EVELYN WAUGH (1903-1966): A REVALUATION

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It is no longer necessary to be defensive about an enthusiasm for Evelyn Waugh. True, a certain resentment engendered by his over-fondness for the English aristocracy and the Roman Catholic Church lingers on; and sharp comments on his personal oddities continue to pursue him beyond the grave. But the accusations of snobbery, reactionary Toryism, and intransigeant Catholicism, so indefatigably launched against him in academic journals since the publication of Brideshead Revisited in 1945, tend now to be replaced by appreciative examination of his literary achievement. To anyone acquainted with the general run of critical opinion on Waugh over the last twenty years it will come as a surprise to read that Frank Kermode, a vocal academic critic of Waugh's social and religious attitudes, has recently allowed A Handful of Dust to be 'one of the most distinguished novels of this century'. But similar estimates are becoming ever more common. Fellow novelists have always been ready to forgive Waugh for his eccentric opinions and have gratefully acknowledged his artistry: Malcolm Muggeridge's recent claim that Waugh 'is about the most accomplished writer in English in our time' is very widely echoed among his colleagues.

For myself, I freely admit that Waugh is one of the few modern novelists in English that I can read with full

comprehension and delight. Despite some uneasiness about the overall intention and effect of almost all of his novels, and despite an aversion to his ultra-conservative views, I have an interest in everything he wrote that amounts to an obsessive fascination. Like Alan Pryce-Jones, I could not imagine seeing his name at the foot of a page without wanting to read it.

I know of no modern writer in English whose prose, as prose, gives me so much pleasure as Waugh's. The most striking, if a relatively minor, feature of his writing is a brilliant, unwearied lucidity. I have read almost every word he has written and I have never had to return to a sentence to make out its meaning. Lucidity is pointed by a chiselled economy of word and phrase; sentences are normally short, direct, and taut. The writing is as hard and brilliant as a diamond and, when Waugh is arguing, his prose cuts with the same efficiency. The clarity and precision of Waugh's writing is a reflection of a lucid, candid, and almost ruthlessly honest mind. There are times when one may be disconcerted by Waugh's refusal to use a customary euphemism and when his frankness borders on brutality. In his youth this toughness of attitude may have been part of the equipment of a Bright Young Man of the Twenties self-consciously out to shock, but in essence it expresses transparent, at times almost embarrassing, honesty and clear judgement.

Waugh had an exceptional talent for exposition and argument. His biographies of Rossetti and Mgr Ronald Knox, and most conspicuously his life of Edmund Campion, exemplify his ability to marshal and control large bodies of facts into a luminously coherent unity. Some of his minor writings contain passages that, to me, are masterpieces of exposition and polemical argument. The opening chapter of Waugh's very poorly received account of the Abyssinian war, Waugh in

Abyssinia, is universally admitted by the book's numerous hostile critics to be a uniquely clear and objective account of a thoroughly muddled situation - the best available. My own favourite passage of argument comes from Robbery Under Law, an account of the political situation in Mexico in immediately pre-war days. In his later years when presented with a really choice target, such as Professor Laski's Faith, Reason and Civilisation, Waugh sometimes over-indulged his talent for sharp expression and he may seem more concerned with making debating points than in dealing with the substantial issues of an argument. But in Robbery Under Law, when he controverts the accusations made against the Catholic Church in Mexico by the revolutionary government, his argument is factual, transparently clear, cogent, and persuasive - a model of polemic writing.

A talent for lucid exposition was perhaps the least notable of Waugh's gifts of expression. He had command of a wide variety of styles. He could be terse, witty, and pointed; he could be copious and even opulent; and he was almost always in complete control of the manner he chose to adopt. The foundation of his success was command of a lavish vocabulary, and the delicate power of using words in their most precise and apt sense. He repeatedly gives delight by the sheer felicity of his choice of a word and the creation of a memorable phrase. Several modern writers, such as Dylan Thomas, can startle and thrill by their adventurous use of words. Waugh, however, can provide similar enjoyment without any parade of singularity and without a suspicion of ostentation.

The one mark of a genuinely creative writer is the power to create metaphor, to mingle and fuse ideas with observed facts. Waugh enhanced all of his writings, particularly his novels, with beautiful and informative imagery. Helena, a novel almost wholly ignored by the professional critics but to my mind Waugh's masterpiece, is the most notable example

of superb balance and completeness of construction resulting from sustained imagery of dazzling brilliance.

Waugh was not only a conscious stylist. He inherited from his father an abiding interest in the English language and he set himself, particularly in his later years, to refine and enrich it. The 'fine writing' that resulted in the later novels has not been to the taste of all readers, especially to some of those who most enjoyed the astringency of Waugh in an ironical mood. Rose Macauley, for example, was rather overpowered by what she called 'an orchidaceous luxury of bloom' in certain passages of Brideshead Revisited, and Waugh himself admits that he 'piled it on rather' in sections of that novel. There are other occasions when one might think that Waugh is playing a kitten game of fine language at the expense of weightier considerations. But these are minor and excusable faults in an author who devoted himself with such success to master the fundamental tool of his trade. Like Ludovic in Unconditional Surrender, Waugh prepared and revised his writing with every refinement of taste and skill, 'curtailing, expanding, polishing; often consulting Fowler, not disdaining Roget; writing and rewriting...'

Waugh is best known and most admired for his early humorous satirical novels. A certain number of intelligent and cultured readers gifted with an adequate sense of humour are not amused by Waugh's rather outrageous early manner and are repelled by what they consider a tendency to brutality and cruelty. But most readers find the early Waugh an irresistibly funny, brilliant entertainer and a deliciously irreverent satirist of wit, gusto, and formidable fury. He was the darling of the Thirties and was then affectionately regarded as a novelist who enjoyed, belonged to, understood, and saw through his times. In the phrase coined by Robert Graves, he was 'the most gifted novelist of the new Disillusion'.

Waugh's early writings include seven novels, one of them, Work Suspended, left incomplete. Appreciative readers of these novels who wish to understand them better, and who are acquainted with the criticism up to now produced on them, will probably feel that there is still need for a careful and perceptive study of this subject. For critics up to the present time have shown such fundamental disagreement on how these early novels are to be interpreted that the plain reader can find little help from his professional guides. He is left, perhaps, with the feeling aroused by the novels themselves, that while they are vastly entertaining they are also tantalizing, seeming to suggest a significance yet not giving sufficient clues to allow a satisfactory definition of significance.

The majority of reviewers continue to read the early novels as essentially, and more or less exclusively, comic; and they have regarded their author as a fashionable clown, 'the arch-playboy of Oxford and Mayfair', and as Sean O'Faolain puts it, 'a purely brainless genius'. There is a lot to be said for this point of view. The novels contain a great deal of inspired fooling, such as Lady Circumference's pontifications in a deep bass voice, that is meant to be funny and nothing else. Then, Waugh has a power of invention so brilliant, so fantastic, so grotesque and macabre, that the world of his novels may seem as unreal as a circus tent, and Waugh a sort of crazy ringmaster. Waugh suggested this image in Work Suspended when he said that the novelist maintains a kind of Dickensian menagerie where his characters live

> 'to be liberated twice nightly for a brief gambol under the arc lamps: in they come to the whip crack, dazzled, deafened and doped, tumble through their tricks and scamper out again...'

The atmosphere of the circus ring is not one in which sympathy, antipathy, or significance are normally looked for; and critics

who stress the unreality of the world created in Waugh's novels accept Basil Seal unwittingly eating his girl friend Prudence in a cannibal stew as being on the same level as Mrs. Stich running her car down the steps of a public convenience - both incidents can be accepted as funny because both are part of a totally unreal world.

As V.S. Pritchett pointed out recently, Waugh had all the gifts necessary for a comedian. He had a superlatively accurate ear for idiom: his dialogue has perfect pitch, never a semitone sharp or flat. He was master of the dry, sparkling circumlocution and of the intentional trap. He did not rely, as Wodehouse did (and this is why the association of Waugh's name with Wodehouse's is so misleading), on the counterpointing of skilfully inflated language against a trivial subject nor on the effortless management of fantastically complex plots. Waugh's humour arises largely from surprise, outrage and shock. His hilarious situations, such as those involving the Connolly children in Put Out More Flags, are given their point by the utterly astonishing audacity and wickedness of Basil Seal combining with the unbelievably grotesque awfulness of the ill favoured family.

A certain number of critics insist that Waugh is not essentially frivolous but is rather profoundly serious, and more, a stern moralist. Again, a great deal can be said to support this claim. Those who like to read Waugh's early novels as simple jeux d'esprit must explain away their author's very strongly held religious views; and they must contend with his life of Edmund Campion, the Jesuit martyr of the sixteenth century, which is not only a biography but an obviously stern-tempered rebuke to English society of the Thirties. More to the point, they must contend with Waugh's own explanation of Black Mischief. The novel had been very severely criticised by prominent Catholics on moral grounds, and the climax of the novel in which Basil Seal eats his

mistress Prudence was singled out as especially repugnant. Waugh replied that the scene was meant to display the emergence of barbarism in a setting described with artistically shaped indignation:

> The story deals with the conflict of civilisation... with barbarism. The plan of my book throughout was to keep the darker aspects of barbarism continually and unobtrusively present, a black and mischievous background... I introduced the cannibal theme into the first chapter and repeated it in another key in the incident of the soldiers eating their boots, thus hoping to prepare the reader for the sudden tragedy when barbarism at last emerges from the shadows and usurps the stage. It is not unlikely that I failed in this; that the transition was too rapid, and the catastrophe too large.

The point that emerges from Waugh's remarks is that one of the most fantastic and grotesque incidents of the early novels is the result, not of a macabre sense of humour, but of conscious craftsmanship in the service of an intensely serious theme.

The early novels are often spoken of as satires, and this would presuppose that they have some element of seriousness. But the term 'satire' is not entirely satisfactory as a description of these works. Satire, as Waugh himself points out, exposes polite cruelty, folly, inconsistency, and hypocrisy by exaggerating them. It strips off the mask of sham respectability to reveal the disgraceful reality behind it. Waugh's novels contain a certain amount of this kind of writing. Scoop, the most readily enjoyable and the least complex of Waugh's early novels, is a straightforward expose of modern journalism. It strips away hilariously the big newspapers' grandiose pretensions to accuracy and efficiency and lays bare the dishonesty and stupidity that govern them.

Though The Loved One is very much more than a satire on American funeral customs, it does successfully ridicule the pretence and nonsense surrounding Gracious Dying in the United States. It would be a grave mistake, however, to assume that the early novels are basically similar in intention. It is true that they all contain a preponderance of spectacularly outlandish, foolish, and wayward characters, all of whom would be ideal targets for satire. But Waugh nowhere gives the impression that he is passing moral judgement on their conduct. Captain Grimes, perhaps the greatest of all Waugh's creations and surely the most improper schoolmaster in English literature, is not censured for indecent behaviour unbecoming to a man making a pretence of instructing the young. Nor is Margot Beste Chetwynde condemned for engaging in White Slavery while maintaining a front of respectability. It is most certainly mistaken to suggest, as does the author of Time's obituary notice on Waugh, that he 'loathes' the Bright Young People of Vile Bodies or that he 'gives tongue to his disgust' at their frivolous behaviour. The truth is quite the opposite. Waugh had an exceptionally genial tolerance of the sins of his characters; he relished their eccentricities, their antics, their pranks, and their waywardness; he was amused by the people he wrote about. Captain Grimes and Basil Seal might be Bounders, but they were Capital Fellows too.

While Waugh does not criticise conduct in terms of an accepted moral code, and while it may be difficult to say where he stands on the behaviour of individual characters, the early novels are still basically serious and their author sternly moralistic. Waugh's peculiar method is to fuse accurately observed conduct with lavish invention to create a novel which, in its careful patterning of themes and contrasts, adds up to something significant. Significance is always unstated, but it is always present. Vile Bodies, for example, leaves

an impression of the irremediable futility of lives that must end in shocking disaster: the world, like Agatha Runcible's racing car speeding to violent destruction, is hastening to self-annihilation in war. A prophetic novel. A Handful of Dust, the climax of Waugh's early works, is the outstanding example of that blending of farce, comedy, tragedy, and pathos that is the unmistakable signature of all of Waugh's novels. It is also profoundly significant. It expresses not only the civilized man's plight in the savagery of modern society but also contains a judgement of Tony Last's, the hero's, humanism. His romantic devotion to the past, humane and sympathetic as it is, does not give him the equipment necessary to cope with the realities of life.

Waugh's finest work, so it seems to me, is contained in the three major novels of his later period, Brideshead Revisited, Helena, and the trilogy Sword of Honour. Most readers of Waugh would agree, I think, that two smaller novels, The Loved One and The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold, which have more modest aims are, within their limitations, more perfect than the novels which show wider ambitions. But the more ambitious works, despite their quite obtrusive weaknesses, attain a depth of significance and feeling and a splendour of style that set them apart from anything else Waugh attempted.

I must admit to being hesitant about putting forward as strongly as I have an opinion that goes so directly contrary to the prevailing critical account of Waugh's development; this insists that his best work was done early, and that his later novels show a marked decline in his powers, a betrayal of his best gifts, and a deplorable enlargement of his snobbery and bigotry. The tendency of critical writing is compactly, if crudely, summed up by John McCormick in his Catastrophe and Imagination when he simply says that Waugh 'did his best work as the funnyman of the Thirties' and that Brideshead Revisited marks 'a literary surrender to Roman

Catholicism and County Snobbery'. The central points of this view are widely echoed among critics. Kingsley Amis puts the same subject matter in explicit and graphic terms when he claims that Waugh's status depends on his 'farcical vein'; that Brideshead Revisited shows numerous and appalling symptoms of 'radical decline'; and that it raises the question of whether 'the author of Decline and Fall could really be going to turn into a kind of storm-trooper from the Sixth at Downside with nothing to offer his audience but a universal grudge and invocations of a fanciful past'.

The popularity of the view that Waugh suffered a decline in his mature years is principally the result of the hostile reception given to the three major novels mentioned above. This hostility can be largely explained by the antagonism aroused by Waugh's views, and by the belligerence with which he put them forward; it is also partly accounted for by Waugh's being outside the fashionable currents of creative writing. Brideshead Revisited appeared at a time when the climate of opinion in literary circles was rather Socialist, and the novels that followed it came onto a world still very much affected by democratic feeling. Waugh, however, set his novels in the highest aristocratic society, and betrayed, or rather proclaimed, a very deep affection for the style of living and the traditions of the milieu he created. Further, in an age that resents explicit dogmas and loves platitudinous generalities Waugh revealed a firm commitment to the Catholic Faith quite literally understood. In addition, Waugh's later novels share none of the drab mood of the Thirties and show no acquaintance with Freud, Lawrence, or Joyce. On the contrary, Waugh novels are remarkable for their lucidity, elegance, haunting cadences, and carefully contrived plotting; and they occasionally lapse into rhetorical and ornamental language. In the circumstances it is not surprising that these works appeared to many critics as an invitation to pro-

claim their own party allegiance rather than an opportunity for objective critical analysis; nor is it surprising that most notices of the novels, when notice was taken, tended to be severe condemnations. How monotonously opinions such as the following from D.S. Savage have come upon us:

> Waugh's conservatism, which some have called neo-fascist, is merely the desire for the perpetuation of a social order known and loved in childhood and youth: his patent dislike for the workers and his obvious snobbery... .

A fully satisfactory answer to the hostile criticism levelled at these novels, if one is warranted, could only be made on the basis of an objective, detailed study of them. Despite the evident need for such a work, none, to my knowledge, has ever been published. In these circumstances, the best that can be attempted in the limited space of a short article is to make some tentative comments on those areas of the novels most criticised and, presumably therefore, most in need of discussion.

All three of the major novels maintain an elegiac tone, a persistent descant on the theme of the world going to the dogs that, for me at least, tends to become irritating. In Brideshead Revisited Waugh's symbol for the Modern World is bored, frustrated army life carried on in a haphazard litter of army huts, the logical outcome of which is the lunatic asylum; for the madmen in the asylum next to the camp are merely happy collaborationists with modern society and 'the undisputed heirs-at-law of a century of Progress'. In Sword of Honour, Guy Crouchback sees himself as engaged in a crusade against 'the Modern Age in Arms' when Nazi Germany and Communist Russia are in alliance. It is all cleverly bitter but too shrill to command sympathy for Waugh's point of view, and one feels that Waugh is at his weakest when riding this hobby horse.

Would it be asking too much, however, to suggest that Waugh be accorded the same indulgence that is generally extended to, say, Lawrence? Lady Chatterly's Lover attacks the destructive effects of industrial society on human sympathies, powers, and emotions in far more sweeping and foolish terms than does Brideshead Revisited; but one does not on that account deny the value of the core of the novel. Similarly, Waugh's novels may be considered flawed, but not harmed in substance, by their author's obsessive dislike for 'the Age of Hooper'.

If Waugh overstates his case, so do the critics who accuse him of being 'a fanatical neo-Jacobite' or a 'neo-Fascist'. For the premises on which Waugh bases his criticism of modern society are not those of a Tory for whom The Times is too conservative, nor those of a sentimentalist hankering after a world that never really existed, but are the fundamental principles of a true humanist. Waugh sees man and human values as the measure of society: it is not economic progress, nor social organisation, but man - the individual man and woman - that must be protected and fostered. Waugh complains that in the Modern World 'man has deserted his post' and that 'the jungle is creeping in' because he feels that mass production destroys beauty, and mass entertainment and mass culture destroys human individuality and eccentricity, freedom, and dignity. He deplores the growing disintegration, violence and brutality of modern life because he is convinced, as he points out strongly in Robbery Under Law and by implication in Black Mischief, that England, uprooted from her traditional religion and intellectual heritage, and from her traditional ordering of life, can as easily revert to chaos and barbarism as did Mexico. In Waugh in Abyssinia he maintains that 'fine workmanship and clear judgement' are the two determining qualities of the human spirit by which alone man grows and flourishes; he is convinced that the Modern World, to its peril, is increasingly losing touch with them. Waugh's attack on modernity, tiresome as it can sometimes be, is not, therefore, a mere die-

hard defence of a passing social order but the foreboding of a man who felt, sincerely, that the springs of civilisation were drying up.

By far the most common accusation made against Waugh is that he is a snob. The complaint is on the periphery of literary criticism and would hardly rate attention if it were not so constantly repeated and such importance placed on it by those who make it. In his early novels, Waugh's characters were normally but not exclusively upper class, often aristocratic, often raffish, and often both. In his later works Waugh drew his sympathetic characters, such as the Marchmains and the Crouchbacks, from among the Old Catholic aristocracy. Waugh's own defence in Fan-Fare of his use of aristocratic characters is valid enough as far as it goes: any novelist must be free to write about the people he knows best and finds most interesting. Prostitutes exist, and a novelist must be free to use them as raw material for his work without incurring criticism from prudes; aristocrats exist too, and the novelist may use them, equally legitimately, without deserving the imputation of snobbery. Not everyone will be fully convinced by Waugh's argument; for the complaint against him is not that he writes about aristocrats in his novels but that he displays an uninhibited preference for them, and that he makes his distaste for some lower class characters, such as Hooper, much too obvious. If this is true, it could of course indicate a narrowness of sympathy and a limited acquaintance with life that are undesirable in a novelist. But many critics go further and profess to find in Waugh a servile reverence for high birth. This is quite unfair. Waugh treats some of the highest born of his characters, such as Bridey in Brideshead Revisited or Ivor Claire in Sword of Honour, savagely. Like Nancy Mitford, Waugh loves the English aristocracy for the character it typically produces: strongly individualistic and often eccentric, genial, tinged with romanticism,

gifted with wit and fantasy, and fearless. More important, and perhaps inaccurately, Waugh claims that it is wealthy, leisured, aristocratic society alone that produces the high culture from which beauty, order, and stability come.

Waugh's later novels have not in general been severely dealt with for the manner of their writing. This has come about partly because critics, unfortunately, have rarely passed beyond generalised comment on Waugh's social and religious attitudes to discuss questions of technique; and partly because some aspects of Waugh's style are so superlatively good that adverse comment on other facets of it seems niggling. Waugh's later novels are cleverly conceived, brilliantly written, often inspired, and, if anything, show a heightening of Waugh's powers of expression. Though many readers find Helena lacking in unity and Sword of Honour too discursive and rambling, their structure is impressive as Waugh faultlessly and effortlessly reaches backwards and forwards into time, repeats his principal themes in varying keys, and interweaves many threads of significance without ever creating the suggestion of confusion. Waugh always had exceptional gifts for creating a variety of moods, and for making brilliantly smooth transitions from mood to mood; for brilliant montage, the perfect timing of the clicking shutter as scene gives way to scene; for uncannily accurate, entertaining dialogue and evocative description. Here in later life we find his powers developed to the full. His charaeters, as always, are beautifully suggested and clearly focused. His humour, too, particularly in the scenes involving Apthorpe in Sword of Honour, is as funny and pungent as ever.

The one adverse criticism commonly made touching Waugh's approach to novel writing in later life is that his novels are Tory or Catholic tracts, works of propaganda, rather than novels. I can see no merit in this suggestion, for it seems to be a direct contradiction of the truth. There are few

forms of art so tolerant of diversity as the novel, and few for which so little can be laid down as normative, but a reader may justly complain if a novelist presents him with factitious characters who speak for the value of the opinion they express rather than as the dramatic requirements of the situation demand; or who act in accordance with their author's theories rather than as human beings. I cannot think of a solitary instance in all of Waugh's writings where he even begins to offend in this way. On the contrary, it could be argued that Waugh's novels would be made more intelligible, and so improved, by the inclusion of a character who would explain the action of the novel.

Two very much more pertinent criticisms than the foregoing can, I feel, be legitimately made. It can be argued that the form of the later novels is in some respects unequal to the profundity and austerity of their themes. The suggestion has been made that Waugh attempted to make these works 'conventional novels', and, being called on to motivate and represent his characters fully, was unable to do so. These works, however, cannot be adequately described as 'conventional novels'; they are rather <u>sui generis</u> and quite unique. For Waugh places far greater reliance than is normal on what he calls 'the knockabout farce of people's outward behaviour', and he attempts to distil comedy, tragedy, and significance almost exclusively from it. More explicitly, he relies heavily on the power of the dramatic scene and the pattern of incidents to suggest wider meanings, and makes no use at all of the explanations that other novelists would consider mandatory. Waugh's novels are not devoid of passion, nor of subtle characterisation nor of significance, but these are suggested by implication rather than directly presented. Obscurity can arise from this method of working; for a reader not familiar with an abstruse subject, such as Catholicism, experiences great difficulty in picking up what Waugh intends to imply.

Another real source of difficulty in Waugh's later works was indicated by a reviewer who said that his characters are so gay and frivolous that they resist serious treatment. For one may be tempted to ask whether these novels do not suffer from a forced yoking together of heterogeneous elements. The themes of the novels are serious and austere, and yet the imaginative form in which they find expression is humorous, witty, farcical and, in the case of Brideshead Revisited melodramatic, and in general so entertaining that the reader is swept along on the buoyant flood of narrative, charmed and supine, and not sufficiently alert to notice the landmarks which indicate that he is moving into the deep waters of the theme. It is too easy to miss what Waugh is trying to point out. Waugh once said that a writer who needs to be explained to his contemporaries is a bad writer. If he is correct, then he must be censured on his own principles. For a very large number of intelligent, well disposed readers do quite miss the point of what Waugh is attempting. The fault lies, partially at least, with the limitations of Waugh's methods of writing. His austere economy of description and attribution of cause to effect, his tendency to build up his novels from conversational nuances, and his scrupulous adherence to the principle that a novel must be directed to entertainment if it is to be true to itself - all these impose a severe strain on a writer presenting themes as wide as the relationship of man with God.

When everything has been said which can intelligently be brought against them, Waugh's later novels remain much better books than they are commonly reputed to be. Far from being a cause of dismay to lovers of Waugh's earlier works, they are evidence of growing complexity and maturity matched by increasing mastery of technique and felicity of language. In his middle and later years Waugh proved that his inventive powers were unwearied and his resolve to come to terms with reality by means of his art even stronger than before.

John Betjeman's words, recorded some few years ago, express my own feelings on Waugh better than any others I know or could compose:

> There is no living novelist whose works I so thoroughly enjoy as those of Evelyn Waugh. Far be it from a cautious critic to say this man will last, that one will be forgotten. But let me fling caution to the winds and say that Evelyn Waugh is the one English novelist of my own generation who is certain to be remembered while English novels are read.