

EVELYN WAUGH AND THE LOSS OF ARCADIA

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*"It is... expedient to preserve some semblance
of the aristocracy, it is also humane."*

*E. Waugh, "What to do with the
Upper Classes: A Modest Proposal."*¹

Readers of Evelyn Waugh's highly successful novel *Brideshead Revisited*, originally published in 1945, will remember that the first of the three "Books" into which the novel is divided is entitled "Et in Arcadia ego". There we are told of the narrator's days up at Oxford as an undergraduate and his meeting Sebastian Flyte whose family are the owners of the splendid property known as "Brideshead". Waugh's interest in, love, and respect for historical England are revealed over this first part of the novel through comments made by the narrator Charles Ryder. Ryder recognises that it was "an aesthetic education to live within [the] walls [of Brideshead]"² and admits that his sentiments are "insular and medieval."³ If one identifies the writer's own sentiments and his aesthetic sense with Ryder's, as I think one must, then Waugh's stand in relation to the modern world may be summed up in the plaint: "Et in Arcadia non ego"!

Waugh's disillusionment with the world around him is not, of course, unique in twentieth century English letters. He may be rewardingly compared with at least three other writers whose satirical works express their concern, discontent and disgust with contemporary developments. In chronological order I am thinking of Aldous Huxley, and *Brave New World*⁴ in particular, George Orwell, and, more specifically, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,⁵ and Anthony Burgess, finally, whose three dystopian works: *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Wanting Seed* and *1985*⁶ might be cited here appropriately. Moreover, Waugh shares with these writers a mistrust of scientists and/or politicians, that is, particular varieties of men who epitomize the Modern Age with its Machiavellian battle for Power.

Orwell and Waugh were both born in 1903 and represent polar reactions to the twentieth century situation. Orwell, primarily a political writer (as he himself insists in his 1946 essay "Why I Write"), argues in the 1930s for the cause of Socialism. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), he would claim: "Socialism means justice and common decency"⁸ and evince the conviction that "everyone who knows the meaning of poverty, everyone who has a genuine hatred of tyranny and war, is on the Socialist side, potentially."⁹ Waugh's commitment was not to any materialistic creed. He took refuge from the modern world in Catholicism, to which he was converted in 1930, and, indeed, one notes a monkish murmur in the following remark, quoted by Malcolm Bradbury:¹⁰ "In the natural order the modern world is rapidly being made uninhabitable by scientists and politicians. [...] As in the Dark Ages the cloister offers the sanest and most civilized way of life."¹¹ A strain of nostalgia has been noted in Orwell's work (what he would come to refer to as "the Golden Country" in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which is essentially the world of George Bowling's childhood, as evoked in *Coming Up for Air*¹²), and I think that both he and Waugh may be regarded as looking fondly back to the Edwardian era, the years of their own childhood. Confirmation for this suggestion may be found in the essays which both writers produced in praise of P.G. Wodehouse.¹³

Waugh's contempt for contemporary society is expressed in his 1948 novel *The Loved One*¹⁴ and by means of incisive satire. The work is a fierce indictment of spurious values in the age with regard to art and man's relationship or, rather, lack of, with his fellow man. Waugh contemplates the deterioration of human interchange as a consequence of men becoming prey to another twentieth century Power seeker, that is, big, business. The main character's employer, Mr. Schultz, is representative of the philistine ethos depicted when he declares: "What for [sic] you want new ideas? [...] Cheaper fuel, cheaper wages, harder work, that is all the new ideas I want." (p. 50).¹⁵

The Loved One (we discover as we move into the novel that this term is the euphemism used within the confines of the dream cemetery, "Whispering Glades", to refer to a dead person or corpse) is a novel about death. It starts and ends with suicide, a particularly lonely sort of death. The first is committed by an elderly Englishman, Sir Francis Hinsley, and the last by a young American, Aimée Thanatogenos, her name already indicative of her fate. These deaths reflect Waugh's concern about inhumanity: in the time leading up to the taking of their lives nobody has had time to properly listen to or sympathize with Sir Francis and Aimée. Lack of authenticity is expressed through character¹⁶ as well as through the main background in the novel, the cemetery-cum-five-star hotel for the dead, "Whispering Glades".¹⁷ Thus Waugh advocates calling a spade a spade, so to speak, as can be appreciated in the fine irony with which he devised such terms as 'The Loved One', 'The Waiting Ones' (those of us on death's waiting list!) and the circumlocution 'Loved Ones who pass over by their own hand', that is, the suicide cases. Again Waugh's plea for plainness is highlighted in the conversation held between Dennis and the "Mortuary

Hostess" (p. 36) when he goes to "the Dream" (p. 37) — the author's idea of nightmare — for the first time to make arrangements for Sir Francis's funeral. Dennis's naïve remark becomes a fine satiric thrust at the jargon of the death trade, espoused by the glorified receptionist:

'Now, Mr Barlow, what had you in mind? Embalment of course, and after that incineration or not, according to taste. Our crematory is on scientific principles, the heat is so intense that all inessentials are volatilized. Some people did not like the thought that ashes of the casket and clothing were mixed with the Loved One's. Normal disposal is by inhumement, entombment, inurnment, or immurement, but many people just lately prefer insarcophagusment. That is very individual. The casket is placed inside a sealed sarcophagus, marble or bronze, and rests permanently above ground in a niche in the mausoleum, with or without a personal stained-glass window above. That, of course, is for those with whom price is not a primary consideration.'

'We want my friend buried.' (p. 37)

Everything in *Whispering Glades* is mock, a parody of a worthier original, and this is summed up in the essential products of the trade, the titillated corpses, transformed so as to look what they are not — simply dead! The atmosphere created at the Glades is a hodge-podge of cultures and styles, as the juxtaposition of Edwardian (pp. 35, 61), Hindu Love Song (pp. 35, 36), Georgian (p. 37) and Handel (p. 42) reveals. Aimée and her senior, Mr. Joyboy, of whom the physical description is wholly grotesque (p. 55), are presented as committed to their "art". Aimée venerates Mr. Joyboy, sees him as "a true artist" (p. 48), and there is reference to Aimée, junior cosmetician, reaching "the crucial phase of her art" (p. 57) as she turns to making up Sir Francis. Waugh's view on such "art" is expressed as Dennis views Sir Francis's body, placed on show in the so-called Orchid Room:

Dennis thought of the wax-work of Marat in his bath. [...] ... — the face was entirely horrible; as ageless as a tortoise and as inhuman; a painted and smirking obscene travesty by comparison with which the devil-mask Dennis had found in the noose was a festive adornment, a thing an uncle might don at a Christmas party. (pp. 61, 62)

The horror contained in the above description, the insult to humanity, is highlighted again when Dennis attempts to produce a poem to be read at Sir Francis's funeral:

... Francis Hinsley ...

Here pickled in formaldehyde and painted like a whore Shrimp-pink incorruptible, ... (p. 69)

Other negative aspects of the society portrayed here are its uniformity — the idea of “the standard product” is reiterated (pp. 45, 105) — and anonymity in people’s dealings with one another. Aimée assures Dennis that he will not require her name when he returns to the Glades, he should simply ask for “the cosmetician of the Orchid Room”. (p. 49) Then violation not only in death but also in life may be seen in the trials to which ‘Juanita de Pablo’ is subjected in order to produce an Irish colleen. The transformation is not easy and, thus, she will come to make an Irish song sound like flamenco! (p. 63).

The irreverent attitude of Dennis Barlow, “poet and pets’ mortician” (p. 34), to all that Aimée with “the sparse furniture of her mind” (p. 105), finds sacred, is refreshing, and it would seem that through this roguish character Waugh meant to create a figure equal to the absurd situation in which he finds himself, an anti-hero for an anti-heroic age, indeed. But it is not just America which is criticised by Waugh. He refers back to European civilization and to England in particular as effete, a quality which is personified through the character of Sir Francis:

... twenty years or more ago, ... Sir Francis, in prime middle-age, was then the only knight in Hollywood, the doyen of English society, chief scriptwriter in Megalopolitan Pictures and President of the Cricket Club. [...] Sir Francis had descended to the Publicity Department and now held rank, one of a dozen, as Vice-President of the Cricket Club. His swimming-pool which had once flashed like an aquarium with the limbs of long-departed beauties was empty now and cracked and over-grown with weed. (pp. 9, 10)

Brideshead Revisited is recognised as a work of Catholic apologetics. Although this emphasis is not prominent in *The Loved One*, the Catholic writer is visible through the style. Dennis repeats a line of poetry to himself: “as a monk will repeat a single pregnant text, over and over again in prayer” (p. 17), the hostess at the Glades leads Dennis to a set of sliding shelves “like a sacristy chest where vestments are stored” (p. 41), and Aimée is described as working “like a nun, intently, serenely, methodically” (p. 57). Waugh’s militant Catholicism will also lead him, as it did Chesterton, to some anti-semitic comment. The coxswain who takes Dennis over to the Lake Island of Innisfree, “the poeticest [sic] place in the whole darn park” (pp. 66-7), where it costs “round about a thousand bucks” (p. 66) to be buried, explains:

They figured the Irish would come but it seems the Irish are just naturally poetic and won’t pay that much for plantings. Besides they’ve got a low-down cemetery of their own downtown, being Catholic. It’s mostly the good-style Jews we get here. (p. 67)

Here, too, Waugh is categorical in striking out at politics. Mr. Joyboy’s mother is anxious not to miss the political commentaries on the radio, described as “the

'raucous stream of misinformation" (p. 90). And, finally, he appears to be intolerant of innovating ideas through the satirical description of "New Thought" (p. 75), adopted by Mr. Joyboy's mother who, in consequence, "wouldn't have it that there was such a thing as death" (p. 75).

What positives, then, —if any — can be gleaned from the work? Waugh's Arcadia is the antithesis of the Dreamer, Dr. Kenworthy's, the founder of the Glades: "... unadorned simplicity and blind fidelity to tradition were alike foreign to the Dreamer's taste. He innovated; ..." (p. 98). "Unadorned simplicity and blind fidelity to tradition" are Waugh's ideals therefore. One does not innovate. When reviewing Donat Gallagher's edition of the essays, articles and reviews of Evelyn Waugh,¹⁸ John Carey declared: "The disadvantage of Catholicism was that it stopped him thinking. He lapsed under its influence into quasi-medieval stupor."¹⁹ Waugh was familiar with such a view. On writing, in 1940, of his conversion²⁰ he outlined "three popular errors"²¹ which he saw as reappearing "with depressing regularity"²² when a convert to Catholicism was spoken about. The third of these was: "He wants to have his mind made up for him."²³ Waugh's answer to the theory was the following:

... if he has a lazy mind it is easy enough to stagnate without supernatural assistance, and if he has an active mind, the Roman system can and does form a basis for the most vigorous intellectual and artistic activity.²⁴

Undeniably Waugh revealed himself as capable of "vigorous intellectual and artistic activity"²⁵ following his conversion, and *The Loved One* stands as full proof of this. Whether, however, the activity was as superlatively vigorous as the writer himself claimed it could be, we shall never know, as Waugh remained faithful to his creed unto death.

Notes

1. Published in *Town and Country*, September 1946. See: Donat Gallagher (ed.), *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh* (Methuen, London Ltd., 1983), p. 313.
2. E. Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (Penguin Books, 1984), p. 78.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
4. First published by Chatto & Windus Ltd., 1932.

5. First published by Secker & Warburg, 1949.
6. *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Wanting Seed* were both published for the first time by Heinemann in 1962 and 1985 by Hutchinson in 1978.
7. See: *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. I, *An Age Like This, 1920-1940* (Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 23-30.
8. G. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Penguin Books, 1984), p., p. 191.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
10. M. Bradbury, "America and the Comic Vision" in D. Pryce-Jones (ed.), *Evelyn Waugh and His World* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973), pp. 165-182.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
12. First published by Victor Gollancz in 1936. See George Bowling's description of the world of his childhood in *Coming up for Air* in *The Penguin Complete Novels of George Orwell* (Penguin Books, 1983), p. 473.
13. Waugh's was first published in 1939 — see "An Angelic Doctor. The Work of Mr. P.G. Wodehouse" in D. Gallagher (ed.), *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, op. cit., pp. 252-255. Orwell's was first published in 1945 — see "In Defence of P.G. Wodehouse" in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. 3, *As I Please, 1943-1945* (Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 388-403.
14. First published by Chapman and Hall. The quotes supplied here are taken from E. Waugh, *The Loved One* (Penguin Books, 1982).
15. Page references following quotes in the text all refer to the Penguin Books 1982 edition of *The Loved One*.
16. See, for instance, Guru Brahmin, who is "two gloomy men and a bright young secretary." (E. Waugh, *The Loved One*, op. cit., p. 93).
17. Created following Waugh's visit to the Forest Lawn Memorial Park in California.
18. D. Gallagher (ed.), *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, op. cit.
19. J. Carey, "Evelyn Waugh: who needs thought?" in *The Sunday Times*, 12 February 1984, p. 43.
20. "Converted to Rome: Why It Has Happened to Me" — published in the *Daily Express*, 20 October 1930. See: D. Gallagher (ed.), *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, op. cit., pp. 103-5.
21. "Converted to Rome: Why It Has Happened to Me", op. cit., p. 103.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*