# *Reconsidering Evelyn Waugh's* The Loved One

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IF WE WERE to grade British authors of this century according to the degree of compassion manifest in their works, one novelist sure to flunk would be Evelyn Waugh. In recent years "compassion" has become a buzz word and it is precisely the overtones carried in its buzz that may account in part for Waugh's unsteady place on the literary stock market on this side of the Atlantic. Not only, as a writer, does Waugh lose points for his low compassion-count but also, as a person, he comes across as hardly tolerable: the image of him in the public mind leaves perhaps too much to be desired. As Steven Marcus sums it up, "Waugh has been variously characterized as nasty, hateful, snobbish, trivial, reactionary, vindictive, fawning, immature, pompous, and rude." All of which, Marcus feels, is "somehow beside the point." For it doesn't affect what is offered in novels like *Decline and Fall* (1928), or *Vile Bodies* (1930), or *A Handful of Dust* (1934), or *Scoop* (1938); what is on offer, according to Marcus, is a dazzling form of entertainment, socially observant and immaculately written, which on occasion reaches the level of art but more often settles for being "artful." Marcus' essay, which can be found in his *Representations: Essays on Literature and Politics* (1975), is entitled "Evelyn Waugh and the Art of Entertainment," and for him, such an art is art enough.

He cautions, therefore, that we not bring to Waugh the "great expectations" we have been taught to bring to literature, expectations which depend on "our mistrust of any piece of writing which does not seem immediately to challenge profound assumptions or elicit the most delicate moral choices."

Now I am not sure that one can as easily as Marcus assumes disentangle a writer's blind spots from his virtues. Nor am I sure Waugh himself was in fact the snob and callow toady he has been made out to be. Few British critics,. for example, recognize Waugh in Marcus' caricature. A critic as esteemed for his compassionate views as John Bayley finds Waugh the man to be, all in all, and despite himself, a "fundamentally good egg"—the public image no more than a defense against intrusions on his private life and literary aims. (Bayley refers to the death scene of the heroine of *The Loved One* [1948] as one of the most "moving" in modern literature.)

But beyond the matter of Waugh's personal qualities, a further question not raised by Marcus presents itself. One can get away with a low grade in compassion

if one is otherwise seen as a thinker or visionary driven by the urgency of one's disturbing perceptions. Consider how commentators on D. H. Lawrence tend to go easy on the brutal tonalities that resound through his work, given the urgency of his prophetic vision. In Lawrence's perspective on social breakdown and sexual renewal we have the sort of "vision" that assures his canonical status—no matter that "vision," like "compassion," serves at present as another shopworn and rather fuzzy counter in literary discourse. Nor does it hurt that Lawrence's fiction easily lends itself to interdisciplinary studies. He is an obvious choice for any core curriculum.

Waugh in contrast would seem lacking in interdisciplinary appeal. In his best work he is neither visionary nor intellectually arduous—though he is clear-eyed indeed in characterizing ideologues. And he also resists, as Marcus is careful to observe, classification as a satirist. "His early novels," Marcus writes, "are celebrations of Mayfair, not satires of it. Nothing is more patent than that he loved...Lady Metroland, proprietress of an international chain of brothels...or that he loved all the raffish, bored useless picaresque characters who fill the pages of his earliest novels."

Satire seeks to warn us against the kind of world and characters it exposes. This is not usually the point with Waugh; he usually takes the world as he finds it. In the case of the "beautiful people" of London's Mayfair, Waugh's attitude is rightly described by Marcus as celebratory. But celebration is surely not the word for Waugh's one novel set in America and centered on its "dream factory": Hollywood. Both in its treatment of the dream factory and of its corresponding dream burial ground, Forest Lawn Cemetery on which the "Whispering Glades" of the novel is based, the novel offers a social and cultural critique which, with the passage of time, comes across today as all the more prescient and apt and with a power that invites labeling as visionary.

The opening paragraphs of *The Loved One* establish a satiric equation between the English "colony" in Hollywood and earlier colonists deposited in equatorial outposts. Nursing their whiskeys-and-soda in a "barely supportable heat," two Englishmen listen to music coming from "nearby native huts" while a "palm leaf" stirs in the breeze. They are identified as "counterparts of numberless fellow countrymen exiled in barbarous regions of the world." One of them, Ambrose Bierce, is evidently modeled on the late C. Aubrey Smith, a leading light in life, as in this fiction, of the British social enclave which enjoyed its heyday in Hollywood in the late 1940s, the time in which *The Loved One* is set. Smith made a career of portraying, in Waugh's words, "many travesties of English rural life," as well as flinty colonialists in travesties of English imperial life. And it's the Smith/Bierce character who remarks of another Englishman forced to return under a cloud to the mother country, "He went completely native." As Bierce sums up his policy: "In Africa, if a white man is disgracing himself and letting down his people, the authorities pack him off home." Bierce is troubled by the doings of a newcomer, a young English poet and adventurer who also threatens to let his side down, having accepted a job at a pet cemetery. Proving to be remorselessly adaptable, the poet takes to the ways of the "barbarous region" with deadpan relish.

In describing this character's arrival on the scene, Waugh places him metaphorically with one foot on either side of the line dividing West Coast natives from English Colonials. "As a missionary priest making his first pilgrimage to the Vatican, as a paramount chief of equatorial Africa mounting the Eiffel tower, Dennis Barlow, poet and pet's mortician, drove through the Golden Gates." Dennis will prove

equal to the natives at their own level of the game and his cool sufficiency is here signaled.

At Whispering Glades, Dennis meets a young woman who serves not only as hostess of the burial ground but also as a member of its elite corps of embalming interns. In their motives and expectations Dennis and the intern, Aimee Thanatogenos, will find themselves at cross purposes; and in their misreadings of one another and missed cues, they will enact a classically neat "clash of cultures." The name of the American specialist in such conflicts, Henry James, is in fact introduced in an exchange between Dennis and his boss at the animal cemetery, the Happier Hunting Ground. "I have become the protagonist of a Jamesian problem," says Dennis, who further notes that James's stories "are all tragedies one way or another"—as one way or another is *The Loved One*, which bears the subtitle *An Anglo-American Tragedy.*

What keeps the encounter between Dennis and Aimee from cliché is Waugh's view of the American character as chiefly determined by spiritual and cultural rather than material motives. A year before the novel's publication in 1948, Mary McCarthy in a celebrated essay, "America the Beautiful," which is included in her collection *On the Contrary: Articles of Belief, 1946-1961* (1962), had stressed that "the virtue of American civilization is that it is not materialistic." Of earlier notable works based on a similar theme we might note George Santayana's *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1920). In fact, as Lionel Trilling has pointed out, it is precisely Santayana's own insistent materialism, as a good European, that makes him, for the American reader, hard to take.

Waugh himself is closer to Santayana than McCarthy in his qualified response to what for her is entirely a "virtue." The idealist virtue McCarthy extols is seen by Waugh to be inseparable from what is tragic in American life. Both the humor and the critical attack of his novel stem from the depiction of a world which casually exploits spiritual and cultural aspirations. Whatever Aimee looks to for cultural nourishment or moral guidance proves a scam.

Waugh takes pains to distinguish Aimee from what he calls the "standard product," which is to say, the sort of airline hostess or reception-desk attendant whom one could leave "in a delicatessen shop in New York, fly three thousand miles and find her again in the cigar stall at San Francisco." This product is certainly, as the author says, "convenient," but "Dennis came of an earlier civilization with sharper needs." And in the "bustling hygienic Eden" of Whispering Glades, Aimee stands out as its "sole Eve." For one thing, her skin is "transparent, untarnished by the sun." This gives her an advantage that Waugh ordinarily reserved for women of his own class; he disliked the sunbathing which became fashionable in the twenties and was put off by sun tans. Aimee's pallor is a small touch but one that reveals sympathetic authorial approval. The author would also be happy to see, as does his hero, that Aimee goes easy on cosmetics. But what excites the hero above all is "the rich glint of lunacy" detectable in Aimee's eyes. Given her untutored aspirations, her "virtue," she is bound in the circumstances to be a bit mad.

Dennis possesses the culture for which the intern is starved. His manner harks back to nineties' aestheticism—the sort of manner and stance with which Waugh in his youth identified. The young poet is to a degree a sketch of the young pre-Catholic Waugh. He is described as "a young man of sensibility rather than sentiment," an apt definition of the type of aesthete whose responses tend more to the coolly appreciative than to stronger currents of feeling. In his new world, our

aesthete and anti-hero at once recognizes that he can exploit his cultivation and skills only as a hustler. He hustles rhymes at his job and uses art to hustle Aimee, who responds to the verses culled from anthologies—the cultural tokens he woos her with—as an earlier native might have responded to the wampum and beads tendered to him by Dennis' forbears.

In her essay, Mary McCarthy notes that we rarely find misers in American fiction although they abound in European; rather, a recurring figure in American stories is the con man. It is an aspect of Dennis' adaptability that he wheels and deals effectively as a con artist. He learns the game from Whispering Glades, a compound where the arts and artifacts of culture entirely serve a cosmetic function—further elements of an overall embalming process.

Thus no building, no statue, no replica of this or that art emblem—Rodin's *The Kiss* or whatever—is left to be scanned or taken in on its own; instead, an instant explanation of its place in the scheme of things, which is to say its educational value, accompanies each art object, on placards in large print or hummed through the sound system. "This perfect replica of an old English manor," Dennis reads, "is constructed throughout of grade-A-steel and concrete." Dennis takes note of how "in Whispering Glades, failing credulity was fortified by the painted word." Several decades before Tom Wolfe, Waugh here anticipates the theme and the very title of Wolfe's book, *The Painted Word* (1975), an attack on an art scene marked by an excessive dependence on hushed explanations and rationalizations of often fluffy works.

Waugh's concern is with the reduction or domestication of art forms to kitsch formulas; Wolfe's, with a putative avant-garde. Yet what Wolfe sees in Soho galleries is the same process Waugh ascribes to Whispering Glades: the gradual, in Wolfe's word, "disintegration" of art works and the enjoyment of art in "the universal solvent of the word." Wolfe is led to look back to a time when "one actually struggled to *see* paintings directly, in the old pre-World War II way." In his novel set in the immediate post-World War II period, Waugh proves exact in his focus on key cultural issues. Nor is his response to the culture of the "painted word" aimed simply as a sardonic passing shot. A deeper response is evident in the musings of his protagonist: "His interest was no longer purely technical or satiric. Whispering Glades held him in thrall. In a zone of insecurity in the mind where none but the artist dare trespass, the tribes were mustering. Dennis, the frontier-man, could read the signs." For the artist the signs point to a crucial subject: art hucksterism in a world whose main expressive modes are those of salesmanship and boosterism.

Waugh's portrait of Aimee proves all the more perceptive and moving in being defined chiefly through her relation to the liberal arts. Waugh observes that Aimee's "only language," learned at the "local High School and University... expressed fewer and fewer of her ripening needs." With its Rotarian stress on good citizenship, Aimee's education has left her not only culturally deprived but also ill-prepared for the shocks of personal relations. And that she is not entirely blocked in her aesthetic responsiveness and capacities puts her even more on dangerous ground; she is stirred by the verses of Keats and Poe and Shakespeare that are dangled before her. Besides her responses to particular works, her attitude to art in the abstract is reverential. It is only when Dennis identifies himself as a poet that he manages to break through her facade "of impersonal, insensitive friendliness which takes the place of ceremony in that land of waifs and strays."

The more Dennis begins plying her

with anthology pieces, the more disorienting they prove. Aimee finds too many of the verses to be "unethical." And Dennis is led to brood: "The English poets were proving uncertain guides in the labyrinth of Californian courtship—nearly all were too casual, too despondent, too ceremonious, or too exacting; they scolded, they pleaded, they extolled. Dennis required salesmanship." Although Dennis begins decreasing Aimee's ration of verses, she has been infected: under the influence of her suitor and his verses she begins to suffer intimations of alienation. She is unable, however, to move past her good citizen's notions of the "ethical" (which she confuses with the inspirational). Her education has allowed her no hint of the effects of either art or passion. Unable finally to handle a modicum of alienation as a fact of life, she lies back on an embalming table and destroys herself. She is presented as victim of a scene whose artistic culture is revealed to be a synthetic Disneyland.

In contrast to Aimee, her would-be tutor and lover is all too adjusted to alienation and in consequence is excessively cool. He exploits the language of passion as Aimee's mentor in embalming, Mr. Joyboy, exploits the idiom of good citizenship. For Waugh culture is inseparable from community and his California lacks both. The natives are as uprooted as the colonials, lacking not only aesthetic but familial sustenance. Mr. Joyboy's mother is a self-absorbed monster who coos over her pet, a stubbornly silent parrot.

It was his first sight of California that spurred another English expatriate, Aldous Huxley, to the writing of *Brave New World* (1932); in key respects both Huxley's novel and Waugh's correspond. Waugh's critical aim in *The Loved One* is as overt as in the classic dystopias of science fiction. The more we are immersed in the mortuary marvels of Whispering Glades, the closer we seem to the tone and trappings of science fiction. In character, Huxley's John the savage is just what his name implies: both cultural primitive and religious zealot. So too is Aimee who, like her counterpart in *Brave New World*, ends a suicide. Even as her full name spells out and conjoins love and death, so does her story, a story which, given its scene, tends inescapably toward the macabre.

Like other features of the novel, the characterization of its heroine seems ahead of its time; it is easy to imagine her in an absurdist play. The presentation of Aimee anticipates the sort of characterization that would be developed for a time by left-wing writers. One can easily imagine Aimee, for example, in the Norman Lear sitcom of the seventies: *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. The comic mode of both Huxley and Waugh is what we recognize today as "black humor"—a kind of humor which provokes at the same time both laughter and guilt. The more we laugh, the more we feel chastised. Both in its dystopian and comic modes, *The Loved One* takes us well beyond the bounds of the artfully entertaining. This may account for the reserve of critics who find that it goes too far. As great an admirer of Waugh as Kingsley Amis put down the novel for being "coarse." The coarse or brutal tonalities, I would suggest, are inseparable from Waugh's social and critical concerns—perhaps in none of his other works is a critical motive more apparent.

In its plot development the novel divides pretty much in two halves—each dealing with a casualty of the times. The first is Sir Francis Tinsley, an older member of the British colony who works in public relations. When he is shunted out of his office and job he hangs himself. In his best days Sir Francis had enjoyed a spot on the literary map as a reviewer, versifier, and travel writer; but this was in the time of the Georgians, before the rumbling advent of "Joyce and Freud and

Gertrude Stein"—a line-up that Sir Francis tells Dennis "he couldn't make any sense of." When he arrived in Hollywood, he was already a literary fossil; and with the loss of his Hollywood post, he is finished. Following this account, Aimee's doomed romance is brought to the foreground. As Dennis officiated at the literary man's burial at Whispering Glades, so too he oversees the disposal of Aimee's body in the crematorium of the pet cemetery. In his profession, Sir Francis, a pre-World War I type, found himself out of his time. Aimee, a pre-World War II type, also seems in her personal dilemma out of her time. Neither has a future in the post-War II world.

Waugh tended to look benevolently on his fossil-types: that he links Aimee's fate with Sir Francis' further suggests his sympathetic attitude toward her—despite, to be sure, the surgical dispassion and precision with which her "case," like Sir Francis' own, is delineated.

Waugh concisely fills us in on the social and cultural backgrounds of both characters; the more he fills us in, the more we see how each is fatally unfit for dealing with the crisis each is caught up in, the one, vocational, the other, personal. Sir Francis is baffled not only by Freud but also by a roster that includes "Kierkegaard and Kafka and Compton Burnett and Sartre." He asks of these, "Who are they? What do they want?" If Sir Francis has outlived his time—"If asked, Dennis would have guessed that he had been killed in the Dardanelles"—Aimee proves too green and misguided for hers. Waugh is as careful to pinpoint her cultural credentials and blank spots as Sir Francis'. As she tells Dennis: "I've always been Artistic. I took Art at College as my second subject one semester." In answer to a query about what she took, she explains: "Just Psychology and Chinese. I didn't get on so well with Chinese. But of course they were secondary subjects too; for Cultural Background."

As Waugh anticipates Wolfe's attack on hucksterism in the art world, he here equally anticipates recent observations by Paul Fussell and other critics on hucksterism in the University. In outlining his heroine's *curriculum vitae*, Waugh, with, to be sure, greater dramatic economy and power, says everything that Fussell touches on in his essay, "The Life of the Mind," included in his book *Class: A Guide through the American Status System* (1983). That Waugh can as deftly sketch in Aimee's background as Sir Francis' again suggests that his portrayal depends on an understanding that borders on compassion and a sympathy that borders on love.

We may also note of the literary allusions strewn through the story that they function as something more than elitist flag-waving. Lines from Tennyson's *Tithonus* or parodic echoes from his *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington* summon up expressive and ceremonial means in coming to terms with death which mark not simply a contrast with the style of Whispering Glades and its environs but with the language and mood of present times in general. Also foreign to the present are the avowals of love cited from Tennyson, Keats, or Shakespeare. That Aimee responds to their lines on love and death is an aspect of her tragic circumstance. *The Loved One* deals not only with the tragic fate of an individual but also with the contours of a tragic age. On this score Waugh would seem to join hands at the last with D. H. Lawrence who begins his *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) with the famous admonition: "Ours is essentially a tragic age...." This premise determines the tone and point of Waugh's novel.

In its treatment of the "clash of cultures" the novel proves more astute and more sensitive than most critics have been willing to grant. The film version of 1965, directed by an Englishman as far to the left politically as Waugh was to the

right, wholly misses his view of the American character and cultural climate. The film remains gleefully platitudinous in its belaboring of American materialism and capitalist villainy. But this miscarriage should not affect our response to a work which, both as love story and as cultural criticism, can still speak to us, and move us, now.

## White Shoes

*For a long time she had wanted*
*white shoes.*

*She was twelve then — small for her age*
*but big enough to wash and dry the dishes*
*help with the cooking*
*peel potatoes  string beans  shuck corn*
*and help make up the beds for the*
*gentlemen lodgers.*

*One day she complained of a pain*
*in her side.*

*The doctor operated*
*but the pain turned poison.*

*There was no medicine then for*
*such things.*
*It went very fast.*

*They hardly realized it*
*when she turned her face to the wall—*

*When they dressed her for her funeral*
*her mother said*
*for so long she'd wanted white shoes.*
*She never had them when she was alive*
*She's going to get them now.*
*Oh, yes.*

*When they buried her she was wearing*

*white shoes.*

*Her mother said*

*maybe the shoes will be like wings*
*to carry her right to Heaven's gates.*

*Her mother said*

*maybe the angels will be jealous*
*when they see her standing there*
*wearing those white shoes*
*waiting to get in.*

*Her mother said*

*maybe Heaven's the right place*

*for white shoes*

*that never walked on earth.*

— Louise Dauner