

# Waugh Stories

by George McCartney

*“A shriller note could now be heard rising from Sir Alastair’s rooms;  
any who have heard that sound will shrink at the recollection of it;  
it is the sound of the English county families baying for broken glass.”*

— Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall*

**The Complete Stories of  
Evelyn Waugh**  
by Evelyn Waugh  
Boston: Little, Brown and Company;  
536 pp., \$29.95



Two vignettes illustrate Evelyn Waugh’s character. One has to do with art; the other, protocol. In 1951, Evelyn Waugh commissioned a painting depicting the interior of a plane’s cabin. At Waugh’s direction, all the passengers’ faces are contorted in various expressions of horror. The implication is unavoidable. The plane is moments away from crashing. Upon seeing it in Waugh’s home, a guest wondered aloud if people might find it shocking. Waugh gleefully replied, “I hope so.”

As for protocol, Waugh was so committed to the pre-Vatican II Lenten discipline that he carried a tiny scale with him when dining away from home. Whether visiting friends or a restaurant, he would produce his scale at the dinner table and weigh his portions to ensure they did not exceed the requirements of the season’s fasting regulations.

Shocking excess, on one hand; scrupulous fussing, on the other: These were the poles that bounded Waugh’s life. He was, in short, a man of extremes, mischievously provocative one moment and unwaveringly austere the next. It was this inner tension that made him preternatu-

*George McCartney is the author of Confused Roaring: Evelyn Waugh and the Modernist Tradition (Indiana University Press, 1987).*



Stephen Wende Anderson

rally alert to the struggle between anarchy and order in the world at large. When Waugh attended a Paris art exhibit in 1929, he was particularly fascinated by the contrast between two of the works on display. One was a surrealist effort by Max Ernst; the other, a Cubist work by Francis Picabia. He reports that they:

hung cheek by jowl, these two abstract pictures, the one so defiant and chaotic, probing with such fierce intensity into every crevice and convolution of negation, the other so delicately poised, so impossibly tidy, discarding so austere-ly every accident, however agreeable that could tempt disorder.

[They] seemed between them to typify the continual conflict of modern society.

Waugh’s interest in these paintings is

not difficult to understand. Their “continual conflict” between chaotic energy and tidy poise marked the fault line from which his creativity sprung. They represented his own personal dialectic, a tension that equipped him to render satirically an age in which, according to Father Rothschild, S.J., in *Vile Bodies*, “a radical instability” had provoked “an almost fatal hunger for permanence.”

The experts in our century have provided us with plenty of ideological maps, but Waugh was convinced that what people really need is a reliable compass. He found his in the Roman Catholic Church. It provided him the absolute coordinates he craved. This does not mean he stayed on course throughout his journey; but he had the grace never to pretend to be a saint or even reasonably good. His son Auberon supplies a vivid instance. During the rationing mania following World War II, some British bureaucrats hit upon the notion of allotting one banana per child to households throughout the isles. At the time, this meant three bananas for the Waughs, the family not having reached its full six-child dimensions yet. When the fruit arrived and was placed on the luncheon table, the children sat down eagerly. They then submitted quietly to the spectacle of their father slicing all three bananas into a bowl and, after adding cream and sugar, eating them himself. A lesson in the unforeseen consequences of good intentions, perhaps.

From that day, Auberon continues, he never took seriously anything his father had to say about morality. Quite right. We do not go to Waugh for preaching. We turn to him for his abundant and ev-

er fertile wit, his superb mastery of the language, and, if we hang around long enough, his insight into human nature and its relation to eternity. You do not have to be nice to deliver these goods; in fact, niceness might get in the way. It certainly does in Waugh's fiction, where his rogues are infinitely more interesting than his decent characters.

As many have noticed, the tension between Waugh's orthodox and wayward selves gave his mature fiction its distinctively bracing character. Now, with the publication of his complete stories, including the juvenilia and undergraduate efforts, in one volume, we can see how this troubling dialectic was his literary inspiration from the beginning of his career onward. It should be noted that many of these works seem to be warm-ups for his longer fiction. Almost all are very good, but with the exception of five, they are not pure Waugh.

His first published fiction in 1926 is appropriately entitled "The Balance." We meet Adam Doure (no one named characters better than Waugh) a distraught young artist whose failed courtship with an equally young lady of aristocratic lineage has turned him suicidal. (Waugh was 23 when he wrote this story, and it reworks his own difficulties in courting Evelyn Gardner, whose mother, Lady Burghclere, disapproved of him for all the predictable reasons.) At the conclusion of a night of wild drunkenness, Adam attempts to poison himself only to be saved when convulsions force him to vomit the chemical potion out his window. When he finally collects his wits, he walks out into the countryside and, pausing on a footbridge, has a conversation with his reflection in a pond. He concludes that his romantic torment was founded on nothing more substantial than a passing dream. His reflection inquires, "Is the balance of life and death so easily swayed?" He replies, "It is the balance of appetite and reason. The reason remains constant—the appetite varies." He then tells his double that he will devote himself to his art, with which he will attempt "to preserve in the shapes of things the personality whose dissolution you foresee inevitably. . . . That is the balance." It is a young man's story done up in a self-consciously arty manner by having the narrative told as though it were a silent film complete with title cards. Without being a success itself, the work indicates the direction Waugh was to

take. The film conceit allowed him to keep his narrator calmly detached from the emotional turmoil he reports while at the same time indicating a longing for some principle of permanence.

There were others who had deployed the unruffled narrator to comic effect—Wilde, Saki, Firbank, Wodehouse—but Waugh perfected the device. Reporting every possible excess and wayward lunacy, his early narrative voice never abandons the civilized precincts of flawlessly measured prose. Even in a trifle like "Period Piece," this technique makes something special of his portrait of Lady Amelia, an elderly widow trained to refinement but inclined to vulgarity.

Lady Amelia had been educated in the belief that it was the height of impropriety to read a novel in the morning. Now, in the twilight of her days, when she has little to occupy the two hours between her appearance downstairs at quarter past 11:00, hatted and fragrant with lavender water, and the announcement of luncheon, she adheres rigidly to this principle. Once luncheon is over, however, she feels at liberty to indulge her recently acquired passion for American authors "in the school of brutal realism and gross slang." As her secretary reads to her in "delicately modulated tones enunciating page by page, in a scarcely comprehensible idiom, the narratives of rape and betrayal, Lady Amelia occasionally chuckle[s] over her woolwork."

In "Incident in Azania," Waugh's voice manages to walk the border between civilization and savagery to wonderfully ironic effect. The subplot concerns British colonists in Africa who never let emotion interfere with good form. When natives bent on extortion kidnap a missionary and send his "right ear loosely done up in newspaper and string" to the consulate, the colonists exhibit admirable restraint. After expressing some concern,

the life of the town began to resume its normal aspect—administration, athletics, gossip; the American missionary's second ear arrived and attracted little notice, except from Mr. Youkoumian, who produced an ear trumpet which he attempted to sell the mission headquarters.

Nothing more is heard of the unfortunate missionary until the story's close, when we learn in a passing aside that his "now

memberless trunk . . . has been found at the gates of the Baptist compound." Faced with this news, the British commanding officer promises to take action. "I am going to make a report of the entire matter," he gamely declares.

Waugh frequently set his stories in primitive locales because, as he explained, his literary sense came alive in "distant and barbarous places," especially at "the borderlands of conflicting cultures and states of development, where ideas uprooted from their traditions, become oddly changed in transplantation." This is not surprising. The savagery and civilization he discovered thriving side by side on his excursions to Abyssinia, Kenya, and Brazil were sure to intrigue one so divided between the appeals of order and anarchy within himself. And the contrast is generally not flattering to Europeans. When a new young lady arrives in Azania, she is put through a sly but rigorous examination by the community's established ladies that is far more excruciating than what the local native girls must endure in their own rites of passage. As

the Sakuya women chanted their primeval litany of initiation, [a] no less terrible ceremony was held over Mrs. Lepperidge's tea table. First the questions; disguised and delicate over the tea cake but quickening in their pace as the tribal rhythm waxed high . . . falling faster and faster like ecstatic hands on the taut cowhide, mounting and swelling.

For Waugh, barbarism was never a matter of geography or race, as he made clear in "Out of Depth." On a visit to London, a wealthy American meets a mysterious magician who sends him 500 years into the future to discover that Englishmen have regressed to the primitive life of tribal hunters. Their rudimentary social and economic organization is provided with whatever tenuous stability it has by the armed benevolence of African imperialists who provide not only a source of social order but also spiritual sustenance, as the 20th-century visitor learns during a reverse "Heart of Darkness" trip up the Thames River. In the wilderness, he detects

something familiar; a shape in chaos . . . something was being done . . . that twenty-five centuries had not altered. In a log built

church . . . he was squatting [with] . . . disheveled white men [who] were staring ahead with vague, uncomprehending eyes, to the end of the room where two candles burned. The priest turned towards them his bland, black face. "Ite, missa est."

By 1933, the church had become Waugh's "shape in chaos," the principle of permanence he had first sought in his artistic vocation without satisfaction. As he would say when *Brideshead Revisited* was published in 1946, God is the determining factor in human life, and writers who do not address this reality cannot hope to write significantly. (How poignantly Waugh's faith in the permanence of the Church's liturgy rings today. No wonder he prayed for the strength not to apostatize some 30 years after writing "Out of Depth" when Vatican II put an end to the Latin Mass.)

The collection includes another jungle story, "The Man Who Liked Dickens," which later became the basis for what many acclaim as Waugh's best novel, *A Handful of Dust*. Here in its original form, this narrative concerns Paul Henty, a well-bred young Englishman who chooses a year's adventure in the

Amazon jungle to escape the embarrassment of being cuckolded once again by his faithless wife. After his expedition falls apart and he is deserted by his native guides, he contracts disease and wanders the jungle deliriously until he stumbles into a backwater village run by Mr. McMaster, a half-breed illiterate with an unlikely passion for Dickens. McMaster nurses Henty back to health and then introduces him to his edition of the collected works of the Victorian novelist. "You shall read to me when you're better," he announces. It takes the dim Henty weeks to realize this is not a request but an order. The barbarous illiterate intends to hold on to his civilized captive in order to satisfy his obsession with Victorian sentimentality. Henty finds himself reading Dickens' novels, while McMaster ruminates on their significance. "Do you believe in God?" his jailer asks one day. "I never really thought about it much," Henty replies. McMaster's rejoinder is withering: "Dickens did."

In this early form, the narrative works quite well as an ironic tale; but in *A Handful of Dust*, Henty's fate becomes emblematic of what Waugh took to be the civilized person's dereliction of duty. Henty becomes Tony Last, the last gentleman. He is decent, kind, well-mean-

ing, but finally feckless. Having spent his life supporting the forms of the tradition in which he was raised, he has never examined the premise on which they were built. For Waugh, culture and tradition are merely sentimental indulgences unless they are understood to be the means through which we seek God. We are made to feel that, for his shallow, uninformed nostalgia, Tony meets his appropriate end. He is doomed to the Sisyphean task of reading Dickens over and over again to his Brazilian captor who, despite his madness, takes the basis of Western civilization far more seriously than Tony ever did.

Underlying all these stories is the conviction Waugh elaborated in 1939. Knowing something of history and himself, he argued that "the anarchic elements in society are so strong that it is a whole-time task to keep the peace . . . [for] barbarism is never finally defeated; given propitious circumstances, men and women who seem quite orderly will commit every conceivable atrocity. . . . We are all potential recruits for anarchy."

In light of these prophetic remarks, I would say Little, Brown's decision to publish these stories has not come a moment too soon.

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# Our Heads Cut Off

by Harold O.J. Brown

“Language is the armory of the human mind; and at once contains the trophies of its past, and the weapons of its future conquests.”

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

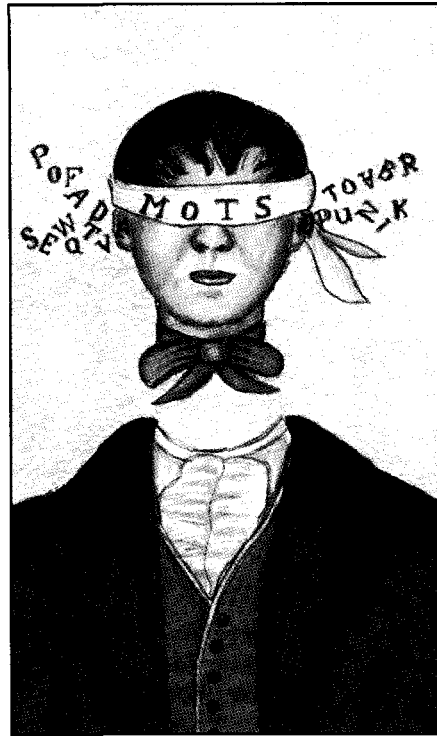
*La Tête coupée: Le Secret du pouvoir*  
by Arnaud-Aaron Upinsky  
Paris: Le Bec; 522 pp., 149 francs

This remarkable French mathematician has written extensively on what he considers the fundamental spiritual problem of our day, the perversion of language, which he believes is related to the perversion of mathematics, a topic that he explored in an earlier book. In the present work, Upinsky's thesis is simple: Since the days of the Greek philosophers, Western intellectual history has been marked by a clash of two different languages, “true language” and “strong language.” True language is the language of the real or—in Upinsky's terminology—of realism, the goal of which is to impart a truthful view of reality. Strong language is the language of nominalism, a language in which words are merely *nomina*—names or symbols designed to influence belief and behavior.

While the conflict between true and strong language is age-old, in our era strong language is being effectively honed so that its dominance becomes ev-

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Harold O.J. Brown is religion editor for *Chronicles*, a professor of theology and philosophy at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina, and the editor of the Religion & Society Report.



er more complete. The result is that we who listen have “our heads cut off”: That is, we are unable to use them for the purpose to which they were designed—namely, to think. Upinsky's insight is kin to that expressed by George Orwell in the imagined totalitarian society of 1984, in which the official language, Newspeak, is made mandatory in order to prevent people from resorting to Oldthink.

Something similar has already been accomplished in Sweden and Norway, where old language forms have been changed, as it were, by government decree in order to simplify the language, or (in the latter case) to distinguish it for nationalistic purposes from the heavily Danish-tinged Norwegian of the old literary classes. In the Scandinavian countries, it is not apparent that any goal other

than “modernization” is in view.

The largest Germanic country has given us a prime example of the use of strong language to manipulate public opinion and make people willing to endure the otherwise unendurable. In *Fichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt described the imposition of Newspeak, or *Neudeutsch*, as we might call it, under the Nazis. She called it “language rules.” Shipment to an extermination camp, for example, was called “resettlement in the East,” while the buses that transported the sick and handicapped to the institution where they would be euthanized bore the identifying inscriptions, “Charitable Association for the Transport of the Sick.”

A wonderful example of the imposition of strong language in our own time is the mental climate that legalized abortion has created, in which the reality of the act has faded from view behind the word “choice.” It is not impossible to use true language to speak of abortion: The Germans, following their experience with *Neudeutsch* under Hitler, have dared to do it. In a 1975 decision, the German Federal Constitutional Court wrote, “The usual language, termination of pregnancy, cannot conceal the fact that abortion is a homicidal act.” That is the undeniable truth, but such real language is hardly acceptable today in the United States, where “homicide” has been replaced by “choice,” a neutral term with great popular appeal. (Even