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### Evelyn Waugh's Travel Books

The publication of Evelyn Waugh's diaries was awaited with almost unseemly eagerness and greeted with a great to-do. The value of the diaries as a mine for scandal-mongers is obvious; their value as documents for scholars and critics is a matter into which I do not wish to venture here. But the extraordinary attention paid to them emphasizes the neglect of a number of documents which have been available for a long time: Waugh's travel books.

Commentary on the travel books amounts to a very small part of a sizable body of the scholarship and criticism that Waugh's work has begotten. And Waugh himself furnished a warrant to anybody who chooses to disregard a half dozen of his books. Christopher Sykes, in his recent biography, calls the first of them a minor work, and Waugh, in a copy inscribed for Sykes, calls the last of them a potboiler. Furthermore, Waugh writes in the Preface to *When the Going Was Good* (1947): "The following pages comprise all that I wish to reprint of the four travel books that I wrote between 1929 and 1935 . . . . These books have been out of print for some time and will not be reissued . . . . There was a fifth book, about Mexico, which I am content to leave in oblivion, for it dealt little with travel and much with political questions." (The sixth travel book is *Tourist in Africa*, published in 1960.)

I should say, however, that Waugh's attitude is unfair to himself and unfortunate for his readers. His novels are available in a wide variety of editions, but his travel books are likely to be found only in the libraries of large universities. It would be silly to deny that these books are uneven (are not the novels, like anyone else's, also uneven?), but they are all valuable. First, they are entertaining. They would be worth reading if someone other than Waugh had written them or if Waugh had written nothing else. Second, they are informative about Waugh's principles and convictions. Third, they have significant links with his fiction.

In the decade before World War II, Waugh traveled extensively. His first wife accompanied him on the Mediterranean cruise which he re-

counts in *Labels* (1930), though she became ill and had to be hospitalized on the ship and in port. By the time he wrote *Labels*, their marriage had failed. With a novelist's license, he transformed himself into a single man (the American edition of *Labels* is plausibly called *A Bachelor Abroad*) and her into "Juliet," the wife of "Geoffrey." But, as Christopher Sykes has noted, the made-up Geoffrey, worrying about his wife's illness, also represents an aspect of Waugh. Most of Waugh's later travels were solitary. He disliked literary cliques and collaborations, and Frederick J. Stopp is no doubt right in saying that during the travel years his dislike increased. Parsnip and Pimpernell (Auden and Isherwood?) who together, Waugh says, almost add up to one writer, move absurdly in and out of Waugh's novels, and their doings are reported in his last short story, "Basil Seal Rides Again," published in 1963. One has become a professor at the "University of Minneapolis," and the other a professor at the "University of St. Paul."

As Stopp has observed, Waugh invented a new version of an old literary form and a new kind of traveler. In *Labels* Waugh describes the kind that Hilaire Belloc invented earlier: The pilgrim on his way to Rome wears shabby clothes and carries a big walking stick. In his haversack are sausages, wine, a map, a sketch book. He talks with poor people in roadside inns and sees in their very diversities the unity of the Roman Empire. He knows something of military history and strategy. But he traveled, Waugh concludes, at a time when few men had marched with an army. Since that time there has been a world war.

The persona of Waugh's travel books, especially the first of them, is less romantic than anti-romantic and less likely to travel to Rome than to some outlandish, even savage place. But instead of adopting G.K. Chesterton's axiom and regarding inconveniences as adventures, he regards adventures as inconveniences. He is not the kind of traveler who, after walking twenty miles through elephant grass, delights in drinking cocoa from a tobacco tin and eating moldy biscuits, and he can imagine nothing more nauseating than a stew of newly killed game. He could do very well without the dangers of exotic diseases and predatory animals. He is aware, not of unity, but of contrast: of civilization opposed to the jungle, of borders and collisions of culture. The social intercourse of the jungle (sitting in a dark hut, drinking strange drinks, swapping compliments through an interpreter) is exhausting.

Nevertheless, Waugh does not remove all romance from his travels and does not wish to. Indeed, he is fascinated by "distant and barbarous places." When, in 1930, he went to Addis Ababa for the Coronation of Haile Selassie, he also traveled to the interior of Abyssinia, Kenya, the

Belgian Congo, Zanzibar, and Aden. Before he left England, friends and old reference books told him fantastic tales about Abyssinia: The Abyssinian Church consecrated bishops by spitting on their heads, and it had canonized Pontius Pilate. The Royal Family traced its descent from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The proper heir to the throne was hidden in the mountains and bound in chains of solid gold.

Waugh was gratified to learn that the reality was quite as bizarre as the rumors. Addis Ababa, he thought, resembled the Israel of Saul and the Scotland of Macbeth, but more than anything else it resembled the world of Lewis Carroll, where rabbits carry watches in their waistcoat pockets and royalty walks around croquet lawns with executioners. Abyssinian men wore daggers and bandoliers. Behind them walked slave boys carrying their rifles. The bullets in the bandoliers might not fit the rifles, but no matter, for they were a medium of exchange and a symbol of status. At the monastery of Debra Lebanos the Mass itself seemed hardly a Christian ceremony, for it was said mostly behind closed doors. The resident aliens were as extraordinary as the natives. In Harar an Armenian hotel keeper called Bergebedgian sold a liquor labeled "Very Olde Scotts Whiskey," "Fine Champayne," or "Hollands Gin," depending upon the preference of the customer. At parties and bazaars Mr. Bergebedgian made himself completely at home, pulling things out of drawers, removing food from ovens to taste it, pinching young girls, giving half-piasters to young children. Waugh happily transferred this sort of thing to *Black Mischief* (1932).

But Waugh also discovers that civilized men are not so different from savages as they would like to think. Droll and ironic and farcical, the resemblances between the two accumulate. Like the English, the primitives of British Guiana are solitary and require a lot of drink to become sociable, are not ambitious or demonstrative, are fond of pets and of hunting and fishing. The fashionable night club in "a rowdy cellar" to which Waugh goes upon his return from Africa is "hotter than Zanzibar, noisier than the market at Harar, more reckless of the decencies of hospitality than the taverns of Kabola or Tabora." The journalists who cover the Italian-Abyssinian War are, in their way, more barbaric than the barbarians. They stage combat scenes and complain that in the Chinese wars an entire army corps could be hired by the day and, for extra pay, actually be shot at. As intrigued by gadgets as any savage, they have equipped themselves, at their newspapers' expense, with rifles, telescopes, ant-proof trunks, medicine chests, pack saddles, gas masks. The language of their cables, designed for economy, is a kind of primitive jargon. When a nurse is reported killed in a bombing

raid, New York and London "Require earliest name life story photograph American nurse upblown Adowa." No nurse has died at Adowa, and the journalists cable back, "Nurse unupblown."

In his fiction Waugh fires, with a double-barreled hilarity, at both the savage and the civilized. In *Black Mischief* the attempts of the Emperor Seth to modernize Azania are ludicrous, but the modernism to which he aspires is even more ludicrous. In *Scoop* (1938) the journalists acquire enough gear to outfit expeditions to all points of the compass. (The running joke about Apthorpe's gear in the World War II trilogy also owes something to the Abyssinian experience.) They have names like Shumble, Whelper, and Pigg, and their professional attitude is summed up by one Corker: "Ring people up at any hour . . . make them answer a string of damn fool questions when they want to do something else—they like it." In *A Handful of Dust* (1934) the savagery of London is more appalling than that of the jungle, and its effects are tragic as well as comic.

Waugh the traveler is as brave as Waugh the soldier will be. In British Guiana and Brazil he tramps through country for which there are no maps, into which no policeman or government officer has gone. The streams all seem to run the wrong way, as they do in *A Handful of Dust*. Once, lost and hungry, he stumbles upon a house and a human being, food and directions, in the face of odds against which, he calculates, only a miracle could have prevailed. He smokes, eats, and drinks all sorts of dreadful stuff. At Port Said he buys a cheap hubble-bubble from a vendor who keeps several going by drawing on each in turn and, though warned by a doctor that he will catch some abominable disease, he smokes without ill effect. In Brazil he is introduced to a drink called cassiri. From the description of cassiri in *A Handful of Dust* the reader may suppose that Waugh invented it to make Tony Last's ordeal more hideous, but Waugh has already described it in *Ninety-Two Days* (1934): "It is made from sweet cassava roots, chewed up . . . and spat into a bowl. The saliva starts fermentation . . ." Waugh is at first understandably reluctant to sample it, but he later finds it refreshing and drinks it by the pint.

Tough though he is, and alone by preference, Waugh suffers occasionally from tedium and depression. Waiting four days between Harar and Aden, he wonders whether anybody has compiled "an anthology of bored verse." It might have for frontispiece Sickert's "Ennui" and include an appendix of suicide letters selected from the newspapers: "I am fed up and resolved to end it all . . . Yesterday the clock broke, and there is four shillings for the milk. Give Aunt Loo my love . . . If the milkman says it's more, it's only four shillings."

But there are circumstances and states of mind which cannot be converted into jokes. In *Antigua*, at Christmas, Waugh reflects upon the melancholy of Christmas holidays in the Tropics. Returning to England, he wakes to hear the ship's foghorn, dismal and perhaps premonitory, for "Fortune is the least capricious of deities, and arranges things on the just and rigid system that no one shall be very happy for very long." As the ship passes through the Dardanelles, an American lady asks him, "Can't you just see the quin-que-remes? From distant Ophir, with a cargo of ivory, sandal-wood, cedar-wood, and sweet white wine?" No, but he thinks that he might, with more imagination, see troopships of Australians going to their deaths in the Great War. All of this is twenty years before the ennui and melancholy of Gilbert Pinfold, before the preoccupation with death in the World War II trilogy.

Politically, the Waugh of the travel books is, as one would suppose, a conservative, but some reviewers thought him much worse than that and called his second book on Abyssinia and his book on Mexico pieces of Fascist propaganda. The truth is that in *Robbery Under Law: The Mexican Object Lesson* (1939), he writes on behalf of capitalism, not Fascism. He protests the expropriation of British oil wells. But it is also the truth that he sees a case for the Italians in Abyssinia, and it is the case that he sees for the British in other countries. Abyssinia is obviously in a fine old mess, but Aden and Kenya, under the British, are in good, civilized shape. (He goes so far as to argue that the very fact of British domination has kept Malta Maltese and Mediterranean and prevented it from being turned into a tourist trap or a bogus charm spot.) The Italians, in turn, will bring civilization to Abyssinia. The fighting is not over, but already they are building roads. (One may think of Pontius Pilate in a story by Anatole France called "The Procurator of Judaea": "What? Refuse an aqueduct? What madness!")

Yet Waugh, like the later Jacobites, is less acquisitive and practical than he is romantic and nostalgic. He is not altogether proud of the whole British Empire and, though patriotic, he is not chauvinistic. Indeed, what he loves most in his own time seems "barely represented" in his own country, and what he loves most in his own country seems to be only the survival of an earlier age. He admires the English settlers in Kenya, not because they are growing rich (he says they are struggling), but because they are re-creating the life of the English squirearchy. (In the war trilogy Guy and Virginia Crouchback talk of their happy times in Kenya, and Waugh sums up their recollections: "the whole Restoration scene re-enacted by farmers, eight thousand feet above the steaming seaboard.")

Waugh's conservatism draws lines of class but not lines of colour. In Algeria he notes approvingly that Moorish landowners sit next to French army and navy officers in cafes, and that white porters and street sweepers trade cigarette ends with coloured ones. Why, he wonders, are the British and the native people of their Empire not equally fraternal? In Abyssinia he visits a noble old chief beside whom Haile Selassie is an upstart, but who represents a tradition that is doomed. He is both regretful and grateful, for he feels that he has traveled across the centuries to "the court of Prester John."

It is in his esthetics that Waugh shows himself not only conservative but also parochial and prejudiced. At an exhibition in Paris he discovers "the very apotheosis of bogosity." It is a head of white wire, "so insignificant . . . so drab and . . . inadequate that it suggested the skeleton of a phrenologist's bust . . . It was called *Tête: dessin dans l'espace*, by M. Jean Cocteau; near it stood a magnificent sculpture by Maillol." In a museum at Cairo, looking at certain works of Arab art which are contemporary with masterpieces in the Musée Cluny, he is suddenly brushed by the Crusader's emotions: zeal for the Cross and contempt for the Crescent. Scholarship at the University of Elazhar is so miserable that it makes that of every school in the West look vigorous, and Agia Sophia is "a majestic shell filled with vile Turkish fripperies."

Like other conservatives, Waugh is pessimistic about the possibilities of human nature: Man will never be self-sufficient this side of the grave; political and economic conditions can do little to augment either his virtue or his happiness; inequalities of wealth are inevitable. A class system is necessary to hold a country together, and the anarchistic impulse in society is so strong that keeping the peace is virtually a full-time task of government. Such attitudes may partly explain something in Waugh which goes back farther than his interest in religion: his interest in the nursery. In the nursery one has order and that figure of affection which is also a figure of authority, the nanny. Sykes's biography makes clear that Waugh loved his nurse Lucy as he loved very few other people, and in *Scoop* William Boot refuses to go to a grand banquet in his honor because he fears that in the eyes of his old nurse he will look ridiculous. The literary work to which Waugh refers most often, in the travel books as in the novels, is a children's book, *The Wind in the Willows*, by Kenneth Grahame. "Boviander," he says, in *Ninety-Two Days*, "is the name given to the people . . . who live . . . along the lower waters of the great rivers . . . they fish, and spend most of their time, like the water rat in *The Wind in the Willows*, 'messaging about in boats.'" In *Remote People* Mr. Bergebedgian, making ready for a party one night, arms himself

with an automatic pistol and deals out clubs to his servants. A French clerk takes a revolver, and Waugh himself, carrying a swordstick, thinks it is all "very much like Rat's preparation for the attack on Toad Hall." The book most often quoted and referred to after *The Wind in the Willows* is *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

In spite of the value that he places on order, there is in Waugh a deep vein of anarchism. As he disembarks at Malta, the ship's medical officer tells him that he risks imprisonment if he does not carry a quarantine form with him and report every day to the Minister of Health. He loses the form and never goes near the Ministry of Health. He writes identical letters to two hotels at Malta, suggesting a free stay in exchange for favorable mention in his book. Having learned that the Great Britain is the better, he tells the Great Britain man at the dock to take his baggage. When the man from the other hotel flutters his letter at him, "A forgery," says Waugh. "I am afraid you have been deluded by a palpable forgery."

Friends assumed and Waugh declared that the remarkable Peter Rodd was the model for Waugh's raffish hero Basil Seal, but I cannot help thinking that in Basil there is a good deal of Waugh himself. On the eve of his departure for Azania (Abyssinia), where he fights for the Emperor Seth, Basil cashes a rubber check at his club (among the troubles between the young Waugh and his father was a notable one over a check that bounced). He steals his own mother's emeralds and at Port Said sells them for a fifth of their true value. He drinks and then fights with a Welsh engineer (as the diaries and other accounts indicate, Waugh was one of the great drinkers of literary history). He sends obscene postcards to his friend Sonia Trumpington (in *Labels* "Geoffrey," that is, Waugh, mails such postcards to an Englishwoman of his acquaintance). And it can hardly be a series of mere coincidences that makes Basil's age, from work to work, approximately the same as Waugh's.

Whereas the conservative in Waugh draws his sword on behalf of traditional art, the anarchist in him tosses bombs among the idols of popular taste. "I do not think," he says in *Labels*, "that I shall ever forget the sight of Etna at sunset . . . in a blur of pastel grey . . . . Nothing I have ever seen in Art or Nature was quite so revolting." When everyone else on the ship sees Gibraltar, through Thackeray's eyes, as an enormous lion crouched between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, Waugh sees it as a big slab of cheese and nothing else. As for the Sphinx, it is ill-proportioned and no more mysterious than Aleister Crowley.

At times Waugh's travels appear to be a succession of happy encounters with the grotesque and the eccentric. In Naples a charming small girl shows him two partially mummified bodies in a church crypt, puts her face to a slit in one corpse that reveals the lungs and digestive organs, inhales ecstatically, and invites him to do the same. In Haifa his driver tries to run over pedestrians and removes both hands from the wheel to light the Lucky Strikes that he smokes incessantly. The journalists in Abyssinia are a catalogue of oddballs including an Austrian in Alpine costume, a Soudanese traveling under a Brazilian passport and working for an Egyptian newspaper, and a German traveling under the name of Haroun-al-Raschid. In British Guiana and Brazil two characters on a grand scale turn up. Mr. Baine, a district commissioner, once had a horse that swam under water, and a guide with a parrot that flew ahead, flew back, and whispered in his ear what it had observed. Mr. Christie, a half-caste rancher, has dreams which indicate the nature of people who are about to visit him: he sees sometimes a pig or a jackal and often "a ravaging tiger." For thirty years he has preached five hours every Sunday without making one convert, for even his own family have the devil in them.

The meetings with fantastic characters are a matter of luck, but Waugh must decide which characters are appropriate to the travel books alone and which are the raw material of fiction. Mr. Baine is merely an amiable narrator of tall tales, and he makes no appearance in the novels, but Mr. Bergebedgian is a more complex discovery, and he becomes Mr. Youkoumian, Basil's assistant in the Azanian Ministry of Modernization. Mr. Christie develops into the terrible Mr. Todd, Tony Last's host and jailer in *A Handful of Dust*. It is worth noticing, however, that in his first novel, *Decline and Fall* (1928), Waugh invented on another basis or on none at all a marvelous religious maniac, the homicidal carpenter of Blackstone Gaol:

"Well, one day I was just sweeping out the shop before shutting up when the Angel of the Lord came in. I didn't know who it was at first. 'Just in time,' I said. 'What can I do for you?' Then I noticed that all about him there was a red flame and a circle of flame over his head, same as I've been telling you. Then he told me how the Lord has numbered His elect and the day of tribulation was at hand. 'Kill and spare not,' he says."

The travel books record Waugh's interests in architecture, painting, etc., which began early and lasted all of his life. He was a student in a school of art (he did drawings for some of his books) and in a school of carpentry (did he meet a model for his homicide there?), and he was

tutored in illumination and script. Therefore, he sees landscapes, cities, houses, churches, works of art with a trained eye. He devotes a long section of *Labels* to the architecture of Gaudi, who he says is to other practitioners of the Art Nouveau as the masters of Italian baroque are to the mediocrities who decorated the boudoir of Mme. de Pompadour. At the same time he notes in Gaudi's buildings a resemblance to the sets in the later U.F.A. films. He thinks of writing as a kind of architecture and cabinetmaking. In *Ninety-Two Days* he says that as a carpenter sees a piece of timber and wishes to square and plane it, he himself has certain haphazard experiences and wishes to turn them into the forms of fiction. In *A Little Learning* (1964), at the close of his life, he says that he makes and sells books as a man makes and sells chairs.

Waugh's travel books are accounts not only of his journeys but also of his temperament and his tastes, his pieties and his prejudices. Most of the accounts of the second kind square with those which he wrote later in life and with his novels—partly because of paradoxes which are common to all of them. There is also a kind of paradox which is peculiar to the travel books: encounters with the unfamiliar enable Waugh to understand the familiar. In foreign countries he learns about his own country what he could not have learned within it ("What should they know of England," Kipling asked, "who only England know?"). He learns about his religion likewise. It is only by witnessing the secretive Abyssinian Mass that he fully apprehends a triumphant fact of his own faith: that from the hidden and criminal sanctuaries of the early Church came "the great open altars of Catholic Europe, where Mass is said in a flood of light, high in the sight of all." Finally, in faraway places and in the company of strange men and women, Waugh learns about himself what he could not have learned in London, in Mayfair, in the midst of the Bright Young People.