

Waugh
with

A Grief Unobserved

Did Evelyn Waugh's cruelty cost him his wife—and life?

by R.J. STOVE

Can a woman ... have no compassion on the child from her womb?

—Isaiah 49:15

Bereavement. Weird thing. You have known for years an utterly kind, virtuous, and devout lady who suddenly tells you that K., her daughter, aged 31—also utterly kind, virtuous, and devout—has just died after a life of cystic fibrosis.

You attend the resultant funeral, whence you emerge more or less sentient but with the generalized conviction of having witnessed “King Lear’s” last act performed in the gulag. You do what pitifully little you can to console the family. You peruse the booklet’s utterances like “May the angels lead thee into Paradise” and “Day of wrath, oh day of mourning” and once your internal screams have died down, your general verdict approximates to Huckleberry Finn’s lit crit: “The statements was interesting, but tough.”

You will later, of course, be benevolently assured by some stentorian atheist, Vicar of Dibley, or liturgical expert that you are “wallowing in self-pity.” Perhaps you are. But it makes you to think. About really primal stuff: good, bad, innocence, guilt.

Memories flood back. Of K., but also of others. You think of de Gaulle, who interred his Down’s Syndrome daughter with the haunting words *Maintenant, elle est comme les autres*, and who spent his last eight years convinced that he survived a 1962 murder attempt because a bullet bounced off that daughter’s picture.

If it has been a religious rite—K.’s was a Requiem Mass—you think about clergy, not always your own communion’s clergy. They might be fictional. You think about Father Brown and Don Camillo and Dos-toyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, and the real-life Father Brown who, in various guises, calmed you—nothing was ever too much trouble for him—and clergy whom you never met but whom you will always remember. Such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, his visage aglow with bliss, preparatory to being hanged with piano wire. Fr. Damien—on the morning he began his sermon not

with “Brethren” but with “We lepers”—is somewhere in your thoughts. So is the late lamented Fr. Lawrence Murphy of Milwaukee, who for two decades got his kicks by molesting not just 200 boys, but 200 *deaf* boys. The resultant legal payouts cost \$26.5 million. A lynching-bee could have achieved a better outcome without one archdiocesan dollar being spent.

You see a crucifix and you alarm yourself by thinking: Christ’s final anguish lasted three hours; K.’s cystic fibrosis lasted 31 years. You realize that K. belongs to one species and you to another, inferior one. K. is recognizably of the same breed as Edith Stein; you, *per contra*, can do a tolerably good imitation of Elmer Gantry, or, on a good day, Tartuffe.

You pay the bills marked, in red, URGENT; you curse yourself for having been too timid to attend the actual burial; you cultivate *Candide*’s garden. You suddenly recall that Maundy Thursday hymn by Peter Abelard, poignant in itself, shattering when coupled to the chorale-like tune (“Intercessor”) composed by Sir Hubert Parry, whom academics once solemnly dismissed to you as “dull” and, worse, “Victorian”:

*This is the night, dear friends, the night for weeping,
when powers of darkness overcome the day,
the night the faithful mourn the weight of evil
whereby our sins the Son of Man betray...*

And, in what leisure remains, you read.

Thomas Mann, tireless anti-Nazi, wrote a 1939 tract with the astonishing title *Hitler: My Brother*. Many authors who first reached publication in the 1980s could have collaborated on a tract titled *Evelyn Waugh: My Brother*. Not only did we never quite get over his work, even if we hated it; we never quite forgot how he could scrutinize our souls.

I’m not speaking of Waugh’s obvious set-pieces

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Culture

(spoiler alert here): Lord Marchmain's deathbed; the Man Who Liked Dickens; Basil Seal digesting stewed girlfriend; Guy Crouchback ultimately cleansing Waugh's bosom of that perilous anti-Jewish stuff which weighed upon the heart; perhaps more vivid than these, the appalling scene in *A Handful of Dust* where an inadvertent mix-up of given names leads to the adulterous wife greeting her son's death with "Thank God." Nor do I speak of Waugh's published nonfiction, which contains in *Robbery Under Law* our language's greatest single traditionalist credo. Instead, I keep recalling a solitary line in Waugh's diaries, which remained unreleased till 1976.

Almost proverbial is Waugh's gift for casual cruelty. This was, after all, a man who, when his old foe Cyril Connolly announced an intention of abandoning the literary life to become a waiter, explained his subsequent worried look to Connolly with the words "I was thinking of your fingernails in the soup." Once Waugh visited Paul Claudel, who afterward observed simply that his guest "lacks the allure of the true gentleman," a remarkably mild insult from the author matched, surely, in lethal French Catholic vituperation's annals by Léon Daudet alone. But a Waugh diary entry of December 1940 perhaps outdoes even the fingernails-soup retort in its callousness.

Waugh's second wife, Laura, had just given birth to their third child, a daughter. While the childbirth went surprisingly easily, within 24 hours the daughter, named Mary, died. She had been given emergency baptism. Waugh's diary entry reads: "I saw her when she was dead—a blue, slatey color. Poor little girl, she was not wanted."

Right. Now you may pick yourself up from off the floor, having absorbed that.

Laura Waugh—who survived her husband by only seven years, dying in 1973 at 56—remains unfathomable. No "professional widow" she. After Evelyn's death she gave no interviews, wrote no memoirs, enforced no copyrights; quite the opposite of T.S. Eliot's surviving spouse. Books about her husband include few, when they include any, photos of her. It is almost as if she had been airbrushed, Soviet fashion, from Evelyn's chronicle.

That chronicle ended in gradual, unmistakable physical and mental decline, coinciding with and partly caused by Rome's *aggiornamento*. ("The Vatican Council has knocked the guts out of me," he revealed.) Between 1964 and 1966, Evelyn had become such a tedious alcoholic as to evoke the celebrated *MAD Magazine* duologue:

GIRL AT PARTY: You drink too much!

MALE DIPSO: I know. But it helps me to forget my problem.

GIRL AT PARTY (concerned): What's your problem?

MALE DIPSO: I drink too much!

To his disciple and future biographer Christopher Sykes, Evelyn admitted: "I try to read the paper. I have some gin. I try to read the paper again. I have some more gin ... That's my life." Meanwhile—and this seems to have gone generally unnoticed—even as Evelyn slowly destroyed himself, Laura the quiet demure ex-convent girl developed an unprecedented taste for memorable speech, at least to Auberon, the eldest son.

Auberon, who once called Solzhenitsyn "that nasty old fleabag," boasted of being "specifically dedicated to telling lies." When aged only seven, Auberon had already acquired from his father the following radiant testimonial: "clumsy, disheveled, sly, without intellectual, aesthetic or spiritual interest." Yet sometimes even Auberon could stop fantasizing and start reporting. A thing he does report is Laura saying to him, as Evelyn—visibly on his last legs—pottered around in the distance: "You see that dreadful old bore? He used to be so witty and gay."

Why this flare-up by Laura? She never, to my knowledge, spoke thus again.

Meanwhile Evelyn, after another petrifying outburst, this time RSVP-ing an invitation to the launch of a book extolling pseudo-Catholic progressivism—"I would gladly attend an *auto-da-fé* at which your guests were incinerated"—dumbfounds everyone by having all his teeth removed. No anesthetic. With his new dentures he can chew nothing. His appetite vanishes. A female guest notices his washroom's strange absence of a toothbrush. His daughter Margaret writes, in a worried letter home: "You must literally be starving yourself to death." The end does not take long. On Easter Sunday 1966 he attends his last Mass—his Jesuit priest friend retains an official dispensation to offer Waugh's beloved ancient Latin Rite, Pope Paul or no Pope Paul—and, when back home, enters the lavatory from which he never emerges.

Evelyn when drunk added, to repellency, personal carelessness. He could—this is all speculation—have left his diary open somewhere. Since he had vast leisure to destroy the diary, but did not, he must have intended it to survive him. Certainly Laura, in good health, was bound to do so.

Did Laura, sometime in 1965, peek into that diary? Would her convent-school education have accustomed her to bouts of illicit diary-reading when

Reverend Mother's back was turned?

Did she discover that terrible, that diabolically insensitive, diary entry about little dead Mary, who "was not wanted"?

Did she confront Evelyn about his writing those words? And take to her tomb every trace of such a confrontation, except that nonspecific complaint to Auberon?

Near the end Waugh wrote, "All fates are 'worse than death.'" Overt suicide, however much he might have craved it, would have been theologically unthinkable, to his family enduringly disgraceful, and to himself logistically impracticable. He had made, years before, one suicide attempt that embarrassingly failed. But might a method have been found by which he could "cease upon the midnight with no pain," yet could leave no suspicion of violating his faith's, and Hamlet's, "canon 'gainst self-slaughter"?

Was that possibly why, against medical advice, he took what proved the fatal decision to have all his teeth extracted? "You must literally be starving

yourself to death..."

To repeat: this is speculation. All concerned have died; Margaret in a 1986 street accident, Auberon 14 years later.

Still, I cannot stop recalling, particularly, two lasses.

One is K., that 31-year-old with cystic fibrosis, whom I knew, who recently breathed her last, and whose courage Satan himself would not dare belittle.

The other is that other young lady, born to Evelyn and Laura. She who lived, not threescore years and 10, not even 31 years, but 24 hours. She of whose name-sake there is not a Christian in the world who dissents from the words, "blessed art thou among women."

At K's grave, we can pay, if we wish, the homage due to a protracted martyrdom. Where Mary Waugh's grave is, I do not know.

But maybe there is one more saint in heaven than Arthur Evelyn St. John Waugh—Evelyn Waugh, who refused to be made CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) because he wanted a knighthood—ever imagined would be there. ■

OLD and RIGHT

The Socialist is mistaken in thinking that there is nothing real behind the phrases "rights of property," "for king and country." On the contrary, there is, and it is exactly what I or any other young Conservative holds. But I should never dream of expressing myself by those phrases, because to the younger generation they don't carry any conviction. When I hear them used from the platform I always feel slightly uncomfortable, although I agree with the attitude from which they spring.

The phrases feel dead in exactly the same way as clichés in bad poetry do. It is only by a certain unexpectedness of phrasing that a certain feeling of conviction is carried over, and you feel that the man was actually describing something real, that he had seen something at first hand. In verse one chooses fresh epithets and fresh metaphors, not so much because they are new and we are tired of the old as because the old cease to convey over the actual vivid meaning that we intend.

Nowadays, when one says that the hill is clothed with trees, the word suggests no physical comparison. One doesn't have a picture as the man who first used the word did, of a definite realization of the metaphor. There is no vivid analogy in your mind of the hill being actually clothed as a woman might be. To get the original visual effect one would have to say "ruffed" with trees, or use some other new metaphor.

The point is that any metaphor or image in time

becomes conventionalized, and so ceases to convey any real concrete meaning. The result of this is that you must have freshness and unexpectedness in any art, not because there is anything desirable in freshness per se, but because, owing to this law which I have just sketched out—that of the inevitable decay of metaphors—it is only by means of freshness that one can be convincing.

This makes my position clear in regard to the dead phrases by which Conservatism expresses itself. I don't object to them because they are old. It isn't simply that I want something new simply because it is new, but because I realize most intensely, both from my own personal experience and from conversation with the type of intellectual I have been discussing, that these phrases no carry no conviction. They must be restated in order to appear real at all.

The political theory behind Conservatism remains the same in every generation, but to remain living and to have any effect it must clothe itself in a different set of catchwords in each generation. Here is our crisis. Our old set of catchwords is dead, and a new one has not yet been worked out. That and nothing else is the cause of the landslides amongst the intellectuals to the Socialist side. The most pressing need of Conservatism is a set of writers who will make our faith living by giving it a fresh expression.

—T.E. Hulme,

"The Art of Political Conversion," 1911