this audience what you want in marriage, but I would assume that you do like a certain feeling of security and a feeling of being able to know

where you will be in three years' time. And also, most wives would like a husband who, if he didn't go out of the house directly before breakfast, went out directly after, and didn't appear again until the evening, by which time she has fulfilled the household chores and she has a bath, puts on a new, fresh laundered dress, is waiting for him with a long cocktail shaker, and she's the reward and recompense for his day, and his return is the zero hour of her day. That is what a happy marriage, I presume, is. [laughter]

But for a writer that is extremely difficult, because if he just moves down the passage into another room, he and his wife may make rules together saying, "We will make no disturbance at all." Well, the telephone goes and someone asks him to a supper party next week. Is she going to wait til the evening to ask him? Well, of course she isn't, with the friend on the phone. She goes around the passage and asks him whether to have the party, whether they can go, and they discuss it for ten minutes or so, and then she answers the telephone and he goes on with his work. Or on the other hand, if he gets a message from his publisher or agent, either with good news or bad news, it isn't human for him not to come and discuss it with her, and the result of this is that by the end of the day, they have nothing to say to one another; all the gossip is over. Usually the pleasure of this zero hour is that each exchanges the gossip of the day.

And also, writing is very solitary business, and if a man has been sitting at his desk for several hours, it isn't a great deal of fun moving just into another room and looking at the television. He does want some kind of a change, and either he can say to himself, "I must not go out running 'round at parties because I've got to be fresh next morning," but he feels there is irritation and he's very ready to break loose, and he may take her up with him on these parties, but he may not. [laughter]

And then he will suddenly feel that he is being cut off from life; he wants new material, and he'll suddenly say, if they're living in the country, "We must get an apartment in New York so we can see more people." And she may be perfectly happy living in the country with her two children, and anyhow I don't think that women really like extravagance being committed unless it's with their approval and connivance. The problem of debt is a constant irritation to her, and then he goes off on these... if he goes off on a trip for six weeks, you might think that it was very nice to be married to a novelist and then you'd go off on trips with him to the South Seas and the Far East. But the problem is that he really gets more work done if he goes by himself; I mean he gets more material if he goes by himself. [laughter]

I don't mean that necessarily he wants to spend his whole time in opium dens, but he does want a liberty of movement so that he can follow up any chance acquaintance, and... [laughter]

...and I don't say that a wife likes being left home for an evening when he's having a business session in New York, but she certainly wouldn't like sitting in an Oriental hotel all by herself, so what he tends to say is, "Now honey, don't worry. I'm going away, I'll bring back some wonderful stories, we'll get a lot of money and then we'll do this and that, and I promise you it won't be more than six weeks." But of course, six weeks is a long time to leave anyone, and she may not be there when he gets back. [laughter]

This is a problem. I have been trying to solve this problem for so long, but I know there is no solution; if a person puts their work first then their domestic life suffers; if they put their domestic life work... their domestic life first then their work suffers. There is no solution to the problem at all and one of the reasons why, occasionally, an author seems to be losing his grip, is to some unsatisfactory arrangement of this problem. At any rate, that is the kind of thing he's up against, and if you find a favourite author of yours disappointing you, do try and think of the various problems of organizing his working life by which he is beset.

There is this main problem, this is the half of the problem of his life. The organization of his working weeks and the actual writing of his novels. And the problem of writing a novel is one that—what to me seems the chief problem is this, and I've never seen it in any critical essay—is the novelist is an entertainer who never sees his audience, and he is the only entertainer who never does see his audience; he can't judge the effect of his work, because he doesn't see how his audience is accepting it.

In very early days when I first went to the Far East, I was shown a sight which you don't see very often now because of radio, and that is the teller of stories at street corners. I would see a man standing at a street corner and telling a story, and at a certain point his friend would go around with a bag or a hat and collect contributions, and when he had been given enough he would go on with his story. And the friend who took me there said, "That is how you would be telling your stories if you had been born in Malaya instead of in London." And he said, "Aren't you very lucky to sit at a desk and have your stories sent out by an agent?" and I said, "Yes, I do agree that, but at the same time, I might write better stories if I could see what part of my stories held an audience and what parts of them don't." I have no idea whether the parts that I consider funny are funny or not. When I write a tender love scene, what I think is a tender love scene, whether the reader thinks, "Oh, there's slush coming," and whether, when I have a long description of the scenery, people say, "Just turn the pages and go on to the action." And I know there must be some parts of my books that people like, otherwise they wouldn't be sold at all, but I would give a great deal to know what they are.

People have often said, "How do you start a novel? What is your plan when you begin it, is it all mapped out?" and I would use this simile, that one... suppose you're going for a walk. You look at a house on a hill and you say, "That house is twelve miles' distance. Twelve miles, at three and a half miles an hour, would take about three and a half hours." You know where you are going, you know how long the walk will take, but you can't tell the exact course of that walk, because there will be little streams in between to be gone 'round or forded, there will be unexpected ravines, you can't tell what is between one hill and the next. There may be a rather charming orchard or village that you want to look at. You know where you are going, how long that you are going to take, but you don't know the exact road. And what keeps that walk interesting is the constant variety along the way, and if one is writing a novel, one hopes to maintain the reader's interest by suspense and by little things of little surprises.

There ought to be a feeling of inevitability at the end of a book. The reader ought to feel this is how, this is the only way it could have turned out; this person had to die, this person could never have been happy with that person, that particular piece of that project could never have worked out. It's very much like a detective story in this respect. When the detective story is finally finished and you know who the murderer is, you don't want to know who the murderer is on page 171 if the book is 310 pages long. You want to be surprised when you get to the end. But at the same time you do want to feel, "Oh yes, yes, of course, there were the clues there, I ought to have known." You do... if, on the other hand, you suddenly learned that the murderer was the man who came 'round to fix the Frigidaire on page 24 and hadn't been heard of since, you would feel cheated. [laughter]

And in the same way, in a novel, you can't have people suddenly being run over by a bus and leaving their money going to the right person, and the character who is ruining everybody's happiness suddenly dying of a new epidemic that's going 'round the town. That isn't a feeling... that's just like the murderer and the Frigidaire. You have to have this feeling of inevitability, but there must be surprises all the time. And in point of fact that is true to life; that there is, in life itself, a perpetual eventfulness from day to day so that you don't know what is going to happen next. And your life does turn, all our lives do turn on mere chance as much as anything. That you're going out of an apartment and you hear the telephone bell ring, and you're in a hurry and you say, "Shall I answer that or not?" And you don't go back, and by not going back you may miss a chance of a business appointment which would have altered your whole fortune; or you do go back and you answer it, and you get invited to a party, and you meet, at that party, the person who is going to change your whole life for you. You think the whole thing turns on chance, but if one takes a long view—I am now in an autumnal age, and looking back over the years, I can see how most of my friends and acquaintances are more or less in the position where one might have guessed they would have been thirty years ago, although their life has

been one surprise after another. One small surprise after another just kept their life varied and amusing.

Yet, there is a perpetual stream of effect and cause; there is a sense of inevitability about the whole thing, and the writer has no idea whether he has succeeded in writing the kind of book he wants to write because he has no audience reaction whatsoever. You might say that a writer would get some reaction from the letters he gets after his book comes out. But though those letters are called fan mail, they are never fan mail at all, because it's an unfortunate thing about human nature: people never write to say thank you, they only write to complain. And the letters that come in are always pointing out the kinds of mistakes that it is inevitable for a novelist to make. I don't know why we should make these mistakes; why we should have a person with blue eyes on page thirty-seven whose eyes change to hazel on page eighty-three. When, either... and sometimes one makes a list before the book starts, by saying, "Barbara: the color of her eyes, when she was born, what scent she prefers," all these sort of things, and then when one is writing a scene, one doesn't have that list by one, or the passage in which this was first referred to is with a typist, you say you'll look back and then you never do. It's extraordinary. And if you once make a mistake, you don't see it the second time you go over it. I remember when I was a machine gunner in the first war—that when one was working out charts of... [...] charts, you did the sum yourself first and then it had to be checked over by somebody else who hadn't seen you doing the sum, 'cause you always repeat your mistakes.

I think of some of the mistakes I made and I can't think how I made them. In one book, I had a scene where a young man without very much money, in London, had persuaded a rather rich society woman to visit him in his flat, and he was very worried because he had a gas fire, which was not a very good gas fire. I don't think you have them in this country; there are tubes going up like this, and you turn a tap and then you light them and there are six cones of light, of gas coming out. And this, one of the tubes was popping, and he was very worried—there's quite several lines about this—he thought this popping gas fire would give a very false impression of him to this lady. Well, she arrived in the flat and it all went very much better than he had dared hope, and there was quite a poetic description of the November day dying and the leafless boughs against the London sky, and then I just said, "And the coals fell through the grate."
[laughter]

And there it was, nobody saw it, and... one cannot stop making these mistakes, and letters about them keep coming in. One doesn't get very much help, either, from the reviews in the paper, because reviews in the paper are written not for the benefit of the author, but for the benefit of the prospective reader of the book. If a student writes a thesis and takes it up to a professor, the professor goes over it carefully, pointing out what the merits are and what the

defects are, but viewing the whole in terms of the student. That is not the case with a novel. The critic's duty is to tell a person reading his review about a new book that's on the market and giving him some indication of whether it's a book that he'll want to buy or not, and that is a very different thing. He gives some vague outline, not too precise, of the plot, the kind of atmosphere that it describes, and whether it's better or worse than the author's last book. It doesn't really give a writer himself any indication as to how he has... whether he has succeeded or not.

He doesn't, if he's wise, regard his reviews as the final judgement of whether he has succeeded in the series of tasks he has been setting himself during the year or year and a half in which he was writing that book. If he is wise, he does take very little notice of his reviews. One novelist I knew never read his reviews at all, but he had his secretary measure out the amount of space he was given, and if he, say, had fifteen yards of reviews for one book and then only eleven yards of reviews for the next, he thought something might be wrong and got worried about it, but he never actually read them.

There is only one... there is, however, one type of review that the writer always looks at and which does affect him very much—and not always in a way that is good for his writing—and that is the serious articles that come out at the end of the year, when an estimate is taken of the production of the year, and in those full-dress articles that come out in papers like *Harper's* and the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Saturday Review*, which present a picture of what is being done in the novel at the moment. A novelist would rather be referred to slightly in an article like that than not to be referred to at all. He feels if he is referred to that he is in the movement, that he is a part of the *avant garde*—or the *derrier garde*—or anything, but he is somebody who counts, and if he's not mentioned he does get touchy; even the greatest are touchy. In the 1930's, Somerset Maugham's popularity was extremely high, but he wasn't held in such high regard as he is today by the highbrows, and in one of his essays he said, "When clever young men write articles about the short story, they never refer to me." He was piqued by not being referred to. And if he's not referred to, and if *he* is piqued, what must you expect of lesser mortals?

And if a writer does not appear in these articles, he begins to worry and wonder why he is not included, and it's very unlikely for him to say he is not included because he isn't good enough. He says he's not included because he's not fashionable, because he isn't grouped under a certain body of writers. It is very much easier for a critic, when he is writing this kind of article, to put certain categories of writer together, he can have the conformists, the existentialists, the angry young men, whatever it is, and then make a little essay on each way of writing and finally produce a theory of writing and say which he considers which is the better and which is the less

good way of writing. But if a person doesn't fit into the pattern, if a person seems to be writing in an entirely individual voice, that writer is not included in those articles and is omitted, because it's difficult for the critic to work them in; a critic has to make a well-rounded article. A novelist like Ivy Compton-Burnett has been writing, I suppose, for over forty years, but she's only been regarded at very a high level, and her strength is that she never allowed herself to be sidetracked by that kind of article. But a good many writers do get affected by it, and when they are affected, then they very often try and alter their style in order that they... their work can be more fashionable and they can be included under these headings. I don't say they do it consciously, but subconsciously, it does seem to me to have that effect on them.

I have been in this game for a very long time now, and I've seen so many fashions come and go. There was the proletarian novel before the war, there's the angry young man novel now; there was the stream of consciousness novel at one time, there was the—when I was beginning to write, there was a general feeling that a plot was wrong, that to write with a plot and with a climax was a contradiction of the verities of life—the authors were quoting Heraclitus, “All things are in flux,” and that life was like a river that flowed on and on; and novels in those days never really finished, they stopped. And a great many very fine novels were written under those conditions, but a good many people got sidetracked by the feeling that if you wrote a novel with a plot, you were writing a bad novel.

There was a novelist, I remember, from those days, who does provide a salutary example of the mistake of listening to theories about writing, because the only thing that is important in a novelist is that he should speak with his own voice and present to the world the world as he sees it through his own temperament. If he listens to theories about writing, he will lose his own individual vision. This novelist I am thinking about used to be on my father's list in 1910, 1911, 1912. And he used to come out to see my father every now and again at Hampstead, and he used to bring the problem of his new novel, and he always used to come when he had reached the same point, when he was about 3/5ths of way through the book, and he used to say, “I don't really know what is going to happen next. I don't know how to... how it's going to turn out.” And he would tell my father this story. He didn't tell... those were the days when you didn't have plots in novels, and he had a kind of a situation, but not more than a kind of a situation. Say, for instance, there would be a husband... a woman with a past was married and she was very worried about this, she wanted to tell her husband. These were in the days when the double standard was in operation, and a woman with a past was in a rather different position than a woman with a past would be in today. And my father would listen to this story and then he would present some rather—well, let's admit it—rather obvious solution, and he'd say, “Well, why don't you have her tell her husband, and then he would say, ‘Well, I'm very glad you've told me; in point of fact I knew it all along.’” And this novelist would look very tired

when my father said that, and he'd say, "Oh, no, you can't have things like that, those things only happen in third-rate novels." So he would... he'd say, "Life ends in a compromise." So he would work out his novels in a compromise, and the compromise was so vague that he wasn't really very clear what had hap... [tape cuts out for a few seconds]

...come from Central European oil, and used in Russia, and as far as anyone was happy in a distracted world I would say he was a very happy man in about 1912 and '13. But then the war came along and his entire life was altered. He went to the front early and got badly gassed, and then the Russian revolution came and the oil mines were expropriated, and it looked as though his income was at an end. And he came 'round to see my father shortly after the war, and he began to talk about himself rather in the way that before he had talked about his novels; he would say, "I don't really know what's going to happen now." Well, my father was a Pickwickian, jovial person, as befitted a man who published Dickens, and he was very cheery, he said, "Oh don't you worry my dear boy, after all the squalor of war people will want a decent, quiet, dignified, scholarly novel. Your novels will probably do very well indeed, and probably these czarist generals will turn out the Bolsheviks and you'll have your oil money back before too long."

But my father didn't think anything of the sort; he didn't think these czarist generals would get back and he didn't believe this man's books would make any impact on the very different world that had grown up in 1919 and 1920. He thought, actually, that the same kind of compromise that had taken place in this man's novels before the war would take place in his own life now; that it wouldn't be very satisfactory, but it wouldn't be too bad. That he'd go down to the Riviera in the sun, that he'd get a pension from the government, that he might possibly get some compensation back from Russia, that he would take great care of his health—looking after one's health is in itself an occupation—and that he would occasionally write an essay about his memoirs of the turn of the century writers, and that on the whole it wouldn't be too bad.

But it didn't, in point of fact, turn out that way at all; about three years later he turned up at my father's house in a lovely, long, low, shining car and a chauffeur with very lovely shining buttons opened the door for him. And my father said, "Now what on earth has happened?" And this is what had happened: he had an uncle in Australia who he'd scarcely seen who used to order all his books when they'd come out, and that when his friends came down from the other stations, he would give them these books to read, and they would bring them down next morning and they would say he hadn't understood them at all. And he was so proud, not only at having a nephew who wrote novels, but a nephew who wrote novels that his friends couldn't understand... [laughter] that he gave all his money to the nephew when he died. [laughter] And

the nephew's eyes twinkled when he told the story—he always had a sense of humour—he said, “It's the kind of thing that happens in third-rate novels—and in real life.” [laughter]

If this novelist had thought more about what happened in real life and less about theories of writing, he might have done very much, written very much better novels. Ladies and gentleman, I said I would be a little frivolous this evening, and perhaps I have been less serious than I have intended, but it is always hard to be serious about the things that lie nearest to one's heart. If you were to see five novelists at a literary soirée in close conversation with their heads together, there is one thing you could be certain they would not be discussing, and that is the purpose, the function, the future of the novel. They might be discussing a boxing match, or a political event, or the scandal in which one of their friends have got involved, but much more likely they would be discussing what is the new policy of the *Saturday Evening Post*, and whether Hollywood is wanting this kind of story or that, whether TV interviews do one any good. They would be, in fact, talking shop, and you would see no great difference on the surface between them and a group of stockbrokers commuting every morning from exurbia.

And yet they would all, those novelists, be thinking of themselves as dedicated men. They do believe that though they have no... they have not the vanity to think that their own worth is likely to be remembered, they do think feel it is important that the novelist should write as well as he can; that he should try to put forward to the world his own interpretation of the world. They think of themselves, in a sense, as torchbearers carrying on the tradition of honest writing. “We make and pass.” That is how [H.G.] Wells finished one of his major books, *Tono-Bungay*. “We make and pass.” “We are all things that make and pass, [striving] on a hidden mission on our way to the open sea.” That is how Wells himself thought of himself.

In the 1930s, when he had ceased to be a major bestseller but was a still very prominent personality, he got involved in the south of France in one of those emotional disturbances which were endemic to him, and he sought solace and security with a brother writer farther down the coast. When he left at the end of a three-week stay, he presented his host with a complete collection of his books. He passed his hand across them like that, he said, “All dated now, all dated.” He said it in a tone of pride; he was glad to think that he had made a mark in his day, and that a new generation was going to carry on the work that he had left in the rough. I think he was over-modest. Though books like *The New Machiavelli* and *Ann Veronica* may date and may be forgotten, I should be very surprised if there isn't some room left in the world's classics for stories like Mr. Kipps and Mr. Polly, or *Kipps* and [*The History of*] *Mr. Polly*. But that is how he saw himself. “We make and pass.”

Every autumn, our books come out, new-minted from the press with what high hopes, and within twelve months most of them are littering the secondhand bookshops, "thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks in Vallombrosa." 99 times in 100, nothing is more dead than the last decade's bestseller, and yet, it is not all the pouring of water through a sieve. There are some books, some novels, that do not all rot in a devouring grave and that stand as signmarks; as signmarks, as landmarks, as warnings. Books that do reveal the human race to itself.

We know that when the balance sheet is cast and an estimate is made of the achievements of this generation, that when our great-grandchildren read of the manifold achievements of science, of how the oceans have been bridged, how the earth has been mined, how the skies have been challenged, there will remain some questions, two questions still unanswered, and the same questions that perplexed the ancients: What happened to the spirit of man? What happened to the soul of man when all this was happening? And we know that our great-grandchildren will not look to long-piled statistics to find that answer. They will look for that answer where the ancients looked for it: in literature. First of all in poetry; secondly in the drama and the novel. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. [applause]

HOST: Thank you very much, Mr. Waugh, for a delightful experience with you, because you seem to know so well the problems of the novelist; and that means, of course, all of the problems of life. I could assure you that we understand the 50-pound expenditure and the 25-pound income, because most of us, of course, have already been attracted by the lure of installment buying in this country, so it's not only the novelist who is experiencing this problem.

Ladies and gentlemen, I should have made one or two brief announcements before we have a few questions. May I say to you that our next speaker is going to be Ms. Freidelind Wagner, the granddaughter of Richard Wagner, who is going to speak to you with, I think, the accompaniment of colored slides on the Beyrouth festival sometime to come. Secondly, I want to be sure that you all know that there is to be a reception for Mr. Waugh following this evening's entertainment in the College Center, which is directly south one block. Now, I think, a very few minutes, if you please, for questions from the audience; Mr. Waugh, would you have any objections?

MR. WAUGH: Not... no, no.

HOST: Does anyone here, then, want to ask Mr. Waugh a question? Just raise your hand and... all right.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Mr. Waugh, how would it work out if a novelist were to marry another novelist? [laughter]

MR. WAUGH: Well I know... I think that would be very difficult. [laughter] It has work... [mic feedback] ...it does, it's working very well with C.P. Snow and Pamela Hansford Johnson, but I should have thought it would be very very difficult indeed, because, well, it is very hard to keep jealousy out, there'd be rivalries and you... one wants, I should think, to have one's own troubles all on one's own, you know, and you'd get annoyed with her problems or she with his, and that one's doing well and the other isn't, and I actually thought that it should be very very difficult. I think to be married to an actress would be rather nice. [laughter] Because they'd be quite different problems and... but I do think that it would be very difficult to be married to another novelist.

HOST: Is there another question? All right.

[audience member asks a question off microphone, inaudible]

MR. WAUGH: On what?

HOST: Do you think that...

MR. WAUGH: On... an effect on what?

HOST: On society.

MR. WAUGH: Well, they're very... there are more goodish novels than there are good short stories, and I think a short story has to be very good to have any effect. And I think that you could probably... 100 short stories would be all there are, almost. Really great short stories. That's probably not true, but there are so few really great short stories. A novel is a big bulky thing, you know. I suppose, well, with Kipling's stories they've had a great effect, and O. Henry's stories have. Shall we say that I think a great short story teller should have as much effect as a great novelist. I think that's the answer, isn't it, but there are so few. They really are. Maugham and O. Henry, Kipling, Maupassant. They're not... Bret Harte's done a few, but there're not a great many.

HOST: Are there any other questions? Well, if not, then we'll all go to the reception at the College Center. Thank you very much. [applause; program ends]