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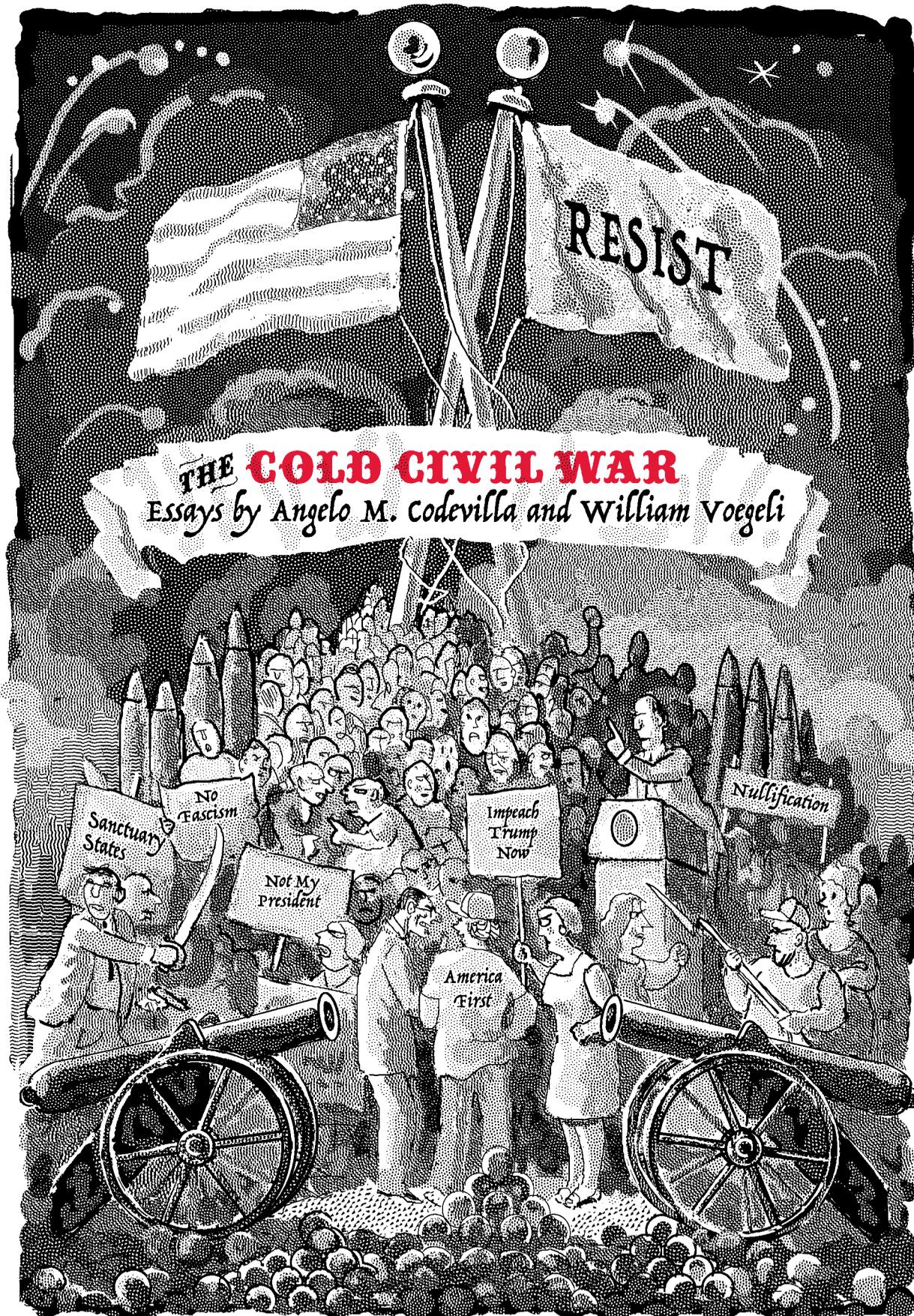
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Book Review by Joseph Epstein

WHITE MISCHIEF

Evelyn Waugh: A Life Revisited, by Philip Eade.
Henry Holt and Company, 472 pages, \$32



WHEN THE FINAL REVIEWS—THAT is, the obituaries—came in, Evelyn Waugh's were mixed. His literary accomplishments were noted, so too his Catholic apologetics, but heavy emphasis was put upon his reactionary views and his snobbery. Waugh's son Auberon, responding to these notices, countered that they were wrong about his father's snobbery (he scarcely cared about pedigree) and his politics ("politics bored him"), and missed the main point about him: "[i]t is simply that he was the funniest man of his generation."

Quite so, though it needs to be added that in the case of Evelyn Waugh funny was not always the same as amusing. Amusing suggests light, whimsical, charming. P.G. Wodehouse is amusing. Waugh's humor tended to the dark, and, given his often gratuitous pugnacity, usually had a victim, or at least an edge. When the favorite of his seven children, his daughter Margaret, wished to live on her own, he told her "you are no more ready for independence than the Congo." After Randolph Churchill had what turned out to be a benign tumor removed through surgery,

Waugh remarked that it was the only thing about Randolph that wasn't malignant and they removed it. When someone called his attention to a typographical error in one of his books, he replied that one cannot get any decent proofreading now "that they no longer defrock priests for sodomy." Waugh's humor was also strong in the line of mischief. While serving in the British army in Yugoslavia during World War II, he spread the rumor that Marshal Tito was a woman—and a lesbian into the bargain. Of his teaching at a boys school in Wales he claimed to take "a certain perverse pleasure in making all I teach as dreary to the boys as it is to myself." When his friend and fellow convert Ronald Knox asked him if he, Knox, seemed to nod off while giving a lecture, Waugh replied that indeed he did, but only for "twenty minutes." He described travel to Mexico as "like sitting in a cinema, seeing the travel film of a country one has no intention of visiting." Of the reception in America of his novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), he wrote: "My book has been a great success in the United States which is upset-

ting because I thought it in good taste before and now I know it can't be."

Waugh soon enough acquired a reputation for social ruthlessness, a ruthlessness nicely abetted by his heavy drinking. "Even his close friends were not spared," Nancy Mitford wrote, "he criticized everyone fiercely and was a terrible tease, but he set about it in such an amusing way that his teasing was easily forgiven." Not by everyone. Martha Gellhorn, a friend of Waugh's friend Diana Cooper, called him "a small and very ugly turd." Duff Cooper, Diana's husband, reacting to a malicious comment Waugh made about Lord Mountbatten at a dinner party, lashed out: "How dare a common little man like you, who happens to have written one or two moderately amusing novels, criticize that great patriot and gentleman. Leave my house at once!" On his own social combativeness, Waugh has Gilbert Pinfold, his autobiographically based, eponymous character in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957) ask, "Why does everyone except me find it so easy to be nice?"

PHILIP EADE'S NEW BIOGRAPHY OF Waugh goes a fair way to answering that question. Eade's book is subtitled, with some precision, *A Life Revisited*, for it is Evelyn Waugh's life and only glancingly his work to which Eade devotes his attention. His is a chronicle of Waugh's recent ancestry and early childhood, his education, two marriages, and career on to his death in 1966 at the age of 62. Waugh's books and their reception are mentioned in due course, but it is his career and the formation of his character that hold chief interest.

Rightly so, I should say, for Evelyn Waugh's novels, travel writings, and biographies (of the painter and poet Dante Rossetti, the Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion, and Monsignor Knox) do not really require elaborate critical exploration. All his writing requires is attentive readers, alive to his elegant prose, his craftsmanship at plotting, and the manifold comical touches that bedizen his pages. "Germans," a character in *Brideshead Revisited* remarks, "sometimes seem to discover a sense of decency when they get to a classical country." In *A Handful of Dust* (1934) a secondary character, Mrs. Rattery, reveals that she has children, two sons:

I don't see them often. They're at school somewhere. I took them to the cinema last summer. They're getting quite big. One's going to be good-looking, I think. His father is.

Rather a different angle on parenting, this, one might say.

Eade recounts Waugh's life in an admirably economic, straightforward manner, with a nice sense of measure and in a prose style free of jargon and cliché. He neither Freudianizes Waugh nor condemns his lapses into social savagery. Without a trace of tendentiousness, free of all doctrine, the biographer seeks to understand the strange behavior of his subject through telling the story of his life without commenting censoriously on it. The task is far from a simple one. Waugh's friend Freddy Smith, the second Earl of Birkenhead, in a memoir of his war days with him, wrote:

Evelyn, like Max Beerbohm, but probably for different reasons, had decided to drop an iron visor over all his intimate feelings and serious beliefs and by doing so excluded one from any understanding of his true character.... This deep reticence detracted in a sense from his conversation, which was of the highest order, because however brilliant and witty, one always felt that he was playing some

elaborate charade which demanded from him constant vigilance and wariness.

Early in the pages of *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, a novel recounting the nervous breakdown of its hero, Waugh stages an interview for Pinfold with a journalist from the BBC. (Waugh himself underwent such a breakdown owing to his overdosing on bromide and chloral combined with his heavy alcohol intake, a potion he hoped would help him attain sleep.) Of this interview Pinfold notes that the interviewer "seemed to believe that anyone sufficiently eminent to be interviewed by him must have something to hide, must be an impostor whom it was his business to trap and expose, and to direct his questions from some basic, previous knowledge of something discreditable." When during an actual interview by John Freeman of the BBC, Waugh was asked why he lived in the country, he answered that it was not because of a love of sport or rural life, but "to get away from people like you." From behind the screen of Pinfold, Waugh describes his own menacing social profile with a nice exactitude. The novel's narrator observes that "his habits of life were self-indulgent and his utterances lacked prudence." As for his tastes, the strongest of them were negative. "[H]e looked at the world *sub specie aeternitatis* and he found it flat as a map; except when, rather often, personal annoyance intruded." The part he decided to play "was a combination of eccentric don and testy colonel...it came to dominate his whole outward personality" as "he offered the world a front of pomposity mitigated by indiscretion that was as hard, bright and antiquated as a cuirass."

SOON AFTER HE CAME TO CONSCIOUSNESS Evelyn Waugh was made aware that he was not his father's favorite child. His older brother, Alec—later a popular, now a largely forgotten, novelist—was. A five-year difference in age separated the two brothers, just the right distance to prevent closeness and make intimacy difficult. Evelyn did not so much hate his father as hold him in contempt. His father was a reviewer (of more than 6,000 books), essayist, publisher (with the firm of Chapman & Hall). Evelyn would later say that he "did everything at deleterious speed." He also early noted his father's pomposity, which, combined with his gross sentimentality, precluded all possibility for admiration on the part of his younger son. The older he grew the more dismissive, not to say derisive, of his father he became. Waugh found succor as a child with his mother and his nanny. He would always find intimacy easier with women—Diana Cooper, Nancy Mitford, Ann Fleming, among them—than with men.

"Golden Boy" is the title that Alexander Waugh, grandson of Evelyn and son of Auberon, in *Fathers and Sons* (2007), his family history, gives to the chapter on Alec Waugh. Golden he may have seemed to his father but rather a zinc dud he must have seemed to his younger brother. While at Sherbourne, the public school of choice for the men in the Waugh family, Alec was caught in a homosexual scandal that made it impossible for Evelyn to attend the same school, and so he had to attend Lancing, a public school a step down on the status ladder.

The young Waugh was also less than enamored of his first name, with its sexual ambiguity. His first book, *Rossetti: His Life and Works*, published in 1928 when he was 25, was reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement* under the assumption that its author was female, the reviewer referring throughout to its author as Miss Waugh. This was another annoyance in a life that seemed to be filled with annoyances. He was early and perennially a victim of boredom; in his uncompleted novel, *Work Suspended*, he speaks of "ruthless boredom." His friend Douglas Woodruff noted: "He was constantly suffering from *ennui*, which ought to be recognized as a major affliction more wearing and painful than most physical disabilities." One ready-to-hand weapon in the combat against boredom, according to Woodruff, was to be found in his readiness "to say the disconcerting thing in the hopes of making something happen or getting a rise, or in some other way breaking the monotony of all too easily predictable social exchanges." In Yugoslavia, for a notable example, Waugh put it about that Birkenhead was having a homosexual affair with an Istrian intellectual and had also become a drug addict through the use of morphia. And, one must understand, he rather liked Birkenhead. Such free-floating malice evidently helped him get through the day.

AS EARLY AS HIS SCHOOL DAYS, WAUGH'S terror of boredom and taste for the ridiculous combined to make him a figure of subversion. Max Mallowan, later an archeologist and husband to Agatha Christie, remembered him at Lancing as "popular among the boys for he was amusing and always ready to lead us into mischief, but had a way of getting others into trouble and himself invariably escaping." Mallowan adds that "[h]e was courageous and witty and clever but was also an exhibitionist with a cruel nature that cared nothing about humiliating his companions as long as he could expose them to ridicule." Eade tells of a fellow student who made the mistake

of using the word “preternatural,” for which he paid the price of being known forever after as “Preters.” Cecil Beaton, who first encountered Waugh when they both attended Heath Mount School in Hampstead, remained terrified of him all his life.

Waugh won a scholarship to Hertford College, Oxford, where he continued his high jinks, with heavy drinking and homosexuality now added. He spoke of the “aesthetic pleasure of being drunk,” by which one gathers he meant the glow of giving way without hesitation to his social effrontery and inherent outrageousness. As for homosexuality, “everyone was queer at Oxford in those days,” the poet John Betjeman remarked. Waugh’s great homosexual flame was a young man named Alastair Graham, one of the figures upon whom he partially modelled his *Brideshead Revisited* character Sebastian Flyte, and through whom he gained his first entrée into the upper-class English world he later portrayed in that novel. Harold Acton, who read T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) out of a megaphone from the window of his rooms at Oxford, was another university connection. Never at all serious about study, Waugh finished Oxford with a disappointing third-class degree.

HIS FIRST AMBITION WAS TO BECOME a draughtsman, and so after Oxford he went off to the Heatherley School of Fine Art in London. He also briefly tried his hand at cabinet making, until he realized, as he put it, “that there was nothing for it but to write books; an occupation which I regarded as exacting but in which I felt fairly confident of my skill.” In the meantime he spent his nights drinking and bonking about town among the Bright Young Things—the decadent London society between the wars that was his social milieu of choice—gathering material, though he may not have known it at the time, for *Vile Bodies* (1930), his novel about the young dissolutes of the day.

Having shed his homosexuality in the way public-school Englishman of the era seemed to do, Waugh played a wide field of women, and, when it came to marriage, chose Evelyn Gardner, perhaps the ditziest of them all, who had been previously engaged no fewer than nine times; sometimes, it was said, to more than one man simultaneously. They were both 24, and in the spirit of the times he proposed marriage by saying, “Let’s get married and see how it goes.”

“I saw a young man,” Gardner noted of her first impression of Waugh, “short, sturdy, good-looking, given to little gestures, the shrugging of a hand which held a drink, the

tossing of a head as he made some witty, somewhat malicious remark. He was easy to talk to and amusing.” Diana Cooper described Gardner as “though very pretty wasn’t much else.” A friend of Evelyn Gardner—now called “Shevelyn” to distinguish her from her husband—noted that “I don’t think she is wildly in love with E.W., but I doubt if she is capable of sustained passion.” The friend was correct. The marriage lasted less than two years, broken off when Shevelyn began an affair with a man of negligible significance named John Heygate, whom she later claimed never to have loved. At the break-up of his marriage Waugh was 26. His own comment on the marriage was that “[f]ortune 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.”

NOT LONG AFTER HIS MARRIAGE ENDED, Waugh underwent what his father called his “perversion to Rome.” Much evidence exists that the breakup of his marriage was not the sole cause of his religious

Waugh’s humor tended to the dark and usually had a victim, or at least an edge.

conversion, though it must have weighed in heavily on the decision. In his autobiographical volume, *A Little Learning* (1964), Waugh notes that he had much earlier attempted suicide by drowning, and was only stopped from completing the job by the incessant biting of jellyfish. In *Vile Bodies*, a novel he felt he had botched, Waugh more than suggests the emptiness of life among the higher bohemia of Bright Young Things. Modernity itself became an affront to him and Catholicism was the spar he chose to grasp against its choppy seas.

The Jesuit Father Martin D’Arcy, who oversaw Waugh’s religious instruction, remarked that he came to Catholicism through his revulsion with the modern world and its faithlessness, hoping, as D’Arcy wrote, that through it he could regain “a recrudescence of hope and even gaiety.” Eliot claimed in *The Waste Land* to show “fear in a handful of dust.” Evelyn Waugh, before his conversion, already knew that fear. *A Handful of Dust* is of course the title of what many find to be Waugh’s most perfect novel.

On September 29, 1930, Waugh was received into the Catholic Church. Why Catholicism? Because he felt it was the oldest, and hence most fundamental, version of Christianity. Eade quotes Waugh as saying that “Catholicism was Christianity, that all other forms of Christianity were only good insofar as they chipped little bits off the main block.” In an essay titled “Conversion to Rome,” Waugh wrote that he saw the world as essentially a struggle “between Christianity and Chaos,” and Christianity represented order. Did his conversion alter his behavior? Not, apparently, outwardly. Hilaire Belloc told Mary Herbert, the mother of Waugh’s second wife, Laura, that “he has the devil in him.” Waugh himself told John Betjeman’s wife, Penelope, that he was “by nature a bully and a scold.” After witnessing his rudeness to a French intellectual to whom she introduced him, Nancy Mitford asked him if it weren’t a contradiction that he was so rude a man and yet he claimed to be a practicing Catholic. “You have no idea,” he replied, “how much nastier I would be if I was not a Catholic. Without supernatural aid I would hardly be a human being.” He might have added, as he wrote in his essay on his conversion, that “[t]he Protestant attitude seems often to be, ‘I am good; therefore I go to church’; while the Catholic’s is, ‘I am very far from good; therefore I go to church.’”

WAUGH DIDN’T LIKE BEING LABELLED a Catholic writer, in the way that Graham Greene, François Mauriac, and J.F. Powers were. Saul Bellow and Philip Roth similarly chafed at being called Jewish writers. Such labels do not make a writer seem minor so much as parochial. Yet Waugh led a very Catholic life. His closest friends—Greene, Ronald Knox, Christopher Sykes—were Catholics, and he was himself Mass-going, confession-giving, orthodox on theological matters, observing of all ritual, deeply disappointed by the loosening of Church doctrine and practice that followed the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s. Catholicism ultimately changed the kind of novelist he was, taking him beyond comedy while never really abandoning it.

Comical all Waugh’s novels indubitably are, often riotously so. He may be the only modern novelist in whom one remembers secondary characters and comic bits as vividly as anything else in his books. Who can forget the vicar in *A Handful of Dust* who continues to give sermons originally written during his time in India, citing tropical conditions and colonial distance, to his congregation gathered in wintry England. Or in

the same novel the bit in which the friends of Tony Last's adulterous wife search out a mistress for Tony to divert his attention from his wife's betrayal, and one suggests "Souki de Foucauld-Esterhazy," to which another responds: "He [Tony] isn't his best with Americans." Or the prostitute with her out-of-wedlock child who, despite her lowly station, is not above a touch of anti-Semitism. Or in *Brideshead Revisited*, Charles Ryder's quite balmy father; or Anthony Blanche, "ageless as a lizard, as foreign as a Martian"; or the voice of a London hotel receptionist that sounded the note of "hermaphroditic gaiety." Or Captain Apthorpe in the *Sword of Honour* trilogy (1952-61) who never travels without his own portable water closet; or, in *Scoop*, the definition of "the news" as "what a chap who doesn't care much about anything wants to read. And it's only news until he's read it. After that it's dead."

WAUGH'S WAS THE COMEDY OF DETACHMENT, both in his fiction and in his life. His grandson Alexander claimed this detachment came as Evelyn's reaction to his father's sentimentality. Who else but he could write of his firstborn child, his daughter Teresa: "I foresee that she will be a problem—too noisy for a nun, too plain for a wife. Well standards of beauty may change in the next 18 years." In Yugoslavia, his reaction to a German bombing raid was to compare it to German opera—"too loud and too long." He did deadpan in prose, no easy literary maneuver. He could nab a character in a single sentence, or phrase, such as the younger sister, Cordelia, in *Brideshead Revisited*, who moved "in the manner of one who has no interest in pleasing."

In a *Paris Review* interview three years before his death, Waugh remarked: "I regard writing not as investigation of character, but as an exercise in the use of language, and with this I am obsessed. I have no technical psychological interest. It is drama, speech, and events that interest me." Precise, pellucid, flawless in usage and deployment of syntax, confidently cadenced, Waugh's was perhaps the purest English prose written in the past century.

Evelyn Waugh has been viewed as chiefly a comic writer. V.S. Pritchett noted that Waugh was always comic for serious reasons, and Pritchett distinguished his earlier from his later books by claiming that the former "spring from the liberating notion that human beings are mad," while his later ones, especially his war trilogy *Sword of Honour*, "draws on the meatier notion that the horrible thing about human beings is that they are sane." Even these earlier books, though,

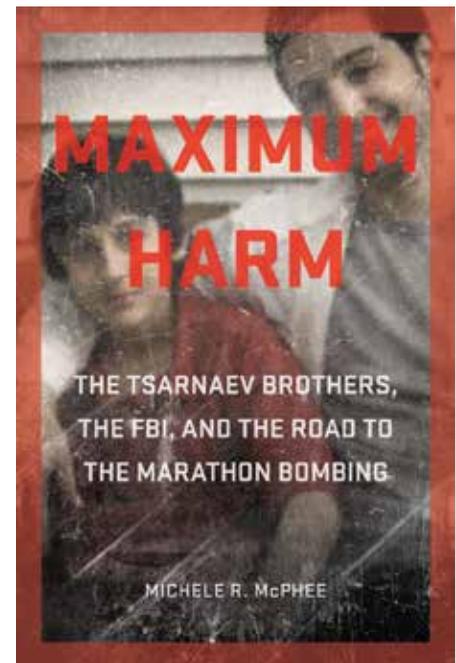
spoke to a yearning for a steadier, more stable world.

AFTER HIS CONVERSION TO CATHOLICISM, Evelyn Waugh found a theme: the emptiness of life without faith. For some this theme diminished him and deprived his writing of interest. Of *Brideshead Revisited*, Waugh's most unremittingly Catholic novel, Isaiah Berlin noted that it "seems to start so well and peter out in such vulgarity," and referred to Waugh as "a kind of [Charles] Maurras—a fanatical, angry, neurotic, violent writer, thoroughly un-English in most ways." In his diary Noel Coward lamented the infusion into Waugh's novel *Unconditional Surrender* (1961) of "long tracts of well-written boredom. The whole book is shadowed by a dark cloud of Catholicism, which suffocates humor and interferes with the story." Edmund Wilson, who in 1944 considered Waugh "the only first-rate comic genius that has appeared in English since [George] Bernard Shaw," two years later, on the occasion of the American publication of *Brideshead Revisited*, found himself "cruelly disappointed," the novel "more or less disastrous," the work a failure of taste, "mere romantic fantasy," its author's snobbery "shameless and rampant," with Waugh's hitherto laudable style gone "to seed." Wilson would later sketchily review Waugh's *The Loved One* (1948), his satire on American funerary rites, and exclaim that "to the non-religious reader, however, the patrons and proprietors of Whispering Glades (the posh California cemetery mocked in the novel) seem more sensible and less absurd than the priest-guided Evelyn Waugh."

Wilson, always a bit of a village atheist, a man readier to believe in revolution than in God, suffered a want of sympathy for writers—Joseph Conrad and Franz Kafka among them—given to spirituality. Myself a bit of a village agnostic, though a pious agnostic, I find Waugh's delving into questions of faith elevated his fiction. One doesn't have to be Catholic, or consider conversion to Catholicism, to be interested the theme of faith—understanding it, finding it, retaining it under difficult conditions. The drama of faith, Waugh's ultimate subject, went directly against the grain of a secular age, but in taking it up in his novels Evelyn Waugh, the brilliant humorist, became a major writer.

Joseph Epstein is an essayist, short story writer, and a contributing editor for the Weekly Standard. His most recent books are Frozen in Time: Twenty Stories (Taylor Trade Publishing) and Wind Sprints: Shorter Essays (Axios Press).

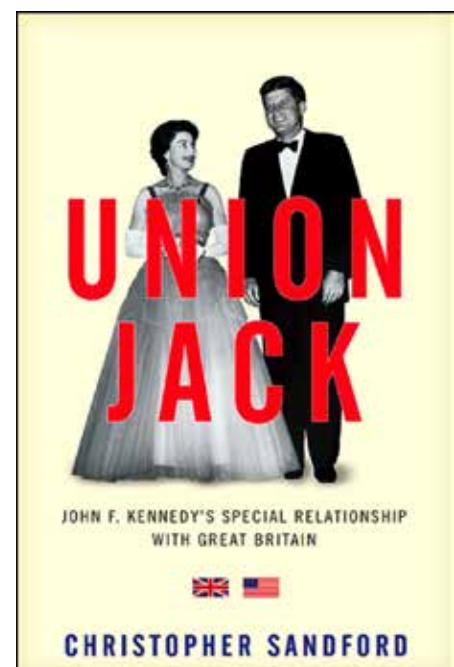
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