ARTS & LETTERS

"In its whimsy, in its obliquity, sometimes in its cruelty, Evelyn Waugh's comedy is not for everyone," notes Epstein, the editor of the *American Scholar*. Typical of Waugh's comic vision is a passage in *Black Mischief* (1932) describing young Basil Seal's view upon awakening on an alien sofa after a night of excess: "There was a gramophone playing. A lady in a dressing jacket sat in an armchair by the gas fire, eating sardines from the tin with a shoe horn." Waugh's humor, Epstein says, "would not have been possible if not dressed out in his carefully measured prose . . . the straight face from behind which the smashing punch lines are delivered."

The English writer's personal life was far from carefully measured. A convert to Catholicism at age 27 (after his first wife left him for another man), later a heavy drinker and drug user, Waugh was renowned for his social brutality. Posted to Yugoslavia during World War II, he even chided his second wife, Laura, for her letters. "[There is] no reason to make your letters as dull as your life. I simply am not interested in Bridget's children. Do grasp that." At a testimonial dinner honoring him late in life, he pointedly directed his ear trumpet away from the keynote speaker. "You have no idea," he told a friend, "how much nastier I would be if I was not a Catholic."

Waugh was doctrinaire on religion and a frank political reactionary. He cherished an idealized vision of life during England's Victorian era; he had an "instinctual aversion to all social progress." Yet he also had a romantic side, most apparent in the popular *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). Literary critic V. S. Pritchett, however, saw a change in Waugh's vision. His early works are inspired by the notion that human beings are mad; his later World War II trilogy, *Sword of Honor* (1952–61), "draws on the meatier notion that the horrible thing about human beings is that they are sane."

For all his eccentricities, however, Waugh was a loving husband and father, and a devoted companion to his few friends. "Evelyn Waugh, alias Mr. Wu," wondered writer Chips Cannon in 1934. "Is he good trying to be wicked? Or just wicked trying to be nice?"

Hopper's Art

"Hopper: The Loneliness Factor" by Mark Strand, in *Antaeus* (Spring 1985), Ecco Press, 18 West 30th St., New York, N.Y. 10001.

Edward Hopper's famed paintings of urban scenes—closed shops, empty streets, and lonely souls bathed in the light of dusk—are noted for their general feeling of desolation.

"It is not the figures themselves . . . that establish the element of loneliness," contends Strand, a critic and painter. Rather it is "something in the formal disposition of the painting."

To him, the answer lies in Hopper's use of trapezoidal shapes and missing or sealed-off vanishing points to structure his images—instead of conventional, rectangular, one-point perspective. "We often feel left

behind, even abandoned, while something else in the painting, usually a road or tracks, continues," Strand writes. *Approaching the City* (1946), for instance, exemplifies the unsettling effect of a nonexistent vanishing point, which leads a viewer's eye nowhere. Against a bleak background of buildings, smokestacks and clouds, a featureless concrete wall gradually darkens and descends underground. The gloom, Strand says, is created by the picture's "determination to disappear into itself. . . . It is a work that invites the viewer in only to bury him."

Similarly, in *Nighthawks* (1942), one of Hopper's best known paintings, the customers gathered in the all-night diner are not obviously disconsolate. Again, says Strand, Hopper uses compositional geometry to affect the onlooker's mood subliminally.

Not all of Hopper's works, though, are tinted with loneliness. *Early Sunday Morning* (1930), for example, depicts the barren streets and closed shops of a universal Main Street. The scene has a standard, rectangular perspective that invites the viewer in instead of pushing him away. Says Strand: "It is a quiet, peaceful scene that would inspire loneliness only in those who derive comfort from being able to shop seven days a week."
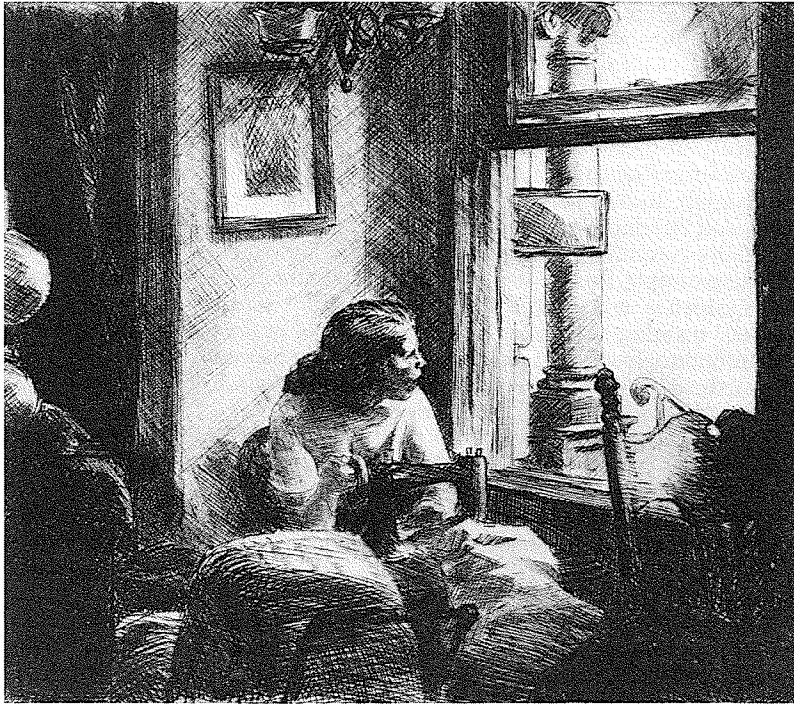
East Side Interior *(1922). "When it comes to [capturing] loneliness . . . in American life," says art historian John Russell, "Edward Hopper has no equal."*