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D. Marcel DeCoste, *The Vocation of Evelyn Waugh: Faith and Art in the Post-War Fiction*. Pp. viii + 188. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2015. £60.00 (ISBN 978 1 4094 7084 7).

Focusing on Waugh's later works from *Brideshead Revisited* to his War Trilogy, D. Marcel DeCoste traces how his writing career had begun with a distinct element of ambivalence towards the role of an English man of letters. Waugh was a talented graphic artist and in the late 1920s had even briefly enrolled on a carpentry course at the Central School of Arts and Crafts. Certainly, writing never came easily to him. His brother Alec (a fluently prolific but much less talented novelist) noted that before 1945 his younger brother was 'almost the only writer I know who did not like writing'. It was only during his military service during the Second World War that Evelyn Waugh finally accepted his true vocation to be that of a writer. This study, therefore, argues that it is primarily in his later – and often under-appreciated – fictions that Waugh finally expresses and fulfils his commitment to the duality of his roles as a prominent English writer and a devout English Catholic convert.

From *Brideshead Revisited* onwards Waugh became a writer increasingly preoccupied with the compatibilities and tensions inherent in his commitment to the artistic and Christian vocations. DeCoste, therefore, offers in this study a detailed analysis of each of the post-war novels and novellas, including *Scott-King's Modern Europe* (1947), *The Loved One* (1948), *Helena* (1950), *Love Among the Ruins* (1953), *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957), and the three volumes of the *Sword of Honour* trilogy (1952-1961). While offering an impressive diversity of subjects, styles and forms these works are also characterised (especially when Waugh's other writings, including his essays, letters and diaries, are held against them) by their author's creative and spiritual doubts and uncertainties. In this respect, these later works have often proved far less accessible to modern readers than his earlier satirically anarchic novels. Fortunately, DeCoste's perceptive study makes considerable progress in remedying this situation. His deft analysis of *Brideshead Revisited* considers how the Proustian memoirs of Charles Ryder mirror Waugh's own experiences in attempting to find his true vocation, along with the intrinsic personal and spiritual dangers of focusing merely upon the beautiful without sensitivity towards the beatific. Developing this theme, DeCoste views *The Loved One* (1948) and *Love Among the Ruins* (1953) as explorations of worlds in which the secular arts have

demeaned the traditional values of Christian spirituality. In contrast, the hagiographic Helena remains one of the most inaccessible and problematic of Waugh's works for a modern readership, with its fourth century contexts of Constantine's Rome implicitly, and often negatively, echoing those of Waugh's own generation. Yet DeCoste offers a persuasive case for a reconsideration of this strangely elusive work and rightly centres it within the significant achievements of Waugh's post-war writings. The conjunction in the fourth chapter of *Scott-King's Modern Europe* with Waugh's alter-ego in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* works especially well in teasing out how the most recognisable of Waugh's literary qualities – including his wry pessimism, anarchic cynicism and gift for sombre farce – were characteristically infused at this period of his career with his escalating dissatisfaction with the insufficiencies of modern culture and the demise of Christian values within modern European society.

Each of the chapters in this study offers a major and impressively diverse reconsideration of Waugh's post-war writings but the fifth and concluding one, "It's *sauve qui peut* now": Art's Death Wish and Charity's Vocation in the War Trilogy', provides probably the most important section of the book. The personal history of Guy Crouchback – as traced in *Men at Arms* (1952), *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955) and *Unconditional Surrender* (1961) – offers a range of culminating representations of the competing vocations to which Waugh himself had been called at various points in his life. Guy's story begins with his innocently worthy but futile attempts to live up to the spurious example of the undeservedly revered Crusader saint Sir Roger of Waybroke. Throughout the three novels Crouchback sustains, like Spenser's often flawed knights in *The Faerie Queene*, a quasi-allegorical and idealistic pursuit of the values and virtues to be drawn from life's myriad experiences while consistently being unable to shake off feelings of self-doubt, scepticism and his suspicion of the ultimate pointlessness of life. Only through his persistent disillusion, coupled with his Christ-like acts of simple human charity in assisting the Yugoslavian Jews and adopting Trimmer's child, can Guy finally attain a sense of true Christian vocation and family contentment.

DeCoste's elegantly written and persuasive reassessment of Waugh's post-war achievements as a Christian writer offers a major contribution not only to an understanding of these challenging and increasingly sombre works by an author who felt himself increasingly unsympathetic to his own age but also to our broader understanding of post-war British fiction during the two decades following the

end of the Second World War. Above all, this study clarifies – perhaps more than any other recent study of Waugh – what he really understood to be the interactive relationship between spirituality and art as a means of fulfilling his own Christian vocation. A renewed appreciation of Waugh’s post-war writings will also enrich, as DeCoste points out, our understanding of the ‘whole trajectory of twentieth-century literature from modernism to post-modernism’ (167). *The Vocation of Evelyn Waugh* will undoubtedly become a standard work in Waugh studies and its publication is especially well timed in view of Oxford University Press’s forthcoming publication of a forty-two volume edition of the Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh.

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