

---

# An Unconditional Surrender: Evelyn Waugh on *Acedia*

BY HEATHER HUGHES

**Evelyn Waugh's *The Sword of Honour Trilogy* is an engaging modern narrative of *acedia*. This saga of sloth-filled English officer Guy Crouchback is enlightening—not only for its disturbing depiction of the damage this vice causes, but also for its potential remedy in virtue.**

---

Speaking abstractly about the vices is always difficult because they manifest in subtle ways particular to the individual. Early Christian writers often told stories to elucidate their meaning and significance, and I think stories are especially helpful when confronting the deceptively interior sin of *acedia*—a deep sadness and willful rejection of spiritual good that can be expressed through lazy inertia or busy distraction.

Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966) provides an engaging narrative of the causes, consequences, and remedies of *acedia* in his *Sword of Honour Trilogy: Men at Arms* (1952), *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955), and *Unconditional Surrender* (1961).<sup>1</sup> Waugh wrote about the deadly sin of *acedia* on several occasions and commended other works of modern and contemporary fiction as illuminatingly representative of the vice, but his *Sword of Honour Trilogy*, tracking the experiences of the sloth-afflicted Englishman Guy Crouchback through the course of the Second World War, is particularly enlightening—not only for its disturbing depiction of the damage that the vice can cause in people's lives, but also for its potential remedy in virtue.

By 1939, in his own words, Guy Crouchback is not an “interesting case.” Thirty-five years old, the only surviving son of an old, aristocratic family now much diminished, he is divorced after marrying young and imprudently before a financial crisis that has left him destitute. He faces a lonely future

with an unfulfilled promise of family life. As a Catholic, he can never remarry while his nonreligious ex-wife Virginia flits from husband to husband, enjoying wealth and popularity. After selling the African farm where he lived with Virginia and moving alone to his family's villa in Italy, he took up occasional, consistently unsuccessful projects that came his way, but basically "time... stood still for him" for eight years (p. 17). Guy may be afflicted with particularly bad luck, but his reaction to misfortune involves more than situational depression. Indeed, with wry, British understatement Waugh portrays Guy's stunted life at the opening of the trilogy as a horror resulting from the inactive, 'lazy' form of *acedia*.

Disappointed in the expectations and hopes of his youth, Guy does not rage or rebel or seek sexual revenge against Virginia; he does something worse. He retreats not just from his former married life, but from life itself—from sacrificial communion with God, the Church, his community, friends, and family—into a powerfully isolating apathy.

...Guy had no wish to persuade or convince or to share his opinions with anyone. Even in his religion he felt no brotherhood.... Lately he had fallen into a habit of dry and negative chastity which even the priests felt to be unedifying. On the lowest, as on the highest plane, there was no sympathy between him and his fellow men. (p. 14)

He maintains his intellectual assent to Christian truth—"a few dry grains of faith" (p. 30)—but performs his religious duties with nothing but a desiccated integrity. His faith brings him no joy and he seeks none. Even Guy's chastity is suspect, since it is merely an absence of sex due to apathy rather than a decisive embodiment of his sexual identity as a married man separated from his wife. Because Christian morality is not a mere checklist of *thou shalt not's* but a positive love for God expressed through virtues that exhibit our true identities which God has authored, Guy does not have to violate clear moral constraints in order to sinfully fail in virtue and work against his own good.

In an essay on sloth, or *acedia*, Waugh calls attention to Thomas Aquinas's definition of this vice: *tristitia de bono spirituali*, sadness in the face of spiritual good. Waugh explains:

Man is made for joy in the love of God, a love which he expresses in service. If he deliberately turns away from that joy, he is denying the purpose of his existence. The malice of Sloth lies not merely in the neglect of duty (though that that can be a symptom of it) but in the refusal of joy. It is allied to despair.<sup>2</sup>

Here is why *acedia* is so difficult to identify: this vice does not attempt to replace our human *telos*, which is to love and serve God, with some secondary good like sex, possessions, or food. It does not inordinately prefer a particular good at all; rather, it says "no" to a difficult and demanding good. In Waugh's words, *acedia* "is the condition in which a man is fully aware of the proper

means of his salvation and refuses to take them because the whole apparatus of salvation fills him with tedium and disgust.”<sup>3</sup> The vice might manifest either in lethargically refusing to do what “the whole apparatus of salvation” requires of us, or in seeking distraction from the parts that happen to be irksome. Any distraction will do, even something good: the fourth-century desert Christians told stories about slothful monks who did works of mercy in order to distract themselves from some greater good of prayer or service which they had come to abhor. *Acedia*, therefore, cannot be diagnosed by what we happen to be seeking (either good or bad), but by what we are avoiding, and why.

In the thrall of *acedia*, Guy Crouchback can almost seem to fulfill the requirements of a healthy Christian spirituality – participating in the sacraments, respecting his neighbors. But even in the execution of his religious duties there is the subtle perversion of the vice:

Guy found it easy to confess in Italian. He spoke the language well but without nuances. There was no risk of going deeper than the denunciation of his few infractions of law, of his habitual weaknesses. Into that wasteland where his soul languished he need not, could not, enter. He had no words to describe it. There were no words in any language. There was nothing to describe, merely a void. His was not an ‘interesting case,’ he thought. No cosmic struggle raged in his stroke of paralysis; all his spiritual faculties were just perceptibly impaired. He was ‘handicapped’ .... There was nothing to say about it. (p. 12)

Guy may appear to be doing what he is supposed to do, but his distorted gestures towards effort actually prevent true healing. He is like a child who merely pretends to wash her hands before dinner or brush her teeth before bedtime – going through the motions, but stopping short of her mother’s instructions (in order to maintain a degenerate form of autonomy), and thereby compromising her own health and well-being in the process.

*Acedia* blinds Guy to the intensity, significance, and joy in life. What begins as instinctual recoil from the pain of his disappointment and divorce becomes a deep-rooted habit of isolation and rejection of his soul’s true fulfillment. He can acknowledge the practice of confession as a good and necessary “apparatus of salvation,” but when he participates in the sacrament he “need not, could not” engage in what it requires of him – that he recognize and give over to God that “wasteland where his soul languished” and that he seek joy in God’s forgiveness. Guy becomes so stunted by *acedia* that the state of his soul no longer alarms him, or even interests him very much. But a “cosmic struggle” is exactly what is happening in his uninteresting “stroke of paralysis” – a true matter of life or death in his fight with deadly sin.

Guy could be stuck in his vicious stasis forever, but he is shaken by the developments of the Second World War. One day he “opened his morning newspaper on the headlines announcing the Russian-German alliance. News that shook the politicians and young poets of a dozen capital cities

brought deep peace to one English heart. Eight years of shame and loneliness were ended." Guy had "...expected his country to go to war in a panic, for the wrong reasons or for no reason at all, with the wrong allies, in pitiful weakness. But now, splendidly, everything had become clear. 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

---

**"His whole uniform was a disguise, his whole new calling a masquerade." Guy has not found the key to his profound problem with *acedia*. He is still at odds with his true identity and *telos*; he has found bustling activity, but he has not yet sought or found joy and fulfillment in God's love.**

---

that battle" (p. 10). For Guy, the news of impending global war does not inspire fear or sadness, but anticipation of something worthwhile to do. He seems to have found a clear task that fits neatly into his sense of honor and the teachings of his Church—a war that demands no compromise or ambiguity, in which the good and the bad are obviously and officially on opposing teams. After feeling stranded and hopelessly ineffectual for

eight long years, he has found a path to rejoin the world of men.

He returns swiftly and hopefully to an England scrambling for wartime employment, adjusting to a life of rations and blackouts. Because he has been gone for so long and maintained so few connections, he finds the war is more difficult to enter than he anticipated. So many men have joined the military, angling to spend their enlisted years with friends, that it seems impossible for an unconnected, over-thirty man to find a place anywhere. But after much discouraging trial and error, Guy visits his humble and holy, dispossessed father at the seaside hotel where he has lived since losing the family's estates (through no fault of his own). Guy finds the quiet hotel now bustling with wartime evacuees and travelers. He meets his father's friend who happens to be a major in the Royal Corps of Halberdiers, a quirky regiment of infantry with a long and respected history. Hearing Guy's predicament, the major easily sets him up with the Corps.

Guy is wholly seduced by this old, eccentric, and proud regiment with its history, habits, and rituals. His days of training to be an officer have the rigorous air of the schoolroom—and demonstrate Waugh's genius and dexterity as a writer. Comic episodes of pranks and delightfully ridiculous characters are underscored, or undermined, by notes of doom from the outside world, the very real timeline of the Second World War intruding on the story. Waugh expertly combines a sense of nostalgia for days-gone-by through Guy's second youth, full of revitalizing military discipline and

camaraderie, with humor, biting social and political satire, and theologically rich character development.

After months of training, Guy is thoroughly a Halberdier: enthusiastic, capable, and exacting. Most of the wartime recruits in officer training are much younger than Guy and have come to affectionately refer to him and the other older recruit as 'uncle.' He has acquired what he deems an imposing mustache and a monocle, to help his aim. This is a time filled with more satisfying exertion and passionate interest in his own place in the world than Guy has experienced perhaps since childhood. Yet, even now, when he is undeniably a man of action rather than inert sloth, Guy is not entirely whole.

While on leave, Guy sees Virginia for the second time in almost a decade (the first being just months before) and she is humorously appalled by his mustache and monocle. What the peculiar Halberdiers admired, Virginia recognizes as discordant. "After all, [Guy] reflected, his whole uniform was a disguise, his whole new calling a masquerade" (p. 116). He immediately goes to shave and, "When it was done, Guy studied himself once more in the glass and recognized an old acquaintance he could never cut, to whom he could never hope to give the slip for long, the uncongenial fellow traveler who would accompany him through life" (p. 117). For all of his activity and acceptance in the Halberdiers, Guy has not found the key to his profound problem with *acedia*. He is still at odds with his true identity and *telos*; he has found bustling activity, but he has not yet sought or found joy and fulfillment in God's love. There is much good in his intentional participation in what he considers the cause of justice. But for Guy, this new, vigorous military life is his only purpose. His passion for justice, patriotism, and loyalty to the Corps are all goods, but they are secondary goods that serve to distract from "his own deep wound, that unstaunched, internal draining away of life and love" (p. 10).

Guy has sought out Virginia in hopes of seducing her, not because he longs for their reunion but because he has convinced himself that she is the only woman he can guiltlessly seduce; and he would have been successful, if he had not revealed those rather loveless details. He returns to the Halberdiers deflated, but is soon given command of the group of men he will lead into battle; at which time,

Guy's shame left him and pride flowed back. He ceased for the time being to be the lonely and ineffective man—the man he so often thought he saw in himself, past his first youth, cuckold, wastrel, prig...he was one with his regiment, with all their historic feats of arms behind him, with great opportunities to come. (p. 128)

His identity in the Corps gives Guy a sense of purpose and meaning. For the time being, it gives him something to work and exert himself for.

Yet Guy's experience of military life exposes a corporate form of *acedia* that Waugh believes defines our age. The inefficient, inconsistent, and experientially arbitrary bureaucracy of the war machine wears on the Halberdiers: "Chaos

prevailed. The order was always to stand by for orders" (p. 179). Incompetent, disliked men are regularly promoted by their superiors, including Guy himself, just to get them out of the way. This undermines the soldiers' questionable devotion; most "had been found to entertain hazy ideas on the subject" of what they were even fighting for. Yet, "Guy believed he knew something of this matter that was hidden from the mighty" (p. 164). For, "[t]here were in morals two requisites for a lawful war, a just cause and the chance of victory," both of which were undeniably met. There was even "great virtue in unequal odds.... And the more victorious [the enemy] was the more he drew to himself the enmity of the world and the punishment of God" (p. 165).

Nevertheless, Guy's participation in the war does not begin so gallantly. His first mission, in the Dakar Expedition of September 1940, does not advance war efforts, but merely helps his commanding brigadier prove their Force Commander wrong about a beach being wired. Guy is forced to return to England with his brigadier for an inquiry into the incident because their escapade went against orders. The inquiry is dismissed, but Guy is stranded back in England, unable to rejoin his Halberdiers in West Africa.

Guy eventually joins a newly formed commando brigade where he becomes friends with a fellow wartime recruit, the fashionable Ivor Claire. In May 1941 the commando unit is sent to the evacuation of Crete, when the Allied defense has already broken. Their orders are to fight to the end, letting men who have been there longer evacuate, and then give themselves up as prisoners of war. Waugh's description of the turmoil and fatigue of this action is especially vivid; he fought in the evacuation of Crete himself, likely encountering there the acute corporate form of sloth about which he later wrote:

I have seen soldiers in defeat who could not be accused of laziness. They were making strenuous exertions to get away from the enemy. Nor were they impelled by fear. They had simply become bored by the mismanagement of the battle and indifferent to its outcome. There were ill-found camps and stations in the war where men refused to take the actions which would have alleviated their own condition, but instead luxuriated in apathy and resentment. There was a sense of abandonment there which, though it was not recognized as such, was theological in essence; instead it found expression in complaints, just or unjust, against the higher command and the politicians.<sup>4</sup>

Guy's commando unit accomplishes next to nothing, traveling on foot with the scattered retreat – men who have been swarming away from their command posts, abandoning weapons, losing their minds, and giving up all sense of honor. Ivor Claire deserts his men and escapes with the disembarkation; Guy risks drowning and starvation by jumping on a broken down, abandoned fishing boat with a few others, but they miraculously make it back to Egypt alive, with severe dehydration.

When finally recovered, Guy is visited by Mrs. Stitch, a socialite friend of Ivor Claire who has already managed to send Ivor to India to protect him from gossip and the risk of court-martial. When she realizes that Guy's sense of honor outweighs his affection after Claire's desertion, Mrs. Stitch uses her ample social connections to have Guy sent back to England on medical leave before he can cause trouble.

[Guy] had no old love for Ivor, no liking at all, for the man who had been his friend had proved to be an illusion. He had a sense, too, that all war consisted in causing trouble without much hope of advantage. Why was he here...why was the young soldier lying still unburied in the deserted village of Crete, if it was not for Justice?" (p. 467)

Before Guy is shipped home, he hears of the German invasion of Russia. His hopes in Justice are damaged irrevocably when the Nazis turn on their partners in transgression and England accepts as convenient ally a nation whose politics and principles have been criminal:

It was just such a sunny, breezy Mediterranean day two years before when he read of the Russo-German alliance, when a decade of shame seemed to be ending in light and reason, when the Enemy was in plain view, huge and hateful, all disguise cast off; the modern age in arms.

Now the hallucination was dissolved...and he was back after less than two years' pilgrimage in a Holy Land of illusion in the old ambiguous world, where...gallant friends proved traitors and his country was led blundering into dishonour. (p. 468)

When he returns to England, Guy is no longer a man of passionate action. His foray into the world through just war has been as unsuccessful and disheartening as his foray into marriage. The satisfaction and distraction of army life is gone, leaving him alone with that "old acquaintance he could never cut" and his uninteresting paralysis of spiritual faculties.

Then, after another "two blank years" of now meaningless military service, Guy visits his father when Italy's surrender is announced in September 1943. Discussing this with Mr. Crouchback, Guy quips about what a mistake the Lateran Treaty (the 1929 agreement that established the territory of Vatican City and limited the political power of the Catholic Church) had been, and how smug the Pope could be now if he had just waited out the Italian state's threats against the Catholic Church in Rome. But "Mr. Crouchback regarded his son sadly," remarking, "That isn't at all what the Church is like. It isn't what she's *for*" (p. 489).

When Mr. Crouchback then qualifies that it is natural for Guy, as a soldier, to delight in his army's victory, Guy informs him,

"I don't think I'm interested in victory now."

"Then you've no business being a soldier."

“Oh, I want to stay in the war. I should like to do some fighting. But it doesn’t seem to matter now who wins....” (p. 489)

Later, in a follow-up letter to his son, Mr. Crouchback draws a distinction between how the people of Rome may feel towards war leaders like Mussolini and how the Church must relate to them – implying that Romans would probably regret the Lateran Treaty as Guy does, but

...that isn’t the Church. The Mystical Body doesn’t strike attitudes and 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 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.’

I write like this because I am worried about you.... You seemed so much enlivened when you first joined the army....

It was not a good thing living alone and abroad....” (pp. 490-491)

This letter has a profound impact on Guy and very soon he is considering its words again at Mr. Crouchback’s funeral:

*‘I’m worried about you,’* his father had written.... His father had been worried, not by anything connected with his worldly progress, but by his evident apathy....

...For many years now the direction..., ‘Put yourself in the presence of God,’ had for Guy come to mean a mere act of respect, like signing the Visitors’ Book at an Embassy or Government House. He reported for duty saying to God: ‘I don’t ask anything from you. I am here if you want me. I don’t suppose I can be any use, but if there is anything I can do, let me know,’ and left it at that.

‘I don’t ask anything from you’; that was the deadly core of his apathy; his father had tried to tell him, was now telling him. That emptiness had been with him for years now even in his days of enthusiasm and activity in the Halberdiers. Enthusiasm and activity were not enough. God required more than that. He had commanded all men to *ask*. (p. 540)

With his father’s death, Guy finally confronts what before he “need not, could not” face – the truth of his own *acedia*; that emptiness which had been with him through all of his torpid Italian days and his vigorous stint in the military. He recognizes with contrition the difference between his father’s humility and his own indifference (it is not humility that says “I don’t ask anything from you”). It is now clear how his passion for Justice and his faith in just war are radically misplaced – not because they are unimportant or

wrong, but because they are dependent on his own calculations of honor over God's love and mercy.

What Guy reveals here about *acedia* are not just the lazy squalor or ineffective busyness that can be its symptoms, but its root in pride. It is pride that stands on its dignity, thinks of its reputation before the saving of souls, and must determine the operation of its own fulfillment. Guy's *acedia*, stemmed from pride, takes failure upon itself, even in the face of an eternal, personal, perfect love and does not ask for anything more. His wife left him, his projects collapsed, his just war devolved into meaningless manslaughter, but instead of lamenting and praying and demanding from God to know *what am I supposed to do?* Guy grumbles: it seems you don't have any use for me. God had not brought joy, fulfillment, or success in the ways that Guy wanted and which seemed perfectly reasonable, and so he prefers not to pursue joy or fulfillment at all. He prefers not to ask.

In this we can see what it means for *acedia* to be a sin against charity. Guy's presumption that God does not need him is a sinfully false humility; it scorns the fact that God has conveniently given everything Guy could possibly contribute as a gift of grace. True humility begins with gratitude, but Guy approaches God like a bureaucrat whose visitors' book he can sign and then be on his way. Yet God is no detached dignitary, and seeking distance from him is no sign of respect. God "commanded all men to *ask*" not as a conceited tyrant, but as a father longing for a true relationship of understanding communion – as love personified.

With Mr. Crouchback's passing, Guy comes to see how truly dry a grain his faith actually is – not close to the rich theological virtue suffused with charity and hope – and he intuits the only real solution to his *acedia*:

In the recess of Guy's conscience there lay the belief that somewhere, somehow, something would be required of him; that he must be attentive to the summons when it came. They also served who only stood and waited. He saw himself as one of the labourers in the parable who sat in the market-place waiting to be hired and were not called into the vineyard until late in the day. They had their reward on an equality with the men who had toiled since dawn. One day he would get the chance to do some small service which only he could perform, for which he had been created. Even he must have his function in the divine plan. He did not expect a heroic destiny. Quantitative judgments did not apply. All that mattered was to recognize the chance when it offered. Perhaps his father was at that moment clearing the way for him. 'Show me what to do and help me to do it,' he prayed. (p. 540)

In this scene we see how far Guy has moved from his initial, autonomous choice to advance God's project through the cause of Justice to his accepting his specific work of service – it is the difference between "I am here if you

want me” and “Show me what to do and help me to do it.” He embraces the remedy for *acedia* recommended by ancient Christians: a commitment and obedience to our individual vocations. He comprehends *acedia* does not just oppose work, but also refuses to welcome the particular ways that through design and circumstance we are meant to accomplish our *telos* of loving and serving God. This is not a climactic realization for Guy, because he is well catechized; rather it is the surrender of his desire to avoid, escape, or control the *telos* that he has always acknowledged, even while failing to pursue.

When you think of the desert Christians’ remedy for *acedia* in their original context, this is what it boils down to. Traditionally there are two vocations through which human beings can accomplish our shared *telos* of loving and serving God – marriage or religious life, both of which require lifelong commitment. The desert Christians called *acedia* “the noonday devil” because the misery of noon in the desert was when they were most beguiled by thoughts and daydreams of family life, the comforts of home, professions in the outside world, and the freedoms of wealth. None of those thoughts are inherently evil, but for monastics committed to lifelong poverty, chastity, and stability, they can be a demonic temptation to shrink from, avoid, resent, or even abandon their vocation – their “function in the divine plan.” It was in the midday heat that they considered how much better it would be to settle on a lesser good, an easier satisfaction than the one they were seeking in the desert – which was ultimately God himself.

When advising prayer and stability in response to *acedia* (“stay in your cell”), they were just counseling monastics to live into their vocations. These are things they should be doing anyway; but they have to truly mean them, without apathy or distraction, if they want to defeat the noonday devil. Today many Christians use vocation to refer to the personal missions they are individually designed by God to accomplish – be it monastic life, marriage, artistic callings, specific works of mercy, or something else. Not all of the desert Christians’ instructions are applicable for the vocations of contemporary men and women, but their message to cease choosing nothing or even lesser goods in favor of the ultimate, terrifying good of God for one’s life certainly is. Whatever our vocation or mission, we are all called to love and serve God in openness to his will and willingness to do what he requires. Guy’s simple prayer – “Show me what to do and help me to do it” – provides an excellent model.

Guy finally abandons his presumption that he must approve the source and operation of his satisfaction in life and can refuse to participate if God does not work in ways he accepts. But this acknowledgement of vocation and his “small service which only he could perform” is not a magic word that solves all his problems – that is what he believed the war to be! He is still in the “ambiguous world,” where discernment and obedience are complicated and experience misleading. He is still plagued by failure and a melancholic disposition. The change in Guy does not make any of

these circumstances emotionally satisfying; instead, it makes him increasingly able to “recognize the chance when it offered.”

When possible summons come, it is not with a clear sign or promise of joyful fulfillment, but Guy, sensitive now to what the Church is *for*, recognizes “It was made my business by being offered” (p. 623). The trilogy ends with two significant occasions when through compassion Guy can sense, “that here again, in a world of hate and waste, he was being offered the chance of doing a single small act to redeem the times” (p. 663). Neither are glorious, and he is only successful in one – which utterly lacks dignity, “not the normal behaviour of an officer and a gentleman; something they’ll laugh about in [his club] Bellamy’s” (p. 663).

On the whole, Guy seems right to have anticipated no heroic destiny. Yet, what Waugh so masterfully shows through this, is that in our age of historic change it is not ultimately what Guy *does* that matters, it is who Guy *is*. Our actions are important and have significant consequences, but they only matter because we are astonishingly permitted by God to join in his work and become instruments of his will. *Acedia* would defame and distort and destroy this terrible gift, but as Guy finally learns, it is possible through love and obedience to embrace that ultimate *telos* we all share: to serve God in joy.

## NOTES

1 Evelyn Waugh is one of the most acclaimed English novelists of the 20th Century. A famous literary convert to Catholicism, well known for his political conservatism, cultural critique, and exquisite writing style, he is also a celebrated biographer, travel author, and reviewer. *The Sword of Honour Trilogy* incorporates much of his own experience of World War II and is an excellent example of his skill and range as a writer. It combines the satiric comedy that first made him famous in early novels like *Vile Bodies* (1930) and *A Handful of Dust* (1934) with the poignancy and theological depth of his most famous novel, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). Quotations from the *Sword of Honour Trilogy* come from the Everyman’s Library edition, which is paginated continuously, and will be cited in the text. Evelyn Waugh, *Sword of Honour* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).

2 Evelyn Waugh, “Sloth,” *The Sunday Times* (London), 1962; reprinted in Ian Fleming, ed., *The Seven Deadly Sins* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Co., 1962), 58.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 61.



### HEATHER HUGHES

is Publication Specialist and Project Coordinator in the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.