

Evelyn Waugh's First Eight Books

Paul Williamson

The Early Works of Evelyn Waugh, **Evelyn Waugh**, Penguin, £20 each (hardback)

The initial instalment of Penguin's new, twenty-four volume, hardback edition of the works of Evelyn Waugh comprises Waugh's first eight books, from his biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1928) to *A Handful of Dust* (1934). The Rossetti biography, three travel books and four novels are the substantial products of a decade of radical, itinerant instability in Waugh's life. He left Oxford in 1924 without taking a degree, deciding not to fulfil the residence requirement that would have given him his third in history, when, after a predictably dismal performance in finals, his scholarship at Hertford was revoked. Burdened with debts, Waugh went to live at the family home in Hampstead – attending art school, studying carpentry, and eventually (after being briefly apprenticed to a cabinet-maker near Bournemouth) failing to realise his Pre-Raphaelite-inspired dream of turning himself into an artist-craftsman. He then did stints as a schoolteacher in Wales, Buckinghamshire and Notting Hill, experiences that provided raw materials to be worked up in the depiction of Paul Pennyfeather in *Decline and Fall*. In 1926 Waugh's long-term lover, Alastair Graham, joined the Diplomatic Service and moved to Athens. Separation signalled the natural end of the relationship, leaving Waugh gradually to establish his heterosexuality before falling in love with Evelyn Gardner ('She-Evelyn'), whom he married in June 1928 and traumatically divorced in a 'smutty lawsuit' little more than a year later. At the same time, sorely in need of an income and still volubly resisting the claims of 'Literature', Waugh was writing *Rossetti: His Life and Works* and sketching out his first novel, *Decline and Fall* (both published in 1928).

These were also years of extensive travel – notably in the Mediterranean

on a delayed honeymoon with She-Evelyn (1929), Africa (1930–31) and South America (1932–33). Occasioned by publishers' commissions, these journeys gave rise to travel books – *Labels* (1930), *Remote People* (1931) and *Ninety-Two Days* (1934); the expeditions to Africa and South America also furnished 'shapeless chunks of experience' that were honed for use in novels – *Black Mischief* (1932), set in the fictional African country of Azania, and *A Handful of Dust* (1934), which draws to its infernal close in the jungles of Brazil. Waugh's second novel, *Vile Bodies*, published in 1930, a book of 'overdrinking and underthinking', as Rebecca West called it, was a runaway success that brought fame and, ultimately, fortune. Also in 1930, amidst the chaos of frenetic personal, professional and geographical turmoil, Waugh was received into the Roman Catholic church.

In addition to being 'really funny', Rebecca West went on to say, *Vile Bodies* has 'a very considerable value as a further stage in the contemporary literature of disillusionment', which she traced back to T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*. A trajectory of progressively more serious philosophical scepticism and grim disenchantment can be plotted through Waugh's thinking from the fantastic, amoral jollity of *Decline and Fall* to the disquieting comedy of *Black Mischief* and *A Handful of Dust*, both concerned with the essential homology of savagery and civilisation. Converting to Catholicism gave Waugh a sense of absolute spiritual stability compared with which the 'barbarity and chaos' of actual life appeared more and more phantasmagoric. In due course Waugh declared himself a Catholic writer whose mission was to represent 'man more fully', by which he meant 'man in his relation to God'. From that impetus emerges the dreary, sentimental piety of *Brideshead Revisited* (1946) and the brusque, snobbish historiography of *Helena* (1950), where the doctrine, to adapt D. H. Lawrence's brilliant thought, has nailed down the novel, emasculating it with the introduction of unchallenged authorial credo. One of the many pleasures of the early novels, by contrast, and, in particular, of Waugh's masterpiece, *A Handful of Dust*, is to see the way the doctrinal demands of the author's increasingly disgusted diagnosis of the human predicament are held in check by the novelist's scrupulous attention to the exigencies of fiction.

Authorial opinion is a welcome presence in *Rossetti*, an impressive

and entertaining book that reacts against the ‘modern critical attitude’ by pitting the representational art of Rossetti against the formalism of Bloomsbury, championed in Waugh’s account by Roger Fry. According to the modernist standards derived from post-impressionism, the purpose of painting is to arouse the elusive ‘aesthetic emotion’ by depicting the ‘necessary relations of forms in space’. What then is the Bloomsbury-educated eye to make of Rossetti, who aimed to translate states of mind into visible forms and was a proudly literary or anecdotal painter in the sense that ‘he knew no valid distinction between beauty of picture and beauty of subject’? Waugh is excellent on both kinds of beauty, engaged and compelling about subject and fascinating in his analyses of technique and form. Full of ideas developed at Oxford, *Rossetti* reflects the very serious interests of the Sybaritic group, including Waugh, who gathered around Harold Acton. As Acton himself wrote, *Rossetti* is ‘tremendously able and considered’, a study of unexpected precision, scholarship and commitment.

Waugh’s travel books are, as is to be anticipated, principally about Waugh. Their leitmotifs are boredom and discomfort. One is tempted to borrow a term from Sterne and call him a Splenetic Traveller, but this would not be quite accurate. In Waugh’s case it is not the traveller’s ruling sentiment that characterises the journey, but the unerring determination with which the sentiment is discovered in every situation. Waugh is a dogmatic traveller and the dogma he carries with him is boredom, an attitude perfectly consistent with his comprehensively sceptical outlook as it developed during the late 1920s and early thirties. ‘I am constitutionally a martyr to boredom’, he declares in *Remote People*, the journey to Africa, organised as an account of two empires and three nightmares. A memorable hero of *Remote People* is the Armenian hotelier, Bergebedgian, a man whose mind is ‘a single translucent pool of placid doubt’, while in *Ninety-Two Days* Waugh extols ‘general scepticism’ as ‘one of the more valuable fruits of travel’. In an occasional rush of high spirits the traveller allows himself a little holiday from boredom, as in Ethiopia where he enjoys an interlude of ‘crazy enchantment’. The scepticism remains, however. This is the ‘preposterous’, childlike, illusory world of *Alice in Wonderland*, as unreal as the parodic Dickensian Christmas that Nina and Adam (impersonating

Ginger, Nina's new husband) spend at Nina's father's house in *Vile Bodies*. 'They put some crumbs of their bread and butter on the windowsill and a robin redbreast came to eat them. The whole day was like that.' That same evening war breaks out.

At the end of *Remote People*, back in the 'third nightmare' of London, Waugh finds himself in a rowdy nightclub in a sweltering, smoke-filled basement and reflects that, to experience true savagery there is no need to go anywhere: 'Just watch London knock spots off the Dark Continent.' The scene is restaged when Basil Seal returns to London in the final pages of *Black Mischief* and the malignant comedy of his African adventures is changed into the debased currency of inane London chatter, in which revolution, murder and a cannibal banquet have no greater or lesser worth than a game of Happy Families. The journey (with or without a return) supplied Waugh with a narrative structure that he used repeatedly in the novels. From the outset, in *Decline and Fall*, the circular arrangement whereby the central character is transported, puppet-like, from scene to scene only to find himself, at the end of the book, exactly where he was at the beginning, typifies the modernist (specifically futurist) absurdity of momentum without growth, motion for motion's sake. The organisation of *Decline and Fall* owes much to Bunyan, but Paul Pennyfeather's career is emphatically not a progress. He ends where he began, in Scone College, expecting to be ordained, whilst in the background 'a confused roaring and breaking of glass' proclaims another Bollinger Club 'beano'. The one-way journey is equally meaningless. In *Vile Bodies* the brittle narrative standstill explodes into apocalyptic futility when Adam is relocated to 'the biggest battlefield in the history of the world'. Similarly, in *A Handful of Dust* Tony Last's attempt to escape the sterile barbarism of London by going in search of Dr. Messinger's lost city turns out to be a single ticket to the jungle, the terrible confinement imposed by Mr. Todd, and the ultimately fatal boredom of Dickens.

Whether at home or abroad, in the novels or the travel books, the inalienable complement of boredom and scepticism is pointlessness. Waugh did not consider his early novels to be satires because, he argued, satire requires 'homogeneous moral standards', which, 'in the Century of the Common Man', are impossible. The early novels make humour out of disclaiming

every sort of value. The normally grave and the normally trivial are juxtaposed without comment, as in the death in a series of throwaway asides of little Lord Tangent in *Decline and Fall* or the hilarious, lightning-quick shifts of conversational topic, full of incongruity and unperceived misunderstanding, in *Vile Bodies* and *Black Mischief*. The stylistic technique (owing as much to Eliot's *Waste Land* as to the film editing procedures of early cinema) is to reveal the fundamental, comic vacuity of the world that is represented by making montages of fragments – intercut scenic snapshots, threads of clipped dialogue, disembodied telephone conversations. In the absence of any appeal to positive 'moral standards' against which characters and events are to be judged the resulting laughter is not corrective but participatory – not one of Jeeves' hangover cures, but another cocktail.

Values may be eschewed but discriminations remain: Margot Metroland, 'like the first breath of spring in the Champs-Élysées', retains her enviable glamour despite her depravity; Mrs Beaver is contemptible. Multiple social distinctions are at play – essentially, it must be said, of the 'What? vs Pardon?' variety. Later in Waugh's career these merge with the author's Catholic revision of English history in a way that seems to make good breeding and cultivated taste into near-essential preliminaries to religious salvation: 'England was Catholic for nine hundred years, then Protestant for three hundred, then agnostic for a century. The Catholic structure still lies lightly buried beneath every phase of English life.' The guardians of the 'eternal' church are the old Catholic families – the Flytes in *Brideshead* – with a cultural and religious perspective sufficiently venerable and continuous to be able to see the English Reformation as little more than a hiccup: 'merely a good time for prospective martyrs to live in,' as Frank Kermode comments in a superb essay ('Mr. Waugh's Cities', *Puzzles and Epiphanies*, 1962). Borrowing a phrase from the first edition of *Brideshead*, Kermode refers to Waugh's 'historical intransigence that equates the English aristocratic with the Catholic tradition'. It is a doctrine that seems to give upper-class Catholics (particularly those from the landed classes) an almost antinomian right to deliverance.

In *A Handful of Dust* the doctrine never intrudes upon the text, in which Waugh's distanced, dispassionate presentation, characteristic of the early

novels, achieves a remarkable consummation. The book is characterised by a dialectical sense of purpose, but the substance of the argument is never made explicit. Rather, the tragi-comedy of Tony and Brenda Last's failing marriage unfolds with an extraordinary attention to realistic detail to create a foreboding sense of inevitability and ruthless irony. It culminates in the sickening scene where Brenda Last, told that her son has been killed in an accident, wrongly believes it is her lover who is dead and is grateful when she discovers her mistake. All this is played out whilst Brenda waits to consult a fashionable fortune-teller who tells fortunes 'in a new way, by reading the soles of the feet'. Waugh said that the book 'was humanist and contained all I had to say about humanism', which, as Martin Stannard explains in his invaluable biography, means 'that vision of the world which places man, not God, at the centre of existence'. The flawed humanist vision is represented in the novel as a series of images of the city – London, Hetton Abbey, the lost city that Tony travels to Brazil to find – phantasms whose allure clouds the understanding and (though we are never told this) obscures the one real city, the City of God. Confronted with the grotesque brutality of a 1930s divorce, the inherited, romantic ideals symbolised by Tony's attachment to his 'English Gothic' home fall apart. The 'transfigured Hetton' that Tony then goes in quest of is another illusion. The lesson (recalling Eliot's *Waste Land*, the source of the book's title) is that, wherever it is found, human life is nothing more than savagery in another form. Accordingly, humanism is impotent to provide consolation, lasting value or reward. In a final, remorseless swipe at the tradition Tony ends up imprisoned in the jungle, forced repeatedly to read aloud the works of Dickens to the demonic Mr. Todd, who laughs and cries with Dickens but totally fails to allow the barren message of sentimental humanism to influence his response to the suffering Tony.

Penguin and Waugh have an association stretching back to the 1930s when Penguin published cheap reprints of several of Waugh's early novels. These fell out of print during the Second World War, but in 1950 Penguin proposed to reprint all of Waugh's fiction, in paperback, with a view to reaching a mass audience. To celebrate George Bernard Shaw's ninetieth birthday Allen Lane had commissioned a reprint of ten of Shaw's works in a print run of a hundred thousand. Works by H. G. Wells and Agatha

Christie were issued in comparable numbers, and a year after the Penguin sets appeared none of these authors had sold less than a million books. Waugh was advised by his agent, A. D. Peters, to accept the deal and in 1951 Penguin published ten of Waugh's novels in the mass-market format. By contrast, Penguin's latest edition, in the Penguin Classics imprint, is hardback and rather expensive – a set of books-as-objects of relatively austere design, intended to provide an aesthetically pleasing alternative to e-books. The set will look handsome on a bookcase, but there are details that could have been improved upon. For a luxury edition, the paper could perhaps have been a fraction heavier and greater care could occasionally have been taken with the inter-word spacing, which is sometimes extremely tight. (The map in my copy of *Ninety-Two Days* is extremely blurred, but that could be a one-off problem.) A greater drawback is that the texts are presented without introductions, textual notes or any other scholarly apparatus. For the moment one can mostly still read the novels without such aids, but *Rossetti* would certainly benefit from an introduction placing Waugh's study in the context of ideas about art that were current in the 1920s. Similarly, although the travel books are undoubtedly an enjoyable read, that enjoyment could only be enhanced by the addition of explanatory notes.