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Chapter 9

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA SHEETS: EVELYN WAUGH AND EDWARD ST. AUBYN— PRIVILEGE, PEDIGREE, AND THE “ORDER OF PRECEDENCE”

Keywords: *A Handful of Dust*, *At Last*, *Brideshead Revisited*, *Decline and Fall*, doubling, *Mother’s Milk*, St. Aubyn, *The Patrick Melrose Novels*, *Vile Bodies*, Waugh

MFS: Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966) and Edward St. Aubyn (1960-) are two of Britain’s writers fixated on social behavior and manners of Britain’s privileged men and women. How is their fiction similar; how is it different?

DS: Utilizing the literary concept of doubling “to compare or contrast the familiar with the strange” provides a useful vantage point to examine the fiction of Evelyn Waugh and Edward St. Aubyn (“What is literary doubling?”, n.d.).

Their novels feature characters of means or individuals who seek to gain access to more well-heeled members of society. Their stories provide readers with what might be characterized as a drawing room view of the antics, desires, failings, and decadence that permeate the lives of those “Bright Young Things”—to use a phrase of Waugh’s—without the undergirding of faith or a moral credo. Both men are master stylists. Both men have a sense of class entitlement, a kind of cultural conservatism that causes them to reject popular culture for the bygone values associated with landed gentry, aristocracy or the elite trappings of an Oxbridge education with all its associated accoutrements: high living, fine dining, witty conversation, and debonair style. Both transform the feminized and thoroughly domesticated comedy of manners into a viperish snake pit of privilege, replacing mockery with satire—Waugh—or, in St. Aubyn’s case, irony drenched in cruelty and laced with sadism.

It’s interesting to note what their fiction is not: These are not novels of consciousness resembling Proust or Joyce or Woolf. Stylistically their stories are modernist in form, but both authors look backward toward estates and the trappings of landed gentry, if not outright aristocracy, rather than celebrating popular culture or anticipating the latest consumer fetish.

Thus, their stories may employ internal monologues, they may reveal the motivations of the characters and in that sense could be characterized as steeped in consciousness, but the objective of both Waugh and St. Aubyn is to render the speech, behavior, dress, and manners of Britain's upper crust. To do that successfully requires a concentrated focus on the outer trappings of life—realism—in order to bring home to the audience the mentalities of these privileged characters and their environs.

But that's not to suggest that their stories and their personal narratives, as well as the moral disposition and character of both men are the same. Waugh and St. Aubyn were born nearly sixty years apart, a full two generations removed from one another. Waugh often presented himself as a member of the aristocracy, although, as Charles J. Rolo has suggested, his "origins were gentlemanly but in no way aristocratic" (Rolo, 1954). Indeed, in order to consider himself "aristocratic" and to justify his inclusion as a member of Britain's upper class, Waugh had to reject the "official order of precedence", deeming it, in his words, "quite irrelevant in determining true social position", which he felt should be calibrated based on "ancestry, possessions, achievements, even humor and good looks" (Wilson, 2001, p. 149).

By contrast, St. Aubyn, as Charles McGrath noted, is "descended from a family that has been in England since the Norman Conquest" and that had inherited wealth and maintained its privileged status for generations. Consequently, St. Aubyn's fiction "has none of that nose-pressed-against-the-glass wistfulness" characteristic of Waugh's narratives. His characters, therefore, "are not cartoonish, like Waugh's, but funny in their horrificness [sic], like the people Dante encounters in the lower basements of hell" (McGrath, 2014). Nevertheless, by the standards of *Burke's Peerage* even St. Aubyn's lineage falls short. Thus, "an English peer, when recently asked to identify St. Aubyn's place in the country's upper classes", Ian Parker suggested, hesitated and replied, "Well, he's upper-middle-class, isn't he?" (cited in Parker, 2014).

The generational and social differences of Waugh and St. Aubyn profoundly influenced their worldviews. Waugh's fiction was shaped by the post-World War I years leading up to and extending through the post-World War II era. St. Aubyn is part of the British generation who came of age with Lady Diana, Princess of Wales. Indeed, her brother, Earl Spenser, designated St. Aubyn as godfather to his eldest son. If Waugh's world was defined by print, radio, movies, and drink, St. Aubyn's Britain is saturated in television, grotesque tabloid celebrity, mass consumerism, the Internet, social media, and a virulent drug culture. For Waugh, fiction ultimately became a search for a moral order that was for him defined by Catholicism and a belief in the afterlife. By contrast, St. Aubyn's Patrick Melrose series, in keeping with our secular age, is immersed in personal trauma seemingly without the possibility of personal or spiritual redemption. Thankfully, its "memoirish" sensibility is distilled by means of fiction, which lends perspective and some distance while, nevertheless, piquing the reader's voyeuristic inclinations.

St. Aubyn was repeatedly raped by his father from the age of three until he resisted at eight years old. Throughout it all, his mother was silent, although evidence suggests that she must have known what was happening and was herself repeatedly raped by her husband. St. Aubyn struggled to overcome his self-hatred and suicidal impulses caused by his familial trauma. By means of the refracting fictional lens depicting his life, "privilege" serves as an incubator for violence and sadism. The reader relives St. Aubyn's experience through his literary "double", Patrick Melrose, witness to the seemingly endless unfolding of horrific events imagined and reimagined through the life of the character.

If Waugh's stories are the search for divine grace in a society that has morally cratered, St. Aubyn stories are about the author's personal trauma, meticulously crafted and presented at a psychological remove by virtue of the character's third person fictional presentation throughout the entire Patrick Melrose series. St. Aubyn's fiction caters to our confessional age and our voyeuristic desire for *schadenfreude*—enjoying the pain and misery of others—while narratively and stylistically refusing to degrade the story to a tabloid “tell-all” memoir. His protagonist navigates a godless world in which the potential for personal annihilation appears frightfully close at hand. In the case of the adult Patrick Melrose, we witness someone who is victimized and dangerous, vulnerable and lethal to all those with whom he is intimate. What salvages St. Aubyn's fiction is his exquisite prose that draws the reader into the inner sanctums of that privileged world. This is prose that glitters with sparkling wit and astute perceptions about human nature. Meanwhile, we are privy to his charming debauchery and villainous vice, his mesmerizing wit and agonizing anguish, manifested through the life experiences of Patrick Melrose, the author's alter-ego.

MFS: In *Vile Bodies* Waugh satirizes the Bright Young Things, the decadent children of privilege, immune to the pedestrian mores of lesser mortals in Britain. How would you compare this work to his satiric novel *A Handful of Dust* or *Scoop*?

DS: American critic Edmund Wilson aptly characterized Waugh “as the only first-rate comic genius that has appeared in English since Bernard Shaw” while Gore Vidal referred to him as “our time's first satirist” (Wilson & Vidal citations in “Evelyn Waugh, Satirical Novelist, Is Dead at 62”, 1966). His best biographer, Martin Stannard, noted that “as a prose stylist he's without peer” while fellow Catholic writer Graham Greene characterized Waugh as “the commanding officer of his generation of writers” (Stannard & Greene cited by Fitzgerald, 1992). *A Handful of Dust* is ranked 34th on the Modern Library's 1998 list of the 100 Best English-Language Novels of the 20th Century followed by *Scoop*, which is 75th, and *Brideshead Revisited*, which is 80th (Modern Library, 1998).

Waugh's early satiric novels, Conor Cruise O'Brien has suggested, represent a “schoolboy delight in cruelty” (O'Brien cited in Greenberg, 2003, p. 356). It is, Cyril Connolly has argued, “derived from his [youthful] ignorance of life. He found cruel things funny because he did not understand them, and he was able to communicate that fun” (Connolly cited in McCrum, 2014). Later, as he matured, accumulating his own painful experiences, his fiction darkened due to his greater understanding of the plight of his characters. This led to what Greenberg has referred to in *A Handful of Dust* as “the breakdown of the comic-ironic sensibility that characterizes his early work” (Greenberg, 2003, p. 352). This maturity, evident in that novel, fostered, as David Lodge has noted, a “subtle balancing and tight control of the tragic and the comic, the emotional and the satirical” (Lodge, 1999).

In appreciating Waugh's satire, it's important, Lodge suggests, to acknowledge that its intent is not “merely to divert and amuse” (Lodge, 1999) as is the case with the writer P. G. Wodehouse, whose “comic novels” give readers humorous and easily digestible diversion. Rather, Lodge argues, “The world of Waugh's fiction, by contrast, is definitely a fallen one, in which people act with appalling disregard for fidelity, honesty, and all the other virtues” (Lodge, 1999).

Consider, for instance, Waugh's satiric style in his first novel, *Decline and Fall* (1928) when he recounts the arrival of the esteemed members of the Bollinger Club at Oxford in the opening two pages.

For two days they had been pouring into Oxford: epileptic royalty from their villas of exile; uncouth peers from crumbling country seats; smooth young men of uncertain tastes from embassies and legations; illiterate lairs from wet granite hovels in the Highlands; ambitious young barristers and Conservative candidates torn from the London season and the indelicate advances of debutantes; all that was most sonorous of name and title was there for the beano. (Waugh, 1977a, pp. 1-2)

While Waugh's second novel, *Vile Bodies* (1930), may take its title from the Bible, its inspiration is drawn from T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922) and features the telephone, then just coming into widespread use, as the conveyor of miscommunication. Written five years after Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, *Vile Bodies* is Waugh's depiction of the Bright Young Things who partied seemingly without end in Britain's Roaring Twenties. He characterized his comedic narrative as "the hard kernel of gaiety that never breaks" (Waugh cited in Hutchens, 1945).

Nevertheless, as Martin Stannard suggests, it is "a manifesto of disillusionment, hilariously funny but bitter", finished after the breakup of Waugh's first marriage (Stannard, 1987, p. 203). This novel, as John K. Hutchens acknowledges, "spares precisely no one. Its people are variously greedy, corrupt, crafty, snobbish, milling about in a serio-comic extravaganza of decadence". He concludes, lest we somehow miss the point, that *Vile Bodies* is "a savage study in public and private morals" (Hutchens, 1945).

Jonathan Greenberg suggests that in Waugh's fiction "death more often gives birth to comedy" (Greenberg, 2003, p. 351). Indeed, in *Vile Bodies* we witness the suicide of the journalist Simon Balcairn, an earl whose career as the gossip columnist "Mr. Chatterbox" comes to an end. He is fired. He decides to kill himself by means of the gas fumes from his oven. Death, however, is never all that easy. He discovers that the paper upon which his head is to lie features the column of yet another gossip columnist. The indignity of it all! He replaces the page and resumes the process, this time to completion.

He shut the door and the window and opened the door of the gas-oven. Inside it was very black and dirty and smelled of meat. He spread a sheet of newspaper on the lowest tray and lay down, resting his head on it. Then he noticed that by some mischance he had chosen Vanburgh's gossip-page in the *Morning Despatch*. He put in another sheet. . . . Then he turned on the gas. It came surprisingly with a loud roar. . . . At first he held his breath. Then he thought that was silly and gave a sniff. The sniff made him cough, and coughing made him breathe, and breathing made him feel very ill; but soon he fell into a coma and presently died. (Waugh, 1977b, pp. 145-146)

For many readers Waugh's best novel is *A Handful of Dust* (1934). The title was taken from Eliot's *The Waste Land*: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (Lodge, 1999). This is the novel that gives deepest expression to the devastating end of his first marriage, interweaving tragedy and satire. Waugh, rejecting the consciousness-driven novel characteristic of Proust, Joyce, and Woolf with its seemingly endless internal monologues,

has the reader infer the thoughts and feelings of the characters principally by what they say and do, rather than by what they think.

“What distinguishes *A Handful of Dust* from his earlier work”, as Stannard suggests, “is Waugh’s ability both to mock and to sympathize with his second-rate protagonists” since, as he notes, “there can be no tragedy without sympathetic involvement”. To achieve this Waugh provides motives for Brenda’s affair, namely, Tony’s priggish behavior and immaturity. In creating this context, Waugh moves the story beyond simple blame to “a more abstract, deep-rooted sickness in ‘civilized’ man” (Stannard, 1987 p. 361).

For Waugh, *A Handful of Dust* characterized a “civilized man’s helpless plight” to be overwhelmed by “savages at home” (Waugh cited in Mendelsohn, 2008). The implications for him were clear: Without a deep abiding spiritual faith we are helpless in the face of human fallibility, the threat of evil, and the looming prospect of our mortality. For Greenberg, *A Handful of Dust* demonstrates the conflicting “tension between Waugh’s implicitly reformative, conservative impulse and his subversive and thoroughly modern—if not precisely modernist—enjoyment of the aesthetic possibilities of cruelty”. Indeed, Greenberg argues that *A Handful of Dust* marks the dissolution of Waugh’s “comic-ironic sensibilities” evident in his earlier works and his embrace of Freud’s “the uncanny”, by which the founding father of psychoanalysis meant that which “arouses dread and horror” (Greenberg, 2003, pp. 352, 362). Thus for Greenberg, *A Handful of Dusts* veers from realism to what might be likened to supernatural dread evident in Gothic fiction. The novel concludes improbably—much to my delight—with Tony held captive by a madman in the Amazon jungle where he is forced to read Dickens seemingly forever.

Perhaps for Waugh and fellow aesthetes who recoil at Tony Last’s hideous Gothic deformation of his Hetton Abbey estate, there is a perverse justice to his final predicament. Indeed, the irony runs deeper than that given that Waugh’s father had been a managing director at Chapman & Hall, which published not only Evelyn’s fiction but also the entire works of Charles Dickens.

Scoop (1938), the last great satiric comedy written by Waugh, is generally regarded by journalists, suggests Lodge, as possibly “the best novel ever written about their profession” (Lodge, 1999). William Boot, a nature columnist, is mistakenly sent to the African nation of Ishmaelia, which is on the cusp of war. The premise of the novel is that in the desire to drive readership and scoop rivals, newspapers and their journalists create the story rather than report it. However, Boot, who isn’t a proper journalist, uncovers the actual events driving Ishmaelian politics. The comedy, of course, is driven by the fact that, as Lodge suggests, “the whole novel is a tissue of mistakes, misrepresentations, lies, and evasions” (Lodge, 1999).

The early satiric novels by Waugh—*Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies*, *A Handful of Dust*, and *Scoop*—have established Waugh’s reputation as one of the finest satiric writers of the 20th century.

MFS: While Edward St. Aubyn has been compared to Waugh, the backgrounds of these two authors could not be more dissimilar. St. Aubyn was reportedly raped by his father, became a heroin addict, contemplated suicide, and was in therapy. How has his childhood shaped his writing and writing style?

DS: The Patrick Melrose series, as Ian Parker suggests, draws upon “the St. Aubyn family disaster—the fiction and the life both involve a perfect house in the South of France, a brutal

English snob, an American heiress with good intentions, and a son who becomes a suicidal junkie”. The series, as he notes, is a “forensic and comic variation on the theme of trauma and imperfect recovery”. St. Aubyn resists the impulse to degrade the narrative into pathos or the “misery memoir”. The result, Parker argues, is that “to read the novels is to watch a high intelligence outsmart cliché (or, to use a more Melrosian word, vulgarity), and so protect his protagonist’s literary distinction” (Parker, 2014).

For St. Aubyn the story should be judged on its artistic merits and must not be relegated to debased and pseudo-therapeutic memoir. The challenge, of course, is that given the highly autobiographical content and the voyeuristic impulses that drive readers’ interest in his fiction, I believe the Patrick Melrose series can never entirely escape the association with what Parker refers to as “Tell Me Why, Mummy” and “Please, Daddy, No” counterparts even if the audience for St. Aubyn’s fiction is far more sophisticated (Parker, 2014).

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to minimize St. Aubyn’s talents. The final book in the series, *At Last* (2011), begins in London at the funeral of Eleanor Melrose, Patrick’s mother. He acknowledges to a friend, “I think my mother’s death is the best thing to happen to me since . . . well, since my father’s death” (St. Aubyn, 2012a, p. 166). A bitterly ironic assessment, it is, nevertheless, hardly an exaggeration since Eleanor not only failed to intervene to prevent the rape of her child by his father, but renounced Patrick’s inheritance and gave away the family’s French country home in Provence to a New Age institution.

But to give the reader a sense of St. Aubyn’s heroin-amphetamine-benzodiazepine-laced style, let me quote another passage recounting Patrick Melrose’s last visit—barely a year previously—to the “Suicide Observation Room in the Depression Wing of the Priory Hospital” (St. Aubyn, 2012a, p. 11). There he committed himself for a 30-day alcohol and depression-related detox. Despite the antidepressants and massive amounts of oxazepam to cope with alcohol withdrawal, he couldn’t help falling for Becky, the lovely 20-year old “self-harming resistant depressive”.

She looked like Botticelli’s Venus, improved by a bloody trellis of razor cuts crisscrossing its way up her slender white arms. When he first saw her in the lounge of the Depression Wing, her radiant unhappiness sent a flaming arrow into the powder keg of his frustration and emptiness.

‘I’m a self-harming resistant depressive’, she told him. ‘They’ve got me on eight different kinds of pills’.

‘Eight’, said Patrick admiringly. He was down to three himself: the daytime antidepressant, the nighttime antidepressant, and the thirty-two oxazepam tranquillizers a day he was taking to deal with the delirium tremens.

Insofar as he could think at all on such a high dose of oxazepam, he could think only of Becky. The next day, he heaved himself off his crackling mattress and slouched to the Depressive Support Group in the hope of seeing her again. She was not there, but Patrick could not escape from joining the circle of tracksuited depressives. (St. Aubyn, 2012a, pp. 12-13)

Or consider the opening lines from the fourth novel of the series, *Mother’s Milk* (2006), which was shortlisted for Britain’s top literary prize, the Man Booker Prize.

Why had they pretended to kill him when he was born? Keeping him awake for days, banging his head again and again against a closed cervix; twisting the cord around his throat and throttling him; chomping through his mother’s abdomen with cold shears;

clamping his head and wrenching his neck from side to side; dragging him out of the home and hitting him; shining lights in his eyes and doing experiments; taking him away from his mother while she lay on the table, half-dead. (St. Aubyn, 2012b, p. 443)

MFS: Would you say that the British caste system and nobility were mocked, ridiculed, and satirized in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*? Why was this subject so keen for Waugh?

DS: The protagonist, Charles Ryder, is infatuated by the aristocratic Marchmain family, despite the many problems and challenges its members encounter. In a sense *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) is Waugh's almost Proustian meditation on his youth, steeped in nostalgia for his earlier immersion in the aristocratic milieu of Oxford associations that while imperfect, nevertheless, evoked a passion that could never be equaled. So no, Waugh is not engaging in mockery of this family nor the aristocracy since he has a deep abiding faith in the nobility of the institution that verged on devotion. Rather, as Stannard has suggested, the novel is "a lament in the [contemporary] waste land but it was also to be a statement of faith" (Stannard, 1992, p. 100). Thus Waugh, in the "Preface" to *Brideshead Revisited*, emphasized that the novel's theme was "the operation of divine grace on a group of diverse but closely connected characters" (Waugh, 1993, p. 1).

In the novel's epilogue Charles Ryder, now an army captain serving during World War II, is billeted at Brideshead, which has been commandeered for military use. Newly converted to the Catholic faith, Ryder prays in the family chapel: "I said a prayer, an ancient, newly learned form of words" (Waugh, 1993, p. 314). For Waugh the embrace of faith at the end of the story actually represents a beginning, rather than an ending. Consequently, as Stannard suggests, the novel necessitates an entirely new reading "in the light of this revelation" (Stannard, 1992, p. 100).

Brideshead Revisited is a novel about memory and consciousness. It is nostalgic for youth, for aristocratic values, and for a nobility that is no more. This is a novel that rejects linear (secular) time and its chronological sequence in favor of "sacred time", which, suggests Stannard, is "the belief in all time existing simultaneously, part of a Divine Plan" (Stannard, 1992, p. 101). For Waugh's biographer this is a very dark story suggesting "all passion spent" that "anticipates nothing pleasurable but the dim prospect of the Second Coming" (Stannard, 1992, p. 111).

The stylistic prose in *Brideshead Revisited* is complex and richly allusive, a significant departure from Waugh's earlier fiction. It reflects a mature authorial voice.

The aristocratic Marchmain family, who are at the center of this narrative, are Roman Catholics. They're terribly flawed, and Charles's friend Sebastian is deeply troubled. However, the family's failings are emblematic of a pervasive societal anomie. The implicit message appears to be that under these bleak circumstances one could pray. One could seek spiritual redemption. One could not restore civilization from its state of collapse.

Here's the opening passage of *Brideshead Revisited*, featured in the "Prologue", which will give our readers a sense of its style.

When I reached "C" Company lines, which were at the top of the hill, I paused and looked back at the camp, just coming into full view below me through the grey mist of early morning. We were leaving that day. When we marched in, three months before, the

place was under snow; now the first leaves of spring were unfolding. I had reflected then that, whatever scenes of desolation lay ahead of us, I never feared one more brutal than this, and I reflected now that it had no single happy memory for me.

Here love had died between me and the army.

Here the tram-lines ended, so that men returning fuddled from Glasgow could doze in their seats until roused by their journey's end. There was some way to go from the tram-stop to the camp gates; quarter of a mile in which they could button their blouses and straighten their caps before passing the guard-room, quarter of a mile in which concrete gave place to grass at the road's edge. This was the extreme limit of the city. Here the close, homogeneous territory of housing estates and cinemas ended and the hinterland began. (Waugh, 1993, p. 3)

Brideshead Revisited became a best seller in America and brought Waugh fame and fortune.

MFS: *Never Mind, Bad News, Some Hope, Mother's Milk, and At Last*—comprise *The Patrick Melrose Novels*. How do you view these books? As autobiographical, therapeutic, sarcastic and critical or something else?

DS: I believe that Edward St. Aubyn is one of the most interesting writers in England today. *The Guardian* has hailed him as “our purest living prose stylist”. The writer Alice Sebold has praised the Melrose series as “a masterwork for the 21st century” (*The Guardian* & Sebold cited in Lyall, 2012).

James Wood, writing for *The New Yorker*, has noted that “St Aubyn’s novels have an aristocratic atmosphere of tart horror, the hideousness of the material contained by a powerfully aphoristic, lucid prose style” (Wood, 2012).

Michiko Kakutani, literary book reviewer for *The New York Times*, has suggested that his novels “are written with an utterly idiosyncratic combination of emotional precision, crystalline observation and black humor”, adding that it’s “as if one of Evelyn Waugh’s wicked satires about British aristos had been mashed up with a searing memoir of abuse and addition, and injected with Proustian meditations on the workings of memory and time” (Kakutani, 2012).

One of English’s most celebrated literary writers today, Alan Hollinghurst, has characterized St. Aubyn as “perhaps the most brilliant English novelist of his generation” (Hollinghurst blurb, 2015).

If you love language, if you long for stylish prose and to be privy to the social interactions of Britain’s “hoity-toity” in those swanky drawing rooms where class distinctions and snobbery smother the 21st century middlebrow predilections for social justice and multicultural identity in lieu of literary excellence, well, St. Aubyn is your man. He has resuscitated a politically incorrect, moribund world of literary fiction, thereby rendering sparkling narratives alive to the human psychodrama of aristocrats, self-proclaimed aristocrats, and faux aristocrats.

St. Aubyn’s wit was recently on display when Ian Parker featured him in a profile piece for *The New Yorker*. When Parker noted that the potential for flooding of the Thames River didn’t seem as threatening as the screaming tabloid headline “RED ALERT” suggested—and clearly failing to take heed of what he knew to be the English penchant for commenting about “WEATHER”—later received his comeuppance in the form of an e-mail from St. Aubyn:

“Someone with a wide variety of extreme-weather channels available to him in America”, he suggested, “is unlikely to be shaken until several herds of cattle and a large number of cars and houses have been lifted into the air, swirled about and dumped onto exploding power lines or into the corpse-strewn floodwaters of ruined cities” (Parker, 2014). Touché St. Aubyn!

MFS: Based on the following quote from *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, published in 1957, what would you say are the fundamental qualities of Waugh’s writing?

The basic qualities of a . . . novel seldom vary and may be enumerated thus: conventionality of plot; falseness of characterization; morbid sentimentality; gross and hackneyed farce, alternating with grosser and more hackneyed melodrama; cloying religiosity, which will be found tedious or blasphemous according as the reader shares or repudiates his doctrinal preconceptions; an adventitious and offensive sensuality that is clearly introduced for commercial motives. All this is presented in a style which, when it varies from the trite, lapses into positive illiteracy. (Waugh, 1979, p. 88)

DS: In this passage Waugh is quite deliberately mocking his literary critics who take umbrage at his fiction. As for his personality, let me quote from the author directly—“always tired, always bored, always hurt, always hating”. As Martin Stannard noted, Waugh despised “the enforced fraternity of a rationalist culture, believing that the only object of art should be to produce a masterpiece” and “that the artist must work alone”. Waugh felt that friendship had been undermined by a social order that “developed sympathy at the expense of loyalty” (Waugh cited in Stannard, 1992, p. 132).

He was a difficult father who never fully understood or appreciated his children and retreated into solitude to write, as he made clear to Lady Diana Cooper.

I abhor their company because I can only regard children as defective adults, hate their physical ineptitude, find their jokes flat and monotonous. . . . I do not see them until luncheon, as I have my breakfast alone in the library, and they are in fact well trained to avoid my part of the house; but I am aware of them from the moment I wake. Luncheon is very painful. (citing Waugh in Kenner, 1995)

Waugh loved his family, but it wasn’t an assessable kind of love. His son, Auberon, wrote a very moving, if painful, memoir, *Will This Due?* (1991), seeking his father’s approbation even, it seems, after his death. It’s a thoughtful, revealing, meditation on his father and the values and attitudes fostered within the family. Auberon’s eldest son, Alexander Waugh, has written a fascinating biography, *The House of Wittgenstein: A Family at War* (2009) that demonstrates, by inference, that in terms of neuroses and social pathology, the Waughs couldn’t begin to compare with the Wittgensteins’ familial dysfunction.

MFS: St. Aubyn has said that “writing is horrible”. Is this due to his inner demons? Does he still have sympathy for the characters?

DS: Almost all writers with high standards who care about craft are likely to agree with St. Aubyn that “writing is horrible” (Moss, 2011). It’s not natural; it’s not social, is frequently leads to isolation and anxiety, if not depression and drink or drugs. At its best it is a way of

describing and understanding a world, of mastering and controlling the text to determine with great precision how events should unfold.

Think about it. Writers write. If they're lucky they create that one great book—rarely more—and the rest of their lives are spent trying to surpass that effort with rare success. And yet, almost all writers continue writing.

Their efforts are manifestations of the myth of Sisyphus—spending a lifetime pushing a boulder up a hill or mountain only to have it roll down once the apex is reached. That experience is agony relived again and again, seemingly for an eternity. In short, it's a lifetime of misery with only the faintest possibility of success. Even then, the outcome is generally less than sublime. How could that be anything less than horrible? Nevertheless, it's what we writers do.

In the case of St. Aubyn, writing enabled him to understand the trauma of his childhood, to find a means of reimagining those events in a controlled environment that enables him to reach a different outcome, one in which he, the author, dictates what happens. If he seems far from sympathetic, if he appears to lack empathy, well, the spiritual demons of his parents battle with his soul every day. It's a miracle St. Aubyn gets up, he writes, and that he hasn't abused his children. A triumph, if you will. But don't look to St. Aubyn for comfort or sympathy. Nevertheless, his fiction makes for fascinating reading.

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