

Cannibals and Catholics:

Reading the Reading of Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief*

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I

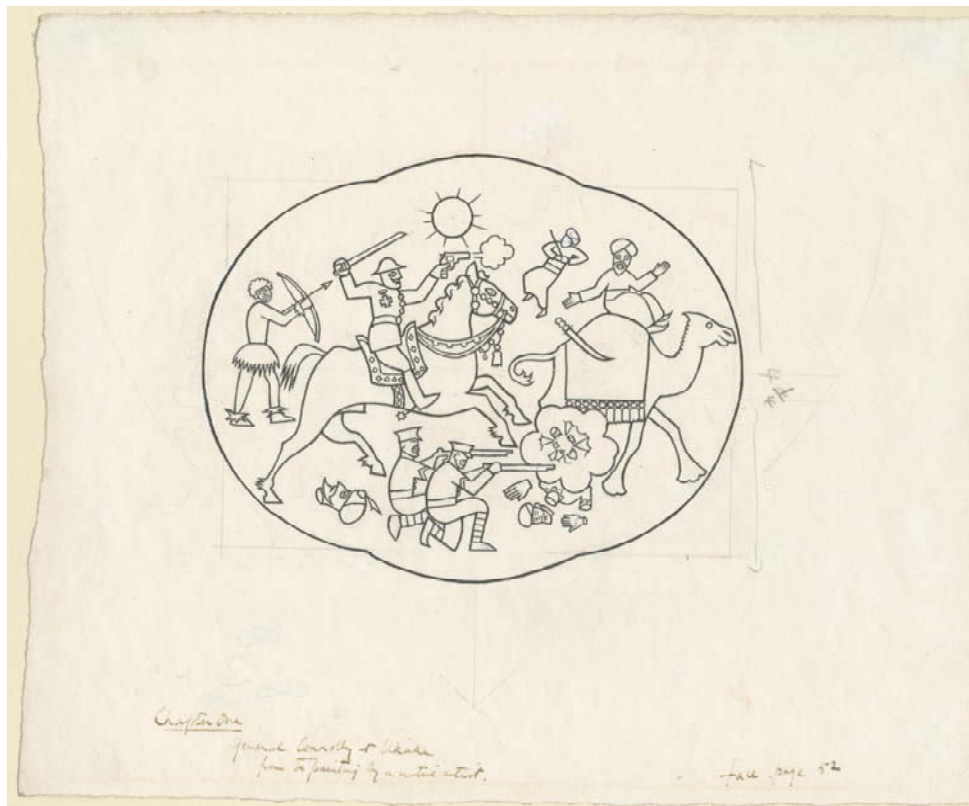
Evelyn Waugh, even more than Wyndham Lewis, is probably the most enduring satirist among British modernists, even though he rejected both labels for his own work.¹ Yet while Lewis's reputation has undergone a triumphant rehabilitation in recent decades, Waugh still suffers from the preconception that his work is minor. Symptomatically, Fredric Jameson's *Fables of Aggression*, a book in part responsible for Lewis's soaring reputation, initiated its restorative project in 1978 precisely at Waugh's expense: "At best, in Britain today, [Lewis] retains a kind of national celebrity and is read as a more scandalous and explosive Waugh."² In other words, Waugh is merely a *less* scandalous and explosive version of Lewis – a less scandalous and explosive version, moreover, of the "old," misread, unreconstructed Lewis, of Lewis the eccentric gadfly rather than of Lewis the radical innovator and analyst of modernity who emerges in Jameson's compelling, if feverish, study. Perhaps because his jokes are funnier than Lewis's, his prose more burnished, and his extra-fictional writing less theoretically challenging, Waugh has yet to find a Jameson to champion his work and bring him into wider accounts of modernism.³ Located between the high and the low, he fits awkwardly into a narrative of the modernist "great divide"; conservative but not extremist, his politics, unlike those of Lewis or Marinetti, have rarely proved interesting to dialecticians.⁴ But it is precisely as a satirist, I maintain, that Waugh is important to accounts of modernism. Literary history is beginning to remember that high modernists such as Pound and Eliot publicly called for satire to be written,⁵ and even though it is still common for critics to assume that satire of any significance ended in the eighteenth century,⁶ the work of scholars such as Tyrus Miller and Jessica Burstein has begun to resituate satire at the center of modernist aesthetics.⁷

Recovering the importance of satire to modernism forces a rethinking of at least three pieces of conventional critical wisdom. First, recent critical attention to the problem of affect⁸ has begun to undermine the assumption that modernism's animus toward the sentimental easily reduces to a reactionary, misogynistic politics.⁹ Satiric stances in modernism were, to be sure, frequently allied with an often reflexive antisentimentality, and the prevailing modernist discourse on sentiment intersects powerfully with conceptions of gender that have little to recommend them. Yet a fuller examination of satiric modernism suggests a much broader range of affective possibilities than a stark dichotomy between popular, feminized, emotional excess, and elite, masculinized, intellectual rigor. For even when modernists sought to "escape from emotion" (in T. S. Eliot's famous phrase), the flight from feeling inevitably led only to new affective positions.¹⁰ Rei Terada's account of the state of feeling in poststructuralist theory describes an "economy of pathos" in which the loss of feeling can itself be the occasion for new feeling. Terada points out that the "compensatory, decorative exhilaration" that Jameson finds in the postmodernism of Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes," is just as much of an emotion as the expressivist angst he finds in Munch's "The Scream"; what Keats calls "the feel of not to feel it" (Terada, 13) is, after all, still a feeling. The antisentimental, satiric postures of modernism often work, I would argue, in similar fashion: escaping feeling in one place only to discover it – displaced, troped, transfigured – in another.¹¹

Here, then, emerges a second benefit of looking at modernism alongside satire: satire, while scorning sentimental modes of feeling, uninhibitedly celebrates other modes, and it is not for nothing that an effective satire is called "wicked." Satire's transgressive wickedness is both a stumbling block

for any effort to theorize satire as a purely moralistic mode and also, at least in the argument of Robert C. Elliott, a residue of its ritual origins in magical utterances and curses. For Elliott, satire is a performative genre in a true Austinian sense of the word, a variety of literature that seeks to change the world not through the rhetorical (perlocutionary) work of persuasion but through the infinitely more powerful (illocutionary) work of divine or demonic fiat.¹² Elliott, writing in 1960, thus anticipates by more than twenty years the notion of what Judith Butler, following Pierre Bourdieu, calls “social magic.”¹³ Satire for Elliott is a form of “excitable speech” *par excellence*, and it may not be wholly coincidental that probably the most politically explosive novel of our time, Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, contains extended rumination on the ways in which satire works its necromancy. As the field of modernist studies attends to an ever-wider sphere of cultural activities, this excitability of satiric speech offers vivid illustration of how literary texts circulate dynamically and unpredictably within culture.

Third, and last, this same aspect of the magical and the ritual dimension of satire makes the reading of satire valuable for an understanding of modernism’s fraught engagement with the “primitive.”¹⁴ Whether Elliott’s account of the origins of satire is a historical truth or merely an anthropological fantasy is irrelevant to the value of his fundamental insight: in calling up transgressive affects, satire seeks to recover – or, if you prefer, simply to *produce* – for a desensitized modernity a thrilling authenticity of feeling. Such a thrill would counter the “waning of affect” that Jameson sees as characteristic of the postmodern (1991, 11) but which (I will argue) can be spotted during the decades more often designated as the modernist period. In the context of modernism, satire’s regressive or “primitivist” tendencies, in other words, might be seen as a reaction to the rationalization of affect that Georg Simmel identified as a crucial problem in modern metropolitan life.



“Chapter One: General Connolly at Ukaka from the painting of a native artist”



“Chapter Four: Viscount Boaz and Mme Fifi at the Victory Ball”

For numerous reasons, then, Waugh’s 1932 novel *Black Mischief* is a felicitous text for examining such questions: its African setting, its satiric humor, its representation of transgressive practices such as cannibalism all speak to the way in which modernist satire, engaging with the primitive, seeks to reconfigure affect. Even beyond these qualities, moreover, the novel’s controversial critical reception – Waugh, a recent convert to Catholicism, was assailed by the Catholic press for his immorality – suggests that satire yet retains some of its old magic power. For this last reason I aim in this essay to offer not only a reading of the novel but a reading of its reading – a phrase I use in two senses. First is what I call the phenomenological sense: I examine the psychodynamic events that happen when “we” read (that is, when an imaginary “ideal reader” or “implied reader” reads) Waugh’s satire.¹⁵ Second,

but equally important, is what I call the historical sense: I analyze the critical reception that the novel received in the Catholic press when it was first printed. For the controversy that emerged in 1933 offers a vantage point not only on Waugh's explicitly articulated ideas about satire and modernity, morality and fiction, but even more valuably, on the necessary contradictions that his method and mode forced upon him; it reveals the extent to which Waugh not only wrote, but was written by, satire. The transgressive satiric comedy of *Black Mischief* escapes the control of its own author and thus invites charges of immorality and cruelty, charges that for the rest of his life – indeed, even in death – would continue to dog the wag.



“Frontispiece: H. I. M. Seth of Azania from the painting by a native artist”



"Chapter Two: Prudence and William"

II

Black Mischief, published in October 1932, interweaves several plots in a manic fashion that nearly defies summary.¹⁶ Broadly speaking, the novel is about the clash of modern and pre-modern life. Basil Seal, a shiftless young Englishman, leaves his decadent circle of London party-going for the East African island kingdom of Azania, a racial and religious hodge-podge at the crossroads of African, Arab, Indian and European cultures. There he becomes an advisor to an old acquaintance from his Oxford days, the Azanian Emperor Seth, who, in the name of "Progress," is attempting to modernize his nation by introducing, at all costs, such Western amenities as railroads, Montessori schools and birth control. But the vast, if comic, failures of these schemes provoke unrest, and anarchy erupts: Seth and his rival for the throne are both killed; Basil's lover, Prudence, flees in an airplane that crashes in the jungle; Basil, indulging in funeral rites for Seth, partakes of a meat stew in which, he later

discovers, Prudence has been cooked. Basil returns to London apparently unruffled by the horrific act of cannibalism that, for most readers, has darkly undercut the raucous laughter of the novel.

Despite its outrageousness, *Black Mischief* does not seem significantly more offensive than Waugh's first two novels, *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*. The timing of its publication, however, was bad. It was Waugh's first novel since his conversion to Catholicism in 1930 and Pope Pius XI had recently issued an encyclical in opposition to "immodest" books.¹⁷ Waugh could expect to receive attention from the Catholic press, and sure enough, in January 1933 the book received a scathing mention by the editor of the Catholic weekly *The Tablet*, Father Earnest Oldmeadow, an elderly man of middlebrow tastes who, despite his name, was not Waugh's own fictional creation:

A year or two ago, paragraphs appeared in various newspapers announcing that Mr. Evelyn Waugh, a novelist, had been received into the Church. Whether Mr. Waugh still considers himself a Catholic, *The Tablet* does not know; but in case he is so regarded by booksellers, librarians, and novel-readers in general, we hereby state that his latest novel would be a disgrace to anyone professing the Catholic name. We refuse to print its title or to mention its publishers. Indeed, this paragraph is not to be read as a review.¹⁸

That a leading Catholic journal would fail to give five stars and a string of superlatives to a story of fornication and cannibalism is hardly surprising, yet Waugh seems to have been blindsided. Catholic friends and supporters responded with letters and, as attacks and defenses sallied back and forth in the pages of *The Tablet*, Oldmeadow was forced to cite passages he found distasteful. These included the depiction of pre-marital sex; the ridicule of "[t]wo humane ladies" (*L*, 73) who visit Azania on a campaign for animal rights; a Birth Control Gala held by the Emperor in the name of modernization (and the renaming of the site of the Anglican Cathedral, "Place Marie Stopes"); the mocking description of some heretical Nestorian monks; and, finally, Basil Seal's consumption of the body of his lover Prudence "stewed to pulp among peppers and aromatic roots" (*L*, 73; *BM*, 300).

In his own defense, stated in a letter of May 1933 addressed to Cardinal Bourne of Westminster (who officially owned the magazine), Waugh offers three interrelated arguments, although not in any systematic fashion.¹⁹ The most prominent is that Oldmeadow missed his irony, that the editor read the novel "with a literal-mindedness that is scarcely sane" (*L*, 74) and that his meaning should be clear to any "reader who [is] not either semi-literate or else ill-intentioned" (*L*, 75). In Waugh's view, Oldmeadow's shocking failure to see the novel's obvious irony caused him to misread radically the author's values, to hold the novelist responsible for the sins of his characters.

At times Waugh extends and modifies this argument, asserting that his irony not only acquits him of the charge of endorsing immoral actions, but actually constitutes a denunciation of those actions. Instead of merely *distancing* himself from immorality, he *condemns* it. *Contra* Oldmeadow, he ridiculed the old ladies "solely [because] they were *not* humane" (*L*, 73; Waugh's italics) because in their zeal to protect animals they are blind to human misery. He created a ludicrous scene of the liberal Emperor's Birth Control Gala to mock the notion of contraception and thus to further the ends of Catholicism; he calls the scene "an attempt, however ineffectual, to prosper the cause which we all have so closely at heart" (*L*, 76).²⁰ This second argument implies a notion of satire based on what Wayne Booth calls "stable irony"; Waugh suggests that any intelligent reader can detect his irony and by a simple inversion recuperate his intended meaning.²¹ His satiric representation of the follies of Azania has a legitimate moral purpose behind it. Such a position firmly situates Waugh in a critical tradition that views satire as a fundamentally conservative and moralistic mode, ridiculing folly and vice with the aim of moral correction.²²

Waugh's third defense, finally, is related to the arguments of missed irony and implicit morality, though not quite identical to them. This is the defense of fictionality: "Now had the ladies in question been real people," Waugh writes, "I can conceive that it might be wrong to ridicule them . . . But these, my Lord Cardinal, are wholly fictitious characters" (*L*, 73). In addition to confusing author and character, then, Oldmeadow committed what we might call, after the right-wing politician and cultural

critic of the early 1990s, the "Dan Quayle fallacy": he failed to recognize the difference between fictional entities and real human beings. The violence, Waugh reminds us, is unreal violence, the cruelty only play-cruelty.

Implicit in all three defenses – irony, morality, fictionality – is the notion that to represent an action is not to condone it. Yet Waugh, adhering to Catholic doctrine, is sensitive to the charge of "immodesty" – that whatever the author's intention, depiction of certain immoral activities, in particular lewd ones, might inflame the sinful urges of a reader. (It is out of this very modesty that Oldmeadow himself hesitates to describe the details of Waugh's novel.) Waugh, however, insists that he has been particularly sensitive to represent sexual transgressions as elliptically as possible: "Now there is nothing in my statement of Basil and Prudence's relationship which could be taken as inflammatory by the most prurient. The few details I give of the occurrence all tend in exactly the opposite direction" (*L*, 76).²³ Strange as it may sound, Waugh actually prides himself on *restraint*. He concedes that in certain cases representing an immoral action might encourage its practice, but argues that in the case of his novel just the contrary is true.²⁴

Nonetheless, Waugh's are sensible arguments that appeal to educated readers who think themselves capable of discerning irony and who believe the pleasure they take in Waugh's writings to be harmless. But although to contemporary liberal ears Waugh appears to make short work of the slow-witted Oldmeadow, might the indignant editor have had a point? Not only are Waugh's arguments potentially contradictory – if fictional events are necessarily harmless, can they still be edifying? – but they also may not fully stand up to a reader's experience of Waugh's novels. Few readers pick up Waugh's satires for an illustration of Catholic dogma, or even for a warning about the dangers of liberal humanism. Waugh himself often disavowed such dogmatic aims, and his insistence on the morality of his work seems somewhat disingenuous. And although some of Oldmeadow's citations from *Black Mischief* seem anything but offensive to most readers today, there are other instances – for example, the Irish General Connolly's repeated references to his African wife as "Black Bitch" – that seem to betray racist and imperialist prejudices, and that may in fact offend readers even more today than in 1932. Giving Oldmeadow the benefit of the doubt, we might grant that something beyond literal-mindedness or stupidity provoked his disgust, and might even provoke our own.

We can begin with Waugh's claim that fictionality justifies his satire. This is of course one of the oldest defenses of poetry: "The poet nothing affirmeth." Few would deny that fictional cruelty and violence are preferable to nonfictional; most readers can take more pleasure in representations of sadism when they understand the events represented to be unreal. But the relation of fictional people to real ones is more vexed than Waugh implies, particularly given his own propensity toward the *roman à clef*. It might be pointed out, as Waugh's biographer Martin Stannard notes, that many of the novel's characters were in fact based on people Waugh knew: the libidinous and daffy Prudence Courteney was based on Esme Barton, the daughter of the British consul in Abyssinia; General Connolly shares a surname with Cyril Connolly whose wife, Christopher Sykes claims, was of relatively dark complexion (Stannard, 342). But even if the novelist is granted the license to draw upon and transform his own experiences, one should probably assume that Oldmeadow realized he was reading a work of fiction. The argument implicit in his criticism is, rather, that Waugh was attacking not simply these specific fictional entities, or individual people "behind" them, but also the many real people who might resemble them. Even more abstractly, Oldmeadow's sympathy for the animal-rights activists, Mildred Porch and Sarah Tin, might be taken as a recognition of the sadistic feelings that get unleashed when the reader watches the women suffer comically through the hardship of the civil war. According to this line of argument, fiction becomes merely a screen for the author to hide behind while he hurls his invective, a technicality that allows him to disavow responsibility for the cruelty he inflicts. A full examination of the ontological status of fictional characters isn't possible here, but Waugh's assertion of no connection between fiction and reality seems hardly more plausible than Oldmeadow's conflation of the two.²⁵

If fictionality can't fully hold up as a defense of Waugh's cruelty, the interlocking arguments of irony and morality prove even trickier. Irony is famous for misfiring, and thus offers an exemplary

instance of a problem that deconstruction has seen as inherent in language.²⁶ *Black Mischief* itself illustrates this very point. In promoting his Birth Control Gala, Seth circulates a poster contrasting pictures of two families; one family, with multiple children, is poor, hungry, and disease-ridden, while the other, with a single child, sits in the midst of leisure and luxury; a headline asks, “*WHICH HOME DO YOU CHOOSE?*” (*BM*, 192). When the African populace sees the posters, the narrator remarks: “Nowhere was there any doubt about the meaning of the beautiful new pictures” (*BM*, 193). The narrative voice then assumes the perspective and idiom of the native African:

See: on right hand: there is rich man: smoke pipe like big chief: but his wife she no good: sit eating meat: and rich man no good: he only one son.

See: on left hand: poor man: not much to eat: but his wife she very good, work hard in field: man he good too: eleven children: one very mad, very holy. (*BM*, 193)

The poster’s rhetorical question, which assumes an answer in advance, is taken by the native Azanians *not* in its rhetorical sense but, in the spirit of Paul de Man’s reading of Yeats’s “Among School Children,” in its grammatical one. When no common cultural frame can stabilize intention, even propaganda, the most rigid of literary forms, becomes radically indeterminate in its meaning.²⁷

Yet even if one takes a more Boothian, less deconstructive view of irony, the implied moral stances of the novel remain troublesome. Take, for example, the issue of racism in the novel, specifically Connolly’s references to his wife as “Black Bitch.” To what extent is Connolly’s racism Waugh’s own? That question can’t be answered unless one first asks another: how does the joke play on a reader’s sensibilities and beliefs to produce laughter (if indeed it does)? Connolly first uses the nickname when the Emperor rewards him with a meaningless title:

“Connolly, I shall make you a Duke.”

“That’s nice of you, Seth. I don’t mind so much for myself but Black Bitch will be pleased as punch about it.”

“And, Connolly.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you think that when she is a Duchess, it might be more suitable if you were to try and call your wife by another name. You see there will probably be a great influx of distinguished Europeans for my coronation. We wish to break down colour barriers as far as possible. Your name for Mrs. Connolly, though suitable as a term of endearment in the home, seems to emphasize the racial distinction between you in a way which might prove disconcerting.”

“I dare say you’re right, Seth. I’ll try and remember when we’re in company. But I shall always think of her as Black Bitch somehow.” (*BM*, 58)

On one level, the laughter here emerges from the matter-of-fact way in which Seth and Connolly, whether out of misplaced priorities or social awkwardness, turn a question of racial attitudes into one of political appearances. The fear of offending Europeans with racist attitudes is what motivates Seth, and he and Connolly seem to agree on both the suitability of the nickname in the home and its awkwardness in public. The very formality of Seth’s circumlocution and the reticence with which he broaches the topic suggest a trivialization of the epithet. Waugh appears to recognize that Seth and Connolly are both racist, as are (in all likelihood) the Europeans they are so afraid of offending.

But this doesn’t quite get the author off the hook. For with every recurrence of this running joke, every “Black Bitch” dropped casually into conversation, the author asks for another laugh. Connolly’s African wife has no other name in the text, and the narrator himself uses the epithet: “Black Bitch flashed a great, white grin of pleasure at the compliment. It was a glorious night for her; it would have been rapture enough to have her man back from the wars; but to be made a Duchess and taken to supper among all the white ladies” (*BM*, 139-40). Is this a racist caricature of an African point of view? Can it possibly be justified as a representation of the way in which racial hierarchies are

reproduced in the colonial consciousness? As long as we're at it, isn't the entire representation of Azania laden with racism, from the "black, naked, anthropophagus" (*BM*, 11) natives to the foolish and incompetent Emperor, parading his Oxford diploma, eager to discuss Surrealism and the Dreyfus Affair, but unable to see how far his own nation lags behind the Western ideal he admires? Yet while these may be valid interpretive questions, answering them is to a large degree beside the point. For it is surely too simple to say either that Waugh participates in this kind of racism or that he condemns it. Waugh shows us this racism neither to enforce nor to challenge our own prejudices but rather to make us laugh. The very shock of the phrase "Black Bitch" punctures whatever restraints, social or moral, external or internal, that keep racist thoughts or feelings in check. Offering a moral defense of Waugh's views on race (or empire, or gender) is thus not only an uphill battle, but also a needless one. Author, narrator, and characters all violate ethical norms, and the violation is exactly what produces the laughter.

However sympathetic, therefore, a reader may be to Waugh's insistence on his moral and religious integrity, his interpretation of his own work seems inadequate, since his argument gives superficial treatment to a variety of theoretical questions related to his comic method. Tracing the sources of laughter is a tricky business, and theories of the comic notoriously abound. But without attempting a new grand theory, I want to emphasize the transgressive nature of much of our laughter in this novel, and in all of Waugh's early works – and to suggest that for Waugh transgression is often an end in itself.²⁸ For what amuses Waugh and his readers seems to be precisely the same cluster of phenomena as what offends Oldmeadow. It is not a question of a joke being *either* offensive *or* funny. Outrage and amusement have the same stimulus.

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud notes that for the hearer of a joke to find it amusing, she must be in a similar psychic state to the joke-teller: "Some degree of benevolence or a kind of neutrality, an absence of any factor that could produce feelings opposed to the purpose of the joke, is an indispensable condition if the third person is to collaborate in the completion of the joke."²⁹ If someone is too greatly offended, her outrage will interfere with the pleasure that the joke would otherwise provide. For this reason the sort of joke that Freud calls "tendentious" is especially likely to meet opposition in the hearer; with tendentious jokes, there is opposition not only to the form of the joke, or the fact of joking – what Freud calls "the joking envelope" (Freud, 110) – but also to the *content* of it. Yet it is crucial to point out that the tendentious joke only provides pleasure because it *can* offend – that is, because it circumvents the internal moral censor that would otherwise keep certain transgressive sources of pleasure off-limits.³⁰ If someone's censor is too strong, she will feel only outrage; the more sacred the taboo transgressed, the fewer the hearers or readers who will be able to overcome their inhibitions and find the joke funny. By the same logic, the more "outrageous" Waugh's comedy becomes, the more uneasy we are likely to be with our laughter. Thus Waugh creates jokes that can offend and amuse at the same time. In short, *we can laugh even when we believe the moral stricture that is circumvented to be completely legitimate*. Laughter can be directed not simply at hypocritical, moralistic posturings, but at valid moral laws to which we sincerely subscribe. A transgressive joke does not distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate moral censors, only between strong and weak ones.³¹

To return, then, to the case of Mildred Porch and Sarah Tin, the animal rights activists, we see how problematic a moral defense is, even when the irony appears relatively "stable." As I have already mentioned, Waugh claims in his letter that the immorality of Mildred and Sarah justifies the novel's cruel treatment of them: "[W]hile they professed an exaggerated solicitude for the welfare of animals, they treated each other and all the human beings with whom they came into contact with a gross lack of consideration" (*L*, 73). The text in this case fully supports Waugh's reading of his own work. Mildred writes in her diary, for example, gems such as these:

Disembarked Matodi 12.45. Quaint and smelly. Conditions of dogs and horses appalling, also children. (BM, 206)

Saw Roman ministry. Unhelpful. Typical dago attitude towards animals. (BM, 207)

Fed doggies in market place. Children tried to take food from doggies. Greedy little wretches. (BM, 207)

Yet if we accept Waugh's own moral justification for his treatment of these characters, we must integrate it into our understanding of the dynamics of the reader's engagement with the novel. That is, the moral justification for cruelty is not merely an extra-textual phenomenon, but part of the process of reading; it helps to make acceptable for the reader what otherwise would be merely offensive. For while holding the moral high ground may justify the sadistic pleasure we enjoy when we see the ladies suffer, it cannot *constitute* that pleasure. Indeed, the moral impulse of satire, instead of working *against* cruelty or aggression, actually turns out to *sanction* these feelings. The censor is, so to speak, brought over to the other side.³²

Waugh's comedy, then, generates conflicting impulses in the reader, amusement and outrage, and a reader may experience one or both of these, depending on her own psychic state. What determines this psychic state, moreover, is highly variable. In fact, the neutrality or benevolence Freud sees as necessary to the enjoyment of a joke suggests a capacity to *be* neutral – a capacity that in turn might rest on various social and psychological factors: race, gender, and ethnicity, but also all kinds of finer ways in which subject position might vary with temperament and experience. To laugh at certain jokes is to betray, or create, or solidify a social identity or affiliation. Waugh's comedy convenes an audience that possesses the neutrality necessary not to be bothered by the cruelty of his comedy. This is a specific kind of cultural capital, an ability to read in a certain manner. One way that modernism has been understood recently is as precisely such a form of cultural capital, a set of rules for reading (often difficult) texts that, when mastered, distinguish its educated readers from an ever-growing literate – or to use Waugh's word, "semi-literate" – public.³³ To this extent, Oldmeadow (and Dan Quayle, Rudolph Giuliani, Jesse Helms, etc.) would be considered philistines precisely to the extent that they are not modern. The capacity to laugh at certain transgressive acts rests on the neutrality Freud describes, which in turn relies on a subject position that is determined by both psychological and sociological factors. Waugh had this capacity; Oldmeadow didn't.

Understanding this capacity to laugh requires also an analysis of the category of character in satire and the messy question of "identification." Wyndham Lewis himself was addressing this issue precisely at the time Waugh was composing *Black Mischief*. Lewis's 1934 *Men Without Art*, something between a treatise and a manifesto, claims satire as a name for an artistic practice that deploys an "external method." Lewis's satire rejects the interiority of Joyce and Woolf, and offers instead a vision of the human as mechanical. In this way it seeks to eradicate the humanist concept of character.³⁴ Thus when Lewis quotes Hazlitt's comparison of Shakespeare and Jonson, he endorses Hazlitt's analysis of the two writers but not his implicit evaluative judgment. Hazlitt writes: "Shakespeare's characters are men; Ben Jonson's are more like machines, governed by mere routine, or by the convenience of the poet, whose property they are."³⁵ For Lewis, Jonson initiates an important reconception of character, an "objective" or "external" conception that obliterates mushy bourgeois ideas of the ethical: "Physical deformity . . . is often comic. Many dwarfs are highly grotesque (superbly grotesque, one may say . . .), and they even relish the sensation of their funniness. But most people only laugh covertly at such spectacles, or sternly repress a smile. For, they would say, these are 'things' which should 'provoke pity or disgust, instead of laughter.' Such is the Anglo-Saxon point of view" (Lewis, 112). Aligning himself with a purported Mediterranean tradition that, uninhibited by Protestant moral repression, openly acknowledges the comedy of the grotesque, Lewis maintains that the more distance or "outsideness" we can gain on human behavior the more it will entertain us. Waugh himself reviewed Lewis's pamphlet "Satire and Fiction" in October, 1930 and enthusiastically endorsed this notion of externality; to a large degree his fiction puts Lewis's theory into practice (*EAR*, 102). Indeed, numerous critics of Waugh have noted that keeping his characters weak, passive, and unheroic is central to his technique.³⁶ For example, in the case of Prudence Courteney being cooked

and eaten, it is essential that the reader fail to identify with her, that he view her from the outside. To become emotionally identified would almost certainly overwhelm a reader with anxiety or pity and prevent the scene from coming across as even ambiguously comic.

Yet even as a reader fails to identify with Prudence, the scene does rely on a more covert identification with Basil. Thus Lewis's idea of satire might be modified by that of another contemporary, Kenneth Burke: "[T]he satirist attacks *in others*," writes Burke, "the weaknesses and temptations that are really *within himself*."³⁷ Founded on an act of projection, satire for Burke works out the classical Freudian ambivalence of id and superego, of gratifying a drive and punishing the enjoyment of this gratification: "A is a satirist. In excoriating B for his political views, A draws upon the imagery of the secret vice shared by both. A thereby *gratifies* and *punishes* the vice within himself" (Burke, 49, original emphasis). Thus in the case of Basil's cannibalism, a reader experiences vicariously through him the violation of one of our most abiding taboos.³⁸ The experience is, however briefly, liberating, even if it is colored by disgust. To the extent that we identify with Basil as a victim, we feel revulsion; but to the extent that he acts out an unconscious fantasy, we have tapped into a generally inaccessible source of pleasure. Yet if we identify with Basil, then Waugh's whole argument of unappreciated irony becomes less compelling. The author can no longer disavow responsibility for the actions of his characters, since he is the one who, as it were, prepared the stew for Basil to eat. His claim to irony, like his claims to fictionality and morality, becomes merely a legal fiction.

We might pause here to distinguish what seem to be two related but not entirely congruent sources of pleasure that satire now seems to afford.³⁹ First there is the pleasure of transgression, achieved through identification with a taboo-breaking character. This pleasure is justified – indeed heightened – by irony or fictionality that mitigates the identification, allowing us, as it were, to have it both ways, to keep the transgression "virtual." Second, however, is the sadistic pleasure of punishment – seeing Mildred and Sarah suffer *because* of their cruelty, seeing Prudence eaten *because* of her promiscuity. This is the pleasure that morality justifies. Representation of vice brings out the first kind of pleasure, while ridicule of it brings out the second. This is not to say that such sadistic pleasure is not transgressive, but rather that while the first kind of pleasure derives specifically from the actions of a character, the second seems to derive more from a quasi-authorial or narratorial attitude, what the text itself is doing. The laughter that Waugh's comedy elicits thus issues from a complicated dynamic whereby we can identify with the perpetrators of vice, distance ourselves from its victims, and justify our position through defensive constructions. Of course it is never so neat in the actual reading: different sources of pleasure cannot always be disentangled, and to the extent that our defenses do not function successfully, we find our pleasure mitigated by pity, revulsion, guilt, or even – as in the case of Father Oldmeadow – outrage.

III

Such a phenomenological-psychoanalytic treatment of reading, even when situated in the immediate reception of Waugh's novel, might tend to universalize reading into a process untouched by history. But the story of *Black Mischief*'s reception is also a story about modernity, modernism, and their affective protocols. Waugh may not have thought himself a modernist, but his fiction is full of the detritus, both objective and subjective, of early twentieth-century modernity. David Lodge notes that Waugh's novels are some of the first in which the idiosyncrasies of telephone communication play an important role in the plot, and that Waugh's commentless "cutting" from scene to scene likely derives from new cinematic techniques.⁴⁰ The novel *Black Mischief* itself revolves around the comedy of modernization, the absurd failures that result from the willful, directed imposition of modern technologies and social practices onto a pre-modern, or not yet fully modern, society. More specifically still, Waugh is quintessentially modern in his representation of a subjective state unique to modernity, that of boredom. Elizabeth Goodstein argues that despite the resemblance of boredom to older terms for similar affective states (*tedium vitae*, *acedia*, *melancholy*), boredom as an English-

language term first emerges only in *Bleak House*, published in 1852.⁴¹ Boredom for Goodstein is a peculiarly modern condition, resulting from a familiar nexus of social developments (such as secularization, the separation of public and private spheres, and the rise of the nation-state) but masquerading as an ahistorical human feeling.⁴²

Boredom as such bears a strong resemblance to what one of Waugh's most astute critics, Ian Littlewood, has called "sophistication" in Waugh's fiction, a term Littlewood defines as "the refusal to be shocked, disoriented, embarrassed or involved" (Littlewood, 14).⁴³ Goodstein notes that for writers such as the Goncourts, boredom "was deemed a sign of spiritual distinction" (Goodstein, 172). For them, "ennui distinguishes the true literary personage for whom lack of popular success only confirms an inborn aversion to the modern world" (Goodstein, 173). This aloofness, which can look very much like a passive kind of cruelty, functions similarly throughout Waugh's work (the Bright Young Things of *Vile Bodies*, the adulterous Brenda Last in *A Handful of Dust*), and is part of Waugh's debt to his dandyish and aestheticist precursors. Such bored sophistication is on display in *Black Mischief* in the post-coital dialogue between Prudence and her lover, the appropriately named William Bland:

"I've invented a new way of kissing. You do it with your eye-lashes."
"I've known that for years. It's called a butterfly kiss."
"Well, you needn't be so high up about it. I only do these things for your benefit."
"It was very nice, darling. I only said it wasn't very new."
"I don't believe you liked it at all."
"It was so like the stinging thing."
"Oh, how maddening it is to have no one to make love to except you."
"Sophisticated voice."
"That's not sophisticated. It's my gramophone record voice. My sophisticated voice is quite different. It's like this."
"I call that American."
"Shall I do my vibrant-with-passion voice?"
"No."
"Oh, dear, men are hard to keep amused." Prudence sat up and lit a cigarette. "I think you're effeminate and undersexed," she said, "and I hate you."
"That's because you're too young to arouse serious emotion." (*BM*, 60)

Sophistication here conjoins many things: a desire for novelty, particularly sexual novelty (both in partners and in activities); an inability either to possess or to value "serious emotion"; a framing of all emotional expression in ironic (bored) tones; an assimilation of cultural attitudes disseminated by new technologies (here, as in *The Waste Land*, represented by the gramophone); and a self-conscious recognition of one's own pretensions that preserves the value of sophistication even as it mocks it.

Even such a seemingly insignificant passage of dialogue such as the above should suffice to indicate the necessary location of these forms of affect within a modern, capitalist society. The "sophisticated voice" that Waugh's characters affect is quite similar to what Georg Simmel called "the blasé attitude": "The blasé person . . . has completely lost the feeling for value differences. He experiences all things as being of an equally dull and grey hue, as not worth getting excited about, particularly where the will is concerned."⁴⁴ For Simmel, boredom is a rationalization of affect that arises as a response to the hyperstimulation of the metropolis and the pressures of the modern economy; as such it is a sign of a subjective struggle against the demands of modernity. "Self-preservation," Simmel writes, "is obtained at the cost of devaluing the entire objective world."⁴⁵ As Goodstein explains, boredom for Simmel thus emerges out of a gulf between the particular and the total – between the meaningless, rationalized, routinized activities demanded by modernity and the desire for a meaningful totality no longer available: "'Boredom' is a name for the state in which the lived discrepancy between the involvement with transient means and their value in a larger vision of existence enters subjective awareness" (Goodstein, 259). Boredom becomes in this way for Simmel

more than merely the status marker the Goncourts made of it; it registers dissatisfaction with the modern yet fails to comprehend or analyze that dissatisfaction.

Thus it is that in Waugh's novel, boredom is not only a social marker; it becomes an emotional, existential and, not least of all, narrative problem that signifies, in Simmel's language, an inability to find value in the objective world. Living the blasé attitude, Basil Seal, the closest thing *Black Mischief* has to a protagonist, moves from one late-night drunken party to the next in his search for new experiences, but has reached the point where nothing can stimulate him. We learn in an exchange with an elderly member of his club:

"Don't you hate London?"

"Eh?"

"Don't you hate London?"

"No, I do not. Lived here all my life. Never get tired of it. Fellow who's tired of London is tired of life." (*BM*, 90)

Basil *is* tired of life, and it is this very fatigue that makes him so interested in trivia such as "Indian dialects" (*BM*, 93) – an interest, ironically, that makes Basil himself a bore to his friends. "The truth about Basil is just that he's a *bore*," one girl says, and when her friend points out that Basil has "done all kinds of odd things," the first girl retorts: "Well, yes, and I think that's so boring too" (*BM*, 93). The attempt to escape boredom, alas, only proliferates it.

Basil's boredom and boringness drives him to leave London for Azania, and thus to launch the plot of the novel itself. Basil explains his motives to his mother: "Every year or so there's one place on the globe worth going to where things are happening. The secret is to find out where and be on the spot in time . . . History doesn't happen everywhere at once" (*BM*, 112). This search for meaning through the participation in global historical change gives rise not only to the plot of *Black Mischief*, but also – to push the point – to the very interest in the primitive and the exotic that so often structures the modernist relation to the non-western world. Aside from the obvious motives of economic exploitation, colonial – or here, newly postcolonial – sites offered not simply newness but an emotional authenticity to counter the deadening effects of the European present. If Picasso weren't bored with European art, he might never have picked up those African masks.⁴⁶

Basil's quest, then, departs subtly from the paradigmatic novelistic plot as formulated first by Lukács and later by Benjamin as a search for the meaning of life on the part of a hero who senses the fragmented nature of modern existence. Such a formulation, Lukács's "transcendental homelessness" – which, Goodstein argues, owes a direct debt to Simmel's diagnosis of the subjective resistance to the demands of modernity (Goodstein, 268) – posits a gulf between an inner need and an outer meaning.⁴⁷ Yet Basil's desire only hints at such a heroic, Lukácsian scale. For Basil (who possesses, à la Lewis's prescriptions, only a minimal interiority) seeks not the meaning of life but merely *amusement*. Amusement – as opposed to pleasure, or joy, or ecstasy – designates only a base-level pleasurable somatic stimulus, the smallest possible elevation of affect above boredom itself. Thus where Lukács finds in the grand aspirations of the novelistic (typically nineteenth-century) subject a heroic desire for meaning, Waugh replaces the heroic *character* with a Lewisian *type*, one whose innermost desires are no more than itches, whims and hankerings.

The most visible example of the blasé attitude occurs on Basil's return from Azania to London, at his first appearance in the novel since the cannibalism scene. His friend Sonia Trumpington says that during his trip she heard vague news of Azania: "Some revolution and a minister's daughter who disappeared. I suppose you were in on all that" (*BM*, 304). As we know, Basil *has* been in on it, and in fact he's also been in on every other cliché of exotic adventure that Sonia asks him about: running the country, falling in love, executing political rivals, eating human flesh. Basil acknowledges all of these activities with utter calm – although in the sophisticated, ironic register in which he and Sonia speak it's fairly clear that Sonia doesn't believe him. Or rather, it's clear that the question of her belief is irrelevant; she's simply not interested; she's bored even with cannibalism. "I just don't want to hear

about it" (*BM*, 304) she says, and suggests that Basil write a book about it. Travel narrative itself, whether Basil's book, or *Black Mischief*, or its predecessor, Waugh's nonfictional *Remote People* (1930), not only is born out of boredom, but itself becomes boring. For both "a stay-at-home" (*BM*, 305) like Sonia and a globe-trotter like Basil, cannibalism is a case of "been there, done that."

In Waugh, moreover, this boredom doesn't merely exist on the level of character or social interaction; it translates into narrative style. Characteristic of Waugh's wit is a species of understatement, the introduction of outrageous details in a deadpan or nonchalant tone. No moment captures this technique better than the belated revelation that the Emperor Seth has been waging an armed struggle against his own father. A war has been underway from the very opening of the novel, but not until page 57, with the defeat of Seth's rival, do Seth and General Connolly exchange the following words:

"And the usurper Seyid, did he surrender?"

"Yes, he surrendered all right. But, look here, Seth, I hope you aren't going to mind about this, but you see how it was, well, you see Seyid surrendered and . . ."

"You don't mean you've let him escape?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that, but the fact is, he surrendered to a party of Wanda . . . and, well, you know what the Wanda are."

"You mean . . ."

"Yes, I'm afraid so. I wouldn't have had it happen for anything. I didn't hear about it until afterwards."

"They should not have eaten him – after all, he was my father . . ." (*BM*, 57; Waugh's ellipses)

If the characters here are astonishingly restrained in their emotions, so too is the narrator. In fact, the discovery that Seyid, the "usurper" against whom Seth has been waging war, is Seth's own father is almost missed because of the greater shock that his father has been eaten by cannibals. Why hasn't the narrator yet mentioned the identity of the "usurper"? It's simply nothing to speak of.

Waugh's use of narratorial indirection exhibits the same blasé style. For example, when the Minister of the Interior gets drunk at a state dinner, he must be carried back by his slaves "to Mme. 'Fifi,' of whose charms he had been loudly boasting through the evening with splendour of anatomical detail which was, fortunately, unintelligible to many of the people present" (*BM*, 178). The language here is loaded with euphemism ("charms," "anatomical detail") that a word such as "splendour" subtly undermines; "splendour," though itself euphemistic, suggests not only an aesthetic dimension to the Minister's description but, consequently, a covert narratorial participation in the pleasure of the representation of Mme. Fifi's anatomy – a pleasure that the final, somewhat moralistic relative clause cannot fully stifle. Waugh's narratorial restraint in the representation of sex (a restraint, that we've seen, on which Waugh prides himself in his letter to the Cardinal) proves here to be *exactly what gives offense*. Although it is not wrong to call Waugh's comedy "outrageous," it would be more accurate to say that it functions through a contrast of outrageousness and calm. Waugh's representation of transgression may indeed imply a moral failure – it is "fortunate," he writes, that many people didn't hear the Interior Minister's quasi-pornographical monologue – but it continuously oscillates between such an imputation of moral failure and a pleased, unruffled acceptance of it.

This blasé attitude, then, appears on every level of the text: in the attitudes of characters, in the impetus for the plot, in the voice of the narrator, and even in the language of the extra-novelistic Waugh himself, writing in protest to the Cardinal of Westminster. In his letter, Waugh mocks Oldmeadow's condemnation of the cannibalism scene: "*The Tablet* quotes the fact that [Prudence] was stewed with pepper, as being in some way a particularly lubricious process. But this is a peculiar prejudice of the Editor's, attributable perhaps, like much of his criticism, to defective digestion. It cannot matter whether she was roasted, grilled, braised or pickled, cut into sandwiches or devoured hot on toast as a savoury; the fact is that the wretched girl was cooked and eaten, and that is obviously and admittedly a disagreeable end" (*L*, 77). Contrary to Waugh's assertion, there is indeed something

"lubricious" in the detail of the pepper and aromatic roots. It is not the particular method of cooking *per se*, but rather the description of *any* such method in detail that is significant. One can sense the pleasure in Waugh's language as he considers the wonderful variety of potential recipes for preparing the hapless Prudence, like a Food Network chef exulting in the versatility of the potato.⁴⁸ Waugh's characteristic understatement, emerging here in phrases like "admittedly a disagreeable end," projects the same kind of calm worldliness that makes Basil's blasé return to London so shocking at the end of the novel. Oldmeadow sensed, even if he did not articulate, that when Waugh elaborates the physical details of culinary preparation, he puts the reader in the position of the gourmand, identifying with the eater, not the eaten. The terms of the debate have already shifted from moral to culinary ones.

The cannibalism scene in *Black Mischief* is of course (for most readers) not simply "disagreeable" but disturbing – this is an ancient taboo whose violation reminds us of the materiality of the human body.⁴⁹ In the words of C. Richard King, sources as central to Western culture as Herodotus and Shakespeare "engage anthropophagy to locate others . . . [to] mark the limits of the moral community."⁵⁰ But it should come as no surprise that, as Freud argued in linking cannibalism and Christian communion in *Totem and Taboo*, this cannibal "other" turns out to be the Western self: a sublimated or displaced cannibalism rests at the very heart of Christian culture. Enlarging on this insight, "[p]ostcolonial studies . . . have," as Maggie Kilgour notes, "suggested that the figure of the cannibal was created to support the cultural cannibalism of colonialism, through the projection of Western imperialist appetites onto the cultures they then subsumed."⁵¹ King points out that the neocolonial practices of tourism have been taken as a metaphoric cannibalism that "eats up" non-western cultures (King, 112). In this broad, metaphoric sense, then Waugh is a cannibal too, touring Africa and returning with not only with cultural material that he can use as a resource for his novelistic production, but also in fact *with affect itself*. His satire thus offers through its depiction of the (post)colonial – that is, through an importation of the postcolonial into the metropole – some amusement, some base-level pleasurable stimulus, to relieve the Londoner's boredom. Occasionally it even delivers more: a shock of transgression that can jolt some life into the blasé London stay-at-home.

For the unease that accompanies the transgressive scene of cannibalism – an unease not visible in Basil, or Sonia, even Waugh, but instead in a reader such as Oldmeadow – constitutes a raising of the novel's affective stakes. The reader moves beyond mere amusement into outrage or revulsion. This outrage or revulsion, it should be repeated, is notably *not* registered by Basil; the character has surpassed the reader in the pervasiveness of his boredom. More thoroughly than the typical modern city-dweller as described by Simmel, or the typical amusement-seeking satire-reader as imagined by Waugh, Basil has girded himself against stimulus, abstracted the world from qualitative to quantitative, rendered all experience interchangeable. And as Basil exceeds the reader, so Waugh, in the manifest pleasure he both enjoys and offers through his representation of the scene, exceeds the outraged Oldmeadow. Lewis claimed (without any deliberate reference to cannibalism) that satirists "must possess *an appetite* for what you regard as 'the horrors' that we 'perpetrate.'" Less disingenuously than Waugh, he owns up to the pleasure he takes in satiric transgression: "What you regard as hideous has the same claims on us even as your ravishing self. We are the reverse of squeamish. Nay, there is no doubt about it, from the standpoint of the sentimental lady-reviewer, we are 'coarse'" (Lewis, 228). But while Waugh may be more cagey, his language gives him away; he too has an appetite for the horrors he perpetrates.

Waugh's role as gourmand, with a whole sheaf of recipes on hand, thus positions him very close to Basil, and not only because of the hint that Basil may, like his creator, transform his travels into a consumable popular narrative. Both author and character, each with his own variety of blasé attitude – now figured as personal-cum-literary style – embody a characteristically *English* sophistication. To no one is the attraction of this style more powerful than the colonial outsider, the African Seth, the ultimate mimic man, who, on the night of his victory celebration, spies Basil and is "overcome by shyness" (*BM*, 146). Seth retreats into memory, recalling the rainy day when he had last seen his Oxford classmate: "He [Seth] had been an undergraduate of no account in his College, amiably classed among Bengali babus, Siamese and grammar school scholars as one of the remote and praiseworthy

people who had come a long way to the University. Basil had enjoyed a reputation of peculiar brilliance among his contemporaries” (*BM*, 146). Three years later, Seth has defeated his father and become Emperor of an island-nation, while Basil has only moved drunkenly from party to club to party. Yet “Basil still stood for [Seth] as the personification of all that glittering, intangible Western culture to which he aspired” (*BM*, 147). Compare now a description of the metropolitan ideal written some fifty years later:

Metropolitan – what did I mean by that? I had only a vague idea. I meant material which would enable me to compete with or match certain writers. And I also meant material that would enable me to display a particular kind of writing personality: J. R. Ackerley of *Hindoo Holiday*, perhaps, making notes under a dinner table in India; Somerset Maugham, aloof everywhere, unsurprised, immensely knowing; Aldous Huxley, so full of all kinds of knowledge and also so sexually knowing; Evelyn Waugh, so elegant so naturally.⁵²

The author is V. S. Naipaul, describing his search for a writing style as a new arrival in London. For Naipaul, Waugh and the other writers of his generation embody something vague, a “writing personality” that entails social, sexual, and aesthetic style: aloofness, experience, knowledge, elegance, nonchalance. Indeed, Waugh represents for Naipaul, as Basil represents for Seth, “the personification of all that glittering, intangible Western culture to which he aspired.”⁵³ Paradoxically, the colonial and the metropolitan here are shown to experience a reciprocal longing: as Waugh’s version of Africa, having been imported to London, is once again shipped out to the colonies, Naipaul comes to aspire to English sophistication – blaséness – just as Waugh, in his travels and novels, seeks those transgressive, regressive thrills that (he imagines) only the colonies can provide.

Waugh’s natural elegance, the “writing personality” that has made his persona and prose shimmer even in far-off Trinidad, is no less present in his letter to *The Tablet*. Notably, however, although Waugh in his letter by and large maintains the ability to transgress with poise, the calm, amused surface of his prose sometimes cracks to reveal his own moral indignation: “[I]s it not an intolerable scandal,” he asks, “that this letter should ever have been necessary” (*L*, 77)? Waugh’s outrage surfaces, provoked by Oldmeadow’s own indignation, itself provoked in turn by the outrageousness of *Black Mischief*. Fittingly then, Waugh concludes his letter to the Cardinal by expressing his anger and regret that “[I] now find myself dragged into this distasteful quarrel” (*L*, 78). Indignant that the mere accusations of obscenity and blasphemy, however ill founded, have sullied his name, Waugh wishes to remain uncontaminated, but he has been “dragged into” the mud of a public quarrel. The satirist, fashioning himself as a moral scourge, has himself been dirtied. Or to use Waugh’s other metaphor, the quarrel is “distasteful” – it forces on him an unsavory aftertaste of the whole episode of *Black Mischief*’s cannibalism.

Yet if Waugh’s blasé attitude gives way to righteous indignation, this oscillation is only a recapitulation of a dynamic that he and Oldmeadow had been acting out together for most of the debate. For the two men together literally perform a dialectic that, as I have tried to articulate, might be thought of as *internal* to satire: one is amused, the other outraged, one blasé, the other hysterical. Indeed, this is a dynamic that often occurs in public debate, where the very lack of outrage on one side becomes a spur for the increased outrage of the other. Ultimately, we don’t need to choose sides between Waugh and Oldmeadow on the morality of *Black Mischief*. They’re both right. As readers we can be both amused and outraged.

The dynamic between Waugh and Oldmeadow, then, rehearses a familiar script, with Oldmeadow playing Oliver to Waugh’s Stan – the one ever-increasing in affect, the other ever-waning. In this light, the debate in *The Tablet* begins to look like something of a vaudeville routine, and we should recognize that Waugh couldn’t score his comic points without Oldmeadow’s stupidly brilliant, or brilliantly stupid, set-up lines. In fact, their comedic routine suggests what Jameson, borrowing a term from Beckett’s *Unnameable*, calls “the agon of the pseudo-couple,” a phenomenon whereby subjectivity is dispersed or externalized into a dyad of characters. Drawing on the theory of characters

as functions or *actants* formulated by Propp and Greimas, Jameson notes in *Fables of Aggression* that a proper name in fiction can designate more than one narrative function while conversely, a single subjectivity can be split into more than one "character":

[T]his is a very different relational category from the conventional pairing of lovers or partners, of siblings or rivals; we need a different word to convey the symbiotic "unity" of this new "collective" subject, both reduplicated and divided at once. It is therefore useful . . . to designate as the pseudo-couple all those peculiar and as yet imperfectly studied pairs in literary history which reach well beyond the twin "heroes" of *The Childermass* and the familiar Beckett teams of Vladimir and Estragon, Hamm and Clov, Mercier and Camier, through Flaubert's Bouvard and Pecuchet . . . all the way back to Faust and Mephistopheles, and beyond them, to *Don Quixote*. (58)

Jameson's sweep across the centuries, far from being ahistorical, offers a cursory but discernible sketch of a history of the modern. My reading of the reading of *Black Mischief*, has, I hope, begun to fill in that sketch. Together Waugh and Oldmeadow externalize and dramatize the *agon* inherent in satire, a heated dialectic of outrage and indifference, morality and transgression, hysteria and fatigue, superego and id. Like Quixote and Sancho, or Didi and Gogo, or Ernie and Bert, Waugh and Oldmeadow are almost unimaginable alone. Indeed, to revise my earlier comment, Oldmeadow in a sense *is* Waugh's own creation. Had he never existed, Waugh would have had to invent him, for the satirist always imagines a less-than-ideal reader somewhere in the world who is fuming with outrage. Tied at the ankle they hobble off together – novelist and reader, satirist and critic, blasphemist and censor, cannibal and Catholic – feuding and griping all the way, as each psychically and structurally completes the other.



“Chapter Six: Frightful Hotel but Armenian proprietor very obliging”

Notes

¹ Waugh famously denied that he wrote satire: “Satire is a matter of period. It flourishes in a stable society and presupposes homogeneous moral standards – the early Roman Empire and eighteenth-century Europe. It is aimed at inconsistency and hypocrisy. It exposes polite cruelty and folly by exaggerating them. It seeks to produce shame. All this has no place in the Century of the Common Man where vice no longer pays lip service to virtue. The artist’s only service to the disintegrated society of today is to create little independent systems of order of his own. I foresee in the dark age opening that the scribes may play the part of the monks after the first barbarian victories. They were not satirists.” Evelyn Waugh, “Fan-Fare,” *The Essays, Articles, and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, ed.

Donat Gallagher (London: Methuen, 1983), 304. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the main body of the text as *EAR*.

² Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1979), 2.

³ This is not meant to slight some of the superlative work done on Waugh and modernism, particularly George McCartney, *Confused Roaring: Evelyn Waugh and the Modernist Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

⁴ A notable exception is the chapter on Waugh in Terry Eagleton's *Exiles and Emigres: Studies in Modern Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970).

⁵ In 1917 Pound announced his preference for "satire, which is due to emotion," over "any sham of emotion"; in the same year Eliot declared: "We only need the coming of a Satirist – no man of genius is rarer – to prove that the heroic couplet has lost none of its edge since Dryden and Pope laid it down." See Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect" in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 13; Eliot's statement is cited in Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 158.

⁶ Harry Levin's judgment is characteristic: "It is generally agreed that English satire enjoyed its heyday during the first half of the eighteenth century; it declined as, with the emergence of mere sentimental and romantic touchstones, wit deserted malice and mellowed into humor." Harry Levin, *Playboys and Killjoys: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 199-200.

⁷ Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Jessica Burstein, "A Few Words about Dubuque: Modernism, Sentimentalism, and the Blasé," *American Literary History* 14.2 (Summer 2002): 227-54. For a fuller discussion of the relation of modernism and satire, see Jonathan Greenberg, "Nathanael West and the Mystery of Feeling," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.3 (2006): 588-612.

⁸ A minor canon of works has emerged in the last five years: Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the "Death of the Subject"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Philip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press 2002); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); and most recently, Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁹ The crucial work here being Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

¹⁰ While some critics, such as Terada, distinguish *emotion*, *feeling*, *sentiment* and *affect*, I will not require such discriminations here.

¹¹ Jameson's discussion of Warhol and other shoe-paintings can be found in *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 1-16.

¹² Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960).

¹³ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), 156; Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 42.

¹⁴ For an authoritative treatment, see Marianne Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Torgovnick treats the question of affect, however, only indirectly.

¹⁵ I am aware of the pitfalls that come from positing such an ideal reader, and in my discussion I attempt to recognize the diversity of response that real-life readers may have to the same text.

¹⁶ Evelyn Waugh, *Black Mischief* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1932). References to the novel will be given in the text with the abbreviation *BM*.

¹⁷ Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years* (New York: Norton, 1987), 336. Biographical information is derived primarily from this source.

¹⁸ Cited by Waugh in *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Mark Amory (New Haven: Ticknor & Fields, 1980), 72. Future references to this volume will be provided in the text with the abbreviation *L*.

¹⁹ Waugh ultimately decided not to publish the letter.

²⁰ Pope Pius XI had in 1930 issued an encyclical prohibiting contraception, in response to the approval of limited contraception within marriage by a council of English Bishops.

²¹ For Booth “stable irony” is “intended but covert, stable and localized.” Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 7.

²² To cite only some classics in the theory of satire, Harry Levin argues that the satirist is “an ipso facto moralist”; Northrop Frye claims satire offers “an implicit moral standard”; Alvin Kernan states that satire relies in part on “a rigid moral system.” See Levin, *Playboys and Killjoys*, 197; Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 224; Alvin Kernan, *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 9.

²³ Waugh does concede that he may be guilty of an “artistic lapse,” though not a moral one, to the extent that he has inadequately “prepare[d] the reader for the sudden tragedy” of the climactic scene of cannibalism. In presenting this crucial scene, it is likely “that the transition was too rapid, that the catastrophe too large” (*L*, 77). The suddenness of Waugh’s tonal shifts, I argue elsewhere, is a crucial component of his style. See Jonathan Greenberg, ““Was Anyone Hurt?”: The Ends of Satire in *A Handful of Dust*,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 36.3 (Summer 2003): 351-73.

²⁴ Unseen by both men, a certain symmetry begins to appear between them: Oldmeadow must mention the novel without deigning to review it; Waugh must allude to his characters’ sins without deigning to depict them too vividly. Both men, in so far as they assume the role of moral guardian, themselves court the danger of immorality.

²⁵ One can argue, of course, that fiction may allow a certain engagement and play with sadistic attitudes that a morality might otherwise prevent. That is, one might accept Waugh's implied argument that delighting in the suffering of a fictional being is not immoral, while at the same time rejecting his claim that his characters bear no relation to real human beings.

²⁶ See Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, and Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

²⁷ Jerome Meckier convincingly shows that Waugh derived this joke, and the birth control motif in general, from a May, 1932 essay by Aldous Huxley that describes a similar diptych in an actual Japanese magazine advertisement. Jerome Meckier, "Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, and Birth Control in *Black Mischief*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 23 (1999), 277-290.

²⁸ Ian Littlewood emphasizes the priority of Waugh's subversive side over his conservative or moralistic side, arguing that Waugh cares more about the texture than the target of his laughter. Like me, he takes Oldmeadow's objections somewhat seriously. Ian Littlewood, *The Writings of Evelyn Waugh* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 52-53.

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989), 178.

³⁰ Freud distinguishes between "the substance of the thought" expressed in a joke and "the joking envelope" (110) or formal properties of the "joke-work." Pleasure can come from either source, or both: "our enjoyment of a joke is based on a combined impression of its substance and its effectiveness as a joke" (109). Yet because "a non-tendentious joke scarcely ever achieves the sudden burst of laughter which makes tendentious ones so irresistible," Freud concludes that "tendentious jokes . . . must have sources of pleasure at their disposal to which innocent jokes have no access" (114). Ultimately, all jokes are tendentious for Freud to the extent that they seek "to promote the thought [that they contain] by augmenting it and guarding it against criticism" (162).

³¹ While Freud sees jokes as participating in the economy of the unconscious, the comic – except in special circumstances where it overlaps with the joke – produces laughter because of *preconscious* processes (258). Freud explicitly identifies satire with hostile, tendentious jokes (115), but Waugh's novel, it seems fair to say, draws on both levels of inhibition and release, the unconscious and the preconscious. Waugh's writing, then, may thus not only be described as the kind of "verbal invective" Freud discusses in his analysis of tendentious jokes (122) but also, at least in places, as an interaction of the comic and the joke by which a comic façade provides a kind of bait for the acceptance of a joke with an aggressive "point" (187). Freud, of course, often found unconscious fantasy content in literature as well as in jokes and dreams, from Sophocles to E. T. A. Hoffmann.

³² My analysis here owes a debt to Norman Holland, who himself draws heavily on *Jokes*. Holland's theory sees emotions produced by reading literature as an interaction of an underlying fantasy content and the management of that fantasy through various defenses, among which he includes a literary work's formal properties. He notes also that psychological studies have shown that violence in film actually produces *greater* aggression in viewers when the violence is accompanied by moral justification. See Norman Holland, *Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 289-90.

³³ In its crude form, this argument is merely the old anti-intellectual charge of elitism, but attending to the role of literature in constituting social hierarchies might also allow one to trace the operations of

social anxieties within modernist literature. See, for example, Sean Latham, *Am I a Snob?: Modernism and the Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

³⁴ Bergson famously defined the comic as “something mechanical encrusted on the living.” But whereas Bergson privileged spirit, flux and subjectivity over matter, form and objectivity – for him the comic recognizes the rigid and mechanical but serves to restore a more fluid humanity – Lewis throughout his writing rejects Bergson’s privileging of the subjective. Henri Bergson, “from *Laughter*,” in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, ed. Robert Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), 475.

³⁵ Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), 111.

³⁶ James Carens, *The Satiric Art of Evelyn Waugh* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), 60; Robert Murray Davis, *Evelyn Waugh and the Forms of His Time* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 21-22; Michael Gorra, *The English Novel at Mid-Century: From the Leaning Tower* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1990), 159; Stephen Greenblatt, *Three Modern Satirists: Waugh, Orwell & Huxley* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1965), 25; Kernan, *The Plot of Satire*, 149.

³⁷ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 49. Burke’s italics.

³⁸ I discuss the cannibalism taboo at greater length below.

³⁹ Dustin Griffin discusses the sources of pleasure in satire. He mentions that the wit involved in satiric attack affords a discrete variety of pleasure; this distinction correlates with Freud’s observation that jokes provide pleasure both through the joking envelope and the tendentious content of the joke. Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 161ff.

⁴⁰ David Lodge, “Waugh’s Comic Wasteland,” *Consciousness and the Novel: Connected Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 173.

⁴¹ Elizabeth S. Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 107.

⁴² I cannot do full justice to Goodstein’s argument here, but she maintains that boredom as a modern phenomenon must be understood both in terms of objective or material developments and in terms of alterations in subjectivity most clearly visible in aesthetic representation. As such it is connected to the modern demand for novelty that seems to emerge with the rise of the bourgeois subject.

⁴³ Littlewood also notes parallels between the unruffled tone of the author and the sophistication of the characters, both in *Black Mischief* and in Waugh’s work more generally.

⁴⁴ Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 256.

⁴⁵ George Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” trans. Edward A. Shils, *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1971), 330.

⁴⁶ Torgovnick discusses the "misreading" of African art as expressionist, which she takes as a projection of European ideals.

⁴⁷ See Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974); Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 83-109.

⁴⁸ It is a joke that had already been made back in 1729: "I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout . . . A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends; and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter." Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal," *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed., Vol. 1C, ed. Lawrence Lipking et. al. (New York: Norton, 2000), 2475.

⁴⁹ John R. Clark identifies cannibalism as one of the major *topoi* of the "modern satiric grotesque," citing this episode from *Mischief* among many others. John R. Clark, *The Modern Satiric Grotesque*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1991), 131-38. Kristen Guest points out that even as cannibalism is imputed to differentiate groups of peoples, the power of the taboo rests on an underlying corporeal similarity among peoples and races: "Ultimately . . . it is the shared humanness of cannibals and their victims that draws our attention to the problems raised by the notion of absolute difference." "Introduction," *Eating Their Words: Cannibalism and the Boundaries of Cultural Identity*, ed. Kristen Guest (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 3. Torgovnick discusses cannibalism as a trope of the primitive at various moments throughout her book.

⁵⁰ C. Richard King, "The (Mis)uses of Cannibalism in Contemporary Cultural Critique," *diacritics* 30.1 (Spring 2000), 108. The key work in modern re-evaluations of cannibalism is William Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

⁵¹ Maggie Kilgour, "Foreword," *Eating Their Words*, vii. Kilgour continues, "Since Montaigne, we have known that that difference is illusory: the cannibal is us" (viii).

⁵² V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* (New York: Random House, 1987), 135.

⁵³ Later in his own narrative, Naipaul comes across a story written by his landlord in the 1920s that interestingly parallels *Black Mischief*: "The story was simple. A young woman gets tired of the English social round . . . She decides to become a missionary in Africa. Good-byes are said; the lovers who are left behind pine in different ways. A ship; the ocean; the African coast; a forest river. The young missionary is captured by Africans, natives. She has fantasies of sexual assault by the African chief to whose compound she is taken . . . Instead she is cooked in a cannibal pot and eaten and all that remains of her, all that one of her London lovers finds, is a twenties costume draped on a wooden cross, like a scarecrow" (Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*, 282). The moment reminds us not only that Waugh was reworking popular clichés, but also that Naipaul himself is negotiating a delicate balance between the romantic acceptance of and critical analysis of western narratives of colonial encounter.