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Evelyn Waugh revisited for 50th anniversary

By Felicitas Casillo

Monumental publishing project set in motion for 43-volume edition of writer's Complete Works

Britain is celebrating one of the most original writers of the 20th century 50 years after his passing. As part of the anniversary efforts, the University of Leicester and Oxford University Press will edit for the first time Evelyn Waugh's complete works.

2016 is a year of special significance for literary connoisseurs: besides celebrating the fourth centenary of Miguel de Cervantes and William Shakespeare's death, we should also note other significant commemorations, one of them is the 50th anniversary of British writer Evelyn Waugh's passing (1903 - 1966).

One of the most notable features of Waugh's identity was his sense of humour; sometimes acid, sometimes tenderly childlike, an elegant form that tends to assume the boldest criticism. In many aspects he was a true rebel; a Catholic in an Anglican country, he harshly criticized British society during the first half of the last century. He used to enjoy the company of contemporary authors, such as Graham Greene, to whom he often wrote letters that are preserved until today, and Muriel Spark — according to him, one of the most brilliant writers of his time.

Waugh's protagonists are closer to suffering rather than corruption. They often suggest uncomfortable and surprising spiritual pursuits in a society where even transgression had taken the form of cliché. Deep down, his characters, like Julia and Sebastian Flyte, in his famous novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), are fragile and wounded. It's not guilt or evilness that drives their actions, but the radical pursuit of a greater good that would overcome even their own misery.

Despite Waugh being a renowned author, much of his work remains unpublished. In *Labels: A Mediterranean Journal* (1930), he recounts his journey through well-known Mediterranean cities and describes the hardships of a successful writer: while he wasn't writing novels he would write articles and —more importantly— in both cases it was essential to find something interesting to say.

Waugh can join the long list of travel writers, although he was not really limited to that. Europe, Africa, Middle East, Latin America: everywhere he went, he found a way to describe not only the customs but the place's own pulse. One of his favourite destinations was Italy, which Waugh toured on numerous occasions; he considered it his spiritual homeland.

A Herculean task

Martin Stannard, a professor at the University of Leicester, is one of Evelyn Waugh's most sensible biographers. On the occasion of this 50th anniversary, Stannard works alongside academic David Bradshaw, Barbara Cook and a team of editors, in an ambitious publishing project which will end in 2020. The edition comprises 43 volumes, including all of Waugh's writings: novels, short fiction, essays, articles, reviews, diaries and letters. 85 percent of his correspondence is still unpublished.

How would you define The Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh?

The Complete Works project was initiated by Alexander Waugh, Waugh's grandson, who curates the Evelyn Waugh Archive at his home in Somerset. I've worked on this idea with him and Oxford University Press (OUP), the publisher. We aim to publish everything we can find, the unexpurgated diaries, all his artwork and a new bibliography. I am the Principal Investigator for the Arts and Humanities Research Council funding, so the project is based at the University of Leicester.

So it's a truly innovative edition...

This project represents the biggest single contribution to Waugh studies, and is probably the largest scholarly edition of a modern author. We include cutting-edge digital humanities technology. We also have a dedicated website which allows all our twenty-three editors to share and search archived data, and invites members of the public to contribute their knowledge.

What does it mean to you to work on this author again?

I edited *Heritage: The Critical Heritage* (1984), and wrote a two-volume biography of Waugh (1986, 1992). Since then, I've worked on other authors, particularly Muriel Spark and Ford Madox Ford. It's a delight to return to Waugh and I hope that all those who become involved with this research will find pleasure in his writing.

Which of his works would you recommend?

A lot of books, reviews and journalism. In England and America, many people associate his name with his most popular novel, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), a book heavily influenced by the war, and by his sense of the war as a victory for barbarism. His other essential works are, I think, his first novel, *Decline and Fall* (1928), one of the funniest novels in the English language; his second, *Vile Bodies* (1930), much darker as his first wife left him when he was in the middle of writing it; *A Handful of Dust* (1934),

probably his masterpiece; *The Loved One* (1948), a hilarious satire of Californian culture; and his war trilogy (1952, 1955, 1961), collectively known as *Sword of Honour*.

Different themes, moments, and always a careful style...

Exactly, there is a substantial body of work. He wrote nothing badly and is recognized now as a master craftsman, one of the major novelists of the 20th century, something acknowledged by OUP's huge investment in the Complete Works.

@felicasillo