

To Crie Alarme Spiritual:

Evelyn Waugh and the Ironic Community

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Those who have read my works will perhaps understand the character of the world into which I exuberantly launched myself. Ten years of that world sufficed to show me that life there, or anywhere, was unintelligible and unendurable without God.

Evelyn Waugh, "Come Inside"¹

I

There's a transition over time in the directedness of Evelyn Waugh's full-length works of fiction: they begin looking outward at the fallen world and end looking inward at the fallen man. It isn't that the total satire of *Decline and Fall* in 1928 gives way to the earnestness of *Brideshead Revisited* in 1945; there's little more scabrous in Waugh's output than *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, published in 1957, and yet Anthony Powell wasn't wrong to call it "the most searching of Waugh's works."² There is, rather, a distinction between an attitude so thoroughly satiric that any norm to which we might compare the characters' behavior is absent beyond conjuring, and an open-eyed attitude which permits the work of self-examination and redemption to find, through much effort, a productive channel.

Thus, you might expect Waugh's conversion to Roman Catholicism to have come midway through his career, some time in the 1940s between *Put Out More Flags* and *Brideshead* and leading up to *Helena*, a novelistic romance about the conversion of the Emperor Constantine's mother and her persistence in discovering the wood of the true cross, proof that the crucifixion and all its implications were historically factual. (Waugh considered *Helena*, published in 1950, his "masterpiece."³) Instead, Waugh converted in 1930, almost at the start of his career. Waugh's spiritual standpoint didn't change at any time afterwards, but the expression of it did.

It's relatively easy to put Waugh's devout Catholicism together with the later, inner-directed books, even where the protagonist, as in *Brideshead*, fails the spiritual test set for him. The spiritual dimension is expressed openly. It's more difficult to figure out how the spiritual dimension functions in his outward-directed "ultra-modern" books, those that predate *Brideshead*, typified by *Vile Bodies*, published in 1930, and *A Handful of Dust*, which appeared four years later.

At initial glance, what strikes me as strange about these two books is that they are both perennially popular with the very types – *i.e.*, sophisticated urbanites – Waugh pictures writhing in a spiritual wasteland. Wayne C. Booth writes of "stable irony" (*i.e.*, saying one thing while covertly meaning another):

A great deal has been made of the inevitable presence of victims, real or imagined, in all stable irony But . . . the building of amiable communities is often far more important than the exclusion of naive victims. Often the predominant emotion when reading stable ironies is that of joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits. The author I infer behind the false words is my kind of man, because he enjoys playing with irony, because he assumes *my* capacity for dealing with it, and – most important – because he grants me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is to be built.⁴

That Waugh intends irony a reader could hardly miss: in *Vile Bodies*, for instance, when the American lady evangelist Mrs. Melrose Ape opens her big oration with the imperative, "Just you look at yourselves," and brings on such self-searching from the crowd as, "Darling . . . is my nose awful?"; or in *A Handful of Dust* when adulterous Brenda Last chides her husband Tony for making her "feel a beast" because she knew that her proposed divorce settlement would require him to sell his ancestral home.⁵ Yet understanding that the irony is intended to boomerang back at the characters is a far cry from understanding the exact nature of the "wisdom" Waugh sees as controlling in these situations. And *sharing* that wisdom is another thing again.

What seems modern about Waugh in his early works – that he's so unforthcoming about what binds the community he is no more than impliedly creating with his irony – is not necessarily modern at root. Quite the opposite. Waugh's early works fall in the tradition of medieval Catholic satire but were produced in an age when the implicit satiric norm and its theological groundings could not be taken for granted. As I hope to show in the discussions of *Vile Bodies* and *A Handful of Dust* that follow, Waugh's religious outlook alone makes the action in those books fully intelligible, yet a failure to reconstruct such intelligibility has never stood in the way of their being widely read *as if* understood. Of course, a book may "mean" many things besides what its author intended. (The annals of unintentional camp can provide you with your own favorite example.) But the possibility that a reader will miss Waugh's great point is arguably intentional. Such willingness early on to amuse the unwise as well as the wise, the seeming indifference to the varieties of misinterpretation this leaves him open to, are perhaps the most ambiguous aspects of his writing. Yet unlike Melville, Conrad, Kafka, he is not struggling towards articulation of a world that can barely be said to make sense. He is emphatically not a doubter. It is arguably this reticence alone (with its inevitably attendant confusion) that marks Waugh's early works as modernist. Waugh's decidedly old-school spiritual beliefs may nowadays sit oddly next to his penchant for comic irony, but even stranger is his readiness to leave the reader to his own interpretive devices – sufficient to stand though free to fall.

II

Vile Bodies, Waugh's second full-length work of fiction, is an epic satire of English high society after the Great War written with the brittle, insinuating wit and flitting attention span of a gossip column. The protagonist Adam Fenwick-Symes, a posh but broke young writer, does, in fact, end up authoring a tell-all newspaper column after his unpublished manuscript is confiscated at customs on his return from the continent and burned. (The officer also takes his copy of the *Purgatorio*, which to him "doesn't look right" (*VB*, 23). It isn't: based on what follows, the *Inferno* would have been more apt.) Typically of all the people in his set, what Adam feels is more on the order of inconvenience than outrage.

For one thing, he's already spent the advance from his publisher. Having no money or further income means he can't marry his girl Nina. The fate of their engagement goes up and down with Adam's financial prospects, and in the world Waugh depicts there's no other footing for marriage, certainly nothing like religious adherence or what Waugh would mean by common morality. (See, for instance, his 1930 article "Tell the Truth About Marriage" in which he argues that the Roman Catholic church's "spiritual sanction" of "monogamy and indissoluble marriage" rests on "two great truths," the second of which is that "one's sex-nature is most fully satisfied not in variety but in intensity of experience. By developing and broadening his relationship with one mate he can achieve a relationship which, when it ceases to be sexual, does so by becoming something more important" (*E*, 96).) Laxity is, of course, convenient, as Nina discovers after she's married a man who *does* have money: Nina and Adam have no qualms about progressing from fornication to adultery. (At the end of the book Nina brings Adam home for Christmas and presents him as her husband to her addled father, and to the servants, who know better.) Nobody in the vast array of characters Adam and Nina come across

socially and professionally would do any differently. Fornication and adultery *are* their common morality.

When Adam first visits Nina's father alone – to hit him up for £1,000 to marry Nina on – he asks the taxi driver at the station to take him to Doubting, the father's house. The driver refers to it as Doubting Hall, which he pronounces Doubting 'All, the pun at the center of the book's vortex: from Waugh's point of view, lack of spiritual certainty is the universal modern problem. The glittering world of the book is a world without answers in which the vulgar "impudence" of Mrs. Melrose Ape's attempt to formulate the questions is gratefully accepted as closing rather than opening the inquiry (*VB*, 99). The imperial Roman ladies in *Helena* gossip about the man who will be Pope Sylvester I: "I'm sure in heaven, when we're all holy, I shall be very pleased to spend hours on end with Sylvester. Here on earth one does want a little something besides, don't you think?"⁶ If the spiritual faddists in *Vile Bodies* come off any better it's only because they show themselves unworthy of revelation in the presence of a fraud rather than a saint.

But despite the prophet's disapprobation underlying the book, you can see why it would be sensationally and enduringly popular. Its ambition is the same as in the late-medieval *Ship of Fools*, the author of which states in the prologue his intention to hold a mirror up to sinners,⁷ but Waugh's mirror throws off kaleidoscopic jazz-age dazzle. And, as already noted, at this point in his career he doesn't get specific about those unformulated questions. What keeps the book turning and refracting light is the way Waugh maintains his distance from both the characters and any possible better model of behavior, while describing their gaddings-about in an up-to-the-minute idiom they themselves could appreciate. In the gossip columns of the day, *Vile Bodies* "was known simply as 'the ultra-modern novel'" (*E*, 35). The book is giddy yet effortlessly accomplished. Waugh, who published it when he was twenty-six, comes across as the most enviably, fantastically deft, young-old man, *the* ultra-modern precocious fogy (considerably more personable than Eliot).

At the same time, *Vile Bodies* is so hectic you sense that Waugh intends something more than frivolity, even ironic frivolity. As Alvin Kernan has written of satire in general: "The scene . . . is always disorderly and crowded, packed to the very point of bursting. The deformed faces of depravity, stupidity, greed, venality, ignorance, and maliciousness group closely together for a moment, stare boldly out at us, break up, and another tight knot of figures collects."⁸ The huge cast of characters in *Vile Bodies* whirls by in a blur and registers like an infinite string of zeroes with no integer at its head. Waugh shows no affection for any of them, no investment in any individual's fate. They aren't realistically drawn characters with artistically approximated interior lives (*i.e.*, the book isn't a novel). They're appealing, in fact, because they're so totally, amusingly, flatly irredeemable, and Waugh's tone is perfectly, glacially consistent – the judgment is already in.

All of which helps make *Vile Bodies* perhaps the least cumbersome, most "deliciously" entertaining epic in literature, its qualities so unusual for epic as to bring some pressure to bear on the definition of the genre. In its classic literary form, epic is the romance of the group and serves to glorify and justify the group's destiny. Their destiny is ordained by the heavens, and their military prowess in establishing a realm on earth reflects this higher sanction. *Paradise Lost* puts more emphasis on the spiritual than the earthly element but, like the *Aeneid*, has both grandiloquence and martial vigor.

The question, then, is whether *Vile Bodies* is too slight for epic. We expect a certain monumentalism of the genre, but epic implies more than a depiction of a sufficient scale. Scope, the ambition of the author to achieve an encompassing vision of the significance of the group's destiny must be more essential to epic than mere scale. This is what Waugh sneaks in on you while you're cackling over his clueless debauchees. A further issue is that artists in modern democratic countries tend not to be possessed of epic certainty. Such certainty, however, isn't essential to epic – the poet's vision can be an expression of his doubt as to the group's destiny. Just so, *Vile Bodies* is an epic treatment of the English elite in which their presumption of eminence has a grandly hollow resonance.

Which is to say that *Vile Bodies* is an ironic epic. It's useful to remember here Northrop Frye's statement that irony considered as a genre "is best approached as a parody of romance: the application

of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content which fits them in unexpected ways."⁹ In *Vile Bodies* Waugh pointedly places an epic structure on a foundation incapable of supporting it. The focal moment comes when Nina and Ginger, the rich husband she doesn't love, are flying to Monte Carlo for their honeymoon and Ginger asks if she knows a bit of poetry that he only half-remembers and misquotes and has no idea is John of Gaunt's tribute to England from *Richard II*. (Ginger's version begins, "This scepter'd isle, this earth of majesty, this something or other Eden.") Ginger gestures toward the English epic ethos by following up with, "Well, I mean to say, don't you feel somehow, up in the air like this and looking down and seeing everything underneath. I mean, don't you have a sort of feeling rather like that, if you see what I mean?" (*VB*, 198-9). Ginger, like Waugh, is looking down on the island, but in Ginger's mouth the most movingly nationalistic verse in English letters becomes self-canceling burlesque.

In *Vile Bodies*, Waugh imagines no present alternative to inconsequentiality for these amoral creatures – who live down to such names as Miles Malpractice, Father Rothschild S.J., and the Duchess of Stayle – and only a worse future, when they'll lack the will to get serious about the (unspecified) international conflict they'll be engaged in. We last see Adam, having lost his platoon on "the biggest battlefield in the history of the world," a scene of "unrelieved desolation" (*VB*, 220-1), still playing footsie with Nina by mail and trying to get money from a drunken major who earlier placed a bet on a winning horse for him. Waugh thus ends his book with a warrior-protagonist named for our first father, the original sinner, who is too emblematically depleted to do anything on that outsized (which is to say, symbolic) testing ground but continue seeking material, sensual gratification.

III

In *Vile Bodies* Waugh's satire is unleashed like a cluster bomb and no one is spared. Such a barrage renders the idea of heroism, even impaired heroism, unthinkable. (It's hard to imagine Christ harrowing hell to redeem Adam Fenwick-Symes.) In *A Handful of Dust*, Waugh still doesn't believe in heroism among the Anglicans but this total skepticism is more specifically articulated in the narrative. In the earlier book there's no basis for feeling differently about Nina and Adam, even though she technically betrays him by marrying a man who can afford her, whom she then betrays with Adam. In *A Handful of Dust* Brenda Last betrays not only her trusting, faithful husband Tony but an entire way of life centered on his country manor Hetton Abbey.

The book opens with gossip worthy of *Vile Bodies* – Mrs. Beaver, an interior decorator, laments that a fire did not "properly" reach the bedrooms, which as a result won't need redoing, but that "luckily" the victims "had that old-fashioned sort of extinguisher that ruins *everything*" (*HD*, 3). The next day her name comes up when Brenda and Tony are trying to figure out exactly who has unexpectedly accepted Tony's invitation down for the weekend; Brenda says of Mrs. Beaver what that first page told us: "She's hell" (*HD*, 29). The guest is her son John Beaver – unlike his mother, a parasite offering no services in return – who, entirely without trying because he can't afford her, will win Brenda from Tony. This affair takes Brenda from the country back to London and an apartment procured for her by Mrs. Beaver. Brenda cheats on Tony but would prefer to carry her indiscretion on openly. It would help enormously if Tony would take up with Jenny Abdul Akbar, invited to Hetton specifically to seduce him.

The turning point in the dissolution of the Lasts' marriage is the accidental death of Brenda and Tony's only child John Andrew. Waugh does not make this little boy appealing. When reproved for calling his nanny a "silly old tart," and reminded of all the things she does for him every day, he replies, "She's paid to" (*HD*, 23-25). John Andrew is a striking personification of original sin, a manifest reality to Waugh. John, not his father, is entirely captivated by Jenny Abdul Akbar during her adulterous mission to Hetton – he wants her to watch him take his bath (*HD*, 118) and hints at bedtime that he'd like her to spank him, hard (*HD*, 119); after his death, her purloined handkerchief is found among his things (*HD*, 168). John Andrew is, in miniature, the classic fool who has his mind on the

wrong things when his time is nearer than he imagines; in church before the fox hunt from which he will never return he is overheard “praying,” “Please God make me see the kill. Please God don’t let me do anything wrong,” meaning by the latter, let his horsemanship be without fault (*HD*, 128).

John Andrew not only reveals the essence of fallen man but, in addition, his self-centered, unsentimental literalism makes him an accurate assessor of the universal type. Tony fancifully tells his son that he doesn’t like Lady Cockpurse, one of the society ladies helping Brenda carry on her affair, because she looks like a monkey. Young John imagines her gibbering and chattering and lashing round with her tail, and then catching some nice, big juicy fleas (*HD*, 56), which is an accurate enough description of *all* fashionable ladies in Waugh’s London.

Brenda is, in fact, at Lady Cockpurse’s in the hands of a fortune-teller who reads the soles of the feet (“All these lines from the great toe to the instep represent lovers” (*HD*, 160)) when Jock Grant-Menzies, Tony’s friend and Brenda’s former steady, arrives to inform her of her son’s death. In the most delicately alarming moment in the book, one worthy of Henry James, Brenda, swooning with modish mysticism and fearing for her lover who has flown to France, gets the names confused and thinks at first that Jock is telling her young Mr. Beaver has died. Sorting the news out, she says, “John . . . John Andrew . . . I . . . Oh thank God” (*HD*, 162). Brenda is never more loathsome, but to Waugh Tony isn’t meaningfully ahead of her.

Mrs. Rattery, Jock Grant-Menzies’s American aviatrix who flies to Hetton for the fox hunt in which John Andrew is killed, spends the day with Tony while Jock drives to London to find Brenda. She is an ambiguous apparition who plays an intricate, four-pack game of patience that tantalizingly suggests some mythological accession to knowledge: “Mrs. Rattery sat intent over her game, moving little groups of cards adroitly backward and forwards about the table like shuttles across a loom; under her fingers order grew out of chaos; she established sequence and precedence; the symbols before her became coherent, interrelated” (*HD*, 150). And she does seem to offer Tony the opportunity for insight: he says of Brenda, “[S]he’s seen so little of John lately . . . I’m afraid that’s going to hurt her” – to which Mrs. Rattery replies, “You can’t ever tell what’s going to hurt people.” Tony, however, doesn’t benefit from the hint, replying, “But, you see, I know Brenda so well” (*HD*, 149). After the parish vicar has offered condolences and left, Tony says to Mrs. Rattery, “[T]he last thing one wants to talk about at a time like this is religion” (*HD*, 158), to which she offers her last, equally fruitless, hint, “Some like it” (*HD*, 158). Mrs. Rattery is more than a sensible woman, she’s a Visitor. While Brenda is with a foot-tickling charlatan who specializes in telling silly ladies what they want to hear, Mrs. Rattery – who arrives at Hetton from above, on wings – gestures in the direction of a door that Tony can’t go through because he can’t even imagine it exists.

You have to be tough-minded to take the story as intended: Waugh doesn’t expect you to mourn Tony’s losses, not even the death of his deeply tainted son. (Waugh did not have to overcome any paternal proclivity in this; his son Auberon wrote, “The most terrifying aspect of Evelyn Waugh as a parent was that he reserved the right not just to deny affection to his children but to advertise an acute and unqualified dislike of them.”¹⁰) The point is that Tony, who attends his Anglican church regularly and even reads the lessons on certain holidays, but whose mind during the service is preoccupied with the remodeling of Hetton except when “some arresting phrase in the liturgy would recall him to his surroundings” (*HD*, 38), is already spiritually dead when he leaves England, and John Andrew’s death is merely a sign that Tony’s life can have no meaningful sequel. In such a construct, sympathy would be a sentimental temptation (and it would not make you Waugh’s kind of reader).

After John Andrew’s death Brenda decides she wants to marry penniless Mr. Beaver on the divorce settlement that will require Tony to sell Hetton. The proposition is brokered by Brenda’s brother, Reggie, who sold *his* family’s historic home and who says, “Big houses are a thing of the past in England,” as if the past were something Englishmen would be eager to move away from. Paradoxically, Reggie is an archaeologist, and he lectures Tony: “One has to change as one gets older. Why, ten years ago I couldn’t be interested in anything later than the Sumerian age and I assure you that now I find even the Christian era full of significance” (*HD*, 203). Reggie, with his “*even* the Christian era,” is so clearly not a man to take advice from in Waugh that even Tony feels it. Although

Tony has been a good sport and let Brenda sue *him* for divorce, he turns around when he hears from Brenda herself that she expects him to sell Hetton.

This, if any, is the moment when you feel Tony will at last rise to the heroism of the English tradition to which he stands heir. (The rooms at Hetton are named for characters in Malory and his brother-in-law accuses Tony of being "medieval" in insisting he doesn't want Brenda back (*HD*, 174).) Tony decides he is going to keep Hetton but not Brenda, though she will not get her divorce. The hero of romance, however, acts in obedience to spiritual powers that guide his path and direct his sword. In this decisive split between Tony and Brenda, Brenda gets her comeuppance not according to any divine authority but because of Tony's sentimental attachment to Hetton, which famously lost its architectural interest when it was "entirely rebuilt in 1864 in the Gothic style" (*HD*, 13). Waugh writes of Tony in this transitional moment, "His mind had suddenly become clearer on many points that had puzzled him. A whole Gothic world had come to grief . . . there was now no armour, glittering in the forest glades, no embroidered feet on the greensward; the cream and dappled unicorns had fled" (*HD*, 209).

Gothic *style* simply does not suffice. Acting out of concert with spiritual powers, Tony is a man living blindly under a curse. Prey to nightmares "until quite late in his life," as a child his room was set up in Morgan le Fay so as to "be within calling distance of his parents, inseparable in Guinevere" (*HD*, 15). This is a great foreboding joke, since Tony will lose Hetton as a result of his own wife's adultery, but it also ties in to what Waugh saw as the English curse of being cut off from the true church – which, as a historical matter, occurred to sanctify Henry VIII's adulterous passion for Anne Boleyn, and which put abbeys such as Hetton in private hands. Tony, who has evolved the "mildly ceremonious order of his Sunday mornings . . . from the more severe practices of his parents" (*HD*, 36), is a spiritually unmoored man and so makes an unfortunate decision about what to do next: he follows Dr. Messinger, a half-cracked explorer, into the South American jungle on an ill-informed quest for a legendary lost city.

Up to this point you could discuss *A Handful of Dust* as an allegorical tableau entitled "Isn't London Hell?" – to quote a line from *Black Mischief*.¹¹ Afterwards the book takes on the trappings of quest romance, a search for "the City" (of God), which Tony pictures as "Gothic in character," "a radiant sanctuary," "a transfigured Hetton" (*HD*, 222). Tony soon loses the heroic definiteness that he had acquired, albeit briefly, in refusing to "give up Hetton in order to buy Beaver for Brenda" (*HD*, 207). Abandoned by their indigenous porters, their supplies running out, and with Tony felled by fever, Dr. Messinger paddles off to find help, goes over a waterfall, and drowns. The delirious Tony is found and nursed back to health by an illiterate half-Indian named Mr. Todd who has a library of ant-bitten Dickens novels that he loves but cannot read. Tony is the second civilized wanderer Mr. Todd ends up holding prisoner, ever so genially, to read aloud to him, the entire Dickens set, over and over. Mr. Todd is charming but shrewd: when he hears that some men on a search for Tony are nearing, he drugs his prisoner, gives the searchers Tony's wristwatch, and shows them the nameless grave of the previous reader. Mr. Todd is also well-connected in that many of the loyal tribesmen who serve him are his children. Plus he's the one with the gun.

London may be "hell," but in the jungle Tony – legally dead in England because of Mr. Todd's ploy – really is in hell. Mr. Todd is the figure of Death (in German "der Tod") and to Waugh an eternity spent reading the works of Dickens, whom he viewed as representing "the fatuous optimism of Victorian humanism,"¹² is about as amusing a form of torment as he could invent. Tony might well envy a Dickensian hero such as Martin Chuzzlewit, who likewise sees the miscarriage of his plans in the New World and is felled by fever, but whose misadventure and illness act as moral restoratives after which he returns home chastened and heroically repairs his ways. To Waugh, however, Dickens is just an example of why Englishmen are in peril of damnation in the first place.

The end of *A Handful of Dust* derives from Waugh's fictional musings on his own off-track wanderings in British Guiana just before he began writing the book (Stannard, 1987, 311-34). He had already given this ending shape in the story "The Man Who Liked Dickens" (published in 1933), but the fiendish little anecdote needs the back story to resonate. There has to be a religious reason the

protagonist is suffering endlessly without spiritual consolation; Tony must both deserve damnation and, in a circle of hell reserved for men who don't grasp the universal spiritual order even after it's too late, not understand why.

For this reason, the echoes of the 16th-century morality play *Everyman* are deliberately faint. *Everyman* begins with a Messenger (cf. Dr. Messinger, his name changed from the less allusive Professor Anderson in the story) who announces the summoning of the spiritually unprepared protagonist by Death. Then God appears and decries humanity "[l]iving without dread in worldly prosperity":

I hoped well that every man
In my glory should make his mansion,
And thereto I had them all elect;
But now I see, like traitors deject,
They thank me not for the pleasure that I to them meant,
Nor yet for their being that I them have lent.¹³

When Death comes for the protagonist he asks Everyman, "Hast thou thy Maker forgot?" (*EM*, l. 86), just as Mr. Todd asks Tony, who has made his mansion in his mansion, if he believes in God and receives the answer, "I've never really thought about it much" (*HD*, 291). Death informs Everyman, "On thee thou must take a long journey / Therefore thy book of [ac]count with thee thou bring, / For [re]turn again thou cannot by no way" (*EM*, ll. 103-5). Unlike Tony, however, Everyman is capable of learning before it's too late how to avoid eternal punishment. The key difference is that *Everyman* belongs to the Anglo-Catholic tradition from which Tony is cut off and which, to Waugh, might have meant the salvation of his soul.

As obnoxious as satire may be to vested powers and ascendant coteries, it tends to be inherently conservative, always comparing current misbehavior to some outmoded but not outdated model from the past.¹⁴ That better model is often mythic, an earthly paradise, but to Waugh it is historic: pre-Reformation England. Thus, among Waugh's works the most illuminating contrast to his vexed take on English heroism in *A Handful of Dust* is provided by the book he wrote immediately after it, *Edmund Campion*, a non-fiction account of the martyrdom under Elizabeth I of that Jesuit priest for ministering the sacraments in England. Waugh presents Campion's heroism on behalf of the faith entirely without irony but both books are of a piece to the extent that they evince Waugh's view of "Catholicism . . . not as an alien fashion brought in from abroad, but as something historically and continuously English,"¹⁵ his sense that the "Catholic structure still lies lightly buried beneath every phase of English life" (*E*, 367). (For a similar reason Waugh made his St. Helena British, "against historical probability," in the words of his biographer (Stannard, 1992, 156).) This is where Tony Last fails as the inheritor of a great English estate, and why he can't be a hero to Waugh.

Tony is likeable and he's the injured party in his failed marriage but being likeable and innocent of wrong aren't enough – *A Handful of Dust* is a description of the negative space around a missing heroic portrait, rendered with ingenious and unflinching humor. As the Christian tutor muses in *Helena*, "Words could do anything except generate their own meaning" (*H*, 108), which is to say that words cannot do what revelation can, and yet until the very end of his last novel, *Unconditional Surrender*, which concludes the *Sword of Honour* trilogy, no Waugh character achieves heroic confluence with revealed meaning. This is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of *A Handful of Dust*, and it compounds the question that *Vile Bodies* and indeed nearly all of Waugh's output raises: Why would a man with such a definite idea of the proper basis for heroism write about it in the negative, and comically?

IV

For anyone who thinks that modernism necessarily implies formal experimentation unmissable on the surface of a work, Evelyn Waugh may not seem like a modernist at all. Which would have been fine with him; as he wrote in 1945: "Chaucer, Henry James and, very humbly, myself are practising the same art. Miss Stein is not . . . I believe Western culture to be in rapid decay and that Picasso and Stein are glaring symptoms."¹⁶ At the same time this letter shows that Waugh does share with such uncontroversial modernists as Joyce, Yeats, and Eliot a sense of living in the twilight of a disintegrating civilization. The title of *A Handful of Dust* is taken from *The Waste Land*, the general mood of which accords with this scrap of narration from *Black Mischief*, "Sir Samson returned abruptly to the twentieth century, to a stale and crowded world" (*BM*, 51). Most importantly, Waugh's fiction dramatizes the condition of irony – the modern condition, I would argue – the sense of living without consensus as to an overarching theophilososophical system. Waugh shares this awareness with Conrad, Joyce, and Faulkner.

There is a considerable difference between Waugh's sense of belatedness and irony and that of other modernists. With respect to the condition of irony, Joyce is much more elusive, almost fey, about what we are to think of it, recreating it from a remove, in the manner of Flaubert before him and Borges after, while Conrad and Faulkner go straight at the subject with the stormy confusion of Melville before them and Mailer after. By contrast, Waugh recreates the condition of irony as a fact while privately enjoying absolute certainty as to its cause (at least in the corner of the modern world he cares about) – *i.e.*, the suppression of the Roman Catholic church in England. This also means that his sense of the lapse of civilization in the modern world is less a matter of Eliot's hypersensitivity as he shores cultural fragments against his ruins and more a matter of facing what Waugh saw as plain historical fact and its inevitable consequences.

For Waugh, always looking centuries backward to a better day, it could only have been a comfort that the satiric mode of *Vile Bodies* and *A Handful of Dust* put him in line with the literary-spiritual tradition of medieval satire.¹⁷ These two books call to mind the motifs of the ship of fools, the dance of death, and the memento mori, knowing, ghastly, devout aesthetic forms intended to give you pause in your habitual activities and headlong urges and to make you use your God-given reason in order to live right. Why, then, not make his belief explicit?

In his classic study of the pious satire the *Romance of the Rose*, John Fleming argues that in the thirteenth century the poem's protagonist, who turns from the counsel of Lady Reason to worship Venus, would have been commonly and readily understood to be foolish, and in the most perilous way – *i.e.*, at the risk of his immortal soul. Thus, considered as of the time of its composition, the *Romance* is an example of irony not really creating a community among its audience in Booth's terms, but summoning that audience by restating its communal values, though in the comic negative. The *Romance* is a work of stable irony and as such its meanings do not appear on the surface, yet they are absolutely deliberate. As Fleming writes: "In the Middle Ages art was not its own excuse for being. It was a didactic and pedagogical technique, joining with a number of other techniques to explain and celebrate a divinely ordained and revealed world order."¹⁸ Such meanings are also thoroughly conventional. Whereas modern irony is associated with ambiguity and the challenging of values, D. W. Robertson, Jr. points out in his *Preface to Chaucer* that the conventional meaning of medieval literature is not mysterious, ambiguous, or controversial in the modern, post-Romantic manner; rather, it is an expression of what the author deems to be universal values.¹⁹

In the intervening centuries, however, the body of doctrine such a collective mentality was based on lost its standing as commonplace wisdom. Fleming notes that "by the end of the fifteenth century the [*Romance*] was no longer clearly understood," "a poignant reminder of the changes in intellectual style which hid the great figurative arts of the Middle Ages from the eyes of the Enlightenment." (Fleming, 6). Consequently, as Elizabeth D. Kirk and Judith H. Anderson write in their "Introduction" to *Piers Plowman*: "A poet asking fundamental questions about religion and society in the post-consensus world of the twentieth century must begin by telling the audience what the traditions to be

examined say and by putting the case for a religious perspective since it cannot be taken for granted.”²⁰ This latter, however, is exactly what Waugh does *not* do, despite writing from a fundamentally spiritual-satirical perspective, and probably why a wide readership can experience his books as witty rather than didactic, as damning as they are.

The misapprehension of the formerly conventional meaning of the *Romance of the Rose* is an historical accident based in the survival of a document beyond its cultural context. There are demonstrative elements of the *Romance*, but this misapprehension has been possible only because the quality of its wit includes a great degree of understatement. To the extent the poets assume the audience’s familiarity with the underlying doctrine, the comedy is freed from overt didacticism. Instead, the meanings are worked up in a rather intricate interplay of allegorical figures and objects, but this technique is also seen as *teaching*. As Robertson explicates St. Augustine’s ideas on the subject: “[S]criptural obscurity . . . was ordained to overcome pride by work, and to prevent the mind from disdain[ing] a thing too easily grasped.” Such textual obscurity “stimulates a desire to learn,” “excludes those who are unworthy from the mysteries of the faith,” and is “pleasant” in itself. As Robertson notes: “St. Augustine’s account of the manner in which pleasure arises from obscurity reveals an aesthetic attitude which became typically medieval” (Robertson, 53). Because of the eclipse of the accepted common values the poem was meant to express, when critics analyze the *Romance of the Rose* out of its medieval context and by modern standards of aesthetics and conduct, the result is often an inversion of the original poets’ didactic-pedagogical intentions (Fleming, 47-50).

Waugh, by comparison, leaves his values unstated though he must know perfectly well that they will not be assumed by his readers. In fact, there’s a *mise-en-abyme* quality to his reticence on this score: the fact that Roman Catholic values can no longer be assumed is part of what damns the Anglicans and perhaps contributes to Waugh’s refusal to be more explicitly doctrinaire. If readers don’t discern the larger pattern of events, they’re doubly “unworthy.” (Though they are perhaps more likely to enjoy the early books if they don’t.)

Waugh is not a hypocrite, at any rate. He may have felt he was “sent under obedience to England” “to crie alarme spiritual against foul vice and proud ignorance, wherewith many my dear Countrymen are abused,” as Campion wrote of himself (*EC*, 73), but Waugh is of the fallen world and he knows it. The surrender necessary for spiritual health meshes with Waugh-the-prophet’s denunciations; he knows sinners as well as he knows himself. Waugh wraps up his 1930 article explaining his conversion to Catholicism by stating, “The Protestant attitude seems often to be, ‘I am good; therefore I go to church,’ while the Catholic’s is, ‘I am very far from good; therefore I go to church’” (*E*, 105). His comic cruelty is thus the more startling not only to the extent that the spiritual foundation for it remains implicit but to the extent that it’s disinterested as well. Under the charming surface of his early books – the dizzy high life recreated by someone familiar enough with it to tattle convincingly – is the spiritual discipline of a man utterly convinced by open-eyed experience that original sin is a burden that all carry and that only those who engage actively in the process of redemption overcome.

This does not imply a personal equation of Waugh with his loftiest intentions. According to his son Auberon, after World War II every English child was rationed one banana, a fruit he and his two sisters had never tasted; Waugh ate all three of the bananas himself, with his children looking on, “anguished.” Auberon comments, “From that moment, I never treated anything he had to say on faith or morals very seriously” (*AW*, 67). Waugh was very far from good, therefore he went to church and attempted, implicitly, to scare his readers there in his train. But only implicitly, at first. (Few, for instance, could guess that the satirist who named a character Father Rothschild S.J. in *Vile Bodies* would also be the man who saw the Jesuit Campion as a hero and a saint and who prized the Jesuits because they “paid particular attention to style of language and dexterity of wit” (*EC*, 45).)

Thus there’s no systemic compassion in Waugh’s early works, as there is in Dickens’s. Generally the dupes who get it in the neck – Paul Pennyfeather in *Decline and Fall*, Tony Last in *A Handful of Dust*, Ambrose Silk in *Put Out More Flags* – don’t deserve it in the secular narrative terms that are now conventional, but there’s glee in the infliction. The bear-traps that snap shut on them are not just ironic but outrageous, sprung in such a way as to elicit breathtaking laughter. Pleasure merges with

cruelty because Waugh writes from enough of a remove to enjoy the chaos he depicts: these creatures, typified by Tony and Paul – who is “reading for the Church” at Oxford²¹ and whose surname suggests just how much substance he would bring to the enterprise – had their chance for salvation and rejected it, brutally, as Waugh makes clear in *Edmund Campion*. (Ambrose is Jewish and thus Waugh’s attitude toward him may be more, or much less, complicated.) The Anglicans blew their chance and the resultant – foreseeable – suffering is entirely on their heads. Waugh is a scintillatingly refined joker, but he plays rough with his dolls because he doesn’t care if he breaks them. They’re only too replaceable.

For a devoutly Catholic author, as for any author, writing comically is primarily a matter of disposition and talent, but there’s a fundamental advantage as well in that sin is more varied than saintliness and more memorable *because* more awful. That is, Waugh can count on the fallen taste of fallen readers. As Northrop Frye has written of satire: “[I]nvective is one of the most readable forms of literary art, just as panegyric is one of the dullest” (Frye, 224). (You might likewise say that a description of a car wreck is more likely to be readable than the state’s driver’s manual.) In addition, as Waugh reassures Randolph Churchill in the dedicatory letter to *Put Out More Flags*:

I am afraid that these pages may not be altogether acceptable to your ardent and sanguine nature. They deal, mostly, with a race of ghosts, the survivors of the world we both knew ten years ago, which you have outflown in the empyrean of strenuous politics, but where my imagination still fondly lingers. I find more food for thought in the follies of Basil Seal and Ambrose Silk than in the sagacity of the Higher Command.²²

Later Waugh writes in the book proper in the guise of Ambrose: “The human mind is inspired enough when it comes to inventing horrors; it is when it tries to invent a heaven that it shows itself cloddish” (*PO*, 71). To Waugh, follies are more instructive, just as obscurity was to St. Augustine, and comedy gives instruction more bite, a fact especially galling to educated readers who’d rather be seen as tragic than risible.

Obscurity according to St. Augustine, and irony according to Booth, create select communities among the literary work’s audience, who see through the surface signs to the true, intended, stable meaning. Waugh’s early satires, however, are enjoyed by people who don’t feel impelled to decipher their religious import according to his (firm) beliefs. *A Handful of Dust* is especially tricky because it’s so easy to sympathize with Tony Last and thus think that he represents the norm that Brenda and everyone else violate, that he doesn’t deserve his fate (and even that Waugh primarily addresses the reader emotionally rather than morally and intellectually). Readers can laugh at Waugh’s technical skill alone as a form of black comedy, or assume an entirely different meaning, *e.g.*, a nihilistic form of irony dramatizing the futility of innocence.

In retelling the stories of *Vile Bodies* and *A Handful of Dust* above, I attempted to show that much that might seem inscrutable, or incurable, in those books resolves itself from an Anglo-Catholic perspective. Yet Waugh does not introduce the equivalent of Lady Reason so that his meanings achieve allegorical coordination within the four corners of his stories (though punishment descends nonetheless). Thus Waugh’s early satires only superficially accord with Tyrus Miller’s claim that the “minimal positionality” of late modernist writers “stands in distinction to more traditional modes of satire, which depend on a stable basis in ethical norms or knowledge or custom, both for the satirist and for the projected audience of the satire.”²³ While it may be correct to include Waugh among the late modernists whose works lack “the strong orchestrating role of earlier modernist authorship,” it is too much to say that he assumes “neither a stable ground of values nor any commonality with an audience” (Miller, 63). Oddly, he assumes a stable ground of values without assuming commonality with his audience.

Waugh’s ground of values could hardly be more stable. As he wrote in 1944 (in response to a work of Marxist millenarianism): “I, personally, do not believe that there will be universal peace and goodwill until the world is converted to Christianity and brought under Christ’s Vicar; whether that

ever comes about is not ordained, but depends on human free-will" (*E*, 278). In 1949 he wrote: "It was possible that . . . the whole Christian revelation was an imposture or a misconception. But if the Christian revelation was true, then the Church was the society founded by Christ and all other bodies were only good so far as they had salvaged something from the wrecks of the Great Schism and the Reformation" (*E*, 367-8). Waugh's view of modernity, then, is not of a world spinning meaninglessly at the center of a void, but of a void spinning needlessly, perversely at the center of a universe replete with meaning.

There's a moment in *Helena* when the heroine asks her husband Constantius if there must always be a wall around Roman civilization. Her point is that the wall impedes the outside world from having a share in that (not yet Christian) civilization. Though Waugh is clearly setting Helena up to become a heroine of Christian evangelism, the early Waugh by contrast would seem to be more like Constantius, who loves the wall-enclosed City: "inside, peace, decency, the law, the altars of the gods, industry, the arts, order; outside, wild beasts and savages, forest and swamp, bloody mumbo-jumbo, men like wolf packs; and along the wall the armed might of the empire, sleepless, holding the line" (*H*, 47). Roman Catholicism is Waugh's wall. The difference, however, is that what Constantius sees outside the ancient City, Waugh depicts *inside* modern London, as if peace and decency and the altars of the gods existed nowhere in that world. Unlike Helena, Waugh doesn't spread the Word, he excludes it.

Waugh's buried irony in *Vile Bodies* and *A Handful of Dust* – his refusal to assert the theological values that shape the narrative – is thus distinguishable from the purposively mysterious irony of *Moby-Dick*, in which the quest romance is turned inside out because the object being hunted does not confer meaning on existence as do other quest objects, such as the true cross or the holy grail. Rather, the voyage of the *Pequod* in search of the great white whale raises the endlessly askable, never-answerable question of such meaning itself. By contrast, Waugh's is the oracular irony of a man who feels very strongly that he knows the answer yet who chooses to obscure it. Counterintuitively, Anthony Powell recalled Waugh circa 1927 as "an extraordinarily uncomplicated man; so uncomplicated that even in those days – far more so later in life – it was often hard to accept that some of his views and attitudes were serious. That was mistaken. They were perfectly serious to himself; within the limits that, possessing his father's powerful taste for self-dramatization, all Waugh's energies were concentrated on any rôle he was playing, however grotesque or absurd" (Powell, 20). It could be that he veiled his spiritual absolutism because of the dramatically comic fury doing so unleashed. It couldn't be just to create a comic effect, however, because it does more than that. The anxiety that Tony Last's demise induces is almost nauseous, that is, if you don't see it in the spiritual light that renders it funnier and more *exquisitely* painful because within one's power to avoid.

From the point of view of literature, the modern can be seen as the incorporation into narrative of radical theophilosophical uncertainty. (In such a view, formal experimentation is an effect not a cause, a ripple not a pebble.) Irony existed before the modern era, but it was doubly "stable," that is, not only intended by the author but grounded in a communal faith in a divinely ordered creation. Modern irony, by contrast, is doubly ironic, that is, it exploits the difference, in both life and narrative, between the ideal and the actual and in doing so reflects the loss of consensus as to the ordering of the universe, a consensus that was formerly inseparable from literary production. Waugh is in some ways a holdover, in that he has an absolute faith in traditional Christian revelation. He is also a literary traditionalist, an anti-modernist. Yet by failing to make these positions explicit in his early satires, he sets the reader up for a classically modernist (some might say "post-modern") phenomenon: intentional miscommunication. If you don't pick up on the disparity between Waugh's actual and seeming beliefs – and the comic skill Waugh evinces in them only helps you to miss it – then the books become two-way mirrors: the author "watches" as you unknowingly misread, laughing all the way to hell. If you do pick up on the disparity, the books and their author's intentions still remain "difficult" because deciphering them requires you to be in the books and out of them at the same time, analyzing the gaps, the silences, the refusals to engage. Waugh was a modernist despite himself.

Notes

¹ Evelyn Waugh, *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh* ed. Donat Gallagher (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984), 367. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *E*.

² Anthony Powell, *Messengers of Day: The Memoirs of Anthony Powell, Vol. II* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), 21. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as Powell.

³ Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: The Later Years 1939-1966* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 249.

⁴ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 27-28.

⁵ Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (New York: Dell, 1930), 98-99; *A Handful of Dust* (1934) (New York: Little, Brown, 2002), 209. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *VB* and *HD*, respectively.

⁶ Waugh, *Helena* (1950) (Chicago: Loyola Classics, 2005), 96. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *H*.

⁷ Raymond MacDonald Alden, *The Rise of Formal Satire in England Under Classical Influence* (1899) (Repr. N.p.: Archon Books, 1962), 19.

⁸ Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 7-8.

⁹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 223. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as Frye.

¹⁰ Auberon Waugh. *Will This Do? An Autobiography* (London: Century, 1991), 45. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *AW*.

¹¹ Waugh, *Black Mischief* (1932) in *Black Mischief, Scoop, The Loved One, The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 65. *Black Mischief* will hereafter be cited parenthetically as *BM* in the main body of the text.

¹² Martin Stannard *Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years 1903-1939* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 329.

¹³ *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, ed. A. C. Cawley (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1959), I. 24 and II. 52-57. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *EM*.

¹⁴ See, for example, Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 266; and Leon Guilhamet, *Satire and the Transformation of Genre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 16-17.

¹⁵ Waugh, *Edmund Campion* (1935) in *Two Lives: Edmund Campion – Ronald Knox* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 34. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *EC*.

¹⁶ Waugh, *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Mark Amory (New Haven and New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1980), 215.

¹⁷ See, for example, Alden, 1-32.

¹⁸ John V. Fleming, *The Roman de la Rose: A Study in Allegory and Iconography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 11.

¹⁹ D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 31-38.

²⁰ Elizabeth D. Kirk and Judith H. Anderson, "Introduction" to William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, trans. E. Talbot Donaldson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), xii.

²¹ Waugh, *Decline and Fall* (1928) (London: Chapman & Hall, 1967), 15.

²² Waugh, *Put Out More Flags* (1942) (New York: Little, Brown, 1999), dedication page. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *P*.

²³ Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 63. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as Miller.