

The Real Waugh

A poet's object is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen either probably or inevitably. The difference between a historian and a poet is not that one writes in prose and the other in verse – indeed the writings of Herodotus could be put into verse and yet would still be a kind of history. . . . The real difference is this, that one tells what happened and the other what might happen. For this reason poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts.¹

Once upon a time, we used to read novels – Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy – to find out about the way we live now, in Trollope's phrase, or, rather, the way we lived then, and what it means to us now. We tend not to do that any more. We read *Diplomatic History*, perhaps even undiplomatic history, instead. Seeking to understand how it really was – that peculiar combination of pedantry and knight-errantry suggestive of the scholarly pursuit – we privilege the fact over the fancy, the documentary over the imaginary, the history over the poetry. We show and tell the truth – telling and retelling and retailing while there is some profit in it, as one might say. Perhaps, following Bakan, we need to make a distinction between *literal* truth and *real* truth. "There is an old tradition, going back at least to Plato, that there can be a truth in madness, dreaming, poetry, or prophecy, which is higher than literal truth. A metaphor or a fiction might open a door that cannot be opened by approaches that are too weighed down by duty to literal truth."² And yet, in our reading and our writing, "fiction" is professionally proscribed. For the scholar, the serious scholar, poetry is at best an indulgence, at worst an excrescence: better the mortification than the ruination of the plump academic flesh. Spielberg's DreamWorks notwithstanding, art barely registers as a source on life.

This restrictive practice is, I propose, misconceived. The artist transforms us into epicures, as Charles Mauron magnificently observed. Without poetry, history is only a subsistence diet. Its enrichment is an adventure and also a

*I am grateful for the stimulus of John Horton and Dan Todman, in particular, in thinking about this piece.

1. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe (London, 1932), 35 [9, 1451b].

2. D. Bakan, "Narrative Research and Hurt and Harm," in *Ethics and Process in the Narrative Study of Lives*, ed. R. Josselson (London, 1996), x.

pleasure: truly an education. No more compelling instance presents itself than the complex figure of war, its elucidation and interpretation. Tutored by Paul Fussell, Samuel Hynes, Jay Winter, and others, we have begun to grasp this for the first great cataclysm of the twentieth century, but hardly yet for the second.³ Apart from the relatively brief elapse of time, the received wisdom is that the ingredients are lacking – where are the war poets, runs the refrain – silenced allegedly by the enormity of events: no poetry after Auschwitz, as Adorno is popularly supposed to have said.⁴ Fussell's attempt at a sequel to *The Great War and Modern Memory* ends in a tacit admission of defeat:

The Great War brought forth the stark, depressing *Journey's End*; the Second, . . . the tuneful *South Pacific*. The real war was tragic and ironic, beyond the power of any literary or philosophical analysis to suggest, but in unbombed America especially, the meaning of the war seemed inaccessible. As experience, thus, the suffering was wasted. . . . America has not yet understood what the Second World War was like and has thus been unable to use such understanding to re-interpret and re-define the national reality and to arrive at something like public maturity. . . . What time seems to have shown our later selves is that perhaps there was less coherent meaning in the events of wartime than we had hoped. Deprived of a satisfying final focus by both the enormity of the war and the unmanageable copiousness of its verbal and visual residue, all the revisitor of this imagery can do, turning now this way, now that, is to indicate a few components of the scene.⁵

The epicures of the Second World War are a lonely few.

Yet a feast awaits. Here is an hors d'oeuvre, offered as a demonstration of the belief that the Promethean intellectual project of the Second World War is now to embrace poetry, broadly conceived, including transgressive hybrids such as Alan Ross or W. G. Sebald, perhaps the profoundest recent meditators on the long half-life of that war, whose books are listed as Memoir/Travel/Poetry or

3. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1975); Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London, 1991); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War and European Cultural History* (Cambridge, England, 1995). The international, cross-cultural project of which Winter is general editor and moving spirit, "Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare," is a bold attempt to embrace "the colonization of military history by cultural historians, and the reciprocal interest of military historians in social and cultural history, to the benefit of both." This pioneering work is anchored in what used to be called the European War of 1914–1918: see, for example, *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914–1919*, ed. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge, England, 1997). It will surely be influential in the study of the Global War of 1941–1945.

4. "To write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" – contrary to George Steiner's influential misreading, a rumination rather than a prohibition: "literature must resist this verdict." T. W. Adorno, "Commitment," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (New York, 1975), 312; George Steiner, "Silence and the Poet" [1966], in his *Language and Silence* (London, 1979), 75. In fact there is no dearth. See *Poetry of the Second World War*, ed. Desmond Graham (London, 1995), an exemplary international anthology of everyone from Anna Akhmatova to Zoltan Zelk.

5. Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York, 1989), 268, 296.

Fiction/Travel/History.⁶ “All this happened, more or less,” writes Kurt Vonnegut alarmingly at the beginning of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. “The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true.”⁷ What remains to be done, I suggest, is to try to comprehend the percipience of the pretty much, the magic of the more or less.

The work in question is a novel or novel sequence by a British author – a very British author – *Men at Arms* (1952), *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955), and *Unconditional Surrender* (1961),⁸ subsequently known as the *Sword of Honour* trilogy (strictly, a recension of the original three volumes), by Evelyn Waugh.⁹ Waugh was a seasoned anthropologist of the military cultures and subcultures he described. He was also an expert vivisectionist. His war was a serial demonstration of what the British dignified as the indirect approach and the Americans dismissed as periphery pecking.¹⁰ Overage, overweight, and overweening, Waugh was determined to do his duty. As an officer on intermittent active service in the Royal Marines and the Commandos, he took part in the expedition to Dakar in 1940, the raid on Bardia and the battle of Crete in 1941, and the military mission to the partisans in Yugoslavia in 1944–45, a cumulative experience at once rich and ignominious. “We grow backwards in wartime,” he mused glumly from his farmhouse hideout in 1944. “First it was public school life in the Marines, then prep. school at COHQ, now nursery – with picnics postponed for rain, everyone with his nose pressed to the window, time dragging, occasional treats of sweets – literally of sweets – when we get a sortie.”¹¹ He distilled this experience into a book of brilliant boldness: “unquestionably the finest novel to have come out of the war,” in the contemporary verdict of the grand panjandrum of critics, Cyril Connolly, and still a contender.¹²

Evelyn Waugh (1903–66) was a Roman Catholic romantic, an unabashed snob, a ferocious satirist, a comic moralist, and a pristine stylist. “Is he good, trying

6. See, for example, Alan Ross, *Winter Sea: War, Journeys, Writers* (London, 1997); and W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* (London, 1996). The hybrid has an interesting Second World War pedigree in Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* [1941] (Edinburgh, 1993); latterly revisited with some notoriety in Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts* (London, 1994). Cf. Brian Hall, “Rebecca West’s War,” *New Yorker*, 15 April 1996.

7. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York, 1968), 1.

8. In the United States, perhaps less contentiously but more prosaically, *The End of the Battle*.

9. A recension (Waugh’s word) is a critical revision of a text, in this case to shape the three books into one: see preface to first edition, *Sword of Honour* (London, 1964). Cf. David Wykes, “Evelyn Waugh’s *Sword of Volgograd*,” *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters* 7 (Spring 1977): 82–99.

10. See Alex Danchev, “Britain: The Indirect Strategy,” in *Allies at War: The Soviet, American, and British Experience, 1939–1945*, ed. David Reynolds, Warren F. Kimball, and A. O. Chubarian (New York, 1994), 1–26; and, on the proponent of the idea, “Liddell Hart and the Indirect Approach,” *Journal of Military History* 63 (April 1999): 313–38.

11. Waugh to Laura (his wife), 5 November 1944, in *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Mark Amory (London, 1995), 192. His wartime diary is in *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Michael Davie (London, 1995), 439–620. See also John St. John, *To the War with Waugh* (London, 1974).

12. Connolly review, *Sunday Times*, 29 October 1961, collected in *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Martin Stannard (London, 1984), 430. A magnanimous verdict, given that Connolly and his work are satirized mercilessly in the book.

to be wicked?" Chips Channon asked himself, "Or just wicked trying to be nice?"¹³ *Sword of Honour* is characteristically acerbic, tender, perspicuous, humane, unsettling. As V. S. Pritchett pointed out at the time, "it required a nerve to treat the war as a sordid social jamboree of smart and semi-smart sets, who are mainly engaged in self-inflation and in climbing up the ladder, to present it as a collection of bankrupt sideshows. But Mr. Waugh has more nerve than any English writer now living, and large portions of the last war were exactly as he describes them."¹⁴ The period expression is exactly right: Evelyn Waugh had a nerve. "They are saying, 'The generals learned their lesson in the last war. There are going to be no wholesale slaughters.' I ask, how is victory possible except by wholesale slaughters?"¹⁵ The slaughters are by no means absent from *Sword of Honour*—there is withering comment on public indifference to "those trains of locked vans still rolling East and West from Poland and the Baltic, that were to roll on year after year bearing their innocent loads to ghastly unknown destinations"—but they take place off the page. For Waugh's happy warriors, fiasco and folly are the order of the day. The play of chance and probability to which Clausewitz famously drew attention is added, anarchically, as if the recension had been done by the Marx Brothers.

Hazardous Offensive Operations Headquarters, that bizarre product of total war which later was to proliferate through five acres of valuable London property, engrossing the simple high staff officers of all the Services with experts, charlatans, plain lunatics and every unemployed member of the British Communist Party—HOO HQ, at this stage in its history, occupied three flats in a supposedly luxurious modern block.

Guy, reporting there, found a Major of about his own age, with the DSO, MC and slight stammer. The interview lasted a bare five minutes.

"Crouchback, Crouchback, Crouchback, Crouchback," he said, turning over a sheaf of papers on his table. "Sergeant, what do we know of Mr Crouchback?"

The Sergeant was female and matronly.

"Ritchie-Hook file," she said. "General Whale had it last."

"Go and get it, there's a good girl."

"I daren't."

"Well, it doesn't matter. I remember all about it now. You've been wished on us with your former Brigadier for 'special duties'. What are your 'special duties'?"

13. Channon diary, 16 December 1934, in *Chips: The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon*, ed. Robert Rhodes James (Harmondsworth, 1970), 28.

14. Pritchett review, *New Statesman*, 27 October 1961, in Stannard, ed., *Critical Heritage*, 425.

15. Waugh diary, All Saints [1 November] 1939, in Davie, ed., *Diaries*, 448–49.

"I don't know, sir."

"Nor does anyone. You've come whistling down from a very high level. Do you know all about Commandos?"

"Not much."

"You shouldn't know anything. They're supposed to be a secret, though from the security reports we've got from Mugg, they've made themselves pretty conspicuous there. I've had a letter from someone whose signature I can't read, complaining in strong terms that they've been shooting his deer with tommy-guns. Don't see how they get near enough. Remarkably fine stalking if true. Anyway that's where you're going – temporary attachment for training purposes X Commando, Isle of Mugg. All right?"

"Very good, sir."

"Sergeant Trenchard here will make out your travel warrant. Have you got a batman with you?"

"At the moment," said Guy, "I have a service car, a three-ton lorry, an RASC [Royal Army Service Corps] driver, a Halberdier servant and a full Colonel."

"Ah," said the Major, who was fast founding the HOO HQ tradition of being surprised at nothing. "You ought to be all right, then. Report to Colonel Blackhouse at Mugg."

"Tommy Blackhouse?"

"Friend of yours?"

"Yes. He married my wife."

"Did he? *Did* he? I thought he was a bachelor."

"He is, now."

"Yes, I thought so. I was at the Staff College with him. Good chap; got some good chaps in his Commando too. Glad he's a friend of yours."

Guy saluted, turned about and departed only slightly disconcerted. This was the classic pattern of army life as he had learned it, the vacuum, the spasm, the precipitation, and with it all the peculiar, impersonal, barely human geniality.¹⁶

And so it goes. The chaotic vies with the psychotic. *Sword of Honour* licensed the captivating lunacy of *Catch-22* (1961) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1968).¹⁷ The

16. *The Sword of Honour Trilogy* (London, 1994), 118, 272–73. All quotations from this edition (Everyman's Library, with an introduction by Frank Kermode). *Officers and Gentlemen* was originally called *Happy Warriors*.

17. *Catch-22* was published at almost exactly the same time as *Unconditional Surrender*, but it too was a long time in the making and Heller had been reading Waugh intensively for at least ten years. A version of Waugh's short story, "Compassion," which adumbrated several of the themes in *Sword of Honour*, and was later cannibalized for it, first appeared in *The Atlantic* in 1949; see Evelyn

Second World War was no longer sacrosanct. The bad Waugh threw the good war into confusion.

But Waugh's was a contradictory effrontery. If he anticipated Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, he also recalled Rudyard Kipling, in his essential sympathy with the soldier.¹⁸ *Men at Arms*, the first volume of the trilogy, paints a remarkably sympathetic picture of the regimental family that is the Royal Corps of Halberdiers, first raised by the Earl of Essex for service in the Low Countries in the reign of Queen Elizabeth; earning the sobriquet of "The Applejacks" because after the Battle of Malplaquet a detachment of the Corps under Halberdier Sergeant Major Breen were bivouacked in an orchard when they were surprised by a party of French marauders whom they drove away by pelting them with apples. . . . Waugh's treatment of what John Keegan has called regimental ideology is a miniature masterpiece of social history.

The normal relationship in the Halberdiers between platoon commander and sergeant was that of child and nannie. The sergeant should keep his officer out of mischief. The officer's job was to sign things, to take the blame and quite simply to walk ahead and get shot first. And, as an officer, he should have a certain intangibility belonging, as in old-fashioned households, to the further side of the baize doors. All this was disordered in the relationship of Guy and Sergeant Soames. Soames revered officers in a more modern way, as men who had been sharp and got ahead; moreover he distinguished between regulars and temporaries. He regarded Guy as a nannie might some child, not of "the family", but of inferior and suspicious origin, suddenly, by a whim of the mistress of the house, dumped, as a guest of indefinite duration, in her nursery.¹⁹

Waugh's books are, among other things, very funny.²⁰ *Sword of Honour* is no exception. The names and characterizations are a delight. Guy Crouchback is the soft-shelled hero. His hard-faced brother-in-law is Arthur Box-Bender. An intelligence officer prone to absurd conspiracy theories is revealed as Grace-Groundling-Marchpole ("each junction of which represented a provident marriage in the age of landed property"), his names suggestively subversive of his notions. There is a comfortless night porter called Job. There is Major

Waugh, *The Complete Short Stories*, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater (London, 1998), 419–40. Heller's other prime source of inspiration is said to be Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London, 1988), originally published as *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (Paris, 1932).

18. Kipling's pervasive cultural presence is an interesting phenomenon in itself. It is not often remarked that the former U.S. Marine Eugene B. Sledge's harrowing memoir, *With the Old Breed, at Peleliu and Okinawa* (1981), purveyed by Fussell as a revelation of senseless savagery, has an epigraph from Kipling, circa 1915, and, in spite of all, an almost Kiplingesque conclusion. Cf. Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York, 1997), 160–64, 173–74.

19. Waugh, *Sword of Honour*, 44, 162–63. Cf. John Keegan, "Regimental Ideology," in *War, Economy and the Military Mind*, ed. Geoffrey Best and Andrew Wheatcroft (London, 1976), 3–18.

20. The sheer joyousness of this fun, and its high seriousness, is acutely analyzed in David Lodge, "Waugh's Comic Waste Land," *New York Review of Books*, 15 July 1999.

Hound – “Fido” to his friends – and Major Cattermole, “tall, stooping, emaciated, totally unsoldierly, a Zurbarán ascetic with a joyous smile,” previously J. Cattermole of All Souls, author of *An Examination of Certain Redundancies in Empirical Concepts*. Above all, there is Brigadier Ben Ritchie-Hook, “the great Halberdier *enfant terrible* of the First World War; the youngest company commander in the history of the Corps; the slowest to be promoted; often wounded, often decorated, recommended for the Victoria Cross, twice court martialled for disobedience to orders in the field, twice acquitted in recognition of the brilliant success of his independent actions; a legendary wielder of the entrenching tool; where lesser men collected helmets Ritchie-Hook once came back from a raid across no-man’s-land with the dripping head of a German sentry in either hand.”²¹

Inspired principally by Brigadier St. Clair Morford – “who looks like something escaped from Sing-Sing and talks like a boy in the Fourth Form at school: teeth like a stoat, ears like a faun, eyes alight like a child playing pirates” – with a dash of Carton de Wiart and Walter Cowan, the maniacal Ritchie-Hook is a wonderful black comic creation, decapitating all and sundry, cavorting madly on the live-firing range, or – a scene surreally worthy of *Catch-22* or *M.A.S.H.* – calling bingo in the officers’ mess.²² His philosophy of war finds its ultimate expression in the Brigade Training Programme: “The Training Programme followed no textbook. Tactics as interpreted by Brigadier Ritchie-Hook consisted of the art of biffing. Defence was studied cursorily and only as the period of reorganization between two bloody assaults. The Attack and the Element of Surprise were all. Long raw misty days were passed in the surrounding country with maps and binoculars. Sometimes they stood on the beach and biffed imaginary defenders into the hills; sometimes they biffed imaginary invaders from the hills into the sea. They invested downland hamlets and savagely biffed imaginary hostile inhabitants. Sometimes they merely collided with imaginary rivals for the use of the main road and biffed them out of the way.”²³

It is surely not completely fanciful to discern some affinity between Ritchie-Hook and Winston Churchill. Churchill’s characteristic itch to *do something*, to make the enemy bleed and burn, as he said, everywhere and all the time, was very Ritchie-Hook. Temperamentally, Churchill was a plunger, as General Marshall put it in an unguarded moment.²⁴ Rhetorically, too, Ritchie-Hook’s biffing was uncannily reminiscent of Churchill’s fighting, in their finest hour. “We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight

21. Waugh, *Sword of Honour*, 151, 633, 637, 60–61.

22. Waugh diary, 18 January 1940, in Davie, ed., *Diaries*, 461; Waugh, *Sword of Honour*, 130–31, 132.

23. Waugh, *Sword of Honour*, 131–32.

24. Pogue notes, 28 September 1956, in *George C. Marshall: Interviews and Reminiscences for Forrest C. Pogue*, ed. Larry I. Bland (Lexington, VA, 1991), 580.

on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”²⁵

The family resemblance was no doubt deliberate. *Sword of Honour* is peppered with Churchillian appropriations and misappropriations, half-concealed and for the most part deflationary. Thanks to the radio, the prime minister’s individual parole leached into the language and consciousness of his people. In another celebrated wartime novel sequence, by Anthony Powell, the narrator overhears a staff officer at Divisional Headquarters giving dictation: “The voice, like so many other dictating or admonitory voices of even that early period of the war, had assumed the timbre and inflexions of the Churchill broadcast, slurred consonants, rhythmical stresses and prolations. These accents, in certain circumstances, were to be found imitated as low as battalion level. . . . If we won the war, there could be no doubt that these rich, distinctive tones would be echoed for a generation at least.”²⁶

Waugh’s reflections on the broadcasts and the broadcaster were more piercing. They point explicitly to another consonance with Kipling – a prophetic engagement with “decline and fall” (the title of his first novel, published in 1928). Waugh was a declinist *avant la lettre*. *Sword of Honour* might be construed as his *Recessional*: “Far-called, our navies melt away; On dune and headland sinks the fire.”

On the day that Mr Churchill became Prime Minister, Apthorpe was promoted Captain. . . .

There was less interest in the change of Prime Ministers. Politics were considered an unsoldierly topic among the Halberdiers. There had been some rejoicing and dispute at Mr Hore-Belisha’s fall in the winter. Since then Guy had not heard a politician’s name mentioned. Some of Mr Churchill’s broadcasts had been played on the mess wireless-set. Guy had found them painfully boastful and they had, most of them, been immediately followed by the news of some disaster, as though in retribution from the God of Kipling’s *Recessional*.

Guy knew of Mr Churchill only as a professional politician, a master of sham-Augustan prose, a Zionist, an advocate of the Popular Front in Europe, an associate of the press lords and of Lloyd George. He was asked:

“Uncle, what sort of fellow is this Winston Churchill?”

25. Speech to House of Commons, 4 June 1940, quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 6, *Finest Hour, 1939–1941* (London, 1983), 468. On the affinity between Churchill and Ritchie-Hook in the realm of grand strategy see Alex Danchev, “Biffing: The Saga of the Second Front,” in idem, *On Specialness: Essays in Anglo-American Relations* (London, 1998), 29–45.

26. Anthony Powell, *The Valley of Bones* (London, 1964), 250, the seventh of the twelve-volume *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951–75). The other wartime volumes are *The Soldier’s Art* (1966) and *The Military Philosophers* (1968).

“Like Hore-Belisha except that for some reason his hats are thought to be funny.”

“Well, I suppose they had to make someone carry the can after the balls-up in Norway.”

“Yes.”

“He can’t be much worse than the other fellow?”

“Better, if anything.”

Here Major Erskine leant across the table.

“Churchill is about the only man who may save us from losing this war,” he said.

It was the first time that Guy had heard a Halberdier suggest that any result, other than complete victory, was possible. They had had a lecture, it is true, from an officer lately returned from Norway, who had spoken frankly about the incompetent loading of ships, the disconcerting effect of dive-bombing, the activities of organized traitors and such matters. He had even hinted at the inferior fighting qualities of British troops. But he had made little impression. Halberdiers always assumed that “the Staff” and “the Q [Quartermaster] side” were useless, that all other regiments were scarcely worthy of the name of soldier, that foreigners let one down. Naturally things were going badly in the absence of the Halberdiers. No one thought of losing the war.²⁷

In his own inimitable fashion this was a balanced assessment. Churchill’s death in 1965 occasioned something more vitriolic. “For the past fortnight my drive has been worn into pot-holes by telegraph boys bearing extravagant offers from newspapers to describe Sir Winston’s obsequies. I have of course refused. He is not a man for whom I ever had esteem. Always in the wrong, always surrounded by crooks, a most unsuccessful father – simply a ‘Radio Personality’ who outlived his prime. ‘Rallied the nation’ indeed! I was a serving soldier in 1940. How we despised his orations.”²⁸ Not everyone subscribed to the magic, mythic genius of “Mr Churchill in 1940,” an image cultivated by Churchill himself and sedulously propagated by tame eulogists such as Isaiah Berlin: “The Prime Minister was able to impose his will on his countrymen, and enjoy a Periclean reign, precisely because he appeared to them larger and nobler than

27. Rudyard Kipling, “Recessional” [1897], in *Kipling’s Verse*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London, 1963), 140; Waugh, *Sword of Honour*, 165–67. The same poem gives color to an unforgetting portrait of Churchill in James Gould Cozzens’s novel *Guard of Honor* (New York, 1948), 394.

28. Waugh to Ann Fleming, 27 January 1965, in Amory, ed., *Letters*, 630. Waugh had the misfortune to serve with Churchill’s son Randolph in Yugoslavia. “Randolph dined with the Lampsons the other evening & Lampson sent a pompous & jaggering cable to Winston ‘Your son is at my house. He has the light of battle in his eye.’ Unhappily the cypher group got it wrong & it arrived ‘light of BOTTLE’. All too true.” Waugh to Laura, 2 June 1941, *ibid.*, 153.

life and lifted them to an abnormal height in a moment of crisis.”²⁹ J. F. C. Fuller and B. H. Liddell Hart, to name but two of the sharpest military minds of the age, were in exact accord with Waugh. For Fuller, Pericles was the greatest mountebank since Nero. “Like Nero he is an expert in turning somersaults in the arena; in short a highly popular clown, who in the press has been transformed into a supreme artist. Nero, however, had the better of him in that he committed suicide when comparatively young: that, at least, was a decent act.” Liddell Hart recorded simply, “Churchill is an upas tree – everything beneath him dies.”³⁰

It would be interesting to know how many others felt the same – if the encrusted blood, toil, tears, and sweat allowed them to say. The year 1940 is the high-water mark of the home front, and the defining moment of British national identity, still. Churchill is its totem. He is worshipped, idolatrously, or invoked, apostrophically, in two manifestations: as talker of the big talk, that is to say as moralizer and chauvinist-in-chief (“some chicken!”),³¹ and as fighter of the good fight or, in more prejudicial language, biffer of the good biff. He met his moment; but he lived a long time between the echo and the dream of battles. Like Vigny, he suffered from the disease of military ardor.³² It is that depravity – together with his caddishness – that less happy warriors (or the more discriminating) found so difficult to stomach.

Waugh for his part was not at all unhappy at the outset. *Sword of Honour* opens with this famous declaration: “The enemy at last was plain in view, huge and hateful, all disguise cast off. It was the Modern Age in arms. Whatever the outcome there was a place for him in that battle.” Once ensconced in the Halberdiers, Guy examines Army Training Memorandum No. 31 (April 1940), a catechism of 143 questions on the war, of which the first and fundamental is *what are we fighting for?* He answers for himself. “England had declared war to defend the independence of Poland. Now that country had quite disappeared and the two strongest states in the world guaranteed her extinction. Now General Paget was at Lillehammer and it was announced that all was going well. Guy knew things were going badly. They had no well-informed friends, here in Penkirk, they had access to no intelligence files, but the smell of failure had

29. Isaiah Berlin, “Winston Churchill in 1940,” in *Personal Impressions* (Oxford, 1982), 15–16, originally a review essay of the second volume of Churchill’s war memoirs, *Their Finest Hour* (1949), in *The Atlantic* (1949); reissued in book form as *Mr Churchill in 1940* (London, 1964).

30. Fuller to Liddell Hart, 7 June 1949, quoted in Danchev, *On Specialness*, 154; Liddell Hart jotting (1951), quoted in Alex Danchev, *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart* (London, 1998), 102. The upas is a fabulous Javanese tree that poisons everything for miles around. See also Liddell Hart, “The Military Strategist,” in *Churchill: Four Faces and the Man* (Harmondsworth, 1969), 153–202.

31. “When I warned them [the French government] that Britain would fight on alone whatever they did, their generals told their Prime Minister and his divided Cabinet, ‘In three weeks England will have her neck wrung like a chicken. Some chicken! Some neck!’” Speech to Canadian Parliament, 30 December 1941, quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 7, *Road to Victory, 1941–1945* (London, 1986), 34.

32. See Alfred de Vigny, *Servitude and Grandeur of Arms* [1835], trans. Roger Gard (London, 1996), 5, 45.

been borne to them from Norway on the east wind.” Nevertheless he is optimistic. “He was a good loser, but he did not believe his country would lose this war; each apparent defeat seemed strangely to sustain it. There was in romance great virtue in unequal odds. There were in morals two requisites for a lawful war, a just cause and the chance of victory. The cause was now, past all question, just. The enemy was exorbitant. His actions in Austria and Bohemia had been defensible. There was even a shadow of plausibility in his quarrel with Poland. But now, however victorious, he was an outlaw. And the more victorious he was the more he drew to himself the enmity of the world and the punishment of God.”³³

In the beginning, in other words, it was a crusade.³⁴ By late 1941, however, it had all turned sour. “The hallucination was dissolved, like the whales and turtles on the voyage from Crete, and he was back after less than two years’ pilgrimage in a Holy Land of illusion in the old ambiguous world, where priests were spies and gallant friends proved traitors and his country was led blundering into dishonour.”³⁵ What went wrong?

First of all, Waugh himself was involved in one military disaster after another, starting with the abortive expedition to Dakar in September 1940 and ending with the scrambled evacuation from Crete in May 1941 (“never in the history of human endeavour have so few been buggered about by so many,” someone scrawled on one of the troopships).³⁶ Waugh returned from Dakar with head unbloody but bowed, as he put it, but still willing. “During the time when we expected to be sent into an operation which could only be disastrous, I realised how much you have changed me,” he wrote to his wife, “because I could no longer look at death with indifference. I wanted to live & was pleased when we ran away. This is a bad state of affairs for a marine, but I believe most of the marines felt the same. Perhaps that is a bad thing for the country. I don’t know. I know that one goes into a war for reasons of honour & soon finds oneself called on to do very dishonourable things. I do not like the R. M. [Royal Marine] Brigades part in this war and I do not like the war, but I want to be back in Europe fighting Germans.”³⁷

Crete affected him more profoundly, even traumatically. He was a member of the Commando force deployed, late in a losing battle, to stiffen the British garrison and organize the retreat. The force was commanded by Colonel Robert Laycock, “that every man in arms should wish to be,” to whom *Officers and Gentlemen* is profusely dedicated and preemptively disclaimed. “He will

33. Waugh, *Sword of Honour*, 10, 164–65.

34. The theme of B. W. Wilson, “*Sword of Honour: The Last Crusade*,” *English* 23 (Autumn 1974): 87–93.

35. Waugh, *Sword of Honour*, 485 (a reprise of 468), the terms of the lament heavily redolent of the Cold War (or Cold Waugh).

36. Waugh, “Memorandum on LAYFORCE,” in Davie, ed., *Diaries*, 495.

37. Waugh to Laura and to Henry Yorke, 28 September and 13 November 1940, in Amory, ed., *Letters*, 141, 145. Waugh’s battalion did not land; they did not run away.

recognize this story as pure fiction: that is to say of experience totally transformed. No real character is portrayed; various offices and appointments are mentioned without reference to any person who at any time held them. No unit, formation, command, organization, ship or club, no incident, civil or military, is identifiable with the realities of those exhilarating days when he led and I lamely followed." There lamely follows a finely wrought and thinly fictionalized account of the ensuing debacle as Waugh witnessed it, in his guise as Laycock's intelligence officer. Battle, as such, was not Waugh's primary concern – "the thing about battle is that it is no different at all from manoeuvres with Col. Lushington on Bagshot Heath: just as confused and purposeless" – but his rendition of the final stages of the Battle of Crete is as convincing an account of grace and disgrace under pressure as any in the literature of this gargantuan war. "Other books about the war have gone straight for the conventional – the battle," noted V. S. Pritchett. "[Waugh], too, can negligently turn out a battle, but his interest is, fundamentally, the moralist's. His eye is trained on the flat detail of human folly, vanity and hypocrisy; and although he can rightly be called a wounded Romantic, he is a most patient and accurate observer."³⁸

Waugh was deeply wounded. Personally and professionally, he seems to have acquitted himself creditably, in fact with conspicuous bravery, throughout the operation; but his flukish escape, and the rout that preceded it, left him in a stew of alienation, disillusionment, and, it has been plausibly suggested, self-loathing.³⁹ Waugh considered that all he held dear had been disgraced – his comrades; his country; not least, his class. "The English are a very base people," he wrote to Diana Cooper some months later. "I did not know this, living as I did. Now I know them through and through and they disgust me."⁴⁰

Political disgrace swiftly followed. For Waugh, acceptance of the Soviet Union as an ally was insupportable (treacherous Godless Communists). "As Guy, in the late autumn of 1941, rejoins his regiment he believes that the just cause of going to war has been forfeited in the Russian alliance. Personal honour alone remains." The cause was not redeemed by the arrival of the Americans to organize "the final dismemberment of Christendom." Their representative in *Sword of Honour* is Lieutenant Padfield, "the Loot," a sinisterly ubiquitous and morally dubious figure at once predatory and parasitic, who finds his niche as factotum to the loathsome Major Ludovic, an arriviste aesthete with blood on his hands from Crete and money in his pocket from a phenomenally successful first novel, *The Death Wish*.

38. Waugh to Laura, 2 June 1941, in Amory, ed., *Letters*, 153; Pritchett review, in Stannard, ed., *Critical Heritage*, 425. See also Waugh's contemporary "Memorandum on LAYFORCE," in Davie, ed., *Diaries*, 489–517.

39. See Antony Beevor, *Crete: The Battle and the Resistance* (London, 1991), 194–95, 222–23; Angus Calder, "Mr Wu and the Colonials: the British Empire's Evacuation from Crete, 1941," in *Time to Kill*, ed. Paul Addison and Angus Calder (London, 1997), 129–46.

40. Quoted in Beevor, *Crete*, 222.

Everyone knew Lieutenant Padfield; even Guy who knew so few people. He was a portent of the Grand Alliance. London was full of American soldiers, tall, slouching, friendly, woefully homesick young men who seemed always in search of somewhere to sit down. In the summer they had filled the parks and sat on the pavements round the once august mansions which had been assigned to them. For their comfort there swarmed out of the slums and across the bridges multitudes of drab, ill-favoured adolescent girls and their aunts and mothers, never before seen in the squares of Mayfair and Belgravia. These they passionately and publicly embraced, in the blackout and at high noon, and rewarded with chewing gum, razor blades, and other rare trade-goods from their PX stores. Lieutenant Padfield was a horse of a different colour; not precisely, for his face, too, was the colour of putty; he too slouched; he, too, was a sedentary by habit. But he was not all homesick; when not in a chair he must have been in rapid motion, for he was ubiquitous. He was twenty-five years old and in England for the first time. He had been one in the advanced party of the American army and there was no corner of the still intricate social world where he was not familiar.⁴¹

Waugh was not a man for the strange semaphore of the special relationship.⁴²

His subject was Vigny's: the servitude and grandeur of arms, and the splintering of that social world. For Waugh, as for Vigny, there remained honor – "active decency" in Vigny's formulation, "compassion" in Waugh's – amid the universal shipwreck of beliefs.⁴³ The moral aphorism at the heart of the *Sword of Honour* trilogy is the remonstrance offered by Crouchback père to his disillusioned son: "Quantitative judgements don't apply." The remonstrance is theologically derived (fierce in all his beliefs, Waugh was a fierce Catholic), but politically and personally applied. The first surrender in *Unconditional Surrender* is that of Italy. "What a mistake the Lateran Treaty was," Guy exclaims to his father when he hears the news. "How much better it would have been if the Popes had sat it out and then emerged saying: 'What was all that? Risorgimento? Garibaldi? Cavour? The House of Savoy? Mussolini? Just some hooligans from out of town causing a disturbance. . . .' That's what the Pope ought to be saying today." Old Mr. Crouchback scolds him for talking nonsense, and afterward writes him an exegetical letter. "The Mystical Body doesn't strike attitudes or stand on its dignity. It accepts suffering and injustice. It is ready to forgive at the first hint of compunction. When you spoke of the Lateran Treaty did you consider how many souls may have been reconciled and have died at

41. Waugh, *Sword of Honour*, 485, 498, 709. "The Loot" was based on "The Sergeant," Stuart Preston, an American art historian "much lionized in London towards the end of the war." Harold Acton, *Nancy Mitford* (London, 1975), 82–83. Ludovic was a fictional creation, originally called Connolly – cruel and unusual punishment even by Waugh's standards, as Wykes says – for Cyril Connolly already appears in the novel as the repellent Everard Spruce. "Waugh's Sword," 91.

42. See Waugh, *The Loved One: An Anglo-American Tragedy* (London, 1948). Cf. Danchev, "On Friendship: Anglo-America at the Fin de Siecle," in idem, *On Specialness*, 153–65.

43. Vigny, *Servitude and Grandeur*, esp. 159–64; Waugh, "Compassion."

peace as a result of it? How many children may have been brought up in the faith who might have lived in ignorance. *Quantitative judgements don't apply*. If only one soul was saved that is full compensation for any amount of loss of 'face.'"44

This aphorism is recalled again and again in the narrative that follows. It acquires a gathering moral force for Guy himself; in a neat juxtaposition it is expressly if enigmatically linked to the machinations of great power politics. "Guy brooded about the antithesis between the acceptance of sacrifice and the will to win. It seemed to have personal relevance, as yet undefined, to his own condition. He re-read the letter from his father which he carried always in his pocket-book. '*The Mystical Body doesn't strike attitudes or stand on its dignity. It accepts suffering and injustice. . . . Quantitative judgements don't apply.*' There was a congress at Teheran at the time [1943] entirely occupied with quantitative judgements."⁴⁵ In due course Guy finds himself part of the British Mission to the Anti-Fascist Forces of National Liberation (Adriatic). The dénouement of the work takes place in proto-Tito Yugoslavia. Given the context, and the nudge, it may be that the aphorism can be read as an anathema on the callous quantification of the so-called percentages agreement, that naughty document, parceling out a prostrate Europe; and, by extension, on the crushing arithmetic of realpolitik. How many divisions has the Pope – the measure of Stalin's scorn – was a poignant question for Guy Crouchback and his author.

Among the displeased partisans and displaced persons in the small compass of his jurisdiction, Guy is moved to intervene on behalf of a group of Jewish refugees. His kindness toward one couple in particular, the Kanyis, leads directly to their arraignment before a People's Court. ("You may be sure justice was done.") Before they part, Guy has a momentous exchange with Madame Kanyi. She asks him this:

Is there any place that is free from evil? It is too simple to say that only the Nazis wanted war. These communists wanted it too. It was the only way in which they could come to power. Many of my people wanted it, to be revenged on the Germans, to hasten the creation of the national state. It seems to me there was a will to war, a death wish, everywhere. Even good men thought their private honour would be satisfied by war. They could assert their manhood by killing and being killed. They would accept hardships in recompense for having been selfish and lazy. Danger justified privilege. I knew Italians – not very many perhaps – who felt this. Were there none in England?

44. Waugh, *Sword of Honour*, 488–91 (my emphasis). After a long series of political accommodations, the Lateran Treaty (1929) established Vatican City as an independent state.

45. *Ibid.*, 600 (his emphasis). There follows a sly joke about summitry and the Big Three: "At the end of the first week of that December [1943], History records, Mr. Winston Churchill introduced Mr. Roosevelt to the Sphinx. Fortified by the assurances of their military advisers that the Germans would surrender that winter, the two puissant old gentlemen circumambulated the colossus and silently watched the shadows of evening obliterate its famous features."

“God forgive me,” answers Guy. “I was one of them.”⁴⁶

“In my utopia,” Richard Rorty has written, “human solidarity would be seen not as a fact to be recognized by clearing away ‘prejudice’ or burrowing down to previously hidden depths but, rather, as a goal to be achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers.”

This process of coming to see other human beings as “one of us” rather than as “them” is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel. Fiction like that of Dickens, Olive Schreiner, or Richard Wright gives us the details about kinds of suffering being by people to whom we had not previously attended. Fiction like that of Choderlos de Laclos, Henry James, or Nabokov gives us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves.⁴⁷

Philosophically contentious though it may be, Rorty’s “redescription” seems to me at once the most compelling and far-reaching recent articulation of what might be called the moral benefits of the artistic imagination – here, in shorthand, poetry – “to make the best selves for ourselves that we can.”⁴⁸ Martha Nussbaum proposes something very similar, and appeals to some of the same magi, in the credo that introduces her luminous readings in philosophy and literature. “In pursuit of human self-understanding and of a society in which humanity can realize itself more fully . . . the imagination and the terms of the literary artist are indispensable guides: as [Henry] James suggests, angels of and in the fallen world, alert in perception and sympathy, lucidly bewildered, surprised by the intelligence of love.”⁴⁹

These are philosophers’ answers to the intransigent question of why exactly we should pay attention to fiction. Given “the long-standing quarrel between poetry and philosophy,” it is perhaps to be expected that some of the profoundest responses come from that quarter.⁵⁰ The philosopher-novelist Iris Murdoch (a gamekeeper turned poacher) observed that “good art is . . . anamnesis,

46. Ibid., 702, 705.

47. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, England, 1989), xvi.

48. Ibid., 80. For a variety of interpretations see *Literature and the Political Imagination*, ed. John Horton and Andrea T. Baumeister (London, 1996).

49. Martha Nussbaum, “Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature,” in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York, 1990), 53. Nussbaum is referring to the preface to *The Golden Bowl*. James writes there of “revision,” the reimagining of the language and form of the text, a notion and an activity that might well have appealed to Rorty.

50. Though the Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney has returned a similar answer from the other side: “The imaginative transformation of human life is the means by which we can most truly grasp and comprehend it.” *The Redress of Poetry* (London, 1995), xv. The “long-standing quarrel” is from Plato’s *Republic*.

'memory' of what we did not know we knew.⁵¹ In terms of the Second World War, Paul Celan's amazing "Todesfuge" ("Death Fugue"), the hypnotic poem written immediately after Auschwitz, is a conscious enactment of precisely that function.⁵² At the other end of the telescope, Claude Lanzmann's epic "Shoah" is another – to take seriously the idea of a "*bricolage*" of cultural forms, as advocated by Rorty, and adumbrated with great prescience a generation earlier by George Steiner.⁵³

In Aristotelian terms, one might say that poetry thickens history. Imaginatively "thick history," by analogy with ethically "thick concepts," bravely acknowledges the frailties of the fact, on the one hand, and judiciously embraces the possibilities of the fancy, on the other.⁵⁴ This is not so much a matter of poetic license as of poetic faith. Embracing imaginative literature is in every sense an act of faith: a willing suspension of disbelief, as Coleridge suggested, and also "an act of interpretive credence," in George Barker's words, a welcoming assent.⁵⁵ But it is more than that. It is a grave necessity. History is filigree, and full of holes. Historical reconstruction is provisional, speculative, contingent.

Truth-loving Persians do not dwell upon

The trivial skirmish fought near Marathon.⁵⁶

The historian's truth is not enough. Facts are fugitive, and much punished. The literal has its limits. Antony Beevor's garlanded *Stalingrad* (1998), an object lesson in thick history, opens with the challenging assertion of the poet Tyuchev that "Russia cannot be understood with the mind."⁵⁷ The implacable Tyuchev was surely right (and the Russians an interesting case of a people claiming poetry, as well as history, for themselves). Beevor's account of that classic siege-offensive is deftly thickened with the work of the Russian novelist Vasily Grossman (1905–64): not only his monumental *Life and Fate* (1980), a kind of *Second World War and Peace*, prohibited in his lifetime, but also his eye-witness

51. "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (London, 1997), 12.

52. Paul Celan, *Selected Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London, 1990), 60–63.

53. George Steiner, "Literature and Post-History" [1965], in *Language and Silence*, 342. *Bricolage*, meaning the eclectic and ever-changing composition of cultural forms, is from Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Paris, 1955).

54. For an attempt to practice what is preached here see my "thick biography" of Liddell Hart, *Alchemist of War*, 58–68. On thick concepts see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London, 1985).

55. Coleridge and Barker quoted in K. K. Ruthven, *Critical Assumptions* (Cambridge, England, 1979), 178–79, from which I have borrowed here.

56. Robert Graves, "The Persian Version," in *Poems Selected by Himself* (Harmondsworth, 1957), 162.

57. Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad* (London, 1998), xiii. A similar point is registered in Richard Overy, *Russia's War* (London, 1998), xvi–xix.

notes and papers.⁵⁸ What Grossman gives to Stalingrad (and hence to *Stalingrad*) is something very like “a new vocabulary of experience,” in Iris Murdoch’s phrase; that is to say, redescription made real – made unforgettable.⁵⁹

Monsieur and comrade,

The soldier is poor without the poet’s lines,
His petty syllabi, the sounds that stick,
Inevitably modulating, in the blood.
And war for war, each has its gallant kind.
How simply the fictive hero becomes the real;
How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.⁶⁰

58. Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, trans. Robert Chandler (London, 1985). Completed in 1960 and smuggled out of the Soviet Union in microfilm by the dissident writer Vladimir Voinovich, the novel was eventually published in Switzerland in 1980 and in the Soviet Union in 1988. Strictly speaking, Grossman was Ukrainian.

59. Iris Murdoch, “Against Dryness,” in Conradi, ed., *Existentialists and Mystics*, 295.

60. From Wallace Stevens, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” in *Collected Poems* (London, 1984), 407–8.