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CONFUSED ROARING: EVELYN WAUGH AND THE MODERNIST  
TRADITION

*City University of New York*

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CONFUSED ROARING: EVELYN WAUGH  
AND THE MODERNIST TRADITION

by

GEORGE P. MCCARTNEY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City  
University of New York

1980

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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1980

## Preface

This study began with a simple question: what made Evelyn Waugh's satirical novels different from other prose satirists of this century? There were two answers that initially presented themselves: 1) Waugh's work, at least his earlier work, cannot be considered moral satire, that is, his fiction does not set out to systematically attack and correct morals and manners measured against a clearly articulated standard; 2) his novels achieve an extraordinary balance between their wild energy and classic poise; they constitute a curious mixture of control and abandonment that is absolutely distinctive to Waugh yet seems perfectly suited to the contemporary world. How had he brought forth this peculiar fictional world that is at once so fascinating and alarming? I found that analyses of his style, characterization and imagery provided a partial answer. But there was still the sustained sense of an urgent commitment beneath the bright surface of his work that was not adequately explained by formal analysis. It was when I learned of the unsuspected depth of Waugh's interest in the philosophical movements of the early twentieth century and their influence on the expression of modernist art that I began to locate the principle that binds his fiction together and gives it

its remarkable vitality. Waugh's particular interest in Henri Bergson and Wyndham Lewis enabled me to see that his satire goes deeper than most other literary thrusts at the twentieth century. His primary aim is not at the usual targets of vice and folly; rather, his work calls into question the fundamental presuppositions of this period: relativism and the supreme importance that has been attached to releasing the self from social constraint. The dissertation that follows grew out of this perception: Waugh does not satirize manners and morals so much as he does the epistemological assumptions that characterize much of the thought, art, and behavior of our time.

I owe special gratitude to a number of people: to my mentor, Professor David Gordon for his unfailing patience and steady encouragement; to Professors Frank Brady and Irving Howe for reading my dissertation in draft and suggesting revisions that helped me improve it; and to my wife, Anne-Marie, who typed the various drafts with extraordinary patience and care and, I am sure, unprecedented dispatch.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a brief review of his early novels, Edmund Wilson wrote that Evelyn Waugh was "an artist, whose personal pattern of feeling no formula will ever fit, whether political, social or moral. For the savagery he is afraid of is somehow the same thing as the audacity that so delights him." <sup>1</sup> Wilson's judgment is confirmed by the many critics who have frankly acknowledged the difficulty of discovering any organizing principles in Waugh's work. His satiric novels are notoriously resistant to interpretive schemes. As satires they at first seem to invite one to look beneath their surface play of wit and fantasy for a specific moral or ideological design. But the novels stubbornly resist programmatic readings. Although attempts to define Waugh's satiric purpose have helped to illuminate aspects of his work, they usually do so at the expense of his characteristic vitality, a vitality that refuses to be contained by familiar moral categories. What does the moral understanding have to say about the world of Paul Pennyfeather and Margot Metroland, a world in which decent people are invariably boring and the wicked, reliably charming? As Malcolm Bradbury puts it, Waugh's "wild fictional world . . . creat[es] for those critics who seek to find a consistent <sup>2</sup> vein of value or purpose . . . a difficult problem."

This "difficult problem" has not been adequately resolved in the criticism that has attempted to place Waugh against other modern novelists by establishing a coherent interpretation of his work. When faced with the question of Waugh's satiric intention, the commentators tend to divide into two groups: the first explains Waugh's purpose in terms of broad value judgments; the second describes his fiction as a miscellany of satiric attitudes that have no morally consistent rationale to bind them together. The first group uses generalizations that are often so wide that they are only minimally helpful for distinguishing Waugh from other twentieth-century novelists. The second group is satisfied with examining the style of Waugh's individual satiric attacks without worrying very much about whether or not the fiction has any organizing principle beneath its varied surface.

In order to assign Waugh's single underlying motive, the first group of critics must formulate generalizations sufficiently broad to accommodate the wild and apparently random energy of his works. James F. Carens explains that Waugh's theme is the decline of western civilization under the invasion of technological barbarism.<sup>3</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, grouping him with Huxley and Orwell, finds that Waugh is particularly preoccupied with the "loss of human identity" in the modern age which tends to dehumanize the individual until he is left either "an automaton or a savage."<sup>4</sup> Anthony Burgess, after arguing that the seemingly

gratuitous violence in many of Waugh's plots is really salutary in its final effect, tells us that "if we look below the surface, we shall find that Waugh is recording an age so lacking in roots or ethical convictions that enormities like even cannibalism (in Black Mischief) can find no category of judgment." <sup>5</sup> William J. Cook writes that Waugh has added "a significant new dimension . . . to the traditional thematic range of satire, that is, the plight of the sensitive, innocent individual in a barbarous, chaotic age." <sup>6</sup> According to these critics Waugh's satiric targets are barbarism, dehumanization, rootlessness, and chaos. While there is no denying that he satirizes these conditions, they compose such standard complaints that to mention that Waugh objects to them does not differentiate him very clearly from many other modern authors. Of course, each of these generalizations serves as a device with which the critic can organize his reading of Waugh. My point here is only to observe that as theses none of these generalizations fully accounts for what makes Waugh distinctive.

The second group of critics do not generalize about satiric aims. Rather they simply assert that they are unable to abstract any coherent satiric rationale from Waugh's fiction. Unable to find a satiric principle founded upon a clearly outlined allegiance to a moral or ideological code, they acknowledge that Waugh's satire does not readily fit the traditional understanding of the term. Using The Loved One

as his example, Donat O'Donnell (Conor Cruise O'Brien) concludes that Waugh's fiction is "disciplined in its tactics but anarchic in its aim."<sup>7</sup> Sean O'Faolain contents himself with classifying Waugh as "a writer of a purely brainless genius" who was "born with a gift for satire."

As far as O'Faolain is concerned, the question of principles and ideologies should not arise in connection with Waugh at

all.<sup>8</sup> Frederick J. Stopp argues that although traditional satire proceeds from an informed sense of an ordered system of morals and manners, Waugh's satiric novels simply do not operate along these generically sanctioned lines. Instead he finds that "Mr. Waugh's earlier comic extravaganzas are to traditional, objective satire as existentialism is to academic philosophy -- the bottom has dropped out of the world picture. There is no correction, but only rejection."<sup>9</sup>

More recently David Lodge has decided that rather than trying futilely and "laboriously to decode a consistent message," Waugh's reader should be satisfied with responding to "a mosaic of local comic and satiric effects." In this approach "the anchor of the reader's response will . . . be, not an abstractable set of positive values, but the intelligence and poise of the implied author as conveyed by his style and management of events."<sup>10</sup>

Alvin Kernan sees validity in both approaches. He first writes that it is impossible to discover "in Waugh's early novels any specific social arrangements or absolute set of values which he espouses and uses as a standard for measuring

the failure of modern life." Then, in what he implicitly admits to be an overly general formulation, he asserts that "what Waugh seems to value is order in social and personal life -- not any particular order, but order."<sup>11</sup>

While Kernan is vague about what constitutes this order, he quite correctly identifies the essential issue. As a satirist Waugh is never primarily concerned with morality or ideology. Rather he is engaged by the question of how to maintain the sense of order he thinks necessary for the cultivation of character. In 1932 he wrote that it was "better to be narrow-minded than to have no mind, to hold limited and rigid principles than none at all."<sup>12</sup> Three years earlier he argued that the younger generation (he meant his own) was largely populated by people who were "undiscriminating and ineffectual" because while they were at school they had been encouraged to "think for themselves; when they should have been whipped and taught Greek paradigms, they were set arguing about birth control and nationalization." His prescription for their malady was "the restraint of a traditional culture [that] tempers and directs creative impulses" because, he argues, "freedom produces sterility." Without fixed standards to rebel against, young people will inevitably turn to "perverse and aimless dissipation."<sup>13</sup> Aimlessness takes over in the absence of the order only a traditional culture can exert. And without order the individual is left adrift; he has no anchoring convictions with which to establish an abiding

character for the self.

The central thesis of this study is that the purpose of Waugh's satire is not ethical but rather epistemological. His satire is not reducible to moral issues because he is not primarily concerned with morality. He is preoccupied with what precedes the ethical: the epistemological coordinates with which one's sense of the world is organized. His fiction constitutes a sustained attack on modern thought's acceptance of a tentative, relativistic world view that stresses spontaneity and openness to the novelty of the moment. In his novels he dramatizes Wyndham Lewis's thesis in Time and Western Man which argues that influential contemporary philosophers like Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead are responsible for dismantling the classical categories with which Western man has traditionally shaped his world and given it meaning. As a result of their popular influence, modern artists have abdicated their responsibility to transform our random material environment into the permanent order of art. <sup>14</sup> Instead of the collective historical effort to domesticate experience within the architecture of traditional forms, a modernist imagination like Virginia Woolf's, for example, demands that the conventional structures which limit awareness be swept away in favor of unconditioned, unmediated experience. It is this vision of a world stripped of all the arduously accumulated conventions of the classical imagination that Waugh attacks because he thinks it destroys

the possibility of civilized life. This is why his novels return obsessively to scenes of neglected and razed architecture. Woolf used the metaphor of demolition to applaud the abandonment of the traditional categories; she thought the "smashing and crashing" of earlier conventions would provide an opportunity for heightened selfhood.<sup>15</sup>

Waugh, however, considered the discrediting of the structures of the classically formed mind a subversive threat to the very possibility of individuality.

Accordingly Waugh's first novels are set against the rubble of traditional buildings and inhabited by protagonists whose passivity is a symptom of the cultural forlornness that leaves them transparent ciphers existing in the featureless present, deprived of their past and, consequently, bereft of any hope for the future.

Having said this much, I must close this introduction by acknowledging that like the generalizations of those critics who have tried to fit Waugh to a formula, my thesis also misrepresents him. What I have written so far makes Waugh out to be an authoritarian traditionalist ready at every opportunity to bully the wayward back to their places. While Waugh himself tells us that he enjoyed playing this role, it was only this -- a role, a useful mask.

Edmund Wilson's aphoristic summing up quoted on the first page of this introduction captures the essence of Waugh much better than any thesis can: "The savagery [or, we might say, the disorder] he is afraid of is somehow the

same thing as the audacity that so delights him." Waugh's friend, Harold Acton, detected this ambivalence in him when they were at Oxford together. In his memoirs Acton describes Waugh as

a prancing faun, thinly disguised by conventional apparel . . . . The gentleness of his manner could not deceive me, nor could the neat black and white drawings . . . . Though his horns had been removed, he was capable of butting in other ways. So demure and yet so wild! A faun half-tamed by the Middle Ages, who would hide himself for months in some suburban retreat, and then burst upon the town with capricious caperings.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, it was precisely Waugh's Dionysian appreciation of the unrestrained and the outrageous, his impulsive faun nature, that caused him to value the discipline of restraint to be found in traditional conventions. We will find that Waugh did not object to abandoning himself to unconditioned experience, to immersing himself in the flow of existence's Becoming which Bergson offered as an end to metaphysical longings. He did, however, object to what he took to be the modernist attempt to institutionalize the spontaneous, to substitute unmediated experience for civilized perspective. To lapse temporarily from the artifice of civilized order, to relinquish for a few moments the struggle "to reduce to order the anarchic raw materials of life" as Waugh once described his task -- such was to be expected of human nature in its weakness.<sup>17</sup> But to take the further step of rationalizing this desertion of one's civilized duty as constituting the proper attitude with which to face life -- this Waugh considered dangerously subjective and mindlessly primitive.

Notes

- 1 Edmund Wilson, "'Never Apologize, Never Explain':  
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- 11 Alvin B. Kernan, The Plot of Satire (New Haven: Yale  
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- 12 Evelyn Waugh, "The Seven Deadly Sins of Today by Seven  
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A Little Order, ed. Donat Gallagher (London: Eyre Methuen,  
1977), p. 26.
- 13 Evelyn Waugh, "The War and the Younger Generation,"  
Spectator, 13 April 1929, collected in A Little Order,  
pp. 11-12.

- 14 Wyndham Lewis, Time and Western Man (London, 1927; Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 162-82, 195-206.
- 15 Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Collected Essays, I (1924; rpt. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1967), pp. 333-34.
- 16 Harold Acton, Memoirs of an Aesthete (London: Methuen & Co., 1948), p. 126.
- 17 Evelyn Waugh, "Fan-Fare." Life, 8 April 1946, collected in A Little Order, p. 33.

## Chapter I

"He Looked Exactly as Young Men Like Him Do Look"

Evelyn Waugh's second novel, Vile Bodies, introduces its protagonist as he boards ship to cross the Channel from France to England:

A young man came on board carrying his bag. There was nothing particularly remarkable about his appearance. He looked exactly as young men like him do look; he was carrying his own bag, which was disagreeably heavy, because he had no money left in francs and very little left in anything else. He had been two months in Paris writing a book and was coming home because, in the course of his correspondence, he had got engaged to be married. His name was Adam Fenwick-Symes.<sup>1</sup>

The book Adam brings with him is, presumptuously enough, his own autobiography which, upon arrival, the Customs Officers promptly confiscate along with another confessional work, Dante's Purgatorio, on grounds that both are examples of indecent literature. ("I knows dirt when I sees it or I shouldn't be where I am today," as the Customs Officer puts it.) After minimal protest, Adam gives up his appeal to reason and soon finds himself in London penniless and quite without prospects. He does nothing further to regain his manuscript and we never learn anything about its contents.

Stripped of his personal past and cultural tradition -- his autobiography and copy of Dante -- he drifts lost in the present moment without plans for the future. He appears without distinguishing marks, a passive victim thoroughly acquiescent to the whims of an arbitrary society. As he shuttles haphazardly from one role to another -- would-be author, gossip columnist, vacuum salesman, impromptu pimp, and finally, a soldier lost in the uncharted landscape of "the biggest battlefield in the history of the world" -- he remains a featureless enigma. We never find out what he thinks and feels. He comes no closer to expressing genuine emotion about his predicament than to vaguely register his discontent with "things" in general: "Do you ever feel that things simply can't go on much longer? . . . I'd give anything in the world for something different." His complaints never become more specific.

As a character Adam cannot be classified. It would be tempting to think of him as a Candidean innocent but he does not fit the mold, for he is quite capable of worldly and even low calculation. He is not above fabricating news to fill his gossip column in the Daily Excess and seems to have no compunction about "selling" his fiancée to a competing suitor in order to pay his overdue hotel bill.

And so Adam remains a mystery. Because Adam is deprived of a personal history and a recognizable psychological interior, we can neither place him nor clearly establish the point of the satire in which he functions as the leading character. He is one of the novel's several

unsolved mysteries. Others include a political conspiracy of unspecified intent and the unaccountable world war with which the novel abruptly closes. Like Adam these elements are put before us without apology or explanation.

Waugh steadfastly deprives his early works of background exposition. Reading these novels is something like trying to follow a detective story constructed by an author who has wilfully neglected to provide the clues and motives necessary to make his plot comprehensible; there seems to be no solution to the mystery that is so cheerfully flaunted. Someone or something is missing but we are never told why. There are criminal forces abroad but no one has any definite charges to press. Shadowy characters flicker about in the middle distance. They find themselves implicated in acts of random cruelty. Mindless violence is liable to break in on them at any moment. And all this proceeds unremarked. Waugh's characters quietly seem not to have the resources to protest their plight. And while these dazed characters wander about submitting to almost any outrage that happens to come their way, we are left stranded. Instead of a clearly defined norm from which to gauge lapses in manners and morals, we encounter a disturbing emptiness, a sense of something left out. Indeed, Waugh's novels are distinguished as much by what they leave out as by what they put in and they most blatantly leave out psychological exposition.

Waugh's fiction seems as first remarkably deficient when it comes to creating the illusion of depth. His characters are stubbornly superficial; they resist all

attempts to sound their psychological interiors. Their actions seem to spring into the world without the ground of inward motivation. However appalling the accidents and treacheries that routinely beset them, they rarely express their feelings. In Vile Bodies a young couple repeatedly make and then break their engagement through the course of their frequent conversations, never raising their voices or forgetting to add a polite goodbye before hanging up. Though they are the novel's central characters, we never learn what they feel about their fluctuating romance. A child in Decline and Fall is accidentally shot in the foot, contracts gangrene, and finally dies. His protracted decline is reported casually in a series of brief asides over the space of a hundred pages. There are no laments. The boy's mother, however, is deeply annoyed because people may now mistake her reason for declining a wedding invitation. She intended her absence from the wedding to be understood as a snub of the bride-to-be and she fears people will think she is not coming because she is in mourning for her son. In the same novel the protagonist Paul Pennyfeather discovers that his guardian has used the occasion of his undeserved dismissal from Scone College as a pretext to cheat him of his inheritance. When he diffidently inquires of his rights, he receives no comfort.

"Have I no right to any money at all?"

"None whatsoever, my dear boy," said his guardian quite cheerfully . . . .

So much for Paul's rights. He never raises the issue again

and we never learn how he feels about being cheated. The narrator merely observes that

Paul's guardian's daughter had two new evening frocks /that spring/ and, thus glorified, became engaged to a well conducted young man in the Office of Works.

Not only are we left wondering what Paul Pennyfeather feels about his greedy uncle, we are also kept from all but his most routine responses to the rest of "the unusual series of events of which his shadow was witness."

One critic refers to Waugh's refusal to display his characters' interior development as the "blank silence" that thwarts the reader's appreciation of these novels at every turn.<sup>2</sup> There is some justice in this charge. The "blank silence" with which Paul reacts, or fails to react, to his unwarranted dismissal and the rapacity of his guardian is not special to his case. This silence is standard among Waugh's characters. It is the same moral silence that in Black Mischief attends Basil Seal's inadvertent participation in a cannibal feast the main course of which turns out to be his mistress. Neither Basil nor the narrator comment on the atrocity unless Basil's remark upon returning to London be considered a moral response to his experience. When his friends inquire of his future plans, he remarks that whatever else he may do he has had enough of savagery for a while. The same silence characterizes Brenda Last's adulterous affair with John Beaver, the dullest man on the London social scene. Other than her general boredom with her life, we never discover Brenda's motives for taking up

with the insufferably tedious John Beaver. It just happens.

Whether farcical or pitiful, Waugh's characters are presented to us deadpan. Their narrative existence is almost wholly external. Character and event are presented with the flat, evenhandedness of a craftsman who seems more interested in the style of his prose than the minds of his subjects. Of course, this is deliberate. Waugh creates an ironic counterpoint between his elegant prose and his emotionally inarticulate characters in order to suggest the utter hopelessness of things. There are no remedies. There is nothing to be done but gracefully report the futility of human existence in the twentieth century. Complaints would be quite beside the point. Such are Waugh's appetites and inclinations; his satiric vision requires that he create a world of shallow, little characters who have no consequence because they have blandly resigned themselves to live in a treacherous world without hope of recourse to any effective moral order. These figures are made to race through a series of mishaps laughably referred to as their lives. In a pointless world there are no depths to be registered. Since purpose is unknowable, there are only appearances to be recorded. Deprived of traditions and order, Waugh's characters have been living in a state of alarm for so long that they are morally numb in the face of any outrage.

To distinguish Waugh's relentlessly external treatment of character in these early works from that of other novel-

ists, we need go no further than his own nonfiction narratives. As a biographer Waugh feels free to avail himself of all the traditional novelistic techniques he needs to explain the moral consequence of his subjects' behavior. Here is a passage from his 1935 biography of Edmund Campion in which he portrays Queen Elizabeth and her principal ministers as they face the problem of Campion's political apostasy:

They then made the proposal for which he had been summoned. The past ten years should be forgotten; the road of preferment was still open; if he would publicly adjure his Faith and enter the Protestant ministry there was still no limit to the heights he might reach. The offer was kind in its intention. They had no desire to kill the virtuous and gifted man who had once been their friend, a man, moreover, who could still be of good service to them. From earliest youth, among those nearest them, they had been used to the spectacle of men who would risk their lives for power, but to die deliberately, without hope of release for an idea, was something beyond their comprehension. They knew that it happened; they had seen it in the preceding reign, but not among people of their own acquaintance; humble, eccentric men had gone to the stake; argumentative men had gone into exile in Germany and Geneva, but Elizabeth and Cecil and Dudley had quietly conformed to the prevailing fashion; they had told their beads and eaten fish on Fridays, confessed and taken communion. Faith -- as something concrete and indestructible, of such transcendent value that once it was held, all other possessions became a mere encumbrance -- was unknown to them; in rare, pensive moments shadows loomed and flickered across their minds, sentiment, conscience, fear of the unknown; some years Leicester patronized the Catholics, at others 'the Family of Love'; Elizabeth looked now on the crucifix, now on a talisman; Bible and Demonology lay together beside her bed. What correspondence, even in their charity, could they have with Campion?

Waugh freely enters the minds of his historical subjects. Thought, emotion, motive -- their interiors are as completely accessible as that of any character in an omnisciently

narrated nineteenth-century novel. And there is no doubt as to where Waugh stands on the issues. The following description of Elizabeth in her last days further displays some of the resources Waugh deliberately relinquishes in his early fiction:

In the middle of March 1603 it was clear to everyone that Queen Elizabeth was dying; her doctors were unable to diagnose the illness; she had little fever, but was constantly thirsty, restless and morose; she refused to take medicine, refused to eat, refused to go to bed. She sat on the floor, propped up with cushions, sleepless and silent, her eyes constantly open, fixed on the ground, oblivious to the coming and going of her councillors and attendants. She had done nothing to recognise her successor; she had made no provision for the disposal of her personal property, of the vast, heterogeneous accumulation of a lifetime in which presents had come to her daily from all parts of the world: closets and cupboards stacked high with jewelry, coin, bric-a-brac; the wardrobe of two thousand outmoded dresses. There was always company in the little withdrawing room waiting for her to speak, but she sighed and sipped and kept her silence. She had round her neck a piece of gold the size of an angel, engraved with characters; it had been left to her lately by a wise woman who had died in Wales at the age of a hundred and twenty. Sir John Stanhope had assured her that as long as she wore this talisman she could not die. There was no need yet for doctors or lawyers or statesmen or clergy. <sup>3</sup>

Waugh captures the pathos of the aged and dying Elizabeth with familiar techniques. The metonymy of possessions and servants externalizes Elizabeth's stubborn determination not to let go of the power that has become coterminous with her life. This accumulation of metonymic detail builds and hardens into symbol with the talisman the wise woman had given her and to which she superstitiously clings as though the exercise of material ownership could protract her life indefinitely. And the paragraph closes with an observation

that clearly emanates from Elizabeth herself. Waugh uses standard fictional techniques to put us in touch with Elizabeth's mind.

As an artist, however, Waugh clearly thinks these techniques inappropriate to the materials of his vision. When he writes his novels, he deprives himself of the strategy he uses in his biographical works. This deprivation enables him to create a bitter hard-edged effect that refuses to acknowledge interior sentiment. Of course the satiric mode generally requires a diminishment or distortion of its characters' psychology in order to prevent the reader from empathizing with the targets of the satirist's attack. But Waugh's relentless exclusion of the interior dimension is so extreme as to make him a special case. Even in the novels that move away from farcical satire toward satiric realism, Waugh continues to use his external approach. There are, however, exceptions in the later works, notably Work Suspended and Brideshead Revisited, which are novels in a much more traditional manner. And there is one quite revealing partial exception in one of the earlier novels, A Handful of Dust.

In an interesting way it is this early exception to his general rule of the external approach that best allows us to see what Waugh is doing. In A Handful of Dust Tony Last, unlike the characters who surround him, comes equipped with a personal background and an interior psychology. As a character he is constructed according to the conventions

of a traditional novel while the other characters are presented as surfaces without interiors. This difference in characterization makes Waugh's point about the quality of twentieth-century life. Tony lives in his private dream of the good life of the nineteenth-century squire. In contrast to Tony's antiquarian complacency with life at his ancestral estate, Waugh creates a particularly sordid vision of twentieth century London invaded by featureless housing structures that offer the streamlined convenience of anonymous one-room flats. Everyone but Tony seems eager to abandon his tradition-laden home for one of these chromium-plated compartments that serve as Waugh's metaphor of the slick emptiness of modern urban life among the affluent. His novel dramatizes the clash between the sentiment of tradition and the deracinated transience of the twentieth century. Tony is still capable of an interior life worth reporting because he insists upon thinking of himself as part of a continuous heritage that extends from the past into the future. At the novel's opening he has not yet suffered Adam Fenwick-Syme's fate; his personal and cultural tradition have not yet been taken from him by the Customs Officers of modern England. His ancestral home, however spurious its pretension to the Gothic style, is the outward sign of his inward allegiance to the historical sense and it is this sense of his place in history, flawed as it is, that provides him with personal depth. Tony's friends and acquaintances have given up the perspective of

the past for the gratification to be had in the unreflective life dedicated to immediately pleasurable sensations. But he clings to his idea of tradition, the only problem being that his idea of tradition is as childishly sentimental as his inability to remove his boyhood toys from his bedroom. It is because he does not really understand what he is paying allegiance to that he is unable to defend either his faith or himself when they are attacked by the representatives of modernity.

Tony's initial appearance signals his anomalous condition in Waugh's fictional world. "All over England people were waking up, queasy and despondent. Tony lay for ten minutes very happily planning the renovation of his ceiling." Tony is not yet queasy with the sickness of Waugh's version of the modern waste land; he still thinks of himself as an individual with purpose, one constructively involved with maintaining a viable tradition of which his country estate is one of the more important emblems. He believes, quite mistakenly as it turns out, that he can live apart from his time as though he were a self-assured Christian gentleman of the Victorian period.

Tony's wife, Brenda, however, had been thoroughly infected with the twentieth century's peculiar disease. While still at Hetton Abbey, she has already become an inhabitant of the waste land. The symptoms of the disease are her restless boredom and mindless superficiality. Brenda, like Tony, first appears as she awakens in her bed, but the

world she arises to is quite different from Tony's.

Brenda lay on the dais. She had insisted on a modern bed. Her tray was beside her and the quilt was littered with envelopes, letters and the daily papers. Her head was propped against a very small pillow; clean of makeup, her face was almost colourless, rose-pearl, scarcely deeper in tone than her arms and neck.

"Well?" said Tony.

"Kiss."

He sat by the tray at the head of the bed; she leant forward to him (a mermaid emerging from fathomless depths of clear water). She turned her lips away and rubbed against his cheek like a cat. It was a way she had.

That insistence upon a modern bed sounds ominous within the context of Tony's ancestral home, his cherished Victorian replica of Gothic architecture. Then the litter of letters and papers abandoned across the quilt speaks of a less purposeful awakening than her husband's. But it is Brenda's colorless face that most gives her away even while it, paradoxically enough, obscures her personality from us. Her face appears to emerge from fathomless depths of clear water. How can those depths from which she rises be clear and fathomless at once? Is this Waugh's signal that we will have to look into Brenda's depths for ourselves without narrative cues? Or is it that there is nothing to be found in these depths? As we examine the passage more closely, we find the fathomless/clear oxymoron signals the degree to which the terms of this description seem to cancel one another. To reinforce the apparent contradiction, the fathomless depths are confounded with a further suggestion of shallowness in Brenda's colorless face, no deeper in tone than her arms and

neck. Waugh makes Brenda a provocatively opaque figure. As a woman who leaves her husband for her lover the day after her son's funeral and then demands that he sell his cherished estate in order to support her new liaison, she behaves with such apparently wilful malice that we come to expect the narrative will at one point or another divulge the deeply rooted motives that must account for it. Is Brenda emotionally unstable? Has she been irremediably wronged by Tony at some point prior to the time of the novel? Or is she simply an unconscionable villain? Waugh, however, refuses us our desired explanations. There is nothing to indicate what Brenda may be feeling except a vague boredom with Tony's world. She never for a moment expresses any serious doubt or guilt about her behavior. In keeping with her initial appearance, Brenda will remain an opaque nereiad throughout the novel. She is at once fathomless and shallow, inexplicable and transparent. We are teased with the suggestion of depths but each time we try to plumb them we come up against an utterly impenetrable surface. Brenda is a creature of surfaces that should have an interior explanation and we are puzzled as much as Tony seems to be when none is revealed to us.

Without psychological explanation Brenda's willfulness is so arbitrary as to be indistinguishable from an absence of will. We know her acts but we never know her. This kind of treatment might not be so troublesome in the case of Margot Metroland in a novel like Decline and Fall in which

Waugh's satire approaches the condition of farce. But A Handful of Dust is in a different key altogether. Brenda's betrayal of her husband and the pain it causes him are portrayed realistically and quite movingly. Yet when we look for Brenda's motives and thoughts, Waugh treats us with his usual "blank silence."

It is at this point that the blank silence begins to speak. With regard to Brenda it tells us that something has been left out; an earlier age might have called it soul. Whatever is missing it has left her less than human. Tony's inability to see what lies at the bottom of his wife's fathomless clarity is indicative of what happens when the traditional moral categories come face to face with the dull, unresponsive emptiness of twentieth century life.

Read this way, Waugh's avoidance of the interior dimension suggests that the twentieth century's failure to sustain conviction in moral absolutes has transformed hapless individuals into hedonistic zombies incapable of the simplest loyalties. But then there is Mrs. Rattery, a character in the line of Waugh's supremely modern types beginning with Otto Silenus and Margot Metroland in Decline and Fall. As a shamelessly modern creature casually negligent of the artifacts of tradition and without a recognizable emotional interior, she seems at first to be the very embodiment of all that Waugh despises in the contemporary world. Yet she is the only character, other than Tony himself, who is capable of loyalty and her loyalty is completely disinter-

ested at that.

Understanding Mrs. Rattery and the type she represents is crucial for appreciating Waugh's fiction. As distant as she is from Waugh the man of antiquarian aspirations, her cool, passionless modernity is very much of a piece with the pose Waugh like to adopt as an artist.

And so the next chapter takes its title from Tony Last's epithet for Mrs. Rattery: the Shameless Blonde.

## Chapter I - Notes

1

Evelyn Waugh, Vile Bodies (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1930, 1977), p. 7. All further references to Waugh's novels will be made to this edition unless otherwise specified.

2

Graham Martin, "Novelists of Three Decades: Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, C. P. Snow," in The Modern Age, Vol. VII of The Pelican Guide to English Literature, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 400.

3

Evelyn Waugh, Edmund Campion (1946; rpt. Garden City: Image Books, 1956), pp. 13-13, 153-54.

## Chapter II

The Shameless Blonde and the Disappearing Self

At the request of Tony's friend, Jock Grant-Menzies, Mrs. Rattery visits the Last estate on the eve of the fox-hunt in which Tony's son will be accidentally killed.

Jock's blonde was called Mrs. Rattery. Tony had conceived an idea of her from what he overheard of Polly's gossip and from various fragments of information let fall by Jock. She was a little over thirty. Somewhere in the Cottesmore country there lived a long-legged, slightly discredited Major Rattery, to whom she had once been married. She was American by origin, now totally denationalized, rich, without property or possessions, except those that would pack in five vast trunks. Jock had had his eye on her last summer at Biarritz and had fallen in with her again in London where she played big bridge, very ably, for six or seven hours a day and changed her hotel, on an average, once every three weeks. Periodically she was liable to bouts of morphine; then she gave up her bridge and remained for several days at a time alone in her hotel suite, refreshed at intervals with glasses of cold milk.

She arrived by air on Monday afternoon. It was the first time that a guest had come in this fashion and the household was appreciably excited. Under Jock's direction the boiler man and one of the gardeners pegged out a dust sheet in the park to mark a landing for her and lit a bonfire of damp leaves to show the direction of the wind. The five trunks arrived in the ordinary way by train, with an elderly, irreproachable maid. She brought her own sheets with her in one of the trunks; they were neither silk nor coloured without lace or ornament of any kind, except small plain monograms.

Tony, Jock and John went out to watch her land. She climbed out of the cockpit, stretched, unbuttoned the flaps of her leather helmet, and came to meet them. "Forty-two minutes," she said, "not at all bad with the wind against me."

She was tall and erect, almost austere in helmet and overalls; not at all as Tony had imagined her. Vaguely, at the back of his mind he had secreted the slightly

absurd expectation of a chorus girl, in silk shorts and brassiere, popping out of an immense beribboned Easter Egg with a cry of "Whooppee, boys." Mrs. Rattery's greetings were deft and impersonal.

I have quoted at length because there is no other way to grasp what Waugh is able to do within the space of three paragraphs using a purely external approach to his subject. Mrs. Rattery is the complete twentieth century woman, a type that fascinates Waugh. She is without background, "totally denationalized, rich, without property or possessions." The insistence of her uprootedness is reinforced by what is left out of her presentation. But for the barest circumstantial details, we never learn what has driven her to achieve her remarkable presence in the world. She is simply there, changing her "hotel on an average, once every three weeks," periodically "liable to bouts of morphine." Rootless and bored, she is the ultimate twentieth century transient. In her ceaseless search for sensation, she willfully dictates the rhythm of her life with the use of drugs. Like Margot Metroland in Decline and Fall, Julia Stitch in Scoop, and Virginia Crouchback in the Sword of Honour trilogy, Mrs. Rattery is one of Waugh's goddesses of modernity whose spirit presides over A Handful of Dust in much the same way these other goddesses preside over their respective narratives. Like one of George Orwell's streamlined people, she has dispatched the nostalgic accessories of the past and abandoned the needless bother of an interior life as if it were so much excess baggage. Asked her opinion of the ancestral Last estate, she replies that she never notices

houses one way or the other. Houses, ancestral houses at least, establish a link from one generation to the next but Mrs. Rattery simply does not value the continuity they represent. She is supremely indifferent to the conventional concerns people have for their past and future. Tony is surprised to learn she has two sons; she casually explains she does not see them often but she knows "they're at school somewhere." Mrs. Rattery's existence is radically present tense. With no background and no interior, she is ideally suited to modern life.

Mrs. Rattery is all cool efficiency capable of meeting the contemporary world on its own terms. Because Tony Last lives in another world, he cannot understand her. As always happens in Waugh, the traditional categories no longer fit present experience. Before she arrives, Tony conceives of Mrs. Rattery at a "Shameless Blonde," popping out of an immense Easter Egg. In fact she is so far from being a frivolous chorus girl that she seems positively austere. Her bed sheets gauge the distance between her world and Tony's. They are neither silk nor colored as Tony seems to have expected. Instead they are functional, without ornament except for the "small plain monograms" that mark them with her practical, straightforward and very contemporary personality. The sexual import of the sheets is quite clear. Tony, living in his sentimental Victorian dream, thinks of unmarried sexual activity as amusingly wicked, accompanied with the luxurious appurtenances of decadence. Mrs. Rattery

lives under a different dispensation altogether. Sex, like any other transaction, is to be managed efficiently and practically. She comes equipped with nothing but essentials. We are made to feel that despite her mysterious presence there is nothing hidden about Mrs. Rattery, no depths to be explored. She recalls Brenda's fathomless transparency; like her, Mrs. Rattery is a contradictory mixture of the apparently hidden and the shamelessly revealed. Even the fact that we never learn her first name promotes this sense of a mystery that has nothing to hide.. She is as functional in a peremptory sort of way as the no-nonsense formality of her surname from which the frivolous adornment of a given name has been removed. She is no more nor no less than the succession of her appearances.

Tony had named Mrs. Rattery the Shameless Blonde before meeting her. His epithet is correct in a way he did not intend. Mrs. Rattery is shameless in that everything about her is completely externalized. She has no reserve, no doubt, no apology. There is no inward self, no private interior distance between what she thinks and what she does. She is indivisibly at one with her visible behavior. In other words, she is not really human but rather an exotic mixture of machine efficiency and animal vitality. (In Decline and Fall Professor Silenus, exasperated by all that is slovenly human, pays tribute to the perfectly inhuman extremes that Mrs. Rattery seems to bring together: "on one side the harmonious instincts and balanced responses of the animal, on the other the inflexible purpose of the

engine, and between them man, equally alien from the being of Nature and the doing of the machine.") As the novel's goddess of modernity, the usual human emotions cannot touch Mrs. Rattery.

She arrives at Hetton by plane; like the goddess she is meant to be, she descends from the sky bringing the twentieth century to Tony's Victorian estate. She lives the life to which Brenda dimly aspires. Like Mrs. Beaver, the interior decorator intent upon convincing people that rented flats walled with functional chromium plating are far more practical than ancestral houses, Mrs. Rattery is one of those who seek to smooth away the inconvenience of traditional attachments in order to institute a cool, functional life style. Accordingly, while staying at Tony's she cannot resist joining the workmen whom Brenda has hired to cover what she thinks of as the morning room's depressingly antiquated moulding and dado with the ultra-modern chic of white chromium plating.

Mrs. Rattery's arrival signals the destruction of Tony's world. His dream cannot stand up to her reality. Her appearance coincides with the death of Tony's son, John Andrew which is also the death of Tony's nineteenth century idyll. The boy's death precipitates Brenda's departure and her subsequent attempt to have Hetton sold.

There is, however, an important complication concerning Mrs. Rattery. She is not simply an occasion for Waugh to revile the present and lament the loss of the past's sense

of order. He is never the simpleminded traditionalist he is sometimes made out to be. Although Mrs. Rattery is made to represent the modern world's gratuitous destruction of traditional values, she is also unquestionably the only character in the novel whose personal behavior is wholly admirable. After John Andrew's fatal accident, she stays on at Hetton to manage the affairs that Tony is too upset to handle. She sends Jock to Brenda in London, stays with Tony to keep unwanted sympathizers away and provides Tony with the distraction of card games, the only solace that works for him in the absence of faith. Mrs. Rattery's aid is unsolicited and disinterested. She has nothing to gain. Once Jock and Brenda return from London, she flies away before anyone can thank her, never to be seen again.

Mrs. Rattery's presence in the novel puts in question the object of Waugh's satire. Is he attacking modern transience measured against traditional stability? If so, why does he portray Mrs. Rattery, the transient *deracinée*, sympathetically as a worldly-wise woman with a disinterested concern for others that she puts into action by coming to their aid so competently and effectively? If Tony Last represents traditional values, the simple moral virtues of a good nineteenth century gentleman, why is he shown to be so childishly helpless at moments of crisis and so culpably innocent with regard to his wayward wife? We may pity Tony but we are hardly invited to sympathize with him or with what he thinks he stands for in the way of morality and social order. Mrs. Rattery, on the other hand, commands

our respect. Here, as elsewhere, Waugh leaves us adrift. In the absence of either psychological explanation or moral evaluation within his narrative, this work, like his other early productions, resists coherent interpretation at every turn. What do these novels satirize and what moral standard do they apply? What is their final significance?

Many of Waugh's critics have decided that there are no answers to these questions; that Waugh is a madcap anarchist with a genius for writing satire that has no point beyond his malicious enjoyment in discomfitting his personal enemies and recording human folly at large.<sup>1</sup> Waugh himself claimed that his works were not satires.

Satire is a matter of period. It flourishes in a stable society and presupposes homogeneous moral standards -- the early Roman Empire and 18th 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.<sup>2</sup>

About his works Waugh is no more helpful than his autobiographical character, Gilbert Pinfold, a successful novelist and less successful tory. When asked to explain the meaning of his work, Pinfold has nothing to say.

Those who sought to detect cosmic significance in Mr. Pinfold's work, to relate it to fashions in philosophy, social predicaments, or psychological tensions were baffled by his frank, curt replies to their questionnaires; their fellows in the English Literature School, who chose more egotistical writers, often found their theses more than half composed for them. Mr. Pinfold gave nothing away. Not that he was secretive or grudging by nature; he had nothing to give these students. He regarded his books as objects which he had made, things quite external to himself to be used and judged by others. He thought them well made, better than many reputed works of genius, but he was not vain of his accomplishment, still less of his reputation.

He had no wish to obliterate anything he had written, but he would dearly have liked to revise it, envying painters, who are allowed to return to the same theme time and time again, clarifying and enriching until they have done all they can with it.

Pinfold's insistence that his books are wholly external to himself is the final refinement of Waugh's external approach.

But neither Waugh nor his critics account for the sustained imaginative power that we recognize in his works. This is not the effect usually achieved in the light satire of such authors as Ronald Firbank and Saki. While traces of both these writers can be detected in his work, the overall strength of Waugh's impact on the reader is of a different order altogether. As I hope to demonstrate, the immediately distinctive quality of Waugh's work is the result of a deliberate esthetic program carried out consistently and thoroughly with a few obvious exceptions that were not meant to be classed with his basic satirical novels. The strategy of this program can be detected in the personal style of a number of Waugh's characters, especially Mrs. Rattery whose manner is both the result and the example of a cold, external approach to writing fiction.

Waugh invests Mrs. Rattery with significance that extends well beyond her brief appearance in A Handful of Dust. Her card games are particularly important not only for the narrative but also for what they implicitly tell us of Waugh's fictional method. Cards, Mrs. Rattery's one unflagging enthusiasm, serve to relieve her general sense of life's pointlessness by supplying her with moments of order.

She kindly urges Tony to take up their existential consolation as he sits numb and inarticulate with grief for his dead son. The modern world has nothing more to offer, Waugh suggests. Traditional rituals no longer make sense of life's accidents. As Tony himself remarks upon the departure of the local minister who has just made a futile attempt to console him, "the last thing one wants to talk about at a time like this is religion." But more than its thematic point within the novel, Mrs. Rattery's card playing echoes Waugh's esthetic practice. In 1946 Waugh wrote of artistic commitment that "the artist's only service to the disintegrated society of today is to create little independent systems of order of his own," a statement that sounds very much like this description of Mrs. Rattery at her cards:

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.

In a "disintegrated society" lacking a commonly held belief structure, Mrs. Rattery creates her own "little independent systems of order," however ephemeral they may be. Her response to the apparent absence of meaning resembles the artist's. While he may not approve the terms of modern life, Waugh thought that the artist as artist -- whatever his private beliefs -- must, like Mrs. Rattery, accept these terms if he is to succeed in producing significant work.

Of the artist he wrote "however aloof he holds himself, [he] is always and specially the creature of the zeitgeist; however formally antique his tastes, he is in spite of himself in the advanced guard." <sup>4</sup> If being in the avant-garde means putting on an inhuman mask, it can only be said that in a soulless age the artist cannot afford conventional human sympathy. He must rid himself of ordinary sentiment.

Mrs. Rattery's determined superficiality appears unimpeachable because it proceeds from her accurate assessment of contemporary life: her opened eyes accept things as they are. Clearly Waugh finds her response to present conditions more realistic than Tony's, which is founded upon a sentimental humanism that Waugh thinks quite spineless since it has abandoned its commitment to any kind of transcendental guarantee. He wrote in 1946 that A Handful of Dust "contained all I had to say about humanism" and, indeed, one cannot read this novel without becoming painfully aware that a man like Tony Last -- obviously decent, well-intentioned, given to inward reflection-- cannot stand up to the casual amorality of an age that largely ignores any claims on its ethical sensibility that extend further than <sup>5</sup> the practical concerns of the here and now. Although Waugh despises the world Mrs. Rattery represents, we cannot help but feel that he nevertheless admires her ability to prosper under the conditions of twentieth-century life. If she achieves nothing else, she at least develops a style that banishes sentimentality and false nostalgia.

She is one of a type that first appears as Margot Metroland in Decline and Fall and to which Waugh returns again and again, obviously fascinated if somewhat appalled by the apparent ease with which the various incarnations of this species accommodate themselves to the moral vacuity of their respective environments.

Waugh's handling of Mrs. Rattery points to a certain ambivalence. While he deplores the new and upholds the traditional, time and again he celebrates the energy of those who are able to live thoroughly modern lives. As a novelist, Waugh is drawn to Mrs. Rattery's cool modernity however much he may personally deplore her disregard for the proprieties he values. The same contradiction can be observed in his personal attitudes concerning twentieth century art when compared to his esthetic practice as a novelist. He sets up to be the bete noire of modern art yet he adopts its methods in slightly disguised ways to build his own fictional world. In fact, like that other alleged reactionary, Wyndham Lewis, Waugh conducts a love-hate affair with the avant-garde of his day. Although he rejects the modernist novel's preoccupation with psychological exploration conducted by interior monologue and stream of consciousness, he adopts that strain in the modernist esthetic that encourages the tendency to abstraction and self-conscious artifice, the strain Ortega y Gasset described as the waggishly ironic dehumanization of art. Like the twentieth century painters he enjoyed ridiculing (Picasso,

Picabia, Ernst, among others), Waugh makes no pretense to verisimilitude when he creates characters like Mrs. Rattery, Otto Silenus in Decline and Fall or Adam Fenwick-Symes in Vile Bodies.<sup>7</sup> They are all frankly abstractions that exist in his satirical fiction in a manner not unlike the deliberately deformed figures on an Ernst canvas.

Waugh gave his reasons for this tendency to abstraction in an occasional piece he wrote for Life magazine 1946. There he argued that fictional characters -- and one infers he meant real people also -- placed in a purposeless world were necessarily abstractions, that without commitment to a "defined purpose" they are artificial figures.<sup>8</sup> This in part -- but only in part -- explains the sense of something missing in Waugh's novels. He deliberately deprives his fictional creations of an interior dimension in order to reflect their emptiness in a world without purpose beyond the immediate moment.

Waugh's insistence upon remaining outside his characters and their personal concerns makes final assessment of his fiction problematic. While some have decided that the farcical nature of his fiction simply makes interpretation beside the point, I do not agree. Waugh may use the elements of what he himself called "knockabout farce" but his fiction is more than this. There is the inescapable sense of seriousness that underlies the black comedy of the surface.<sup>9</sup> This is undeniable in a novel like A Handful of Dust and I think it is true of his other novels as well. They have an

impact that cannot be explained in terms of farce alone.

Waugh's fictional technique and its impact can be traced to his particular mode of perceiving the world, his epistemology. Epistemology may seem a disproportionately heavy word to bring into a discussion of a writer admired for the elegant lightness of his prose style but I find it necessary. I think it demonstrable that Waugh's fiction finds its coherence in the terms of a specific epistemological controversy. Critics have tried to trace Waugh's intentions to his morality and ideology. But if there is a norm from which Waugh's satire operates, it does not reside in either his moral code or his system of belief; it has an origin anterior to ideology. The organizing principle behind Waugh's fiction can be located in the tension between competing epistemologies -- one characterized by the classical conviction that man lives in a fixed and essentially intelligible world and the other by the modern distrust of the conceptual patterns with which man organizes the immediate data of his senses.

## Chapter II Notes

- 1 O'Faolain, pp. 68-69, is perhaps the leading example of this point of view.
- 2 "Fan-Fare," p. 33.
- 3 "Fan-Fare," p. 33.
- 4 "Felix Culpa," Commonweal, 16 July 1948, p. 322.
- 5 "Fan-Fare," p. 33-34.
- 6 Jose Ortega y Gasset, The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature, trans. Helene Weyl (Madrid, 1925; rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 46-48.
- 7 Evelyn Waugh, Labels: A Mediterranean Journal (London: Duckworth, 1930) pp. 16-17, uses the works of Picasso and Ernst as examples of what has gone wrong in the twentieth century; The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh, ed. Michael Davie (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), p. 639, in which Waugh records on 21 December 1945 that he has joined "in the baiting of Picasso" with a letter to The Times.
- 8 "Fan-Fare," p. 31.
- 9 "Fan-Fare," p. 32.

## Chapter III

"Smashing and Crashing": Waugh and the Modernist  
Conception of the Self

In Waugh's unfinished novel Work Suspended (1941), the narrator's engagingly eccentric father is an accomplished painter who prides himself on being totally out of step with the avant-garde: "Only Philistines like my work and, by God, I like only Philistines." As far as he is concerned, the public is much better served with the opportunity to look at his copies of the old masters than to make themselves "dizzy by goggling at genuine Picassos."<sup>1</sup> With its studied disdain for esthetic fashion this remark has the derisive tone Waugh himself reserved for what he considered the excesses of experimental and non-representational art.

In a 1938 essay on twentieth century functional architecture he wrote of "the horrible little architects [who] crept about -- curly-headed, horn-spectacled, volubly explaining their 'machines for living.' Villas like sewage farms, mansions like half-submerged Channel steamers, offices like vast bee-hives and cucumber frames sprang up round their feet, furnished with electric fires that blistered the ankles,<sup>2</sup> windows that blinded the eyes." Yet these sour observations

are not the whole story. Although he affected this sneering attitude toward much of what has come to be considered representative of twentieth century art, Waugh was obviously fascinated by the very works he maligned. In a very early essay dated 1917, he quite sincerely defended Cubism against the "deliberate misunderstanding of a prejudiced public."<sup>3</sup>

As we have already seen, he thought the artist as artist was necessarily part of the exploratory avant-garde movement of his day regardless of his personal predilections. And the abstract, schematic composition of his works has much in common with the deliberate distortion and dehumanization of contemporary art, both visual and literary.

Waugh responds to modern art in two ways. On one hand, he rejects the epistemological assumptions implicit in its world view and, on the other, he sees its appropriateness to the "disintegrated society" around him. We can see this double response at work in his 1930 travel book Labels in which he takes perverse delight in the architecture of Antoni Gaudi Cornet. By chance he came across some of Gaudi's architecture while travelling in Barcelona. Astonished by what he has seen, he declares that in Gaudi's "work is apotheosised all the writhing, bubbling, convoluting, convulsing soul of the Art Nouveau" and with obvious relish speaks of it having broken "through all preconceived bounds of order and propriety, and coursed wantonly over the town, spattering its riches on all sides like mud." Then he goes on to explain in detail.

But, indeed, in one's first brush with Gaudi's genius it is not so much propriety that is outraged as one's sense of probability. My interest in him began on the morning of my second and, unfortunately, my last day in Barcelona. I was walking alone and without any clear intention in my mind, down one of the boulevards when I saw what, at first, I took to be part of the advertising campaign of the Exhibition. On closer inspection I realised that it was a permanent building, which to my surprise turned out to be the offices of the Turkish Consulate. Trees were planted in front of it along the pavement, hiding the lower stories. It was the roof which chiefly attracted my attention since it was coloured peacock-blue and built in undulations, like a rough sea petrified; the chimneys, too, were of highly coloured glazed earthenware, and they were twisted and bent in all directions like very gnarled fruit-trees. The front of the building, down to the level of the second row of windows, was made of the mosaic of broken china I have described above, but thoughtfully planned so that the colours merged in delicate gradations from violet and blue to peacock-green and gold. The eaves overhung in irregular, amorphous waves, in places attenuated into stalactites of coloured porcelain; the effect was that of a clumsily iced cake. I cannot describe it more accurately than that because, dazzled and blinded by what I subsequently saw, my impression of this first experience, though deep, is somewhat indistinct.

Having caught his first glimpse of Gaudi's work, he tells us that he rushed off to see as much more as he possibly could before he had to leave Barcelona. Of some buildings on the grounds of a recreational park he writes that as he looked at them he

could not help being struck by the kinship they bore to the settings of many of the later U.F.A. films. The dream scene in Secrets of the Soul, the Oriental passages in Waxworks particularly, seem to me to show just the same inarticulate fantasy.

Summing up his impressions of a church designed by Gaudi, he tells us that

It will be seen from this that Gaudi has employed two very distinct decorative methods in his sculpture, the one so evanescent and amorphous, the other so minute and intricate, that in each case one finds a difficulty in realising that one is confronted by cut stone, supposing instinctively that the first is some imperfectly moulded

clay and the second ivory or mahogany . . . . Gaudi is a great example, it seems to me, of what art-for-art's-sake can become when it is wholly untempered by considerations of tradition or good taste. Picasso in Paris is another example; but I think it would be more exciting to collect Gaudis.

Clearly what strikes Waugh about these works is their esthetic commitment to the "evanescent" and "amorphous" and their apparently random attention to detail. They celebrate in stone pure subjective expressiveness unfettered by the constraint of traditional conventions. Waugh the classicist finds himself fascinated by their wilful disregard of the of the forms and proportions appropriate to their materials. His comparisons are telling: these structures are like "inarticulate fantasies"; rather than solid, habitable buildings, they look like "a rough sea petrified," an "amorphous wave," and a "clumsily iced cake." These are buildings that appear to be as fleetingly temporary as the gimcrack settings of a cheaply produced film and yet they are meant to be permanent. Nothing could better indicate how contemporary assumptions about the nature and value of existence have turned the artist away from his proper object. For traditionalists like Waugh art was the one enterprise in which men have the opportunity to transcend the accidents of time. Yet here was an artist who had bent his considerable powers to render not the essential enduring forms of things, but rather any stray, accidental impression with which he had found himself impulsively caught up.

With respect to Waugh's ironical estimation of Gaudi,

it is useful to consider what he had written about the harmful effect of photography on the pictorial arts. After pointing out that photographic technology had made it possible to arrest and analyze instantaneous appearances that would ordinarily elude the unaided eye, he concludes the "the camera revealed a new truth that was not only far less graceful [than the 'truth' of pictorial arts] but also far less in accordance with human experience." Waugh thought that the influence of this "truth" on painting and sculpture had been disastrous. The artist was lead to give up the classic discipline involved in composing his work from life within a recognizably human perspective. Instead, according to Waugh, he is encouraged to follow one or the other of two possible directions: 1) he might attempt to recreate the inhuman distortions made visible by means of the "snapshot" that captures so well the transient un-gainliness of the inessential moment, those instantaneous fragments of time that speak of life in its aspect of aimless indeterminacy precisely because they have been snatched from an unfinished rhythm that has yet to achieve its formal balance (the paintings of Francis Bacon illustrate this approach); or 2) he might forfeit verisimilitude to the camera altogether and slothfully -- "verisimilitude was what took the time and trouble" -- rely upon spontaneous inspiration to invest his non-representational work with some higher reality. The stand Waugh takes here is the same taken by Wyndham Lewis in Time and Western Man (1927): the

epistemological assumptions of twentieth century art are such that it abandons the attempt to fit its materials to the perception of what is timeless and essential; instead, it occupies itself with the temporary and accidental. Rather than serving the human need for a sense of permanence, it insists upon the transient, the perishable. We are given Gaudi's buildings that look like waves about to break or cakes about to melt. For Waugh such works were<sup>6</sup> deliciously grotesque and regrettably appropriate.

Architecture was Waugh's index to a society's relative state of health. He repeatedly used traditional architecture as his emblem of continuity; it is the art that more than any other spoke to him of collective human destiny. What he found so appallingly entertaining about Gaudi was that this was an artist who had tried to capture in the permanence of stone this century's obsession with the kind of unconditioned subjective experience in the here and now that his own Mrs. Rattery would come to exemplify. Instead of forming a bridge in the present that would connect past and future, the artist now deliberately strove to sever his work from any kind of historical context as he chased after whatever was new, striking, utterly unique, and stupefyingly original. Waugh's satiric paradigm for this disregard of continuity is Silenus, the functional architect of Decline and Fall whose masturbatory self-absorption is of a piece with the inhuman sterility of his buildings.

Although we have been considering Waugh's response to

the painting and architecture, his comments nevertheless have their relevance for narrative art as well. There is, for instance, a revealing comparison to be made between Waugh's assessment of Gaudi's architecture and the kind of narrative elements Virginia Woolf describes in her famous call for the creation of a modernist esthetic. Consider the similarities. Here is Woolf proposing that the novelist go beyond the usual constraints of convention to capture purely subjective experience however stray, however fleeting:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions -- trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms. . . . Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.<sup>7</sup>

Waugh, who in his diaries tells us he refused to believe Virginia Woolf's fiction was good, must have seen in Gaudi<sup>8</sup> the materialization of Woolf's "uncircumscribed spirit." This is what happens when the impulsive self is allowed total freedom from "considerations of tradition and good taste"; Gaudi's excesses are the result of an epistemology like Woolf's that sanctions an ahistorical abandonment to the sensation of the moment in what Waugh obviously thinks a futile search for subjective truth.

So Waugh's objection to modernist art is not primarily

an argument of fashion. He is disturbed by the world it both reflects and helps to create. Above all, he distrusts its emphasis on the self as the final arbiter of truth.

In his review of the main tendencies of modernist culture, Irving Howe observes that

it strips man of his systems of belief and his ideal claims, and then proposes the one uniquely modern style of salvation: a salvation by, of, and for the self. In modernist culture, the object perceived seems always on the verge of being swallowed up by the perceiving agent, and the act of perception in danger of being exalted to the substance of reality. I see, therefore I am. Subjectivity becomes the typical condition of the modernist outlook. In its early stages, when it does not trouble to disguise its filial dependence on the romantic poets, modernism declares itself as an inflation of the self, a transcendental and orgiastic aggrandizement of matter and event in behalf of personal vitality.<sup>9</sup>

It is this condition of unchecked subjectivity that Waugh attacks by creating what might be thought of as an alternate modernism. His works are shaped by a sensibility and method that implicitly criticize mainstream modernist culture. In creating this alternate modernism, Waugh's first strategy is to reduce the interior dimension of his characters. On this point he shares Wyndham Lewis's allegiance to the "Great Without."<sup>10</sup> He finds the inward search for the genuine self abhorrent. Stream of consciousness and the irrational mind do not interest him; outward behavior does. While the modernist explores the possibilities of the subjective, Waugh insists upon being objective.

Waugh uses the conventionally flat characterization of satire to diminish the sense of individuality in his fiction. Rather than swelling in an "orgiastic aggrandizement of matter and event," the self -- the civilized self, that is -- fades

anemically before the contemporary world's ceaseless and quite pointless turmoil. In his first novel, Decline and Fall, he announces this theme with mocking directness by simply making the narrator explain the precise limits of the protagonist's character. Paul Pennyfeather, he informs us, "would never have made a hero" although he "could be expected to acquit himself with decision and decorum in all the emergencies of civilized life." Unfortunately for Paul -- and, by implication, for us -- he rarely finds life civilized. If this novel can be said to be "about" something it is this: the inability of the individual to deal with a society that has abandoned customary restraints. The world Waugh portrays is inhabited by wilful monsters and spineless naifs. There seems to be no room for the moderate, responsible human being simultaneously capable of moral perception and decisive action. As the narrator of Decline and Fall blandly informs us, the novel is really about the "mysterious disappearance" of that most moderate of young men, Paul Pennyfeather. In a world without a normative code of behavior, Paul Pennyfeather becomes as weightless as his name suggests. Like so many of Waugh's protagonists, he lacks specific gravity. Once the modern world is through with him, there is no more to Paul than the type he fecklessly becomes: the scholarly young man completely out of his element in a degenerate society. Probing beneath his surface would be quite pointless; there is nothing worth bringing to light.

In his 1929 essay praising Ronald Firbank as the novelist's novelist, Waugh suggests some of the reasons for his rejection of the modernist preoccupation with subjectivity. To be understood properly, this essay's argument and its eccentric claims for Firbank should be placed in context with Virginia Woolf's comments on the novel in "Modern Fiction" (1919) and "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown" (1925), two essays that could have hardly escaped Waugh's notice. When read together, Waugh's piece seems to be answering Woolf's arguments directly by opposing Firbank's frivolous superficiality to her probing sincerity.

On one point Woolf and Waugh agree: the nineteenth century novel is dead. The traditional novelist's preoccupation with verisimilitude is beside the point. It is a verisimilitude rooted in assumptions and conventions that are no longer relevant. According to Woolf the elaborate care novelists like Bennett and Galsworthy took to build up the solidity of a realistically described context has more to do with bourgeois materialism than what is most important in fiction: character.

Woolf uses Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells and John Galsworthy as representatives of that class of writers whose conventions no longer apply. She argues that the novelist's aim is to portray character or life itself. To illustrate her point she uses a hypothetical Mrs. Brown, an irreducible unit of human nature that earlier novelists, especially Edwardian novelists of the previous generation, too often overlooked

in favor of other interests, e.g. political or moral ideas.

After quoting from Bennett's Helda Lessways at some length,

Woolf comments:

I have formed my own opinion of what Mr. Bennett is about -- he is trying to make us imagine for him; he is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there. With all his powers of observation, which are marvellous, with all his sympathy and humanity, which are great, Mr. Bennett has never once looked at Mrs. Brown in her corner. There she sits in the corner of the carriage -- that carriage which is travelling, not from Richmond to Waterloo, but from one age of English literature to the next, for Mrs. Brown is eternal, Mrs. Brown is human nature, Mrs. Brown changes only on the surface, it is the novelists who get in and out -- there she sits and not one of the Edwardian writers had so much as looked at her . . . . They have developed a technique of novel-writing which suits their purpose; they have made tools and established conventions which do their business. But those tools 11 are not our tools, and that business is not our business.

And in "Modern Fiction" Woolf observes that

for the moderns . . . the point of interest lies very likely in the dark places of psychology.

The novelist pursues the self apart from traditional and societal structures. The external world becomes interesting only as it occasions a series of emotionally weighted sensations within the self and "the task of novelist [is] to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible." 12

Woolf discarded the assumption that there is a common phenomenal world we can jointly subscribe to, a world that can be reported by the conventional methods of empirical history. There no longer are commonly agreed upon categories with which to explain the world and our lives in it. (Of

course, this view subverts the traditional sense of the self as a permanent entity.) Woolf embraces a romantic epistemology that concentrates on the significance of the shifting, momentary sensations that arise from the mingling of the perceiving subject and the perceived object, sensations that exist outside the traditional concepts of the rational intellect. These are the unconditioned experiences of romanticism that Wordsworth celebrates for their power to remove the blinders of routine within which we ordinarily run. But Woolf's romanticized experience differs from Wordsworth's. Wordsworth postulates, however vaguely, an organizing principle, a unifying intelligence that gathers all these moments of experience into some ultimate and purposeful harmony. Woolf has the epistemology without the teleology. There is nothing that binds these sensations together, nothing that makes any final sense of them other than the personal sincerity of the artist at the moment he creates. This is what lies behind Woolf's wry contention that human nature had changed in 1910. Men were beginning to find that they were living outside the conventional structures provided by tradition and religion. She argues that there is nothing for it but to fall back on the self and the immediate data of consciousness, that amorphous, endlessly fascinating interpenetration of sensation and sensibility. The novelist must drop the conventions of realism that demand minute descriptions of the frayed furniture, the grimy window and the neighbor's garden

so that he can get to the genuine self in its moment-by-moment awareness -- fertile, chaotic, infinitely suggestive. The self, represented by Mrs. Brown in this context, must be rescued from the worn-out furniture of realism.

At whatever cost of life, limb and damage to valuable property Mrs. Brown must be rescued, expressed, and set in her high relations to the world . . . so the smashing and crashing began. Thus it is that we hear all round us, in poems and novels and biographies, even in newspaper articles and essays, the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction.

While the conventions of earlier fiction are being properly destroyed, an art of fragments will have to be tolerated until a new and fitting set of conventions can be found to re clothe the self without suffocating it.

13

The "smashing and crashing" Woolf thinks necessary to liberate Mrs. Brown can be heard everywhere in Waugh's fiction. Almost every novel contains references to ancestral houses being neglected, abandoned or razed. Those torn down are predictably replaced by functional structures composed of one-room flats. Waugh agreed with Woolf that the traditional conventions men used to define themselves were no longer working. But he did not find this cause to rejoice in the liberation of the self. In his works the smashing of traditional conventions does not release the self from bondage but rather threatens to reveal its shallow inconsequence. As their ancestral homes are destroyed to make way for the new, the owners do not achieve self-discovery amidst the wreckage. Rather they become lost ciphers lead-

ing absurdly rootless lives in transient flats. Some, like Tony Last in A Handful of Dust, hide from the truth by living in fake replicas of an earlier, more self-assured age. Others live in the bare functional design of modern architecture blandly accepting the terms of their inconsequential existence in the twentieth century. Decline and Fall sets the pattern for Waugh's architectural motif when Margot Metroland replaces her sixteenth century home with a "surprising creation of ferro concrete and aluminum" that has been designed to eliminate "the human element from the consideration of form." Far from aiding self-discovery, the "smashing and crashing" of traditional structures deprives the individual of his identity.

Waugh thinks that whatever character men pretend to must ultimately be attributed to the artifice of convention and cannot exist apart from it. In Brideshead Revisited he has his character Charles Ryder, whom he elsewhere explicitly designates his spokesman, state his view of the matter: "I regarded men as something much less than the buildings they made and inhabited, as mere lodgers and short-term sub-lessees of small importance in the long, fruitful life of their homes."<sup>14</sup> On these terms subjectivity unencumbered by traditional structures and anchored in personal sincerity alone seems little more than whimsical.

Charles Ryder makes his living by painting ancestral estates just before they are torn down. He sees his task as an elegiac mission to record the remains of a dying society

before it passes from sight completely. It is hard not to see this as Waugh's comment on his own undertaking: a novelist in the process of rendering a passing civilization. In 1946 Waugh himself remarked rather portentously that he foresaw "in the dark age opening that the scribes may play the part of the monks after the first barbarian victories. They were not satirists," but rather the chroniclers of a desolation that was now returning in another guise.

This, of course, is the official Waugh speaking. There is another Waugh who delights in flouting tradition and revels in the anarchic energy released when the old forms are swept away. It is the tension between these two Waughs apparent in his chapter on Gaudi -- one plaintively conservative, the other cynically subversive -- that gives his fiction its wild energy. But, although he shares some of Woolf's enthusiasm for dismantling the nostalgic delusions people entertain about a past that never was, Waugh adamantly refuses to subscribe to her thesis that this is a salutary destruction which will reveal valuable truths about the inner self. As a novelist Waugh's problem, then, is to find a way to acknowledge -- at times even take a sardonic enjoyment in -- the collapse of traditional conventions under the weight of the present moment's incoherence, but to do so in such a way that he will not surrender to what he thinks of as sentimental subjectivity. He finds his solution, eccentrically enough, in the works of Ronald Firbank.

While Waugh's extravagant praise of Firbank must seem to us today either facetious or absurd, there can be no doubt that he did learn some important lessons from this minor novelist. Waugh found in Firbank's narrative technique a way to avoid both the restrictive conventions of realism and what he thought the subjective excesses of modernism. In his essay on Firbank Waugh complained, as did Woolf, that the strategies of earlier fiction were inadequate to his needs. But his reasons for dissatisfaction were quite different from hers. Unlike Woolf, Waugh did not take the Edwardian novelists to task for neglecting "the dark places of psychology," but rather objected to their attempt to make narrative causality and chronology seem plausible. This he thought artistically limiting and simply inappropriate to the fragmentary nature of contemporary society with its lack of clearly defined purpose.

Nineteenth-century novelists achieved a balance of subject and form only by complete submission to the idea of the succession of events in an arbitrarily limited period of time. Just as in painting until the last generation the aesthetically significant activity of the artist had always to be occasioned by anecdote and representation, so the novelist was fettered by the chain of cause and effect. Almost all the important novels of this century have been experiments in making an art form out of this raw material of narration.

Waugh generally agreed with Woolf that the possibilities of traditional fiction had been exhausted, but radically disagreed on the question of where to go next. While Woolf called for the inward exploration of the self, Waugh argued for a hard-edged objectivity that would achieve its effects by juxtapos-

ing exteriors so that they would mutely comment upon one another. For Woolf the inner Mrs. Brown was paramount; for Waugh only the outer Mrs. Brown mattered.

And this is why Firbank's fiction served Waugh so well. Summing up Firbank's technique, Waugh described it as an exercise in structural wit with which he "emphasized the fact which his contemporaries were neglecting that the novel should be directed for entertainment." While others had been "forced into a subjective attitude to [their] material, Firbank remained objective."

Firbank's novels -- if that is what they are -- involve a rapid counterpoint of discontinuous scenes with little attention to descriptive detail, cause and effect, or chronology. The typical Firbank plot does not progress in linear fashion; rather it composes itself in a loose structure of disparate pieces that coalesce into a unified field of experience.

His later novels are almost wholly devoid of any attributions of cause to effect; there is the barest minimum of direct description; his compositions are built up, intricately and with a balanced alternation of the wildest extravagance and the most austere economy, with conversational nuances. They may be compared to cinema films in which the relation of caption and photograph is directly reversed; occasionally a brief, visual image flashes out to illumine and explain the flickering succession of spoken words . . . .

In this way Firbank achieved a new art form primarily as a vehicle for bringing coherence to his own elusive humor. But in doing this he solved the problem which most vexes the novelist of the present time. Other solutions are offered of the same problem, but in them the author has been forced into a subjective attitude to his material, Firbank remained objective and emphasized the fact which his contemporaries were neglecting that the novel should be directed for entertainment. This is the debt which the present generation owes him.

The rapid counterpoint of briefly sketched scenes treated with hard-edged objectivity: this was the technique Waugh learned from Firbank.<sup>16</sup> Early in his career it became the method with which he pursued what he referred to as his "absorbing task, the attempt to reduce to order the anarchic raw materials of life."<sup>17</sup> That he could have learned these techniques elsewhere is irrelevant. Firbank's treatment of the most absurdly inconsequential subjects, his weightless characters with no substance beyond their elliptically naughty wit -- all this was congenial to Waugh's satiric temperament. With the passing of those conventions that had clothed men with tradition and belief, Waugh found the paper-thin characterization in Firbank quite appropriate to his vision of man in the contemporary world stripped of "his systems of belief and his ideal claims."

Claiming to follow Firbank's example, Waugh developed an objective, external approach and, wherever possible, suppressed all but the visible behavior of his characters. With its cultivated shallowness and deliberate lack of resonance, this external treatment enabled Waugh to put into practice Wyndham Lewis's admonition that fiction should deal with "the Great Without" through "the wisdom of the eye."<sup>18</sup> While their novels are quite dissimilar, Waugh and Lewis are at one in their distaste for stream of consciousness and interior monologue. In order to suggest how insipidly shallow people have become in the absence of shared values, they avoid psychologizing and restrict themselves to the

surfaces of their subjects. To treat psychological interiors would be to take seriously the flow of indiscriminate sensation that makes up Woolf's version of the modern mind.

Lewis described Woolf's literary attempt to record the experience of total immersion in immediate sensation as a symptom of contemporary man's reversion to barbarism.<sup>19</sup> Of course, both Waugh and Lewis knew that submitting to this flux of immediate experience would deprive them of the detachment necessary to maintain a fixed satiric fulcrum. They chose not to abandon their leverage.

Waugh and Lewis rejected the twentieth century conception of a fragmentary, protean self adrift in a relativistic world. They opposed the epistemological categories that gained ascendancy in the first decades of this century largely by means of the works of Henri Bergson, William James, John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead. These were the thinkers who dislodged the categories of classical philosophy in order to admit process into their world views. Lewis argued that they accomplished this task at the expense of the mode of conceptualization that had enabled man not only to make sense of the ordinary world of his experience but also to act effectively within it, convinced of the significance of his deeds.<sup>20</sup>

This is the one issue that Waugh returns to again and again in his fiction. He is preoccupied with the habit of mind with which we organize experience.

Although Waugh clearly stated his philosophical and esthetic beliefs in his essays, articles and biographies, he never wrote what could be considered a fully systematic argument to support his preference. Nevertheless his predisposition to a hierarchical essentialist epistemology is evident everywhere in his fiction. This is especially so in the opening and closing of Decline and Fall which can be read as a novelistic working out of the argument Wyndham Lewis makes on behalf of the classical essentialist position in Time and Western Man. When put together, Decline and Fall and Lewis's sustained attack on relativism provide us with the coordinates necessary to perceive the principle of coherence in all of Waugh's work.

## Chapter III - Notes

- 1 Evelyn Waugh, Work Suspended, in Tactical Exercise (London, 1941; Boston: Little, Brown, 1954), pp. 140, 141.
- 2 Evelyn Waugh, "A Call to Orders," Country Life, 26 February 1938, in A Little Order, p. 62.
- 3 Evelyn Waugh, "In Defense of Cubism," Drawing and Design, November 1917, in A Little Order, p. 54.
- 4 Labels, pp. 172-80.
- 5 Evelyn Waugh, "The Death of Painting," The Saturday Book: No. 16, ed. John Hadfield (London, 1956), in A Little Order, pp. 73-74.
- 6 Lewis, 241-249, is especially concerned with the difference between art that attempts to arrest the permanence of form and art that accommodates the transient.
- 7 Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," Collected Essays, II (1919; rpt. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1967) p. 106.
- 8 The Diaries, p. 225.
- 9 Irving Howe, The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts (New York: Horizon Press, 1967), p. 14.
- 10 Wyndham Lewis, Satire and Fiction (London: The Arthur Press, 1930), pp. 151-53.
- 11 "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," p. 330.
- 12 "Modern Fiction," pp. 108, 105.
- 13 "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," pp. 333-34.
- 14 Evelyn Waugh, When the Going Was Good, (1946; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951), p. 8. In the preface of this collection of his travel writing, Waugh quotes Charles Ryder's speech in Brideshead Revisited and then explicitly identifies Ryder's point of view with his own.
- 15 "Fan-Fare," p. 33.
- 16 Evelyn Waugh, "Ronald Firbank," Life and Letters, II (March, 1929), in A Little Order, pp. 77-80.

17

"Fan-Fare," p. 33.

18

Lewis, Satire and Fiction, p. 53.

19

Satire and Fiction, p. 52-53.

20

Jeffrey M. Heath, "The Year's Work in Waugh Studies," Evelyn Waugh Newsletter, 13, (1979), p. 5, quotes from an interview Elizabeth Jane Howard had with Waugh in which he did not equivocate about his resistance to the literary fashion that had its origins in the epistemological shift announced by Bergson, Whitehead and other early twentieth century philosophers. In this interview Waugh "crisply maintains the Gertrude Stein 'wrote absolute gibberish' and that James Joyce 'wrote absolute rot.' You could watch Joyce going mad sentence by sentence, Waugh says, until the Americans hired him to write Finnegan's Wake, 'which is only fit for examinations at Cambridge.'"

## Chapter IV

### "Confused Roaring": the Fall from Perception to Sensation

The opening scenes of Decline and Fall satirically portray an encounter between Waugh's portrait of a hopelessly cultivated sensibility existing within "preconceived bounds of order and propriety" and Woolf's "uncircumscribed spirit" intoxicated with the "luminous halo" of indiscriminant experience. The result of this meeting comes as no surprise.

Decline and Fall is Waugh's first novel and, appropriately enough, it begins and ends with the "confused roaring" of disorderly tribal primitivism sweeping irresistibly over the civilized individual. As the novel opens, we are told that the irrepressible Bollinger Club is noisily conducting its annual dinner at Scone College. The revelry has reached its shrillest note when the quiet protagonist, Paul Pennyfeather appears and with him the novel's central conflict.

Waugh carefully orchestrates the collision of ebullient confusion with restrained order as the Bollinger

Club and Paul Pennyfeather move toward one another unawares. He does this by juxtaposing two carefully described scenes: one of the gross disorder among the drunken Bollingers; the other, an elaborate description of Paul's meticulously arranged life.

A shriller note could now be heard rising from Sir Alastair's rooms; any who have heard that sound will shrink at the recollection of it; it is the sound of the English county families baying for broken glass. Soon they would all be tumbling out into the quad, crimson and roaring in their bottle-green evening coats, for the real romp of the evening.

It was a lovely evening. They broke up Mr. Austen's grand piano, and stamped Lord Rending's cigars into his carpet, and smashed his china, and tore up Mr. Partridge's sheets, and threw the Matisse into his water jug; Mr. Sanders had nothing to break except his windows, but they found the manuscript at which he had been working for the Newdigate Prize Poem, and had great fun with that . . . .

Paul Pennyfeather was reading for the Church. It was his third year of uneventful residence at Scone. He had come there after a creditable career at a small public school of ecclesiastical temper on the South Downs, where he had edited the magazine, been President of the Debating Society, and had, as his report said, "exercised a wholesome influence for good" in the House of which he was head boy. At home he lived in Onslow Square with his guardian, a prosperous solicitor who was proud of his progress and abysmally bored by his company. Both his parents had died in India at the time when he won the essay prize at his preparatory school. For two years he had lived within his allowance, aided by two valuable scholarships. He smoked three ounces of tobacco a week -- John Cotton, Medium -- and drank a pint and a half of beer a day, the half at luncheon and the pint a dinner, a meal he invariably ate in Hall. He had four friends, three of whom had been at school with him. None of the Bollinger Club had ever heard of Paul Pennyfeather, and he, oddly enough, had not heard of them.

Little suspecting the incalculable consequences that the evening was to have for him, he bicycled happily back from a meeting of the League of Nations Union. There had been a most interesting paper about plebiscites in Poland. He thought of smoking a pipe and reading another chapter of the Forsyte Saga before going to bed.

Paul's prudently managed life of precise measurements -- three ounces of this, a pint and a half of that -- is of a piece with his absorption in the romance of Edwardian society, The Forsyte Saga. Obviously his readings at Oxford have not included Virginia Woolf. If they had, he would know the Galsworthy's sage is pure fantasy, a bourgeois dream of social order in need of some salutary "smashing and crashing" applied in the modernist mode. But the Bollinger Club members are there to bring him to his senses. Their enthusiasm for "smashing and crashing" will change Paul's life "incalculably" as he falls from the measured into the immeasurable, from the world of clear ideas into the world of noisy, turbulent experience. He will be swallowed up by the "kaleidoscope of dimly discernible faces," the anonymous mass intent upon destroying form and harmony represented in this scene by the grand piano, the Matisse and the manuscript. This is the fall that recurs in all Waugh's fiction, the fall from the fixed decorum of civilized life into the "confused roaring" of modern primitivism, the decline from perception to sensation.

The Bollinger Club is composed of aristocrats but they are all remarkably degenerate: "epileptic royalty from their villas of exile; uncouth peers from crumbling country seats; smooth young men of uncertain tastes from embassies and legations; illiterate lairds from wet granite hovels in the Highlands; ambitious young barristers and Conservative candidates torn from the London season and the indelicate

advances of debutantes." The language here is carefully chosen for its cumulative effect. The "sonorous of name and title" are epileptic, uncouth, illiterate, uncertain and torn; they come from crumbling country seats and wet granite hovels. The entire ruling class is declining into the inanely primitive. Paul's encounter with the Bollinger Club members is described in terms that emphasize their barbarous incomprehension of civilized distinctions.

Out of the night Lunsden Of Strathdrummond swayed across his path like a druidical rocking stone. Paul tried to pass.

Now it so happened that the tie of Paul's old school bore a marked resemblance to the pale blue and white of the Bollinger Club. The difference of a quarter of an inch in the width of the stripes was not one that Lunsden of Strathdrummond was likely to appreciate.

"Here's an awful man wearing the Boller tie," said the Laird. It is not for nothing that since pre-Christian times his family has exercised chieftainship over uncharted miles of barren moorland.

Acting as chief over uncharted wasteland is not likely to encourage an aptitude for fine discriminations. Civilized distinctions -- that quarter-inch difference in the tie's stripe -- can no longer defend against the muddled barbarians. And rightly, so we are made to feel. Those who make the distinctions are rather pallid when put up against the robust revelry of those drunk with confused experience.

Paul finds himself powerless before these celebrants of the indiscriminant.

Paul had no particular objection to drunkenness -- he had read rather a daring paper to the Thomas More Society on the subject -- but he was consumedly shy of drunkards.

He can entertain the idea of drunkenness but he has no

resources to deal with the experience of the drunkard. From the beginning, Waugh's satire dramatizes an absurd disjunction between idea and experience, perception and sensation. Until his meeting with the Bollinger Club, Paul has lived protected in an intellectual environment still hospitable to ideas of order and value. But upon contact with actuality beyond Scone College, these ideas prove illusory either because they are bankrupt in themselves or because their custodians are too weak to impose the modes of order they imply. The action of Decline and Fall's opening scene is chorically witnessed by figures of supposed authority, the Junior Dean and the Domestic Bursar, who remain in their rooms, their lights put out the better to avoid any possible confrontation with the Bollinger revelers who have come from all over Europe to run wild during this irregularly held event. When Mr. Sniggs, the Junior Dean, suggests they should do something to protect Paul from injury, Mr. Postlethwaite, the Domestic Bursar, prudently advises the wiser course.

"No, Sniggs," said Mr. Postlethwaite, laying a hand on his impetuous colleague's arm. "No, no, no. It would be unwise. We have the prestige of the senior common room to consider. In their present state they might not prove amenable to discipline. We must at all costs avoid an outrage."

Authority supinely tolerates the new barbarians. It has neither standards nor convictions with which to caution them.

In Waugh's world the real no longer need pay respect to

the ideal; what is has no obligations to what ought to be. Matters have been quite reversed: the ideal disappears into the real; fixed substantial being is abandoned for a flickering succession of appearances. The essential Paul Pennyfeather disappears into his alarming experiences. This is why Waugh halts his narrative midway through the novel to explain with a casual backhanded manner that Paul Pennyfeather is not quite real, that he has become a shadow of his former self. The novel's major concern is with how Paul loses his identity as a result of his contact with the "real" world of educational charlatans and aristocratic white slavers.

For an evening at least the shadow that has flitted about this narrative under the name of Paul Pennyfeather materialized into the solid figure of an intelligent, well-educated, well-conducted young man, a man who could be trusted to use his vote at a general election with discretion and proper detachment, whose opinion on a ballet or a critical essay was rather better than most people's, who could order a dinner without embarrassment and in a creditable French accent, who could be trusted to see to luggage at foreign railway stations, and might be expected to acquit himself with decision and decorum in all the emergencies of civilized life. This was the Paul Pennyfeather who had been developing in the placid years which preceded this story. In fact, the whole of this book is really an account of the mysterious disappearance of Paul Pennyfeather, so that readers must not complain if the shadow which took his name does not amply fill the important part of hero for which he was originally cast.

Caught in the rush of rogues and fools, Paul can no longer maintain the balance of a life poised on the classical mean. He tumbles into an absurdly improbably series of experiences that reduce him to the status of any other half-human particle in the mass of men being harried through life on

the way to nowhere. He becomes the passive innocent whirled through one outrage after another beginning with the loss of his trousers to the mischievous Bollingers, an incident that quite literally exposes what he has in common with the mass of humanity at the expense of his individuality. From this moment Paul's sense of identity pales before "the unusual series of events of which his shadow was witness." While these events are startlingly funny, they are touched with the grim sense of loss. In Waugh's vision of the century of the common man, the civilized individual does not have much of a chance. Despite his grasp of public issues -- his ability to discuss budgets, birth control and Byzantine mosaics -- he has but a weak hold on his sense of identity. He can be "expected to acquit himself with decision and decorum in all the emergencies of civilized life" but in the barbarous conditions of the present he is lost. As Virginia Woolf had indicated, the traditional structures have been torn down as irrevocably as has been the sixteenth century estate that Decline and Fall's amoral goddess of modernity, Margot Metroland, orders razed once it passes into her unscrupulous hands. Without shelter to sustain it, the exposed self does not stand up very well. Without effective categories with which to order his life, Paul Pennyfeather fades into the background of this age's bizarre experiences.

Paul finally loses his identity altogether. In order to escape from the prison to which he has been wrongly sentenced,

he must undergo an official death and become his own cousin. After his stay in the world of experience, it is not surprising that back in the world of ideas at Scone College Paul takes a hard line with regard to the ancient heresies he encounters in his resumed theological studies.

There was a bishop in Bithynia, Paul learned, who had denied the Divinity of Christ, the immortality of the soul, the existence of good, the legality of marriage, and the validity of the Sacrament of Extreme Unction. How right they had been to condemn him! . . . So the ascetic Ebionites used to turn towards Jerusalem when they prayed. Paul made a note of it. Quite right to suppress them. Then he turned out the light and went into his bedroom to sleep.

Having found himself unable to impose his ideas on the world as it is at present, he becomes somewhat sadistically intent upon the vicarious enjoyment provided by the spectacle of other ages in which ideas were taken seriously indeed.

Decline and Fall shows Waugh already preoccupied with the theme that will concern him for almost the next forty years: the peculiarly divided sensibility of the twentieth century. Waugh's concern parallels in part T. S. Eliot's dissociation of sensibility, the phrase Eliot used to indicate what he thought to be the fundamental disharmony between the analytic and intuitional sides of man's nature. But it is Wyndham Lewis's differentiation between the classical restraint of the spatializing intellect and the romantic abandon of the temporalizing intuition that best explains Paul Pennyfeather's disastrous encounter with the Bollinger Club.

Although there seems not to have been any personal contact between them, Evelyn Waugh and Wyndham Lewis knew each

other's work. Waugh includes a direct reference to Lewis's famous, short-lived Vorticist periodical, Blast, in Vile Bodies.<sup>1</sup> With some reservations, Lewis wrote approvingly of Waugh's early novels.<sup>2</sup> While there is no danger of ever mistaking a Lewis novel for one by Waugh, it is hard not to remark the similarities in their thought and temperament. Both have a highly developed visual sense: Lewis is a respected painter; Waugh, an accomplished illustrator. Their training in the visual arts seems likely to have contributed to their dedication to the external approach -- "the wisdom of the eye" -- in composing their narratives. Both are politically on the right. Each laments the bankruptcy of traditional modes of order while seizing upon this "cultural failure" as an opportunity to create his own idiosyncratic fiction that defies standard classifications.

In 1927, one year before Waugh's first novel, Lewis published Time and Western Man, an extended treatise that supported a classical essentialist epistemology against what he understood to be the contemporary preference for an existentialist epistemology, especially as developed in the work of Henri Bergson. Waugh was probably aware of Lewis's book and its attack on Bergson during the period he was writing Decline and Fall. His diaries record his interest in Bergson at the time and in Decline and Fall he satirically alludes to the issues Bergson and Lewis raise when his enigmatic young Bauhaus architect, Silenus, discusses the

problem of man in this parody of Hamlet's soliloquy:

What an immature, self-destructive, antiquated mischief is man! How obscure and gross his prancing and chattering on his little stage of evolution! How loathsome and beyond words boring all the thoughts and self-approval of this biological by-product! this half-formed, ill-conditioned body! this erratic, maladjusted mechanism of his soul: on one side the harmonious instincts and balanced responses of the animal, on the other the inflexible purpose of the engine, and between them man, equally alien from the being of Nature and the doing of the machine, the vile becoming!

"Becoming," of course, is the term Bergson applies to his evolutionary sense of time.<sup>3</sup> If Waugh's satire can be said to have one subject it is this "vile becoming" which Lewis heatedly attacked as the major threat to Western man's understanding of himself. Lewis's argument is primarily with Bergson and what contemporary writers were making of Bergson's philosophy of becoming. It is an argument that makes explicit the assumptions with which Waugh creates his fiction.

Bergson's Creative Evolution had become popular in England largely through the efforts of T.E. Hulme and Samuel Alexander in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> In 1925 Whitehead's influential Science and the Modern World cites Bergson as the philosopher whose thought best characterizes his epoch. Whitehead's own organicist philosophy follows the line of Bergson's basic premises and thereby extends their influence.<sup>5</sup> We know that Virginia Woolf had read Bergson and used his ideas as a basis for her narrative innovations. Indeed Bergson's presence is apparent everywhere in the first decades of this century and

it is no surprise to discover Waugh reading him in 1925 while he is finishing the draft of his first published story, "The Balance."

That Bergson should have had so much impact on the twentieth century novel is easily explained. His intuitional philosophy argues that reality is temporal, that the slippery secret of Kant's thing-in-itself is to be found in the relentless process of evolutionary growth that can be unreflectively experienced but not intellectually apprehended. With its emphasis on time and immediate experience Bergson's philosophy proved especially interesting to novelists because their art is by its nature concrete and profoundly temporal. Serious novelists could not help but be interested in a philosophy that attempts to revolutionize man's perception of his temporal being. Of course, the use made of Bergson varied from writer to writer. By opening the psychological dimension of time, he paradoxically provided some novelists with strategies that sought to deliver narrative from its bondage to temporal sequence. In a way, this seems to have been Bergson's value to Waugh.

In Creative Evolution Bergson argues that beginning with the Greeks, classical philosophy in the West places intellect over intuition. As a result, Western man assumes that the substantially real is only that which the intellect can objectify and communicate by means of representation in language and symbol. Other knowledge -- information reported through the senses and intuition -- is necessarily immersed

in changeable, unreliable material existence. Seeking to alter this evaluation, Bergson emphasizes that the intellect's reality is an abstraction from immediate experience. The intellect deals with experience by making a symbolic construction upon it. In order to do this, direct experience must be artificialized in two ways. First, the intellect conceives of itself as a subject distinct from the object of experience. Second, time and process are removed from experience so that it can be divided into manageable units. Bergson points out that this intellectualizing of experience is necessary since it allows us to transform the world into symbols. With these symbols we can manipulate the materials of our environment for our own practical purposes. Our ability to abstract and symbolize gives us the linguistic and technological grasp necessary to bend the materials of the external world to our will.

Bergson goes on at length to describe the basic assumptions of classical epistemology in which essence precedes and defines existence. An existent is real to the degree that it approximates its essential form. A tree achieves its being to the extent that it conforms to some ideal preconception, some Platonic form of treeness. A man fulfills his being at those moments in which he most conforms to the essential definition of the human. Existence is measured and classified according to a preconceived hierarchy of being; experience is validated by the preexisting idea. The essentialist's epistemology is one of privileged

moments. It is aristocratic, hierarchical. It prizes the spatial over the temporal, the static over the dynamic. In this scheme the shabby, unreliable world of change only redeems itself at those moments when it allows the immutable forms of things to show through the veil of shifting appearances.

According to Bergson this essentialist perspective deprives man of a sense of harmony with the world as it actually is. While there is no doubting the positive gains it provides in terms of our ability to control our circumstances, the classical outlook comes at a cost. The intellect is cut off from the life of things. The world, nature, experience -- all tend to be objectified, deadened because the intellect cannot deal with process. Bergson uses Zeno's paradox to demonstrate his meaning. When Zeno proves the arrow never moves on its trajectory from point A to point B, he thinks he is demonstrating the illusory nature of motion. In fact, Bergson argues, he is illustrating the intellect's hostility to process.

Take the flying arrow. At every moment, says Zeno, it is motionless, for it cannot have time to move, that is, to occupy at least two successive positions, unless at least two moments are allowed it. At a given moment, therefore, it is at rest at a given point. Motionless in each point of its course, it is motionless during all the time that it is moving.

Yes, if we suppose that the arrow can ever be in a point of its course. Yes again, if the arrow, which is moving, ever coincides with a position, which is motionless. But the arrow never is in any point of its course. The most we can say is that it might be there, in this sense, that it passes there and might stop there . . . . It is enough to point out that [Zeno's argument] consist[s] in applying the movement to the line traversed, and supposing that what is true of the line is

true of the movement. The line, for example, may be divided into as many parts as we wish, of any length that we wish, and it is always the same line. From this we conclude that we have the right to suppose the movement articulated as we wish, and that it is always the same movement. We thus obtain a series of absurdities that all express the same fundamental absurdity. But the possibility of applying the movement to the line traversed exists only for an observer who, keeping outside the movement and seeing at every instant the possibility of a stop, tries to reconstruct the real movement with these possible immobilities. The absurdity vanishes as soon as we adopt by thought the continuity of the real movement, a continuity of which every one of us is conscious whenever he lifts an arm or advances a step.

The intellect perceives everything, still or moving, under the category of space. If movement is measured spatially according to the line formed by its trajectory, contradictions necessarily arise. One obvious problem is that structures in space are repeatable in a way that movement in time is not. As Whitehead puts it, the intellect conceives of reality as a series of "instantaneous configurations of matter" in space. Whitehead calls this the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" by which he means that the intellect's version of reality is really an abstraction. Bergson uses film as his metaphor of the abstracting intellect. The intellect functions cinematographically, reducing perception to a series of representative snapshots. Because the stillness of each photographic frame makes it both manageable and communicable, we tend to accept its representation of reality as reality itself. According to this scheme, process is the illusion we experience when these individual frames are run through the mind one after another. In the intellect's habitual view of things

that which can be represented spatially and statically is real; that which involves process, change or what Bergson calls becoming is either unreal or less than true being. Bergson traces the bias for intellectual apprehension with its falsifying picture of the world to Greek philosophy in general.

The Greeks trusted to nature, trusted the natural propensity of the mind, trusted language above all, in so far as it naturally externalized thought. Rather than lay blame on the attitude of thought and language toward the course of things, they preferred to pronounce the course of things itself to be wrong . . . . As becoming shocks the habits of thought and fits ill into the molds of language, they declared it unreal. In spatial movement and in change in general they saw only pure illusion. This conclusion could be softened down without changing the premisses, by saying that the reality changes, but that it ought not to change. Experience confronts us with becoming: this is sensible reality. But the intelligible reality, that which ought to be, is more real still, and that reality does not change. Beneath the qualitative becoming, beneath the evolutionary becoming, beneath the extensive becoming, the mind must seek that which defies change, the definable quality, the form or essence, the end.

Bergson examines the conflict of experience and idea and finds that traditional philosophy has gotten it all wrong. We have been led into the habit of making experience fit our ideas rather than shaping our ideas so that they properly accommodate experience. This occurs on all levels of thought and perception, from the most elementary acts of cognition to the most sophisticated scientific reasoning to moral judgements.. The result has been an ascendancy of intellect over intuition that is based upon an assumption that has not been questioned adequately. We assume that reality can be grasped by the intellect because the intellect

provides us with the tools -- language, symbolism, numbers -- to communicate our experience to others. Since the abstractions of the intellect do not accommodate motion, philosophy has been traditionally at pains to explain away process in favor of the static, spatial categories of rational understanding. Bergson repeatedly argues, as does Whitehead after him, that the intellect by its nature does not apprehend reality itself but rather re-presents our experience under what Whitehead calls a high degree of abstraction. The rational mind deals with models of reality; it apprehends the visible external shell that is always in the process of being discarded by the numinous principle within. In order to think or speak about experience at all, the intellect must predicate it with stable, clearly identifiable qualities. But the thing-in-itself, life itself, which is fundamentally a process of becoming in time, eludes the intellect's spatializing categories.

How, then, do we make contact with the real, Kant's thing-in-itself? Bergson's answer is that we do this already through intuitive experience in which the perceiving subject and the perceived object are no longer distinct from one another but join in a moment of direct, unreflective perception. Only this intuitive approach can give us that awareness of the irreducibly real that puts man into emotional and imaginative harmony with his world. This is the experience of durée in which we unmistakably contact the numinous principle of existence: becoming. The problem is

that the Western intellectual tradition has not valued this experience properly.

Bergson reopens the old controversy between essence and existence by concentrating on the psychological sense of time. His terms for the dialectic between essence and existence are, respectively, being and becoming. Our sense of the world depends upon which side we favor: if we are essentialists, being is primary; if we are existentialists, becoming.

In Bergson's philosophy, existence precedes essence. Becoming is substantively real; being is an abstraction. Concepts of being and essence are artificially imposed by the intellect. There are no privileged moments at which an entity approaches perfection of being by approximating its essential form. Time is democratized. All moments are moments of the one reality which is becoming. Everything that exists fulfills itself at each moment of its becoming. Bergson's epistemology favors the temporal over the egalitarian. By accepting the reality of process, it strives to make ideas fit experience so that all times have their significance, their perfection.

Bergson's thought is basically romantic and optimistic; it celebrates each coming moment as yet another fulfillment in "the perpetual climax of the now." It has the democratic spirit one finds in Emerson and Whitman where every moment, every self, every experience is as important as every other because each potentially contains all the others.

In Time and Western Man Wyndham Lewis unequivocally charges Bergson's thought with intellectual subversion. As far as he is concerned, it poses a clear and present danger to Western man. Attacking Bergson's philosophy of becoming, he argues in favor of traditional philosophy founded upon the concept of being. Lewis does not mean to suggest that one philosophy is truer than the other. He thinks that essentialist and existentialist premisses develop alternate epistemologies, each with its own validity. (Indeed, this is Bergson's view of the matter also, although Lewis does not acknowledge it.) Lewis is concerned with the practical effects that flow from favoring one position rather than the other. He finds that contemporary art and politics are increasingly characterised by assumptions traceable, directly or indirectly, to Bergson's temporal philosophy. He further argues that Bergson's influence threatens to undermine what is valuable in Western civilization: reason, individualism, order.

Lewis claims that Bergson's celebration of durée or direct unreflective experience is antithetical to rational individualism. According to Lewis, Bergson urges us to overcome the distinction between subject and object by abandoning ourselves to a rapturous identification with the temporal flow of indiscriminate experience. This, he explains, is both naive and dangerous. It can only serve to blur our understanding of ourselves and our surroundings. To enter Bergson's time-world is to surrender to the confusion

of process. We give up the spatial world of static forms at our peril. The pattern of shifting variables is a poor substitute for the uniqueness of the stable individual.

In Bergson's philosophy, Lewis argues,

Pattern, with its temporal multiplicity, and its chronologic depth, is to be substituted for the thing, with its one time, and its spatial depth. A crowd of hurrying shapes, a temporal collectivity, is to be put in the place of the single object of what it hostilely indicates as the 'spatializing' mind. The new dimension introduced is the variable mental dimension of time. So the notion of the transformed 'object' offered us by this doctrine is plainly in the nature of a 'futurist' picture, like a running dog with a hundred legs and a dozen backs and heads. In place of the characteristic static 'form' of Greek philosophy, you have a series, a group, or, as Professor Whitehead says, a reiteration. In place of a 'form' you have a 'formation.'

With this analysis of the consequences of Bergson's epistemology, Lewis seeks to prove that far from putting us in touch with the numinous and concrete principle of reality, the philosophy of becoming offers us instead just another instance of the abstract posing as the concrete.

Lewis extrapolates this elevation of formation over form to politics where it becomes the elevation of the mass over the individual. He contends that the romantic philosophy of thinkers like Bergson and Whitehead threatens us with return to the amorphous primitive condition in which we will be so inextricably immersed in experience that the rational intellect will not have the leverage it needs to make the value discriminations requisite to civilized life. This unreflective immersion in raw sensation can be very rewarding emotionally but it is like a potentially addictive drug;

excessive use can render us irresponsibly passive and deprive us of the ability to direct our lives. Lewis is not one to relinquish control lightly and it is on this point that he criticizes Bergson most bitterly. He feels the Bergsonian position robs us of our initiative by putting intuition before intellect. Deprived of the intellectual tools with which to segment and arrange experience, we lose our purchase upon the terms of our existence. We give up the powers of discrimination that enable us to parcel experience into manageable, boundaried units. Instead of exercising the civilizing force of the intellect and will, we lapse into a passive primitivism in which we allow our surroundings to shape us.

It is definitely our segregations that are to be broken up, our barriers to be broken down. The paradigmatic 'objects' that are held up to us, as our mirrors or as pictures of our reality, are of that mixed, fluid and neutral character; so that, if we survey them long enough, and accept them as an ultimate -- as a metaphysical, as well as scientific -- truth, they will induce us, too, to liquefy and disintegrate, and to return to a more primitive condition. The word primitive is still the key to all these movements which in every case lead to some form of primitivism.

Lewis considers the classical epistemology of the Greeks with its fixed forms and definite boundaries a civilized achievement of moral will. He is not concerned with its scientific truth. Science will always be testing different coordinates from which to interpret the world, but it does not follow that we should allow the experiments of science to affect our common sense view of things. The static, spatializing vision of Greek philosophy is a legacy we must

preserve, Whatever the current cultural pressures, there is no good reason for abandoning our classical inheritance in favor of a pantheistic primitivism with its indiscriminating worship of sensation. The primitive experience may provide an emotionally comfortable animistic relation with the world but it will also disable our powers of intellectual self-assertion and so deprive us of our freedom. Politically, the Bergsonian position, Lewis argues, will diminish the possibility of individualism and promote a sentimental collectivism.

In his consideration of the Bergsonian impact upon the arts, Lewis especially fastens upon contemporary experiments with stream-of-consciousness narration. He judges the stream-of-consciousness narrative to be not only objectionable but also dangerous. (Here, as elsewhere, Lewis's tendency to be prescriptively cautionary betrays the authoritarian streak that was to mislead him into those apologies for fascism he would come to regret in the 1940's and 1950's.) He can admire Joyce's mastery of technique in Ulysses and the portions of Finnegans Wake then available. But he finds these works to be symptoms of a dangerous tendency toward the primitive, the irrational and the collective. As far as Lewis is concerned, Joyce's exploration of the subconscious and unconscious mind does not discover the unique self. It ends in discovering the banal psychological substratum possessed by everyone. The distinguishing features of the individual are blurred until

only the characteristics of the mass are left. Lewis uses Joyce as an example of the artist gone wrong under the influence of Bergsonian concepts. In his attempt to register the unstructured flow of the conscious and preconscious mind, Joyce submits to the muddle of time and sacrifices the clarity of space. Instead of perception, we are left with sensation; instead of hard spatial definition, soft temporal approximation.<sup>7</sup>

According to Lewis, the modernist narrative emphasizes the senses of hearing and touch over that of sight. He takes this to be symptomatic. Hearing and touch require the kind of immersion in experience that Lewis wants to avoid. They do not require the discrete distance between subject and object necessary to vision. As a result the information reported by these senses is not nearly as precise and certain as that communicated by sight. Lewis is particularly appalled by the assault on the ear that constitutes the stream-of-consciousness narrative, which is

a tumultuous stream of evocative spell-bearing vocables, launched at your head -- or poured into your unconscious -- [that] is, finally, a dope only. It may be an auriferous mud, but it must remain mud -- not a clear but murky picture. As a literary medium it is barbaric.

The murmuring of the stream-of-consciousness is obsessive and hypnotic. The appeal to the ear is a drug; it puts the higher esthetic sense to sleep. It is emotional and kinetic rather than rational and static. Lewis objects to artistic expression that requires an emotional identification with its object. Art should neither attract nor repel but invite

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the contemplative attitude. It is ironic that Lewis should have attacked Joyce on this issue since Joyce also thought the static, contemplative esthetic experience superior to the kinetic and emotional. But, of course, Lewis's reading of Joyce and other contemporaries is at many points a provocative misreading. Most critics of Joyce agree that his narrative techniques are used to transcend time, not submit to it. In Finnegans Wake Joyce has a character modelled after himself named Gracehoper ask a caricature of Lewis named Ondt the following:

Your genius its worldwide, your spacest sublime!  
But, Holy Saltmartin, why can't you beat time?

Joyce's send-up is quite appropriate in both its meanings. Lewis cannot "beat time" in the sense of keeping time to the music of life nor can he free himself from his obsession with the temporal. Joyce seems to be suggesting that to transcend time one must first come to an understanding of it by submitting to its irresistible flow.

But Lewis would neither submit nor compromise. Adamantly against the Bergsonian esthetic of the modernists, he urged the classical perspective with its clear distinction between subject and object, its spatial representation of experience in fixed segments and its insistence on the individual point of view. In his esthetic the visual takes precedence over the auditory and tactile. Lewis insisted on this point.

Dogmatically then, I am for the Great Without, for the method of the external approach, for the wisdom of the eye, rather than that of the ear.

9

Visual information is highly defined; the articulation of boundaries is certain. Vision requires perspective; the eye perceives the object from a particular point of reference. Perspective means distance between subject and object and ensures an individual point of view. In Lewis's esthetic there is no room for the uncertainties of an interior terrain.

In Decline and Fall Waugh dramatizes the conflict between Lewis's classic insistence on the clear distinctions of the conceptualizing intellect and Bergson's romantic immersion in the immediate flux of experience, between the intellect's need to know and distinguish and the will's desire to experience and merge. Everything Paul Pennyfeather has learned before the events of the novel has seemed to warrant his conviction in the ordering power of ideas. But he discovers that his traditional allegiance to the categorizing intellect cannot protect him from the "confused roaring" of the Bollingers, who are thoroughly and barbarously drunk with Bergsonian immediacy and who will have nothing to do with fine discriminations. And so he fades into their "kaleidoscope of dimly discernible faces."

Waugh clearly shared Lewis's apprehension that the modern world had turned hostile both to intellectual distinctions and the personal integrity of the individual.

## Chapter IV - Notes

- 1 Vile Bodies, p. 65.
- 2 Wyndham Lewis, "Winn and Waugh," The Doom of Youth  
(New York: Robert McBride, 1932), pp. 99, 106-07.
- 3 The Diaries, pp. 215, 218.
- 4 T. E. Hulme, Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the  
Philosophy of Art (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul,  
1924), pp. 143-69; Samuel Alexander, Space, Time and  
Deity, I (1918; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1966),  
pp. 36-44; Lewis, Time and Western Man, pp. 211-19.
- 5 Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World  
(1925; rpt, New York: Mentor, 1964), pp. 133-34.
- 6 Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution, trans. Arthur Mitchell  
(New York: Henry Holt, 1911), pp. 308-10, 314, 298-345.
- 7 Lewis, Time and Western Man, pp. 176, 203, 75-113,  
162-249.
- 8 Lewis, Satire and Fiction, pp. 52-53.
- 9 Hugh Kenner, The Pound Era (Berkeley: University of  
California Press, 1971), pp. 232-47.
- 10 Lewis, Satire and Fiction, pp. 51-53.

## Chapter V

**"They Ought to Class People as Static and Dynamic"**

At its center Decline and Fall is directed by a mad architect named Otto Silenus who, not altogether unlike Waugh himself, has decided that contemporary artistic expression requires "the elimination of the human element from the consideration of form." This enigmatic young man lectures Paul Pennyfeather about life in the twentieth century.

Instead of this absurd division into sexes they ought to class people as static and dynamic. There's a real distinction there, though I can't tell you how it comes. I think we're probably two quite different species spiritually.

He uses the metaphor of the amusement wheel at Luna Park to make his meaning clear.

"Shall I tell you about life?"

"Yes, do," said Paul politely.

"Well, it's like the big wheel at Luna Park. . . .

"You pay five francs and go into a room with tiers of seats all round, and in the centre the floor is made of a great disc of polished wood that revolves quickly. At first you sit down and watch the others. They are all trying to sit in the wheel, and they keep getting flung off, and that makes them laugh, and you laugh too. It's great fun." . . . the nearer you can get to the hub of the wheel the slower it is moving and the easier it is to stay on. There's generally some one in the centre who

stands up and sometimes does a sort of dance. Often he's paid by the management, though, or, at any rate, he's allowed in free. Of course at the very centre there's a point completely at rest, if one could only find it. I'm not sure I am not very near that point myself. Of course the professional men get in the way. Lots of people just enjoy scrambling on and being whisked off and scrambling on again. How they all shriek and giggle! Then there are others, like Margot, who sit as far out as they can and hold on for dear life and enjoy that. But the whole point about the wheel is that you needn't get on it at all, if you don't want to. People get hold of ideas about life, and that makes them think they've got to join in the game, even if they don't enjoy it. It doesn't suit every one.

According to Silenus's division of the human race, the dynamic are those who can ride the spinning wheel of time untroubled by its whirl of indiscriminate sensation while the static are those who are best advised to remain seated in the stands where they can watch the spectacle without mixing with its uproar. The dynamic are with Bergson; the static, with Lewis. Paul's headlong adventures are the result of his falling from the gallery of static spectators onto the wheel of dynamic participants.

Silenus's big wheel at Luna Park serves as the emblem of Paul's journey in Decline and Fall, which is as futile as it is circular. However amusing the ride, once set spinning on this modern wheel, Paul loses the ability to step back and put into perspective "the unusual series of events of which his shadow was witness." In the classic pattern of satire, the novel concludes with Paul returning to the point of his departure.<sup>1</sup> He sits in his rooms at Scone College once more but this time disguised as his own cousin by the feeble expedient of a newly grown moustache. His experiences

in the world outside the sheltered academy of ideas have provided him with an alternate education. But this second education has not equipped him with the means to change anything for the better; he has not been led from darkness to light. Rather he has fallen from a life of bankrupt assumptions into the flux of confused experience that proves irremediably resistant to the light of any ordering principle. There is nothing for him to do but impotently retreat to his former isolation from the world at large. In the last scene of the novel as he talks with Peter Pastmaster, the son of his former lover, Margot Metroland, the annual Bollinger Dinner with which the novel began once again loudly works its way through its usual catastrophes. Peter, who has become a Bollinger member since coming up to Oxford, has left the revelry for a few minutes to look in on Paul. As they listen to the same "confused roaring and breaking of glass" with which the novel began, Peter tries drunkenly to assess the difference between Paul and himself.

"You know, Paul, I think it was a mistake you ever got mixed up with us; don't you? We're different somehow. Don't quite know how. Don't think that's rude, do you, Paul?"

Paul laconically agrees using the categories he has learned from his enigmatic mentor Professor Silenus.

"I know exactly what you mean. You're dynamic and I'm static."

This is the rueful knowledge Paul brings back from his

brief tour of the twentieth century: the static intellect and dynamic will have been divorced from one another; the fruitful dialectic between form and energy has been abandoned. There are the sterile thinkers and the anarchic doers, and neither group can understand the other.

Between the confused roaring of the opening and closing of the novel, Paul journeys from a cloistered innocence to an embittered awareness of the crippling division that hobbles his age and prevents anything like the civilized development of the whole person. Since Paul's circular journey sets the pattern -- slight variations excepted -- for almost all of Waugh's protagonists, it will be worth while to consider its course in some detail.

Paul's adventures parody those of the epic journey in which the hero descends into the underworld to meet the shades of the dead and obtain from them the knowledge he needs to prevail in his mission. There is, however, this difference: in his descent to the underworld of the twentieth century, Paul is the shade ("the shadow . . . flitting about this narrative under the name of Paul Pennyfeather") while the people he meets are vibrantly if grotesquely alive and contact with them only serves to further paralyze Paul's already enfeebled will.

Paul's classical Oxford education has not prepared him for a hero's role. One of the novel's running gags develops around Paul's reluctance to play either Aeneas or Dante to the fools, rogues and madmen he meets on his mock-

epic journey through the twentieth century. As in the conventional epic, each new character feels compelled to recite his life story to Paul upon their first meeting. "I expect you wonder how it is that I come to be here? . . . I don't know why I'm telling you all this; nobody else knows. I somehow feel you'll understand." They will make their confession whether Paul wants to hear it or not. At first Paul politely resigns himself to his undesired role. Soon he tries to resist.

"No," said Paul firmly, "nothing of the kind. I don't in the least want to know anything about you; d'you hear?"

"I'll tell you," said Philbrick; "it was like this --"

"I don't want to hear your loathsome confessions; can't you understand?"

But they don't understand; they continue to confide in him in spite of his protests. As the epic traveller, however unwilling, Paul has no choice but to listen.

On his journey Paul does a turn as a master at a criminally negligent boys' school in Wales where he readily complies with the policy of educational fraud openly acknowledged by all concerned, faculty and students alike. As the headmaster Augustus Fagin, Esquire, Ph.D., advises him, "schoolmasters must temper discretion with deceit." He then finds himself taken up by Margot Beste-Chetwynde, who is soon to become the infamous Lady Margot Metroland. With her Paul enters his Circe episode. Margot, goddess of modernity, collects men as one might stamps. She invites Paul to her country estate, King's Thursday, formerly a sixteenth century home which she has replaced with an absurdly functional creation in "ferro concrete and aluminum." After

putting Paul to the test in bed and then gaining her son's approval, Margot decides her latest lover is worth marrying. The wedding plans proceed. Alastair Digby-Vane Trumpington, the leader of the Bollinger party that first pushed Paul into this strange new world, shows up to play best man to Paul's groom. But there is a "hitch in the wedding preparations." At the last minute Margot sends Paul to France on some business she does not have time to attend to herself. Naive and inexperienced, he thoroughly lacks the resources of the wily Odysseus; so this contemporary Circe takes him in easily and completely. She simply neglects to tell him that her business comprises a chain of South American brothels and that his business in France is to expedite travel arrangements for some young women in the profession. Of course the hapless Paul is arrested, tried and convicted for trafficking in white slavery. He quietly resigns himself to take the punishment due Margot because he cannot conceive of her in prison. When he arrives at the prison house, he does not seem particularly surprised to find it inhabited by the same men he had worked with at the Llanabba boys school. If anything he thinks this coincidence fitting, "for anyone who has been to an English public school will always feel comparatively at home in prison." In fact, Paul rather enjoys prison; it affords the detachment from the turmoil of modern life his static soul requires. But there is yet another step in the circuit of his journey. In a moment of compassion, Margot contrives his escape and returns him to that

other comfortable prison, Scone College. And so the novel turns back upon itself, an inverted epic journey that leaves Paul where he began. Although the narrator assures us that Paul is quite capable of acquitting "himself with decision and decorum in all the emergencies of civilized life," contemporary conditions are such that he has no chance to direct his destiny and must finally, in contrast with the Odyssean hero, retreat from life altogether.

In Waugh's vision the twentieth century is not deplorable because there has been some quantum jump in vice and folly. He knows better than most that other ages could easily hold their own in this respect. No, the problem as he sees it is that people have been deprived of any sense of absolute norms from which the significance of human action can be measured. This is why his early fiction portrays a flattened moral landscape much like Hemingway's in which no moment, no experience has any more value than the next. In the world of becoming, fixed principles, as Paul Pennyfeather finds out, are "radically inapplicable." And although self-will is liberated in the absence of absolutes, the new freedom comes at the expense of identity. The integrity of the individual cannot survive in the rush of momentaneous existence. This is why the narrator refers to Paul as one who is in the process of mysteriously disappearing.

Paul's journey is futile because his static soul can have no impact upon the dynamism of those who live in the world of unprincipled action. On the other hand these

dynamic personalities have no goals beyond immediate self-aggrandizement. They live only in the moment, without past or future like Mrs. Rattery and Brenda Last in A Handful of Dust. Or, like the senile Colonel Blount and the distracted Lottie Crump in Vile Bodies, they exist as chronic amnesiacs.

Paul has been transported from the nineteenth century with its belief in continuity and responsibility enshrined in a "code of ready-made honour and is the still small voice, trained to command, of the Englishman all the world over" into the twentieth century where one is encouraged to go his way "careless of consequence" and advised to "temper discretion with deceit." Nineteenth century decorum has given way to what Edmund Wilson describes as Waugh's twentieth century, a world of "perverse, unregenerate self-will" that gives "rise to confusion and impudence." <sup>2</sup> Faced with the shameless scandal of this world, Paul decides there is "something radically inapplicable about this whole code" of "ready-made honour" by which he lives. It does not fit the age of Margot Metroland. At his trial on charges of procuring, he must decide whether to give evidence against Margot or allow himself to be convicted for her crimes. Paul does the honorable thing: he sacrifices himself for Margot. He cannot help but see the "undeniable cogency" of her son's remark: "You can't see Manna in prison, can you?" In fact the more Paul considers this "the more he perceives it to be the statement of a natural law. He appreciated the assumption of comprehension with which Peter had delivered it.

As he studies Margot's photograph . . . he was strengthened in the belief that there was, in fact, and should be, one law for her and another for himself."

He saw the impossibility of Margot in prison; the bare connection of vocables associating these ideas was obscene . . . if the preposterous processes of law had condemned her, then the woman that they actually caught and pinned down would not have been Margot, but some quite other person of the same name and somewhat similar appearance. It was impossible to imprison the Margot who had committed the crime.

If Margot could actually be "caught and pinned down," she would no longer fulfill her role; she would become merely a mortal, subject like everyone else to the usual constraints. But Margot is not mortal; she is the goddess of becoming, a pure principle unconditioned by any of the concerns of being. If there were a dialectic between these two principles -- being and becoming -- she would be culpable and justly subject to arrest. In the absence of such a dialectic, she acts with impunity. To expect her, then, to be responsible for her deeds is to ask her to be someone other than who she is. And while Margot is all vital energy and no restraint, Paul, for all the powers of discrimination bequeathed him by an Oxford education, is shadowy and effete; he had neither the conviction nor the energy to act effectively in this world. There is one law for those who reside in the static hierarchical world of fixed principles and another for those who live in the dynamic world of unprincipled self-assertion. Not only is this the reason he cannot testify against her, it is also the reason he cannot marry her. As Silenus points

out, they are "two quite different species spiritually." (It is worth mentioning divorce becomes a central issue in Waugh's novels, whether in the form of a broken marriage or failed courtship. Futile courtship is the subject of his first published story "The Balance," it appears as one of the very few plot continuities in Vile Bodies, it provides focus in the unfinished novel Work Suspended and finds cynically sadistic portrayal in The Loved One. The failed marriage is the bitter catalyst of A Handful of Dust. Both courtship and marriage miscarry in Brideshead Revisited and The Sword of Honour. No doubt Waugh's own difficult courtship and subsequent divorce are influences here, but his continuing recourse to this plot element both before and after his own marital problems suggests that he is using a motif that goes beyond autobiography. In Waugh's fictional world marriage with its compromises and reconciliations is not viable. The failed marriage is his emblem of a more general failure to bring the various aspects of human nature into productive harmony.)

James F. Carens thinks this division of characters into irreconcilable extremes may be morally confused.

The satirist seems to imply that amoralism may be justified by the very nature of things, that there are those such as Paul, who live within the law and are judged by it, while there are others, such as Peter and his mother, who, by virtue of their dynamism and, perhaps, their position, are outside the "whole code of ready-made honour," inherited by Paul but "inapplicable" to them.<sup>3</sup>

This is true enough on moral grounds. But these are not the grounds upon which Waugh has chosen to work. The characters

and situations in his novels -- certainly his early novels -- dramatize epistemological concerns anterior to moral considerations. They are frankly abstractions deployed in his calculated analysis of the modern world. Even by the standards of satire, these characters are too flatly one-sided to be seriously considered as moral agents. This is the point, of course. The contemporary division between idea and experience has dehumanized society. Paul and Margot have been effectively removed from any known moral arena. They exist as polar remnants of a disintegrated humanity -- one forever imprisoned by the bankrupt categories of a failed order, the other boundlessly self-assertive because she is untrammelled by any consideration of moral consequences. For Paul to testify against Margot would be as supererogatory as if one were to indict the will for having appetites. There is not much point in arraighing the given. On the other hand, Paul is already imprisoned by the "code of ready-made honour" with which he has been instilled and which is wholly inapplicable to a society that has forfeited its belief in the possibility of absolutes. The chapter in which Paul goes to jail is titled "Stone Walls do not a Prison Make." The line has been ironically twisted from its original meaning. In Paul's case there is not need for walls; he is already imprisoned by the values of a tradition that people like Margot simply ignore. He might as well complain against his nature as protest his prison sentence. Either grievance would be as futile.

Professor Silenus had diagnosed the problem by declaring Margot and Paul different species spiritually. His finding echoes another German theoretician who argues that the human race expressed itself according to its different souls. Both Silenus and the novel's title suggest a parody of Oswald Spengler and his major work, The Decline of the West. There is at least one other indication that Waugh had Spengler in mind while composing his first novel. He tells us that he packed The Decline of the West to read on a pleasure cruise he took in 1929. Presumably he already had at least superficial knowledge of the book or he would not have referred to it as one of the "two or three solemn" works he took with him.<sup>4</sup> In any event, the book had appeared in an English translation in 1926, well before Waugh came to write Decline and Fall. Although he recorded nothing else about it, there can be little doubt that Spengler's apocalyptic pessimism would have appealed to the young Waugh.

Certainly Spengler's argument could provide a thesis to explain the world in which Waugh's lost characters exist. Making a distinction between culture and civilization, Spengler's historical analysis finds that the West has developed beyond the stage of cultural coherence and is now loosely held together by the fading memory of a once vital and compelling body of convictions. In the cultural period individuals, singly and collectively, feel themselves bound up with the fate of their community. The meaning of their lives flows from the shared beliefs and traditions that have

served them in their common struggle for survival. The period of civilization, however, is characterized by a skeptical cosmopolitanism. The populace tends to cluster in cities in search of economic opportunity. Monetary wealth becomes a measure of value more important than honor, tradition, or property. (In Decline and Fall the Junior Dean and Domestic Bursar gauge the Bollinger infractions not in terms of moral but rather financial values. As they sit idly by, their only concern is how much they will be able to fine the celebrants for their drunkenly destructive behavior. They even pray that the revelers might attack the chapel so that the maximum in punitive damages might be levied against them. With growing affluence and security the cities swell with self-interested deracinés who have little sense of common destiny with their neighbors. The resulting ethos encourages the society Waugh portrays, a society in which it is every man for himself. (His last novels return to the phrase sauve qui peut over and over as though it were a refrain echoing the final wisdom of contemporary society.)

Spengler's thesis would also explain why the plot of Decline and Fall takes the form of an inverted epic. While the traditional epic assumes its heroes are convinced of their cultural identity and have the strength of will to impose this identity on the external world, Decline and Fall, like Waugh's other satires, assumes the opposite. When faced with the modern world the putative custodians of tradition merely retreat; they have no faith in the power of their

deeds to make a difference in their society. Those who do take action are enabled to do so because, like Margot Metroland and Mrs. Rattery, they have no sense of cultural obligations at all. Indeed, it may have been Spengler's work, as much as Bergson's or Lewis's, that provided Waugh with the rationale for dividing his characters into these two irreconcilable groups, the static and the dynamic.

Spengler used the static-dynamic polarity so dear to Professor Silenus to describe the difference between the Classical Greek and Faustian European cultures. (Spengler's contrast between the classical and the Faustian parallels in part the more familiar distinction between classic and romantic.) Working in the tradition that passes from Kant through Nietzsche, Spengler naturally assumes that a culture is best understood through its own characteristic epistemology. Whether in the arts or sciences, a culture's thought and production reflect the largely unconscious assumptions of its peculiar world view. Spengler isolates eight distinct world cultures and then proceeds to outline each one's habitual, one might say reflexive, perception of the world. For our purposes we need only consider the distinction he makes between the Classical and the Faustian or Romantic outlooks. Spengler uses these terms to designate sensibility as well as period. Historical conditions in a given age tend to favor one of several competing sensibilities. The favored one becomes dominant and characterizes the age. This does not mean other predilections disappear; they simply become

less visible because the individual finds it less profitable to express them. Used here, Spengler's categories will refer to sensibility rather than historical age.

Comparing the classic sensibility with the Faustian romantic, Spengler wrote that

The "Nature" of Classical man found its highest artistic emblem in the nude statue, and out of it logically there grew a static of bodies, a physics of the near . . . . Faustian man's Nature-idea was a dynamic of unlimited space, a physics of the distant. . . . Apollinian theory is a quiet meditation . . . the Faustian is from the very outset a working hypothesis.

For the classical sensibility ideas are timeless Platonic forms; they are fixed coordinates from which we make the world intelligible. We can rely on them to shape our understanding of the flow of experience. In contrast, Faustian or romantic man values ideas not as ends in themselves but rather as means with which to exert his will over his surroundings; he maintains no absolute truths, only hypotheses shaped to deal with inconclusive experiences. Spengler's descriptions of the classical and Faustian sensibilities find their way into Waugh's novels in various guises, most notably the recurring motif of an anachronistic naif bedazzled by one of modernity's goddesses, roles first filled by Paul Pennyfeather and Margot Metroland. Classical epistemology is capable of supporting Paul Pennyfeather's ready-made code of honor, a world view in which Wyndham Lewis's spatial-imagination can flourish. The romantic sensibility with its provisional categories suits Margot Metroland whose precariously accelerating career demands

infinite adaptability; it accords with Bergson's temporal imagination which emphasizes evolutionary flexibility. The classical attitude cautions us to live within the limits of the possible; the romantic urges us to transcend these limits. Of course this binary opposition between the classic and romantic is another version of the being-becoming debate that Lewis raises with regard to Bergson and which Waugh parodies in Silenus's division of the human race into the static and dynamic.<sup>5</sup>

From the beginning of his career Waugh dramatizes the irreconcilable breach between the Apollonian order and Dionysian chaos. This is his subject from first to last; it runs through all his work from the wild humor of his early satires to the elegiac ironies of the Sword of Honour trilogy. At once fascinated and appalled by his theme, he returns to it again and again in one guise or another: reason severed from will, the ideal lost to the real, the categories of being abandoned to the process of becoming. His treatment of the issue is all the more effective because he refuses to moralize about it. And despite what some have said, it is never a matter of merely championing order over disorder that engages Waugh's imagination.

His position can be demonstrated by comparing two comments on the usefulness of discipline and repression. The first comes from a work Waugh strongly endorsed and repeatedly urged his friends to read: Ronald Knox's God and the Atom. The second is taken from one of his own essays. First, Knox.

I take it that we do not exceed the bounds of legitimate metaphor, if we think of the human personality in this way. At the core of it, there is a bundle of instincts, impulses, prejudices, phobias and what not, each of them bound, and each, though often in a very slight degree, straining at its bonds. They are held together and held in by the elastic band of Repression; some of it conscious, much more of it unconscious, or half-conscious at the best. If the band snaps, the result is lunacy; all the hidden impulses of a man's nature regain their freedom, held in only by random, external checks. If the band slips, the result is that sudden brain-storm or black-out which the psychologists have christened schizophrenia; the subject "forgets himself," is untrue to his normal habits of behaviour; it may be, only for a short interval. But in the ordinary life, the elastic band holds, and the hidden impulses remain bound, only betraying themselves by casual mannerisms and fidgetings, by the images that haunt us in our dreams, and so on. What must be the strength, when you come to think about it, of this band which holds our psychic life in position, consisting in part, but only in part, of that free will which we consciously exercise! <sup>6</sup>

The second passage comes from a piece of journalism Waugh was commissioned to write in 1929 concerning the impact of The Great War on the generation coming of age in the 1920's and 1930's. He finds it unsurprising that this generation should be composed of "undiscriminating and ineffectual people." The blame can be laid especially to the mood of tolerance that followed the war.

The only thing which could have saved these unfortunate children was the imposition by rigid discipline, as soon as it became possible, of the standards of civilization. This was still possible in 1918 when the young schoolmasters came back to their work. Unfortunately, a very great number, probably the more influential and intelligent among them, came with their own faith sadly shaken in those very standards which, avowedly, they had fought to preserve. They returned with a jolly tolerance of everything that seemed "modern." Every effort was made to encourage the children at the Public Schools to "think for themselves." When they should have been whipped and taught Greek paradigms, they were set arguing about birth control and nationalization. Their crude little opinions were treated with respect. Preachers in

the school chapel week after week entrusted the future to their hands. It is hardly surprising that they were Bolshevik at eighteen and bored at twenty.

The muscles which encounter the most resistance in daily routine are those which become most highly developed and adapted. It is thus that the restraint of a traditional culture tempers and directs creative impulses. Freedom produces sterility. There was nothing left for the younger generation to rebel against, except the widest conceptions of mere decency. Accordingly it was against these that it turned. The result in many cases is the perverse and aimless dissipation chronicled daily by the gossip-writer of the Press.<sup>7</sup>

Compare Knox's defense of repression with Waugh's. At first Waugh seems to be saying much the same thing Knox does except for the curmudgeonly pose with which he calls for whipping the young and sneers at their "crude little opinions." But Waugh's emphasis differs from Knox's. For Knox repression is an elastic band that holds back dangerous impulses, a sort of moral girdle. For Waugh, repression is basic to culture not merely for moral reasons but also, and perhaps more importantly, for esthetic reasons. Repressive culture in the form of discipline and standards provides the means not to hold back impulse but rather to strengthen and direct it. Confronted with the constraints of the civilized order, libidinous and creative energies must find cleverer ways of expressing themselves than if they were allowed free, undirected play. Without Apollonian restraint, Dionysian impulse dissipates itself in futile, aimless expression. Conversely, and this is sometimes left unremarked in discussions of Waugh, without Dionysian ebullience, Apollonian order is lifeless.

It should be noted, however, that although Waugh

thought an ideal state of affairs would be one in which classic restraint and romantic energy would naturally temper one another, he seems to take inordinate delight in demonstrating their incompatibility in contemporary society. Even allowing for the distortion of satire, we cannot help wondering whether we are being presented with the peculiar world of Waugh's experience or Waugh's peculiar experience of the world. Do Waugh's novels reflect, in however exaggerated a manner, the world as it is or do they represent his special way of seeing things? Of course the world Waugh lived in did suffer a sense of inner division, a loss of confidence in traditional values. This is attested to by almost every major writer of the century. Yet it seems also true that Waugh may have had a personal interest in casting the elements of his experience into mutually exclusive compartments. From every indication he liked to sweep mankind into one camp or the other. As a practical matter this way of seeing the world provided him with a simple, straightforward way to satirize it. As a satirist he did not want to use ambiguous shading and textured nuance. Clearly he was attempting to write fiction that was as hard-edged and reductive as the schematic cartoons he drew for his early novels in which he used firm, resolutely assured lines to achieve a stylization that portrayed the disorder of his subject matter but never surrendered to it.

But his tendency to polarize experience seems also to reflect his own divided nature. Here was a man who entertained a lifelong preoccupation with reason and decorum

but who was, nevertheless, given to the rudest of impulsive behavior until his last days. He made a point of announcing that his conversion to Roman Catholicism was quite without emotion, a matter of cold rational conviction and yet, on other occasions, he could be brutishly unreasonable.<sup>9</sup>

When a woman for whom he had taken an instantaneous dislike praised one of his books, he had so little control that he responded by saying that he had liked it himself "but now that I know that a vulgar, common American woman like yourself admires it, I am not so sure."<sup>10</sup> The divorce between reason and impulse Waugh observed in the world began with himself.

This contradiction within Waugh himself seems to have encouraged him to polarize all issues along one axis or another. And while this tendency may have strengthened his art, it did little to deepen his political understanding as the following examples from his fiction and his life will serve to demonstrate.

In The Sword of Honour trilogy the protagonist, Guy Crouchback, actually rejoices when he receives news of the Hitler-Stalin Warsaw pact. The agreement may seriously threaten the Allies but it simplifies the ideological issues. Now, Guy thinks, he can go into battle with the clear conscience of a principled warrior fighting the dehumanizing collectivism of "the Modern Age in arms." If this is meant ironically -- as I think it is in a partial and complicated way -- then the irony is directed not only at the fictional

character but also Waugh's younger self. Waugh had recorded the following thoughts on the Hitler-Stalin agreement in his diary for 22 August 1939: "Russia and Germany have agreed to neutrality pact so there seems no reason why war should be delayed." Later when it became clear that British policy favored working with the Russians, he wrote:

The papers are all smugly jubilant at Russian conquests in Poland as though this were not a more terrible fate for the allies we are pledged to defend than conquest by Germany. The Italian argument, that we have forfeited our narrow position by not declaring war on Russia, seems unanswerable.<sup>11</sup>

Better the risk of an ideologically pure fight against near impossible odds than the contamination of a prudent but compromising alliance. Despite subsequent events, Waugh never wholly abandoned this position. His was always the wish for neat divisions, clear lines of allegiance, uncompromised efforts. How could this wish not decay into the embittered nostalgia that periodically darkened his later years?

Waugh used a similar polarizing strategy to describe Ronald Knox some thirty years after Decline and Fall. In his preface to Knox's A Spiritual Aeneid Waugh borrowed his friend's own terms to portray his nature.

He [Knox] liked the classic division of mankind into the 'drastic' -- the men of action and decision who know what they want and how to get it, who have little patience with the hesitation of others, who never shrink from 'making a scene' -- and the 'pathetic' who take what is on the table when it is offered them, who suffer neglect rather than assert their rights, who hate to inconvenience anyone. 12

In this sense he was eminently pathetic.

In saying that Knox was pathetic, Waugh meant that he was a man who suffered the world to gain the perspective necessary to understand it. Drastic men, on the other hand, drive themselves in their compulsion to dominate. They are so thoroughly immersed in the sweep of events, they have no time to question their world, its values or their place in it. This is little more than the familiar distinction between the intellectual and the man of action. But, familiar as it is, Waugh's use of this distinction is peculiarly characteristic of him.

Waugh evidently liked to think of those he admired as uncontaminated by the world. As a pathetic, suffering figure, in Waugh's vision of him, Knox was clearly innocent of the world's evil. We sense that Waugh was drawn to this position himself. That part of him that answered to Paul Pennyfeather's static soul desired the intellectual order and steadfastness of Platonic categories only available to those who were willing to remove themselves from the world's seductions. This may well explain in large measure why he became a Catholic. As an institution, the Church afforded him a timeless retreat whenever he needed respite from the world's "confused roaring." Still, as we have seen, he could not resist the temptation to behave drastically not to say boorishly, when the opportunity arose. Indeed, his need for a sense of immutable order was probably dictated as much by his apprehension of what was unpredictable and

wayward in himself as by his fear of the contingencies of external circumstance.

Whatever failings Waugh's inner contradictions and his tendency to polarize issues may have constituted personally, these traits imparted energy and conviction to his novels. For instance, consider the drastic - pathetic polarity he applies to Knox. When used in his fiction this distinction becomes powerfully effective. Paul Pennyfeather's fellow masters at Llanabba Castle in Decline and Fall provide a perfect illustration. These two gentlemen stand at opposite ends of Silenus's dynamic - static axis or, in the words Waugh later used to place Knox, one is drastic, the other, pathetic: first, the irrepressibly confident Captain Grimes who is convinced there is no self-inflicted catastrophe from which he cannot wriggle free; second, the ineffectual, painfully insecure Mr. Prendergast, a former clergyman who has left his vicarage because he suffers "Doubts."

Consider Captain Grimes whose career so cheerfully serves the cause of becoming. Grimes always lands "in the soup" as he puts it. His casual treatment of complaisant women together with his excessive interest in adolescent boys make it necessary for him to cultivate the wiles of a confidence man and the skills of a quick-change artist to merely survive as he keeps one small step ahead of the authorities. And survive he does with splendid resilience. While in the armed service he is given the choice between a dignified suicide and a squalid courtmartial for disgraceful --

probably homosexual -- behavior. Left alone with a revolver to do the decent thing, he gets drunk instead. But as usual Grimes has already begun yet another upswing on fortune's spinning wheel. A fellow Harrovian is first to discover him in the stupor of his double infamy. Loyalty to the public-school tradition prevails and Grimes is shipped to Ireland to work in the postal service for the war's duration. When his erratic, not to say erotic, teaching career takes him to Llanabba Castle, he soon finds himself forced into marriage with the headmaster's daughter. To escape this odious alliance, he pretends suicide by swimming out to sea. Shortly after this adventure, he appears at Margot's to apply for a job with her Latin-American Entertainment Co. Ltd. as a manager of one of the chain's brothels. When Paul Pennyfeather goes to prison, there is Grimes again mildly complaining that three years is too long to serve for bigamy. "Still, we'll have God's own beano when I get out. I've been thinking about that day and night." So Grimes decides to escape. It is worth the risk. As he explains to Paul, "I can stand most sorts of misfortune, old boy, but I can't stand repression." He easily escapes under the cover of fog during a work detail in the countryside surrounding the prison. When he is not recovered, the prison officials confidently agree that he has drowned in the bogs of Egdon Mire. But Paul knows better.

Grimes, Paul at last realized, was of the immortals. He was a life force. Sentenced to death in Flanders,

he popped up in Wales; drowned in Wales, he emerged in South America; engulfed in the dark mystery of Edgon Mire, he would rise again somewhere at some time, shaking from his limbs the musty integuments of the tomb. Surely he had followed in the Bacchic train of distant Arcady, and played on the reeds of myth by forgotten streams, and taught the childish satyrs the art of love? Had he not suffered unscathed the fearful dooms of all the offended gods of all the histories -- fire, brimstone and yawning earthquakes, plague and pestilence? Had he not stood, like the Pompeian sentry, while the Citadels of the Plain fell to ruin about his ears? Had he not, like some grease-caked Channel-swimmer, breasted the waves of the Deluge? Had he not moved unseen when darkness covered the waters?

Grimes is another character who approaches the condition of pure Dionysian becoming -- formless, protean, infinitely adaptable. That echo of Genesis in the last sentence of the passage above -- "Had he not moved unseen when darkness covered the waters?" -- mockingly suggests that Grimes is like the unformed clay of brute matter before the form of being has imparted shape and destiny to its unconditioned potency. Indeed his name further supports this reading: he is the original grime of the world subversively rising to every occasion that might allow its uninhibited energy to overthrow the shallow pretensions of civilized order and reassert the primal disorder. Like Margot, Captain Grimes represents the purposeless vitality of becoming, endlessly charming but essentially futile: all action but no progression.

At the other pole there is pathetic Prendergast, the churchman who suffers "Doubts", whose commitment to a prescribed order of being has withered to a vapid nostalgia that renders him helplessly ineffectual. Paul first comes upon Prendergast at Llanabba Castle where he has gone after

leaving the ministry. Abysmally incompetent as a master, he has spent the last ten years as the butt of school-boy pranks most of which he fecklessly calls down upon himself. He wears a cheap and obvious wig that naturally becomes the irresistible target of his students' cruellest jokes. As he explains to Paul, once he put the wig on he felt he could not go back. Removing it might cause increased mischief, a risk he is unwilling to run. Prendergast does not have the will to expose himself honestly and without this power of will he is ineffectual in all his efforts. At their first meeting Prendergast offers Paul some port. Having had a glimpse of conditions at Llanabba, Paul eagerly accepts. But they find there is only one glass in the commons room, the one from which Prendergast is drinking. Prendergast makes a feeble attempt to locate another glass but quickly gives it up. The failed clergyman possesses the wine but he cannot produce communion; there is promise but no delivery. He does not have the power to give anyone, including himself, what is needed.

On their second meeting, Prendergast tells his story.

'I expect you wonder how I came to be here?'

'No, no,' said Paul soothingly. 'I think it's very natural.'

'It's not natural at all; it's most unnatural. If things had happened a little differently I should be a rector with my own house and bathroom. I might even have been a rural dean, only' -- and Mr. Prendergast dropped his voice to a whisper -- 'only I had Doubts. I don't know why I'm telling you all this; nobody else knows. I somehow feel you'll understand.'

Again Paul is cast in the role of a shadowy Dante tour-

ing an all too substantial inferno. He must hear Prendergast's confession whether he wants to or not.

'Yes, I've not known an hour's real happiness since. You see, it wasn't the ordinary sort of Doubt about Cain's wife or the Old Testament miracles or the consecration of Archbishop Parker. I'd been taught how to explain all those while I was at college. No, it was something deeper than all that. I couldn't understand why God had made the world at all. . . . You see how fundamental that is. Once granted the first step, I can see that everything else follows -- Tower of Babel, Babylonian captivity, Incarnation, Church, bishops, incense, everything -- but what I couldn't see, and what I can't see now, is, why did it all begin?

'I asked my bishop; he didn't know. He said that he didn't think the point really arose as far as my practical duties as a parish priest were concerned. I discussed it with my mother. At first she was inclined to regard it as a passing phase. But it didn't pass, so finally she agreed with me that the only honourable thing to do was to resign my living; she never really recovered from the shock, poor old lady! It was a great blow after she had bought the chintz and got so friendly with the Bundles.'

'Perhaps one day I shall see Light,' he said, 'and then I shall go back to the ministry.'

Prendergast is, of course, a natural victim of his age and perhaps a forecast of what Paul would have become if his theological studies at Scone had not been interrupted. The edifice of Prendergast's rational faith has lost the support of emotional conviction. As a member of a society in which tradition has become mere form and morals little more than good manners, Prendergast has had to confront the seeming arbitrariness of the ethos he once set out to serve. It is too much for him. He does not have the character, the force of will to continue the struggle to impose meaning on experience. This is not merely a loss of faith in a particular creed. He has lost his sense of being and consequently finds himself thrown into the world of becoming

where he is a weightless figure of fun pathetically tossed about by chance.

After leaving Llanabba Paul next meets Prendergast in prison. Having discovered that one can be a clergyman without subscribing to any particular belief at all, Prendergast returns to the ministry as a prison chaplain. In this dubious capacity he meets the force his abdication of will has let loose in the world. Among his prison flock there is a religious lunatic who is convinced that the angel of the Lord has commissioned him to murder the faithless. This self-styled "lion of the Lord's elect" decides -- with some reason -- that Chaplain Prendergast is not a Christian and murders him by sawing his head from his body. Prendergast fatally discovers the light for which he had been waiting. The message is ghastly. His inability to sustain an intellectually coherent religious vision calls into existence the fanatic led by the inner light of untutored emotional conviction alone. In the absence of a living discipline, the fools, rogues, and fanatics gain ascendancy. As a follower of the Inner Light of personal inspiration Prendergast's murderer is an extreme example of the perverse self-will allowed expression once the restraint of an objective rational order ceases to inspire allegiance to itself. Prendergast's decapitation serves as an emblem of a society that has lost its head, that has allowed reason to be severed from impulse. This is why eccentrics and fanatics recur with such frequency in Waugh's fiction: they

demonstrate -- sometimes hilariously, sometimes gruesomely -- what happens when the center does not hold. In Vile Bodies Lady Melrose Ape sings her famous hymn, "There ain't no flies on the Lamb of God," and Colonel Blount rents his ancestral estate to serve as the location for an "all-talkie super-religious film" about the religious enthusiast, John Wesley. In Black Mischief the young Oxford-educated emperor is convinced that "at [his] stirrups run woman's suffrage, vaccination and vivisection" because he is the apostle of Progress -- "I am the New Age. I am the Future." So he builds railroads that go nowhere and insists his soldiers wear boots while they, equally stubborn, insist upon eating them. Aimée Thantogenos is The Loved One is the rapt evangelist of Dr. Kenworthy's cosmeticized trivialization of death. These and other true-believing lunatics like them are the symptoms of a society splintering into incoherence.

With few exceptions the characters of the early novels are only half human, belonging either to the axis of dynamic becoming or the axis of static being. The whole man has largely ceased to exist in the world of Captain Grimes and Mr. Prendergast, a world that has given up the dialectic between classic restraint and romantic striving. In Scott-King's Modern Europe, the pallid, painfully unassuming protagonist returns from a tour abroad to the school at which he teaches classics. Here he is patiently informed by his headmaster that the classics program may soon be dropped from the curriculum.

"What are we to do? Parents are not interested in

producing the 'complete man' any more. They want to qualify their boys for jobs in the modern world. You can hardly blame them, can you?"

"Oh yes," said Scott-King. "I can and do."

Although the head master offers Scott-King the opportunity to begin teaching other courses against the day when there may be "no more classical boys at all," he refuses.

"I will stay as I am here as long as any boy wants to read the classics. I think it would be very wicked indeed to do anything to fit a boy for the modern world."

"It's a short-sighted view, Scott-King."

"There, head master, with all respect, I differ from you profoundly. I think it the most long-sighted view it is possible to take."

The modern world does not want the "complete man" produced by the classical vision; it is quite happy to do without Odysseus. Men with individual points of view capable of standing by their convictions would only be an encumbrance. Modern partial men are far more useful because without allegiance to any absolutes at all and without the historical sense with which to compare their age to others, they are infinitely more malleable to the ends of government and commerce. As Louis MacNeice puts it in his mocking farewell to the idea of permanence:

Goodbye now, Plato and Hegel,  
The shop is closing down;  
They don't want any philosopher-kings in England,  
There ain't no universals in this man's town.

There is, however, one apparent exception to this decline from the classical concept of moderation informed by an allegiance to fixed principles. This is Imogen Quest of Vile Bodies whose "Set . . . achieved a superb mean between those two poles of savagery Lady Circumference and

Lady Metroland," Lady Circumference being all purblind unquestioning allegiance to an otiose nineteenth century ethic and Lady Metroland representing, of course, irresponsible modernity. Imogen, unlike almost every other young person in Waugh's novels, is married successfully and appears to be reasonably happy with her state. "From the first she exhibited signs of a marked personality . . . her character . . . a lovely harmony of contending virtues -- she was witty and tender-hearted; passionate and serene, sensual and temperate, impulsive and discreet." In other words Imogen is a whole, self-sufficient individual; she integrates the two dimensions -- reason and impulse -- that otherwise exist in dehumanizing isolation in the modern world. But Imogen Quest is a joke; she does not exist. Her "lovely harmony" of the dynamic and static, romantic impulse and classic poise, is a fiction made up by Adam Fenwick-Symes the novel's putative hero who has taken the squalid job of a gossip columnist for the Daily Excess and must fill his daily report with figures of interest. Having resorted to fictional characterization, Adam goes a step too far with his creation of Imogen Quest. For, ironically enough, imaginary though she is, Imogen so captivates his readers that she becomes more real than living members of society. "And this knowledge on the intangible Quest set, moving among them in uncontrolled dignity of life, seemed to leaven and sweeten the lives of Mr. Chatterbox's readers." Soon Adam's readers including his

employer, Lord Monomark, are clamoring to meet Imogen. Adam makes the mistake of announcing in his column that she is going to give a party.

On the following day Adam found his table deep in letters of complaint from gate-crashers who had found the house in Seamore Place untenanted.

When Lord Monomark requests an introduction, Adam has no choice but to send the Quests to Jamaica on an indefinite holiday. Modern England is clearly no place for civilized men and women. Imogen and the "superb mean" she represents are nothing more than nostalgic illusions; her balanced, integrated, fully human life is merely an attractive fiction and even at that it cannot survive the gate-crashing barbarism of the twentieth century. That Adam's fiction should provoke such intense interest signals the unspoken sense of loss that pervades this society. In the absence of Imogen's leavening power, people are left bewildered and inarticulate as in the following conversation.

"Adam, darling, what's the matter?"

"I don't know. . . . Nina, do you ever feel that things simply can't go on much longer?"

"What d'you mean by things -- us or everything?"

"Everything."

"No -- I wish I did."

"I dare say you're right . . . what are you looking for?"

"Clothes."

"Why?"

"Oh, Adam, what do you want . . . you're too impossible this evening."

"Don't let's talk any more, Nina, d'you mind?"

Later he said: "I'd give anything in the world for something different."

"Different from me or different from everything?"

"Different from everything . . . only I've got nothing . . . what's the good of talking?"

"Oh Adam, my dearest . . ."

"Yes?"

"Nothing."

Adam and Nina have been deprived of the strength of a "marked personality" like Imogen's, strength that would enable them to make sense of their world and direct their lives in it with dignity. Instead they are carried away by the sweep of sensation: endless parties ("Masked parties, Savage's parties, Victorian parties, Greek parties, Wild West parties . . . almost naked parties . . ."), sickening rides on boats and planes, repulsively fascinating evangelists, homicidal auto races, "all that succession and repetition of massed humanity. . . . Those vile bodies." They are overwhelmed and left listlessly bored. In these early novels the sensate world has become too much for the impoverished intellect. None of the characters has the strength or the poise to create order out of the wildly accelerated fragments of experience. It is all a "confused roaring" that first bewilders and finally numbs the mind. This is a world so filled with Cyclopean horrors and unscrupulous Circes that it has no room for Odyssean heroism.

## Chapter V - Notes

1

Alvin B. Kernan, The Plot of Satire (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 90-103, 152-155. Kernan argues that satiric plots are almost always circular because the satirist portrays a futile world in which progress toward some destination is out of the question.

2

Wilson, p. 146.

3

Carens, p. 73.

4

Waugh, When the Going Was Good, p. 11.

5

Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality, I (1926; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976) pp. 382, 377-428.

6

Ronald Knox, God and the Atom (London: Sheed and Ward, 1945), p. 93.

7

Evelyn Waugh, "The War and the Younger Generation," Spectator, 13 April 1929, collected in A Little Order, p. 12.

8

See especially the illustrations that accompany the texts of Decline and Fall and Black Mischief.

9

Evelyn Waugh, "Come Inside," The Road to Damascus, ed. John A. O'Brien (London, 1949), collected in A Little Order, p. 149.

10

Christopher Sykes, Evelyn Waugh: A Biography (Boston: Little Brown, 1975), p. 287.

11

The Diaries, pp. 437, 443.

12

Waugh, "Preface" to Ronald Knox, A Spiritual Aeneid (1948; rpt. London: Burns, Oates, 1958), p. vi.

## Chapter VI

"Faster, Faster.": Satire, Speed and the  
Impulse to Abstraction

In his 1930 travel book, Labels, Waugh recorded his estimate of the painting of Picabia and Ernst that he had viewed at a Paris art exhibit in 1929.

It was very French. Picabia and Ernst hung cheek by jowl; these two abstract pictures, the one so defiant and chaotic, probing with such fierce intensity into every crevice and convolution of negation, the other so delicately poised, so impossibly tidy, discarding so austere every accident, however agreeable, that could tempt disorder, seemed between them to typify the continual conflict of modern society.<sup>1</sup>

The paintings suggest to Waugh the same polarity that obsessed him to the end of his career: Apollonian poise on one side, Dionysian energy on the other; their divorce he found typical of modern society.

His comments regarding them become especially revealing when compared with the juxtaposition of two scenes near the end of Vile Bodies, the novel he published the year following his trip to Paris. The two passages that compose these scenes follow one upon the other without interruption or transition. In the first Nina Blount is physically sickened by the strange perspectives of her first airplane ride, in

the second Agatha Runcible drifts into hallucination as she approaches her death due to injuries sustained in an automobile accident.

Nina looked down and saw inclined at an odd angle a horizon of straggling red suburb; arterial roads dotted with little cars; factories, some of them working, others empty and decaying; a disused canal; some distant hills sown with bungalows; wireless masts and overhead power cables; men and women were indiscernible except as tiny spots; they were marrying and shopping and making money and having children. The scene lurched and tilted again as the aeroplane struck a current of air.

"I think I'm going to be sick," said Nina.

"Poor little girl," said Ginger, "That's what the paper bags are for."

There was rarely more than a quarter of a mile of the black road to be seen at one time. It unrolled like a length of cinema film. At the edges was confusion; a fog spinning past; "Faster, faster," they shouted above the roar of the engine. The road rose suddenly and the white car soared up the sharp ascent without slackening of speed. At the summit of the hill there was a corner. Two cars had crept up, one on each side, and were closing in. "Faster," cried Miss Runcible. "Faster."

"Quietly, dear, quietly. You're disturbing everyone. You must lie quiet or you'll never get well. Everything's quite all right. There's nothing to worry about. Nothing at all."

They were trying to make her lie down. How could one drive properly lying down?

Another frightful corner. The car leant over on two wheels, tugging outwards; it was drawn across the road until it was within a few inches of the bank. One ought to brake down at the corners, but one couldn't see them coming lying flat on one's back like this. The back wheels wouldn't hold the road at this speed. Skidding all over the place.

"Faster. Faster."

The stab of a hypodermic needle.

"There's nothing to worry about, dear . . . nothing at all . . . nothing."

The descriptions of these two scenes are remarkably analogous to Waugh's impressions of the Picabia and Ernst paintings. Like the geometries of a Picabia canvas, Nina's aerial view

of the countryside is "impossibly tidy." Plunged into the midst of accelerating confusion, Agatha Runcible's hallucination recalls the surreal, convoluted chaos of Ernst's work.

The fictional scenes can be related to Waugh's art criticism in Labels by two facts in addition to internal evidence. First, there is the matter of their closeness in time: the comments in Labels must have been composed between 1929 and 1930, the same period in which Waugh was working on Vile Bodies. This would hardly settle the matter but there is a second consideration. A few pages before he makes his comments on Picabia and Ernst, Waugh recounts the tale of his first plane flight, the flight that brought him to Paris in time for the exhibition. After some preliminaries concerning the circumstances of the flight, he writes.

I was sick into the little brown paper bag provided for me. One does not feel nearly as ill being air-sick as sea-sick; it is very much more sudden and decisive, but I was acutely embarrassed about my bag. If we had been over the channel it would have been different, but I could not bring myself to throw it out of the window over the countryside. In the end I put it down the little lavatory. As this opened directly into the void the effect was precisely the same, but my conscience was easier in the matter.

The view was fascinating for the first few minutes we were in the air and after that very dull indeed. It was fun to see houses and motor cars looking so small and neat; everything had the air of having been made very recently, it was all so clean and bright. But after a very short time one tires of this aspect of scenery. I think it is significant that a tower or a high hill are all the eminence one needs for observing natural beauties. All one gains from this effortless ascent is a large scale map. Nature, on an elusive principle, seems usually to provide its own view-points where they are most desirable.<sup>2</sup>

The experience is unmistakably the source for his description of Nina's flight in Vile Bodies. Is it too much to assume that the Picabia and Ernst he discusses a few pages further on provided the esthetic and thematic substructure for Nina's aerial view and Agatha Runcible's hallucination? Let us assume the passages from Labels were at one point journal sketches that Waugh worked into his fiction. Such an assumption seems warranted when we examine each of these fictional scenes closely and then apply to them Waugh's esthetic evaluations of the Picabia and Ernst paintings.

In the first scene, Nina's aerial view of the twentieth century landscape, Waugh distills his personal experience in a manner not unlike that of an abstract painter. The objective scene is distorted until it reflects his subjective evaluation. He reverses the actual relationship of organic to inorganic. While people in the landscape become the nearly indiscernible dots one might find on a statistician's graph, the roads become "arterial", bungalows are "sown", factories are "decaying." The inorganic structures are invested with a vitality that dominates the scene while the invisible human beings have faded into their functions: they are lifeless machines for "marrying and shopping and making money and having children." Notice the peculiar arrangement of this last clause. We would expect to hear that these people are marrying and having children, shopping and making money. By shuffling these activities and adding an extra coordinate conjunction so that first

"marrying" and "shopping" are linked and then "making money" and "having children", Waugh can suggest syntactically that there are no value distinctions among these activities. People in the twentieth century landscape are reduced to the measurable functions of an economist's report in which love and the consumption of material goods are of equivalent importance. In the foreground of Nina's vision of the countryside seen from the air the "wireless masts and overhead power cables" form the technological grid under which the century takes its shape. No wonder Nina feels sick. This is a vision in which things are more alive than people. Like the geometric poise of a Picabia painting, the scene is "impossibly tidy" and thoroughly dehumanized. Five years later Gertrude Stein would record a similar response to her first aerial view of the American landscape.

When I looked at the earth I saw all the lines of cubism made at a time when not any painter had ever gone up in an airplane. I saw there on the earth the mingling lines of Picasso, coming and going, developing and destroying themselves, I saw the simple solutions of Braque, I saw the wandering lines of Masson, yes I saw and once more I knew that a creator is contemporary . . . he is contemporary and as the twentieth century is a century which sees the earth as no one has ever seen it, the earth has a splendor that it never has had, and as everything destroys itself in the twentieth century and nothing continues, so then the twentieth century has a splendor which is its own and Picasso is of this century, he has that strange quality of an earth that one has never seen and of things destroyed as they have never been destroyed.<sup>3</sup>

As Waugh seems to have done implicitly, Stein explicitly connects her aerial view of the country side with abstract art. She also sees in it the destruction of continuity, but, like Virginia Woolf, she seems to find such destruction

welcome while Waugh's character finds it sickening.

Swinging from "impossibly tidy" abstractions to the opposite extreme, Agatha Runcible's hallucination portrays the chaos of momentaneous existence. Her perception becomes forfeit to sensation as her consciousness is reduced to the rush of black road over which her race car speeds at an uncontrollable velocity. This is the perfect surreal parody of Bergsonian becoming or, to be more precise, Wyndham Lewis's account of becoming. There is no perspective, no past, no future, only the confused sensation of each immediate moment as Agatha rushes into it. The experience is vibrant and vital, "probing," as Waugh had said of Ernst's work, "into every crevice and convolution of negation" on the way to the ultimate and unforeseen negation of death. As the nurse repeatedly assures Agatha, "there's nothing to worry about . . . nothing at all . . . nothing." The perspectives of place and destiny have become a confused "fog spinning past." Agatha, the victim of becoming, is finally rendered supine and anesthetized by the flux of indiscriminate sensation that overwhelms any residual abilities she might have had for steering her car or imposing a human order upon experience. The only abiding principle in the scene of becoming is speed -- "Faster. Faster."

These two scenes set the boundaries of the course through which the novel runs. Their juxtaposition becomes both a structural and thematic principle. On the one hand, static and inhuman order; on the other, the unmanageable

flux. More than a course, it is the grotesque gauntlet of the twentieth century as Waugh sees it expressed in the extremes of Cubism on one side and Surrealism on the other. Through this gauntlet race a virtually plotless series of incidents involving an untidy collection of disparate characters most of whom never meet or directly influence the putative protagonist, Adam Fenwick-Symes. By relating his subject to contemporary artistic expression, Waugh bypasses symptoms and goes to the root of the disease. Rather than wasting time with jeremiads on immorality and folly, he simply exposes the divided sensibility of his age as reflected in experimental art.

T. E. Hulme claimed that the temper of an age could be best read in its art, for the business of the artist was to escape being "soaked in the thought and language of the period" so that his creations would go beyond convention.<sup>4</sup> Waugh held much the same view: "the artist . . . is in spite of himself in the advance guard." The artist's was the one sure voice in a society otherwise blinded by self-absorption. As we have already seen in Waugh's satiric appraisal of Gaudi's architecture, he thought that even when art had turned barbarous and ludicrous, its wayward distortions and obfuscations could themselves provide the insight needed to understand contemporary experience. It is no surprise, then that much of Waugh's satire has its original stimulus in his response to contemporary artistic expression. Functional architecture, abstract painting and film all play roles in his fiction as

occasions for satire and parody. But more than this, Waugh adapted the strategies of these art forms to his own purposes: his novels are built upon absurdly inhuman structures, they are crafted to achieve the studied flatness of abstract painting, and edited to simulate the rapid juxtapositions of film. He used the techniques and subject matter of the works he so often ridiculed in order to portray his sense of the contemporary world's cultural disintegration. What Samuel Hynes writes about Vile Bodies in The Auden Generation holds true for much of the rest of Waugh's fiction: "I would not call it satire; it is rather, I think, a surreal or expressionist attempt to record reality at a time when it seemed more and more to be, by any rational observation, unreal."<sup>5</sup>

Waugh's affinities with experimental art can be demonstrated at various points in Vile Bodies where the novel's language becomes a pastiche of early twentieth century avant-garde theory. This becomes especially apparent when we try to make sense of the plot's welter of incident.

Beneath its seemingly random surface, Vile Bodies is preoccupied with speed, the sheer acceleration of change. At midpoint the novel's story is interrupted by an elaborately executed episode concerning automobile racing. Until this point the ostensible narrative line has dealt with Adam Fenwick-Syme's futile attempts to marry Nina Blount, attempts that will culminate with his first "selling" her

to a mutual friend for the price of his past-due hotel bill and then resuming his affair with her after disguising himself as the friend she has casually married during their separation. Failed marriage and disguise we have already seen in Waugh, but it is the auto race in Vile Bodies that metaphorically locates the cause of these symptoms of disintegration, and the cause has much in common with the themes that preoccupy art movements like Futurism and Vorticism.

The race draws drivers from all over Europe. These are the

Speed Kings of all nationalities, unimposing men mostly with small moustaches and apprehensive eyes; they were reading the forecasts in the morning papers and eating what might (and in some cases did) prove to be their last meal on earth.

The Speed Kings have come to win the prize trophy "a silver gilt figure of odious design, symbolizing Fame embracing Speed." When compared to ordinary vehicles, the cars these racers drive

offer a very happy illustration of the metaphysical distinction between 'being' and 'becoming'. Some cars, mere vehicles with no purpose above bare locomotion, mechanical drudges such as Lady Metroland's Hispano Suiza, or Mrs. Mouse's Rolls-Royce, or Lady Circumference's 1912 Daimler, or the 'general reader's' Austin Seven, these have definite 'being' just as much as their occupants. They are bought all screwed up and numbered and painted, and there they stay through various declensions of ownership. brightened now and then with a lick of paint or temporarily rejuvenated by the addition of some minor organ, but still maintaining their essential identity to the scrap heap.

Not so the real cars, that become masters of men; those vital creations of metal who exist solely for their own propulsion through space, for whom their drivers, clinging precariously at the steering-wheel, are as important as his stenographer to a stockbroker.

These are in perpetual flux; a vortex of combining and disintegrating units; like the confluence of traffic at some spot where many roads meet, streams of mechanism come together, mingle and separate again.

In the modern world the prize goes to those who can best keep pace with becoming; those who lag behind among the timeless categories of being are not in the race at all. This, of course, is another version of Silenus' Big Wheel metaphor that separates the dynamic from the static. But in this novel dynamism exacts a price not only from the static outsiders but also from those who ride its spinning wheel. The cars of becoming master the men who drive them. These "unimposing men" lose their individuality to the race; as Paul Pennyfeather had faded into the background of "dimly discernible faces" when he fell from his spectator's position into the "perpetual flux" of the Bollinger dinner, so these race drivers become indistinguishable from one another as they hide behind their identical "small moustaches and apprehensive eyes." As Agatha Runcible observes from her hospital bed after her auto accident, "How people are disappearing." Paul Pennyfeather had been the mysteriously disappearing hero of Decline and Fall. In Vile Bodies his disappearing act has become the general condition of society. Everyone's individuality suffers diminishment before the dehumanizing speed of a technological society.

Waugh's mock paean to the racing car recalls the kind of celebration of the new technological age found in the

modern art manifestoes of the early twentieth century, especially Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's Futurist pronouncements and Wyndham Lewis's mockingly defiant assertions in Blast, the Vorticist publication. Early in Vile Bodies Waugh creates an ultra-chic character whose only apparent function in the novel is to send party invitations modelled after Wyndham Lewis's periodical and Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto. It seems safe to assume that Waugh intended the racing car episode to satirize not only Bergson's Creative Evolution but also the Futurists' worship of speed, mechanism and inhuman efficiency or what Lewis scornfully called the cult of "automobilism."<sup>6</sup> Compare Waugh's ironic treatment of the automobile as metaphysical emblem to Marinetti's vision of the racing car.

The intoxication of great speeds in cars is nothing but the joy of feeling oneself fused with the only divinity. Sportsmen are the first catechumens of this religion. Forthcoming destruction of houses and cities to make way for great meeting places for cars and planes.

We say that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty; the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath -- a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot -- is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.<sup>7</sup>

Of course Waugh never shared Marinetti's revolutionary political sympathies, but he may have been attracted to him for the same reasons D. H. Lawrence was. If Futurism represented so much of what Waugh thought barbarously wrong with the world, it also had this virtue: it dismissed humanist sentimentality of the kind Tony Last indulged. Certainly this was why Lawrence valued Marinetti. In Women

in Love he created a character based in part on Marinetti. This is Loerke the artist who intends to "interpret industry as art once interpreted religion" and make "our places of industry our art -- our factory area our Parthenon."

Loerke seems unmistakably a forerunner of Waugh's Silenus in Decline and Fall. It may be that Lawrence and Waugh both used Marinetti as their model or, as perhaps more likely, Waugh was acquainted with both Marinetti and Lawrence's portrayal of him. In any event, like Silenus after him, Loerke finds "machinery and the acts of labor . . . extremely, maddeningly beautiful," and man's highest good "nothing but work . . . it is nothing but this, serving a machine, or enjoying the motion of a machine -- motion, that is all."<sup>8</sup>

In Decline and Fall Silenus's comments on architecture also sound like a deliberate parody of Marinetti's esthetic. Compare the following passages. First, Marinetti:

I will leave you an explosive gift, this image that best completes our thought: Nothing is more beautiful than the steel frame of a house in construction.

To a finished house we prefer the framework of a house in construction whose girders are the color of danger . . . hammers and hearts, and from time to time -- yes, let it happen -- the harrowing cry and heavy thud of a fallen construction worker, great drop of blood on the pavement! . . . The frame of a house in construction symbolizes our burning passion for the coming-into-being of things.<sup>9</sup>

In an interview with newsmen, Silenus observes that

the problem of architecture as I see it . . . is the problem of all art -- the elimination of the human element from the consideration of form. The only perfect building must be the factory, because that is built to house machines, not men. I do not think it is possible for domestic architecture to be beautiful, but I am doing

my best. All ill comes from man, please tell your readers that. Man is never beautiful, he is never happy except when he becomes the channel for the distribution of mechanical forces.

Then, annoyed at having to compromise his principles by building a staircase for Margot Metroland's new house, Silenus bitterly complains of the 'human element' he has been forced to accommodate.

Why can't the creatures stay in one place? Up and down, in and out, round and round! Why can't they sit still and work? Do dynamos require staircases? Do monkeys require houses?

The similarities in these passages suggest Waugh was parodying Marinetti or someone -- Walter Gropius, perhaps -- given to much the same theoretical line. It is interesting to note in this connection that the most formidable and dangerous competitor of the Speed Kings in the automobile race in Vile Bodies is named Marino. For his brutally competitive driving, he is praised as "a real artist." His name, his reckless driving, and his designation as an artist make Marino sound suspiciously like Marinetti. And, after all, how could Waugh not have seen the justice in Marinetti's call for an unsentimental, dehumanized art that would deal honestly with the mechanism and speed that had helped to create a momentaneous world of becoming? Although Marinetti's practical objectives could have hardly been less congenial to Waugh personally, his esthetic provides the means with which the artist in Waugh could accurately portray the consequences that follow from an uncritical indulgence of the Bergsonian sensibility. The swift, cool, dehumanized

landscape of Futurism dramatizes what happens when one becomes fused with the movement of becoming. In a racing car one can embrace the heady acceleration of the twentieth century; speed provides immediate kinetic gratification to those willing to abandon themselves to its participatory excitement. Functional form, swift efficiency -- these are the only values. For Waugh Futurism and Bergsonian becoming are one and the same. They both abolish the sense of before and after; there is only the immediate sensate moment. They are philosophies that express a world in which scientific theory and applied technology have democratized time; there are no more privileged moments from which to gain the hierarchical perspective of a classically formed sensibility. Here individuals are as replaceable as the standardized parts of an automobile. This seems to be the negative dimension of Marinetti's view of the modern world and it finds its echo in Waugh: the anonymous Speed Kings of the automobile race are eminently replaceable; they are "unimposing men" who serve the machine. Their lives take on the momentaneous character of the racing cars they drive. These cars have the true Bergsonian elan vital; they do not exist at any one time in any one place but are rather in "perpetual flux." As the cars race about the track, they make frequent pit stops to replace worn parts. Like the river of Heraclitus, they are never quite the same car from moment to moment. They are always in the process of becoming the car they will be in the next moment. Rather than an objective car tangibly continuing its existence in time, they

present instead an abstract idea of car-ness that exists "like the confluence of traffic at some spot where many roads meet, streams of mechanism come together, mingle and separate again."

The cars of becoming have a comically abstract and momentaneous existence that is shared by the characters who inhabit this and many of the other novels. The prominence of disguise in Waugh's fiction is one unmistakable symptom of this radical discontinuity: a Jesuit appears in a false beard without explanation; titled aristocrats like the eighth Earl of Balcairn, Viscount Erdinge, Baron Cairn of Barcairn, Red Knight of Lancaster, Count of the Holy Roman Empire and Chenonceaux Herald to the Duchy of Aquitaine scramble from one fashionable party to the next in their chosen guise as gossip columnists caught up in a desperate search for the scandals they need to fill their columns; Colonel Blount, the father of Adam's fiancée, issues Adam a 100 pound check signed Charlie Chaplin; later Adam impersonates his former fiancée's new husband and Colonel Blount, having forgotten entirely their earlier meeting, accepts him at his word. While one set of characters become the succession of their disguised appearances, another set responds to the resulting momentaneous world by lapsing into the self-forgetfulness of cheerful senility. After inviting Adam into his house, Colonel Blount first confuses him with a vacuum cleaner salesman. Once this mystery is resolved,

he retires for his daily nap. Upon awakening he discovers Adam in his library and asks, "Who the devil are you?" Lottie Crump, Waugh's affectionate portrayal of Rosa Lewis, the famous Edwardian hotelier, solves the problem of memory and identity in the midst of ceaseless change by reducing everyone she meets to namelessness: "You all know Lord Thingummy, don't you?"; "There's Mr. What-d'you-call-him"; "your Honour Judge What's-your-name, how about a drink for the gentlemen?" There is a certain unreality to people and events as they shift and slide from under their identifying labels. No one is quite the same person from moment to moment. Continuity, identity, tradition have all been lost in the blur of unordered experience.

Virginia Woolf sought reality at the point in which unreflective intuition directly immerses the self in the experience of becoming. Waugh, like Wyndham Lewis, resisted this notion that an intuitive identification with the flow of becoming puts one in contact with concrete reality. As we have seen, the racing car -- Waugh's metaphor of becoming -- exists abstractly rather than concretely; it is never wholly realized because it is forever caught up in the process of becoming itself. However vital, its existence is unstable at best. It is always more the idea of a car than the reality of one. In the commonsense classical perspective, on the other hand, experience is objectified and segmented into intelligible units based upon our sense of the essential form that individuates each materially

existing particular. Lewis had argued against Bergsonian becoming that we should identify the objects of perception with our permanent sense of their ideal or perfected form rather than continuously adjusting our perspective to accommodate the endless series of changes their mutable material existence implies. In other words, whatever modern science's notions of relativity have to say about it, we should subscribe to the useful fiction of common sense by which the objects our perceptions report to our intellect are solid, enduring and capable of lasting identification.<sup>10</sup> In the perception of their practical-minded owners, the cars of being do not exist as a confluence of changing elements; no matter the rust, the repairs, the replaced parts, they retain their essential character as mechanical conveniences for travelling about. Similarly, in this view of things, people are expected to have abiding personalities that transcend the accidents of time. Lewis strenuously objected to what he considered the modern abandonment of this orderly commonsense world. He argued that Bergson promoted a mode of perception, a way of knowing,

that has no favoured moments, peaks, objects, or locations. A egalitarian science, as it were, is the science of his preference, which recognizes no "objects," that substitutes for them a cluster of "events" or of perspectives, which shade off into each other and into other objects, to infinity.

Lewis concluded that Bergson's "reality is where things run into each other, in that flux, not where they stand out in a discrete 'concreteness.'" Or as Waugh writes of the

cars of becoming, Bergson's reality is "a vortex of combining and disintegrating units." One is reminded of Futurist paintings like Marcel Duchamp's famous Nude Descending a Staircase that scandalized its first viewers by visually portraying what Lewis called temporalized experience. This painting like other Futurist works takes as its subject not the fixed object but process itself. The result reflects twentieth century experience in which stability and certainty disappear into a blur of fragmentary plurality.

Speaking on behalf of the Futurists, Marinetti jubilantly proclaimed that they had created "the new aesthetic of speed. We have almost abolished the concept of space and notably diminished the concept of time. We are thus preparing for the ubiquity of multiplied man."<sup>12</sup>

Waugh no doubt, agreed with this assessment of the modern sensibility although he hardly shared Marinetti's enthusiasm over it. For, in what he called the Century of the Common Man, he thought the anonymous masses -- Marinetti's ubiquity of multiplied man -- threatened to eliminate the individual.<sup>13</sup> Waugh's esthetic problem was to find a way to register Bergson's indiscriminate flux (Marinetti's speed) as the mode of contemporary experience without surrendering to it. Not for him the expressive fallacy implicit in stream-of-consciousness or the defiant turbulence of literary surrealism.<sup>14</sup> His novels are exercises in controlled chaos. He employs two devices to achieve this

effect: 1) cinematic editing and 2) a directorial narrator.

The next chapter is devoted to Waugh's use of film in his fiction. Here I just want to sketch the two cinematic strategies that reflect Waugh's interest in the modern art spokesmen of the early twentieth century, particularly Marinetti and Lewis.

When we compare Marinetti's remarks on narrative technique with Waugh's, we can see why Waugh found in cinema the perfect analogue to what he wanted to accomplish in his novels. In the preface to his anti-novel, The Untameables, Marinetti called for an end to the linear narrative in much the same way Waugh did in his essay on Ronald Firbank.

Before us, men had always sung as Homer did, with narrative sequence and a logical catalog of events, images, and ideas. There is no substantial difference between Homer's poetry and Gabriele D'Annunzio's.

Our free-word tableaux on the other hand, finally distinguish us from Homer since they no longer contain narrative sequence, but rather the simultaneous poly-expression of the world . . . . You can find stories and descriptive articles that have passages of speeded-up writing, synthesizing, essential and at times real words-in-freedom with the same quick flashes of thought, notation, simultaneity.<sup>15</sup>

Notice how Marinetti's comments on the restrictive nature of narrative sequence find their echo in Waugh's praise of Firbank as "the first quite modern writer to solve for himself . . . the aesthetic problem of representation in fiction" by abandoning the nineteenth-century novelist's "submission to the idea of the succession of events in an arbitrarily limited period of time." Waugh was attracted to what he called Firbank's structural wit because it served to create

novels no longer "fettered by the chain of cause and effect."<sup>16</sup> In other words, Waugh discovered in Firbank an esthetic built to Futurist specifications. Given his familiarity with Marinetti's manifestoes, it seems reasonable to conclude that he saw the connection between Firbank's novel of structural wit and Marinetti's fiction of "simultaneous polyexpression." Needless to say, Waugh would have made the connection with a good deal of irony.

Waugh applied the lessons he learned from Firbank to create a narrative composed of brief counterpointed scenes linked associationally rather than developed from one another with linear logic. He thought of this method of composition in terms of cinematic editing. What he said of Firbank's novels could be applied as well to his own: he compared [them] to cinema films in which the relation of caption and photograph is directly reversed; occasionally a brief, visual image flashes out to illumine and explain the flickering succession of spoken words." In his own novels Waugh used Firbank's technique as the narrative equivalent of the cinematic jump-cut in order to impart to events a kind of centrifugal recklessness. As a result his characters typically seem to be caroming away from one another at breakneck tangents.

Elsewhere Waugh praised the composition of a novel by Graham Greene with words that also could be used to describe his own productions: "It is as though out of an infinite length of film, sequences had been cut which assembled, com-

prise an experience which is the reader's alone, without any correspondence to the experience of the protagonists. The writer has become director and producer." <sup>18</sup> Notice that Waugh values this cinematic approach because it enables the writer to remain outside manipulating his characters to create effects which are the reader's alone. Again we see his commitment to the external approach.

Now, of course, as has been pointed out by a number of commentators, novelists did not have to wait upon film technology to exploit the possibilities of counterpoint and montage. Alan Speigle goes so far as to analyze Madame Bovary's filmic structure on the premise that cinema is a technology that concretely realizes the tendencies modern <sup>19</sup> fiction had been developing long before its advent. I am using the film analogy because it is useful to explain the structure of Waugh's fiction and, more importantly, because Waugh explicitly thought of narrative composition in terms of film editing.

We have already discussed an example of this kind of editing in Vile Bodies in which the narrator at one point makes a sudden, transitionless shift from Nina Blount's sickening plane ride to Agatha Runcible's hallucinations on her death bed and thus in two pages jumps from one extreme to the other in the "continual conflict of modern society": the vision of an inhumanly abstract order technologically achieved and the descent into mindless sensationalism of those who carelessly surrender their indi-

viduality to the seduction of the immediate moment. As we will see in Chapter VIII, the jump-cut appears throughout A Handful of Dust where it becomes Waugh's chosen method of banishing the distance between the so-called civilized and the so-called savage. A character in London argues pork import policy and in the next paragraph, without benefit of narrative transition, we are in Brazil watching some Indians set out to hunt wild pig. Utterly lost in the Brazilian wilderness, his watch stolen, Tony Last finds he can no longer maintain the sense of time he had taken for granted in England. On the next page we are back at the Last's family estate in England where we hear the clock strike fourteen hours for lack of adequate maintenance. With this filmic juxtaposition of scenes, Waugh can economically emphasize the sense of disorientation that follows the neglect of civilized distinctions.

In other novels Waugh's filmic editing suggests the fragmentary, distracted attention of people overwhelmed by the immediate. For instance, in Black Mischief we are presented with a foreshortening of the process by which political crises flare into public view for a moment only to be as quickly extinguished in the collective indifference of a people who have been desensitized to human suffering by the unrelieved urgency with which newspapers jump from one alarming event to the next in their competitive struggle to attract the attention necessary to sell their product. Here is London's response to the plight of Azania, an African

nation torn by a civil war instigated in large part by European influences.

Two days later news of the battle of Ukaka was published in Europe. It made very little impression on the million of so Londoners who glanced down the columns of their papers that evening.

'Any news in the paper tonight, dear?'

'No, dear, nothing of interest.'

'Azania? That's part of Africa, ain't it?'

'Ask Lil, she was at school last.'

'Lil, where's Azania?'

'I don't know, father.'

'What do they teach you at school, I'd like to know.'

'Only niggers.'

'It came in a crossword quite lately. Independent native principality. You would have it it was Turkey.'

'Azania? It sounds like a Cunarder to me.'

'But, my dear, surely you remember that madly attractive blackamoor at Balliol.'

'Run up and see if you can find the atlas, deary . . . Yes, where it always is, behind the stand in father's study.'

'Things look quieter in East Africa. That Azanian business cleared up at last.'

'Care to see the evening paper? There's nothing in it.'

In Fleet Street, in the offices of the daily papers: 'Randall, there might be a story in the Azanian cable. The new bloke was at Oxford, See what there is to it.'

Mr. Randall typed: His Majesty B.A.... ex-undergrad among the cannibals . . . scholar emperor's desperate bid for throne . . . barbaric splendour . . . conquering hordes . . . ivory . . . elephants . . . east meets west. . .

'Sanders. Kill that Azanian story in the London edition.'

'Anything in the paper this morning?'

'No, dear, nothing of interest.'

Other than an example of cinematic editing, this passage also seems to be a parody of a film convention popular in the thirties and forties that visualized the passage of time

or the development of issues as a sequence of newspaper headlines each of which flies into focus on the screen for a moment and then disappears to make way for the next. Here, however, we do not see the headlines themselves but rather surmise what they must be as they are refracted in the conversation of a number of anonymous readers and journalists. This, Waugh implies, is the history of human concern in our journalistic age.

The second film influence I want to examine here is Waugh's use of the detached directorial narrator who always seems utterly impervious to the emotional significance of the scenes he arranges for our inspection. In his essay on Ronald Firbank Waugh commended this minor novelist for emphasizing "the fact which his contemporaries were neglecting that the novel should be directed for entertainment." Waugh's use of the word "directed" in this passage is revealing, especially in light of the essay quoted earlier in which he praised Graham Greene for developing a narrative method in which "the writer has become director and producer." The idea of the writer as director calmly orchestrating action at a distance must have had a strong appeal for Waugh. What better model could he have had for cool, intellectual detachment. At will the director and his editor can quicken or retard events, cut them into instantaneous fragments or protract them indefinitely; he can shuffle incidents into any order or apparent disorder he chooses. In "The Film Age" chapter of his Social

History of Art Arnold Hauser claims that twentieth century artist sets out with "the intention . . . to write, paint and compose from the intellect, not from the emotions" as though any given artistic project were an intricate problem demanding reasoned solutions rather than subjective convictions. Hauser goes on to say that the writer has found one of these solutions in cinema. He has adopted from the film editor the device of montage in order to represent "the new concept of time, whose basic element is simultaneity and whose nature consists in the spatialization of the temporal element . . . expresses in no other genre so impressively as in this youngest art, which dates from the same period as Bergson's philosophy of time." <sup>20</sup> This seems to explain film's value for Waugh. Here was a medium that was at once structurally poised yet perfectly suited to represent the teeming mindlessness of contemporary society. It was a method that could suggest the stillness of artistic control even while it captured the clutter of disorder. So he adapted cinematic form to do justice to his vision of a divided world.

The writer as director is apparent in Waugh's use of montage editing, of course, but there is also the directoral aspect of his special narrative voice. One of the remarkable features of Waugh's satire is the sustained distance between tone and incident. The Picabia-Ernst polarity is useful on this point. Waugh creates a narrative voice that has all the "delicately poised," "impossibly tidy" virtues he saw in Picabia and then uses it to calmly report the "defiant

and chaotic" outrage of an Ernst canvas. The result can be illustrated with the following representative passage taken from Scoop which deals with the reception accorded Europeans by a small African nation.

Various courageous Europeans, in the seventies of the last century, came to Ishmaelia, or near it, furnished with suitable equipment of cuckoo clock, phonographs, opera hats, draft-treaties and flags of the nations which they had been obliged to leave. They came as missionaries, ambassadors, tradesmen, prospectors, natural scientists. None returned. They were eaten, every one of them; some raw, others stewed and seasoned -- according to local usage and the calendar (for the better sort of Ishmaelites have been Christian for many centuries and will not publicly eat human flesh, uncooked, in Lent, without special and costly dispensation from their bishop). Punitive expeditions suffered more harm than they inflicted and in the nineties humane counsels prevailed. The European powers independently decided that they did not want that profitless piece of territory; that the one thing less desirable than seeing a neighbour established there, was the trouble of taking it themselves. Accordingly, by general consent, it was ruled off the maps and its immunity guaranteed.

Who or what does this passage satirize? Cannibals, Europeans, Man? We could say all of the above and have done with it. But when we consider the passage closely, we find that the answer resides precisely in the interval between the tone and the subject matter, between the poised narrator and the hideous events he reports. With unruffled reasonableness, the narrator calmly reviews the finely graded limits within which Christian cannibalism is permissible -- the Ishmaelites "will not publicly eat human flesh, uncooked, in Lent, without special and costly dispensation from their bishop." The effect of this passage is outlandishly funny just because of the Ishmaelites' attempts

to introduce polite restraints into their cannibalistic practices. And here is the focus of Waugh's satire: the absurd disjunction between man's pretension to order and his actual behavior. Waugh's characters, whether savage or civilized, are always observing polite forms as they indulge in the most atrocious excesses. He manages this type of scene with his seemingly detached narrator who assembles the elements as though he were only responsible for moving the show along quickly and efficiently. We are made to feel that any pause to evaluate the behavior being reported would be not only tactless but also quite pointless.

Using directoral distance, Waugh can create narrators who remain uncorrupted by the unseemly turmoil they portray. The narrative voice that speaks to us in a typical Waugh novel is characterized by the fastidious mockery of the dandy who finds it amusing to watch others flail about in a hopeless muddle but who takes care never to contaminate himself by identifying with them. Waugh is an early practitioner of camp. Brian Wicker makes this point very nicely in his Story Shaped World.

Waugh's contribution to the literature of dandyism consists in his development, not of the dandyish character, but of the dandyish narrator. It comes out in the special tone of the early novels, and particularly in the narrator's studied neutrality towards actions and attitudes which, by ordinary decent standards, cry out to be judged. This refusal to judge, coming as it does from a recognition that the only standards available from the bourgeois world, by which to make a judgement, are themselves irredeemably corrupt, gives the early novels their scandalous and outrageous, but also their valuably invigorating character.<sup>21</sup>

This "dandyish narrator" cultivates a delight in the out-

rageously vulgar but his fascination for his subject is always touched with unspoken mockery. So he brightly tells us about "surprising creation[s] in ferro concrete and aluminum," "the Bright Young People . . . popping all together out of someone's electric brougham like a litter of pigs . . . squealing up the steps," an African birth control program so misconstrued by its proposed beneficiaries that they set about celebrating their renewed intention to achieve even greater fertility, an acquisitive interior decorator complaining that "the fire never properly reached the bedrooms." His tone remains a constant mixture of fascination and mockery. Both drawn to and repelled by his subject, he takes his stand at a discreet distance from the clutter of events he reports. His voice is calm, elegantly reasonable in the face of passionate turmoil and shameless vulgarity. Cynical amusement is not the right term; his voice suggests the tonic lucidity of one who has passed through despair to discover there is nothing so serious that it cannot be turned to laughter. There is, of course, no hope for the world as it is; clearly, matters have got thoroughly out of hand. There is, however, consolation to be taken as an amused observer of the passing scene on its way to a soulless modern perdition.

Waugh's narrative tone ideally suits his clear intention which is to present a dehumanized vision of the contemporary world. Consider, for example, Simon Balcairn's suicide in Vile Bodies. When the young aristocrat of an ancient and

richly decorated family discovers that an influential society hostess has decided to bar him from her parties and fully intends to seek whatever other means necessary to destroy his career as a gossip columnist of the Daily Excess, he files one last thoroughly false, incontestably libellous column and then sticks his head in his oven.

Then he turned on the gas. It came surprisingly with a loud roar; the wind of it stirred his hair and the remaining particles of his beard. At first he held his breath. Then he thought that was silly and gave a sniff. The sniff made him cough, and coughing made him breathe, and breathing made him feel very ill; but soon he fell into a coma and presently died.

So the last Earl of Balcairn went, as they say, to his fathers (who had fallen in many lands and for many causes, as the eccentricities of British Foreign Policy and their own wandering natures had directed them; at Acre and Agincourt and Killiecrankie, in Egypt and America. Some had been picked white by fishes as the tides rolled him among the tree-tops of a submarine forest; some had grown black and unfit for consideration under tropical suns; while many of them lay in marble tombs of extravagant design).

Even by the standards of satire, the distance between the narrator's tone and what happens in this scene is quite startling. After unemotionally reviewing the respiratory progression from sniffing to coughing to breathing to feeling very ill, the narrator concludes with the purest mockery: "but soon he fell into a coma and died." That "but" condescendingly absolves Balcairn of his unseemly sniffing and coughing as if to say that his dying, at least, displayed a vestigial sign of good breeding. Of course, Waugh provides himself the luxury of such cold indifference to individual fate by never letting his readers feel his

readers feel his characters are quite human. Dehumanizing detachment from his characters has always been the satirist's privilege. Waugh simply avails himself of the tradition. But few satirists have been so relentlessly committed to populating their works with two-dimensionally abstract figures.

Waugh's satiric world is thoroughly dehumanized because the figures he creates are either utterly will-less naifs committed to a bankrupt code of behavior or boundlessly wilful rogues capable of any excess. Neither character type constitutes recognizable human wholeness. His satire has the same qualities Ortega y Gasset found in the dehumanized art of the first decades of the twentieth century: it is negative, derisive, ironic, and deliberately unrealistic; it does not take itself seriously.<sup>22</sup> Waugh's method parallels that of the abstract artist; he represents the world of his experience by abstracting its tendencies and then purifying them so that he can capture as intensely as possible what he thinks is their ultimate significance untrammelled by realistic qualifications. Other satirical novelists -- Huxley and Orwell, for example, -- are realistic when compared with Waugh. Although they include the improbable and distorted, although they exaggerate beyond the limits of plausibility, they never entirely leave the real world. Waugh, on the other hand, never pretends to be realistic. His works -- with the obvious exceptions of novels like Brideshead Revisited and The Sword of Honour --

are frankly two-dimensional, inhabited by the paper-thin figures of farce: Lady Circumference, Lady Throbbing, Mrs. Beaver, Lord Metroland, Mr. Outrage. As Waugh himself points out, in a disordered, purposeless world,

I have come to the conclusion that there is no such thing as normality. That is what makes story telling such an absorbing task, the attempt to reduce to order the anarchic raw materials of life.<sup>23</sup>

In this reduction to order, characters and action necessarily become abstract, schematic. In Work Suspended his autobiographical narrator observes

The algebra of fiction must reduce its problems to symbols if they are to be soluble at all. I am shy of a book commended to me on the grounds that the 'characters are alive'. There is no place in literature for a live man, solid and active. At best the author may maintain a kind of Dickensian menagerie, where his characters live behind bars, in darkness, to be liberated twice nightly for a brief gambol under the arc lamps; in they come to the whip crack, dazzled, deafened, and doped, tumble through their tricks and scamper out again, to the cages behind which the real business of life, eating and mating, is carried on out of sight of the audience. 'Are the lions really alive?' 'Yes, lovey.' 'Will they eat us up?' 'No, lovey, the man won't let them' -- that is all the reviewers mean as a rule when they talk of 'life'. The alternative, classical expedient is to take the whole man and reduce him to a manageable abstraction. Set up your picture plain, fix your point of vision, make your figure twenty foot high or the size of a thumb-nail, he will be life-size on your canvas; hang your picture in the darkest corner, your heaven will still be its one source of light. Beyond these limits lie only the real trouser buttons and the crepe hair with which the futurists used to adorn their paintings.<sup>24</sup>

Examining the modern impulse in art Ortega y Gasset found the contemporary artist in 1925 had placed a ban on pathos, given up the nineteenth century humanist enterprise that was to create an art capable of saving mankind. Instead,

the truly modern inspiration is "invariably waggish"; it cultivates a jesting ironic approach that seeks to triumph over its subject matter stylistically or, as Waugh observed, by the explicit mockery of fastening "real trouser buttons" and "crepe hair" to its works. Rather than bending his art to the lineaments of the world, the modern artist deliberately uses style and wit to derealize or dehumanize what Waugh calls "the anarchic raw materials of life." The resulting imaginative pattern "only asks," according to Ortega y Gasset, "to be linked to the triumph of sport and games." It is this spirit of self-conscious, mocking estheticism that Waugh brings to his satires; it is what makes them different from traditional satire.

Waugh developed a derisive esthetic not unlike Wyndham Lewis's. Indeed, when in Vile Bodies Waugh's narrator calmly describes the "perpetual flux" of the racing cars as a "vortex of combining and disintegrating units," he seems to be alluding directly to Lewis's Vorticist esthetic. (Since Lewis is earlier footnoted in this novel, this is not an unwarranted assumption.) Lewis called upon the artist of the vortex to create "a violent central activity attracting everything to itself, absorbing all that is around it into a violent whirling -- a violent central engulfing." The auto race in Vile Bodies does become just this: a "central engulfing." Adam and his friends are drawn into it casually but inescapably. They know nothing about racing nor are they interested in the spectacle that

attends it. Nevertheless they find themselves not only at the race but also in a pit signalling drivers (incorrectly, of course) and finally in the race itself when one of their group, Agatha Runcible, takes over a disabled driver's car. Later, as Agatha lays dying from injuries sustained in her subsequent automobile accident, she remarks that "people are disappearing." And indeed they are: the metaphor of the auto race overwhelms the novel. It begins as a centripetal force that irresistibly draws all the speed-crazed moderns to itself and then, as the acceleration becomes intolerable, it violently disperses them all to their random fates. Just as the speeding cars break down or jump the course's circuit, so Adam's world comes apart as his friends begin to commit suicide, die in auto accidents, go off to Paris to paint, or marry maharajahs. Then as a sign of ultimate disintegration in the novel's closing pages the entire world explodes into war. Clearly the race to win the "silver gilt figure of odious design, symbolizing Fame embracing Speed," serves as an emblem of the uncontrollable acceleration of change that finally shatters existing patterns of community, loyalty, continuity, and reason itself.

Waugh returns again and again to Vorticist images of "violent whirling" and other absurdly cyclical movements. Beside its deadly racing circuit, Vile Bodies closes with another circle of futility. In the last pages Adam Fenwick-Symes wanders lost on an anonymous "expanse of mud" in which "every visible object [is] burnt or broken." This is "the

biggest battlefield in the history of the world" from which all landmarks have been removed. As Adam wanders through this "unrelieved desolation," he hears "like a circling typhoon, the sounds of battle" returning. Satire's brutal circle asserts itself once again. We have already examined the cyclical movement of Decline and Fall, a novel that opens and closes with "confused roaring" and breaking glass and has for its emblem the big wheel at Luna Park. Black Mischief, Waugh's novel about Europe's disastrous presence in Africa, repeats key images to suggest circular aimlessness. Its early descriptions of the African nation Azania include a seemingly incidental reference to an impoverished family that has made a home of an abandoned automobile. In the novel's closing pages we learn that despite Azania's commitment to modernization the same abandoned automobile housing the same family continues to obstruct the major avenue of Azania's largest commercial city. So much for modernization. Another image of "violent whirling" haunts the pages of Black Mischief. Among the many executions that result from the young Azanian emperor's attempts to Europeanize his country, one comes into sharp and unforgettable focus.

On the south side of the Palace Compound . . . a single dog . . . gnawed her hind quarters in the patch of shadow cast by two corpses, which rotated slowly face to face, half circle East, half circle West, ten foot high in the limpid morning sun.

The barbarous circle described by the twirling corpses finds its gloss in the image of the dog turning to gnaw upon itself; Black Mischief's circular emblems portray a thoroughly self-

devouring mindlessness among both Europeans and Africans. So much for the civilizing influence of Europe. A Handful of Dust opens with Tony Last attempting to preserve his harmonious dream of the good life with the props of an already extinct Victorian culture. In the novel's final scenes Tony is held captive in a Brazilian jungle where he is forced to read and reread in an endless cycle the complete works of Dickens to his mad captor. Tony's grimly appropriate fate takes him full circle from his naive dream of the Victorian good life to its antithesis: a Dickensian nightmare of Victorian dehumanization. He is yoked to an endlessly futile task that resembles nothing so much as the depressing round of repetitive piecework in the nineteenth century factory. In the Sword of Honour the disturbed Apthorpe makes repeated reference to "wheels within wheels" to explain what otherwise seems senseless in military policy. His paranoid suspicion of unseen manipulation turns out to be both more and less than the truth about the self-defeating gyrations of political expedience during the second World War.

As Alvin Kernan has remarked, Waugh's circular images and plot movements suggest the pointlessness of effort in his world.<sup>27</sup> But the shadow of Lewis's vortex also appears in his narrative structures, for as the novels turn in upon themselves, returning at their conclusions to the squalor, disorder, and delusions with which they began, Waugh's narrator remains sublimely unmoved. He displays the virtues of Lewis's Vorticist:

The Vorticist is at his maximum point of energy when stillest.

The Vorticist is not the Slave of Commotion, but its Master. 28

The Vorticist does not suck up to Life.

By abandoning sequence in favor of counterpoint, Waugh's narrator achieves a type of poise in the midst of commotion so that he can reveal disorder without losing detachment. This tension between poised narrator and befuddled scene typically elicits adjectives like brittle, bright and hard from Waugh's commentators. The effect they are responding to parallels the esthetic goal Lewis had praised when he spoke of "Our Vortex."

Our Vortex is proud of its polished sides.

Our Vortex will not hear of anything but its polished dance. 29

Our Vortex desires the immobile rhythm of its swiftness.

Immobile swiftness is especially apt for describing the effect of reading Vile Bodies where the succession of discrete, sequentially unrelated scenes becomes so rapid that it begins to suggest a simultaneity rather than progression of event, but it also applies, with varying degrees of appropriateness, to much else in Waugh's fiction.

By investing his narrators with the pose of the dandy and adapting avant-garde esthetics to his own purposes, Waugh freed himself to create a frankly artificial and abstract fiction of unlikely coincidences, impossibly one-sided characters, and implausibly swift transitions. It is a world in which outrage meets with bland acceptance. Like the modern artist who attempts to extract the form of his subject rather than painting it realistically, Waugh tries to capture the

geometric essence of his satiric prey. Assuming the dandy's bemused unshockable detachment, he seems to pay mocking tribute to Marinetti's vision of style and speed triumphing over indolent, sluggish nature.

Tortuous paths, roads that follow the indolence of streams . . . these are the laws of the earth. Never straight lines . . . Speed finally gives to human life one of the characteristics of divinity; the straight line.<sup>30</sup>

Waugh presents the straight line of his vision rather than the heavily decorated verisimilitude of an Arnold Bennett. His fiction has the directness and simplicity of the firm unbroken lines of the cartoons with which he decorated his early novels. With an elegantly self-assured line he contains the chaos of his subject in the stylization of a caricaturist's art.

I have been arguing that Waugh's fiction parallels the modern artist's interest in abstraction. In Abstraction and Empathy the German aesthetician Wilhelm Worringer put forth a thesis that may help us to understand Waugh's artistic decision to derealize and dehumanize "the anarchic raw materials of life." Worringer's study appeared in 1908 and subsequently found its English reception in T. E. Hulme whose discussion of it in Speculations<sup>31</sup> could have made it available to Wyndham Lewis and Waugh. Worringer argued that the contemporary taste in painting and plastic arts was parochial. It favored the organically realistic over the abstractly stylized. Excessive attention to art of the late classical

period and the Renaissance had induced artistic myopia among his contemporaries. There was another tradition in artistic expression that was just as valid as the realistic imitation of the organic. This Worringer called the "impulse to abstraction." Realistic or empathetic art was the product of ages in which man generally felt himself at home in the universe. At such times there was a desire to empathize with the perceived harmonies of the external world. In other ages man had felt himself a stranger lost in an inhospitable universe. During these periods artistic impulse expressed itself in abstractly stylized works. When the outer world appears arbitrary and threatening, the artist translates the raw materials of experience into the clarity and certainty of the geometrically shaped and mathematically proportioned. Worringer found this particularly true among the civilized peoples of the East who,

tormented by the entangled inter-relationship and flux of phenomena of the outer world, . . . were dominated by an immense need for tranquility. . . . [Their artistic impulse was to take] the individual thing of the external world out of its arbitrariness and seeming fortuitousness, [to externalize] it by approximation to abstract forms and, in this manner, [find] a point of tranquility and a refuge from appearance. Their most powerful urge was, so to speak, to wrest the object of the external world out of its natural context, out of the unending flux of being, to purify it of all its dependence upon life, i.e. of everything about it that was arbitrary to render it necessary and irrefragable, to approximate it to its absolute value.

It was under the influence of Worringer's thesis that T. E. Hulme looked expectantly to a new formalism in art as  
 33  
 it turned away from the tired pieties of humanism. So

too Wyndham Lewis spoke of the Chinese quality of the new abstract art that would supplant realism.. The new art would do away with any mode that invested its subject with merely human sentiment.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, Worringer's book deals with painting and sculpture.. With the exception of experimental works such as Robbe-Grillet's, fiction cannot cut itself competely loose from the world of ordinary human affairs. And such transcendence of the given world would hardly have served Waugh's satiric purpose. His object was to present the unruly and chaotic as he found them in the world of his experience but present them under a degree of abstraction that would permit him to maintain a margin of perspective and control. He sought to reduce the "anarchic raw materials of life" to an abstractly schematic order and he did this quite openly with something like the mocking defiance that Ortega y Gasset discovered in the dehumanized products of modern art. In Decline and Fall fictional conventions are casually flouted so that the narrator can address us directly concerning the lack of verisimilitude in the protagonist. Vile Bodies takes up and drops characters and events without any concern for readerly expectations and then suddenly concludes amidst scenes of a universally disastrous world war the causes of which are never explained. In these early works there is simply no pretense to realism and the usual narrative conventions are blithely suspended.

In his first published story, "The Balance," Waugh's

hero attends an art school in which the only student more competent than himself creates his life-class figure drawings on geometric principles. While the model takes her break, he continues "calculating the area of a rectangle" that he has abstracted from the shape of her body. In one way this "promising pupil" seems the satiric prototype of Silenus in Decline and Fall. Both characters have an obsession with the abstract form to be rescued from the unreliable organic world. But the art student also provides an internal comment on Waugh's choice of method. This early story ends with the protagonist deciding against suicide and choosing to pursue his craft as he reflects that art is one with "the appetite to live -- to preserve in the shapes of things the personality whose dissolution you foresee inevitably." <sup>35</sup> As Worringer argued, the artist abstracts "the shapes of things" in order to create for himself and his audience the security of a stable order in an otherwise arbitrary, threatening world.

And Waugh had reason to cultivate the impulse to abstraction. His world did not afford him a sense of home. He claimed to believe he was living in the advent of a new dark age in which the "scribes [would] play the part of the monks after the first barbarian victories," an age in which satire was already irrelevant since the norms and standards satire implied were already bankrupt. <sup>36</sup> Of course, Waugh enjoyed shocking his audience with such ominous portents. But there is no doubt he believed that the

twentieth century was reverting to the barbarous as a result of its uncritical abandonment of the classical perspective together with its mindless faith in a technology capable only of meretricious effects.

By reflecting the disorderly rush of the modern world in his abstract satires, Waugh illustrated what he meant when he wrote elsewhere that "the artist's only service to the disintegrated society of today is to create little independent systems of order of his own."<sup>37</sup>

## Chapter VI - Notes

- 1 Labels, p. 20
- 2 Labels, p. 14.
- 3 Gertrude Stein, Picasso (London: 1939), as quoted in  
Wylie Sypher, Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature  
4 (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 267.
- 5 Hulme, p. 114.
- 6 Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation: Literature and Poli-  
tics in the 1930's (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. 63.
- 7 Wyndham Lewis, "Vortices and Notes," in Wyndham Lewis  
on Art: Collected Writings 1913 - 1956, ed. Walter  
Michel and C.J. Fix (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969),  
p. 47.
- 8 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The New Religion-Morality of  
Speed," Marinetti: Selected Writings, ed. R.W. Flint,  
trans. R.W. Flint and Arthur A. Coppotelli (New York:  
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971), p. 96.
- 9 The Letters of D.H. Lawrence, ed. Aldous Huxley (New  
York: Viking Press, 1932), pp. 197-200.
- 10 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "Birth of a Futurist  
Aesthetic," Marinetti: Selected Writings, pp. 81-82.
- 11 Lewis, Time and Western Man, pp. 162-82.
- 12 Lewis, Time and Western Man, p. 164,
- 13 Marinetti, "The Birth of a Futurist Aesthetic," p. 81.
- 14 Waugh, "Fan-Fare," p. 32, "The Common Man does not exist.  
He is an abstraction invented by bores for bores."
- 15 Lodge, Evelyn Waugh, pp. 4-5, states that Waugh was  
"distinctively modern without surrendering to what has  
been called 'the fallacy of expressive form.'"
- 16 Marinetti, "The Free-Word Style," the preface to The  
Untameables, in Marinetti: Selected Writings, p. 164.
- 17 Waugh, "Ronald Firbank," p. 79.
- 18 Waugh, "Ronald Firbank," p. 79.
- 19 Waugh, "Felix Culpa?" p. 162.

- 19 Alan Spiegel, Fiction and the Camera Eye: Visual Consciousness in Film and the Modern Novel (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), pp. 16-27, 90-92.
- 20 Arnold Hauser, "The Film Age," Social History of Art, collected in The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Horizon Press, 1967), pp. 226, 234.
- 21 Brian Wicker, "Waugh and the Narrator as Dandy," in The Story-Shaped World (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), pp. 155-56.
- 22 Ortega y Gasset, pp. 47-48.
- 23 Waugh, "Fan-Fare," p. 33.
- 24 Waugh, Work Suspended (London, 1942), as quoted by Christopher Hollis, Evelyn Waugh (London: Longman's, Green, 1954), p. 8. Hollis used the unrevised text published by Chapman and Hall, London, in 1942 in a limited edition of five hundred copies. Martin Stannard "Work Suspended: Waugh's Climacteric," Essays in Criticism, 28 (October 1978), pp. 312-13, compares the original 1942 text with the 1949 version and finds that a good deal has been eliminated in revision including the passage I have quoted.
- 25 Ortega y Gasset, pp. 25, 47-48, 50-51.
- 26 Wyndham Lewis, "The Vorticist," Vogue, September 1956, collected in Wyndham Lewis on Art, p. 454.
- 27 Kernan, The Plot of Satire, p. 153.
- 28 Wyndham Lewis, "Our Vortex," Wyndham Lewis on Art, p. 53.
- 29 Lewis, "Our Vortex," p. 53.
- 30 Marinetti, "The New Religion-Morality of Speed," p. 94.
- 31 Hulme, pp. 82, 85-86.
- 32 Wilhelm Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style, trans, Micheal Bullock (1908; rpt. New York: International Universities Press, 1953), pp. 16, 3-26.
- 33 Hulme, pp. 46-63, 113-140.
- 34 Lewis, Satire and Fiction, pp. 52-53.

35

Waugh, "The Balance," Georgian Stories 1926, ed.  
Alec Waugh (London: Chapman & Hall, 1926), pp. 262,  
253-91.

36

"Fan-Fare," p. 33.

37

"Fan-Fare," p. 33.

## Chapter VII

Film: the Glaring Lens of Satire

In 1957 Waugh published his one avowedly autobiographical novel, The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold, in which he described his public persona as "a combination of eccentric don and testy colonel," a role he had created for himself in order to keep the annoyances of the world at a distance. "He offered the world a front of pomposity mitigated by indiscretion, that was as hard, bright, and antiquated as a cuirass." From behind this character armor

he looked at the world sub specie aeternitatis and he found it flat as a map; except when, rather often, personal annoyance intruded. Then he would come tumbling from his exalted point of observation. Shocked by a bad bottle of wine, an impertinent stranger, or a fault in syntax, his mind like a cinema camera trucked furiously forward to confront the offending object close-up with glaring lens.

Among the images Waugh uses to describe himself in this passage, two are remarkably incongruous with respect to each other; the cuirass and the cinema camera. He offers the world a front as antiquated as armored breast plate

yet when some aspect of the world affronts him, his mind responds as would a camera zooming in for a close-up of the offending agent. The incongruity of these images is not a matter of careless writing. The distance between cuirass and camera measures quite accurately the range of Waugh's interests while it gauges the tension between his public pose and private sensibility. On the one hand he is the hardened old-guard reactionary encased by views so unalterably settled that he has "never voted in a parliamentary election, maintaining an idiosyncratic toryism which was quite unrepresented in the political parties of his time"; on the other, he is the ever-alert satirist enthusiastically, if furiously, rushing out to seize the provocation of the moment with whatever techniques his age has provided him. That he should describe his response to the world's insult in cinematic terms is not metaphorical caprice. Throughout his career he turned to the film maker for instruction and inspiration even while protesting his scorn for most of the film industry's products. Some thirty odd years before The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold the twenty-one year old Waugh helped produce and acted in an amateur film entitled The Scarlet Woman with Elsa Lanchester, the plot of which concerned the Pope's attempt to seduce, literally seduce, the Prince of Wales into the Church of Rome with the charms of a hired woman and then use the leverage of potential scandal to draw the rest of the royal family into the fold. Two years later Waugh published his first fiction after

leaving Oxford, a short story entitled "The Balance." An experimental if somewhat precious work, the narrative is arranged to read as though it were a silent movie including some rather awkward scene directions, block-lettered captions, and italicized remarks made by an audience that is supposed to be viewing the film of the story we are reading.<sup>2</sup> Silenus, the strange spokesman of his first novel, Decline and Fall, gained his eminence in the world by designing film sets. Vile Bodies includes a send-up of film making that is as central as anything else in that relentlessly eccentric novel, which is itself edited much like an elliptical avant-garde film devoted to individual scenes while sublimely negligent of narrative development. "Excursion in Reality", a 1936 short story, and The Loved One in 1949 both use for their background Waugh's experience as a would-be writer-adaptor-consultant for the film industry.<sup>3</sup>

Whether as metaphor or structural device, Waugh used film to present a number of his satiric perceptions of contemporary conditions. These perceptions can be grouped under four headings: 1) the levelling of civilized distinctions; 2) the lapse into primitivism; 3) discontinuity and the disintegration of the self; 4) incoherence and the subversive detail. Let us consider each of these themes in turn.

Levelling

Waugh naturally associated both the making and the watching of film with what he considered the levelling of civilized distinctions in the twentieth century. There are two distinct but closely allied reasons for this -- one esthetic, the other economic.

As Wyndham Lewis and Marshall McLuhan have argued, each in his own way, film formally offers an aesthetic experience that dissolves the conventional perspectives of space and time, presenting in their stead a dreamlike amalgam of disparate sensations that can readily frustrate the literate mind conditioned to expect the continuity of perspectives in a visually coherent space.<sup>4</sup> (Waugh was offended by the abruptly changing, odd-angled perspectives he encountered in air-flight preferring "natural" vantage points from which to view the world. McLuhan would, no doubt, take this to be symptomatic of the literate mind's resistance to the shifting relativistic perspectives of the modern sensibility that film represents so well.)<sup>5</sup> As a medium, film encourages immersion in momentary sensate experience rather than the detached contemplative perspective one can maintain in the presence of a static art like painting or sculpture or even the temporally experienced art of literature. Film discourages the mind from making critical discriminations while it encourages an unreflective sensuous abandonment to its unreeling experience. It is

especially adept at producing immediate visceral excitement of the most basic kind. Of course, this formal characteristic became allied to the economic impetus behind film making from the industry's beginning because it is this kind of experience that will appeal to the largest possible audience. Given their immense production costs, it is not surprising that film producers have generally settled for the popularly sensational rather than the distinctive perceptions of genuine art.

Like Virginia Woolf, Waugh was early drawn to the esthetic possibilities of film form, but he was also sadly aware that production expenses would rarely allow film to achieve its full potential. Despite its seemingly endless technical resources, they both thought early cinema crude and primitive.<sup>6</sup> In a 1947 essay, "Why Hollywood is a Term of Disparagement," Waugh made this jaundiced observation concerning the economic obstacles set in the way of film's ever achieving artistic distinction.

A film costs about \$2,000,000. It must please 20,000,000 people. The film industry has accepted the great fallacy of the century of the Common Man . . . that a thing can have no value for anyone which is not valued by all. The economics of this desperate situation illustrate the steps by which the Common Man is consolidating his victory.<sup>7</sup>

It should be pointed out that Waugh's pejorative reference to the Common Man is not simple snobbery even though he was quite capable of indulging an elitist attitude toward anything democratic. In another context he explains that the Common Man does not exist but rather is an abstraction

coined by "economists and politicians and advertisers and other professional bores of our period." <sup>8</sup> Common Man becomes his rubric for all those forces that militate against the individual and his ability to think for himself. His point is not that Hollywood has subversive intentions with regard to the classical world view of the cultivated gentlemen, but rather that it is dominated by the economics of large numbers as is the rest of the technologically organized world. Commercial film makers turn out a dehumanizing product because they direct their energy to serve that most inhuman of all abstractions -- the statistically average consumer. Other than their preoccupation with profit margins, Waugh concludes that most film producers are "empty-headed and without any purpose at all. Thus anyone interested in ideas is inevitably shocked by Hollywood according to his prejudices." <sup>9</sup>

Waugh used film making as a metaphor of contemporary society's levelling tendencies seventeen years before his trip to Hollywood. In Vile Bodies Colonel Blount rents his house and estate to The Wonderfilm Company of Great Britain at reduced rates so that he can play a small role as a peasant in the "all-talkie super-religious film" of John Wesley's life. Putting himself under the authority of the film's director-producer, Colonel Blount manages to reduce himself to playing the part of a commoner on his own ancestral estate. Soon he takes to signing his checks Charlie Chaplin, the silent screen's epitome of the little

man. Begging the director for a larger part among the film's peasant characters, he presents the unseemly spectacle of all those eager to embrace blindly the modern disenfranchisement that deprives them of their individuality by reducing them to membership in the amorphous mass known as the Common Man.

Waugh's most sustained treatment of film making as the locus classicus of the levelling process of the twentieth century is his 1934 short story, "Excursion in Reality," in which Simon Lent, a young struggling writer, suddenly finds himself hired by phone call to write a film script for Sir James Macrae the elusive and sleepless producer. Whisked away at any hour of day or night by chauffeur, driven cars to attend production and writing conferences that rarely materialize, Simon belatedly discovers that Macrae has employed him to work on a production of a film version of Hamlet. Simon's "name naturally suggested itself" Macrae remarks because "many of the most high-class critics have commended Mr. Lent's dialogue." When Simon points out that in the case of Hamlet "there's quite a lot of dialogue there already," Macrae patiently explains that "it's angle that counts in the film world" and he intends to produce Hamlet "from an entirely new angle."

There have been plenty of productions of Shakespeare in modern dress. We are going to produce him in modern speech. How can you expect the public to enjoy Shakespeare when they can't make head or tail of the dialogue. D'you know I began reading a copy the other day and blessed if I could understand it. At once I said, "What the public wants is Shakespeare with all his

beauty of thought and character translated into the language of every day life."

Film is the art that suits the age of the Common Man. It is part of the general homogenizing tendency that smoothes away traditional discriminations and reduces everything to the foreshortened perspective of the immediate moment. Only one language can be tolerated in this context, the Common language of the Common present. Soon Simon takes up the enterprise's democratizing spirit himself. It will be art for the masses whatever the expense to the individual. His girl friend complains that he has changed. Simon cheerfully agrees

"Yes!" said Simon, with great complacency. "Yes, I think I have. You see, for the first time in my life I have come into contact with Real Life. I'm going to give up writing novels. It was a mug's game anyway. The written word is dead -- first the papyrus, then the printed book, now the film. The artist must no longer work alone. He is part of the age in which he lives; he must share -- only of course, my dear Sylvia, in very different proportions -- the weekly wage envelope of the proletarian. Vital art implies a corresponding set of social relationships. Co-operation . . . co-ordination . . . the hive endeavour of the community directed to a single end . . ."

Simon continued in this strain at some length, eating meantime a luncheon of Dickensian dimensions.

The elimination of the individual point of view, the levelling of artistic expression to a packageable commodity that will sell to the public -- Simon can go along with it all, or so he thinks. But then he discovers that "the hive endeavor of the community" is not without its competitive resistances. As he turns in one "treatment" of the play after another, Macrae's board of experts -- "production, direction, casting,

continuity, cutting and costing managers, bright eyes, eager to attract the great man's attention with some apt intrusion" -- insist that the original story elements require additions and substitutions to insure mass-audience appeal.

"Well," Sir James would say, "I think we can O.K. that. Any suggestions, gentlemen?"

There would be a pause, until one by one the experts began to deliver their contributions . . . "I've been thinking, sir, that it won't do to have the scene laid in Denmark. The public won't stand for travel stuff. How about setting it in Scotland -- then we could have some kilts and clan gathering scenes?"

"Yes, that's a very sensible suggestion. Make a note of that, Lent . . ."

"I was thinking we'd better drop this character of the Queen. She'd much better be dead before the action starts. She hangs up the action. The public won't stand for him abusing his mother."

"Yes, make a note of that, Lent."

"How would it be, sir, to make the ghost the Queen instead of the King . . ."

"Yes, make a note of that, Lent"

"Don't you think, sir, it would be better if Ophelia were Horatio's sister. More poignant, if you see what I mean."

"Yes, make a note of that . . ."

"I think we are losing sight of the essence of the story in the last sequence. After all, it is first and foremost a ghost story, isn't it? . . ."

And so from simple beginnings the story spread majestically.

Of course, the play becomes unrecognizable. Pieces from Macbeth are worked into it and then it is renamed The White Lady of Dunsinane. At the third conference, Sir James finally calls a halt to the project.

'No, it won't do. We must scrap the whole thing. We've got much too far from the original story. I can't think why you need to introduce Julius Caesar and King Arthur at all.

When reminded that he had ordered these additions, Sir James is undeterred. His feeling now is that "what the public wants

is Shakespeare, the whole of Shakespeare and nothing but Shakespeare." And so he makes plans to film Hamlet in the original. Sir James is one of Waugh's gallery of eminent characters who succeed precisely because they have the happy faculty of forgetting what they have said or done from one moment to the next. Their instantaneous amnesia is wonderfully suited to the fragmentary, disconnected world of their experience.

10

The ludicrous mixture of historical periods in Simon's film script suggests the general absence of perspective in the twentieth century's film-like world. As the story's title, "Excursion in Reality," suggests, this is contemporary reality: a ceaseless shifting of points of view that results in the breakdown of all traditional distinctions. There is no authoritative perspective with which to pull the past and present into a continuous pattern of order for it is only "angle that counts in the film world" and one angle is as valid as another, the only question being, which will make more money. As Arnold Hauser and Alan Spiegel point out, film is ideally suited to a relativistic epistemology. It is capable of suggesting the fluid, shifting perspectives of a world without any fixed principles beyond profit. This is why film structure is perfect for Waugh's purposes.

11

### Primitivism

The next chapter treats at length Waugh's fascination

with primitivism and his belief that modern technocracy unwittingly promotes a reversion to a barbarous sensibility and abandons any responsibility to history in favor of the claims of the here and now. At this point I merely want to indicate that Waugh repeatedly associates the barbarous and the modern by linking primitive details to film technology. Wherever the twentieth century's technological art form appears, so does the jungle. In "The Balance" Adam Doure's contemplation of suicide is accompanied by a film montage that represents his state of mind, "fragmentary scenes interspersed among hundreds of feet of confusion" which include the recurring images of "a native village in Africa on the edge of the jungle" and a naked man dragging himself into this jungle to die alone.<sup>12</sup> In "Excursion in Reality" Simon Lent is brought by high-speed car to a film producer's house that is located on an estate as "black and deep as a jungle in the darkness."<sup>13</sup> The Loved One opens with this description:

All day the heat had been barely supportable but at evening a breeze arose in the West, blowing from the heart of the setting sun and from the ocean, which lay unseen, unheard behind the scrubby foothills. It shook the rusty fringes of palm-leaf and swelled the dry sounds of summer, the frog-voices, the grating cicadas, and the ever present pulse of music from the neighbouring native huts.

In that kindly light the stained and blistered paint of the bungalow and the plot of weeds between the veranda and the dry water-hole lost their extreme shabbiness, and the two Englishmen, each in his rocking-chair, each with his whisky and soda and his outdated magazine, the counterparts of numberless fellowcountrymen exiled in the barbarous regions of the world, shared in the brief illusory rehabilitation.

The neighboring huts in these "barbarous regions" compose the British colony of actors and screen writers who have settled in Hollywood.

The emotional and visceral immediacy of the film experience seems to suggest to Waugh the situation of the primitive whom he conceives immersed in the moment's sensation without the perspective of civilized detachment.

### Discontinuity

Many writers have used film as a metaphor of the twentieth century's sense of metaphysical disorientation and personal discontinuity. In Justine one of Lawrence Durrell's characters wonders,

Are people continuously themselves or simply over and over again so fast that they give the illusion of continuous features -- the temporal flicker of the old silent film?

Aldous Huxley had already answered this question in Eyeless in Gaza by having his protagonist flip through a series of old photographs of himself, his family and friends as though they were so many still frames from a film of his life. He finds that the photographs speak to him of the radical incoherence of his life rather than continuity, for what he is in the present moment seems to bear no necessary relation to what he had been in earlier periods. Wyndham Lewis complains in Time and Western Man that

people have already somewhat that sense of things laid out side by side, of the unreality of time, and yet of its paramount importance.<sup>14</sup>

And T. S. Eliot, earlier than these writers, had expressed modern anxiety in terms of film projection: "as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen." Waugh also turns to film when he wants to express his sense of the modern world's discontinuity and unreality. Without conviction in any ultimate purpose to existence, the self and its experience become fragmented, arbitrary. As in Bergson's parody of becoming, life begins to seem a series of discrete sensations placed side by side like individual frames in a film unified by some mechanical motion applied from the outside.<sup>15</sup> Gone is the sense of necessary growth toward fruition. Under these conditions success and happiness depend upon one's ability to live momentarily without regard for the past or the future. Like Colonel Blount in Vile Bodies and Lord Copper in Scoop, Sir James Macrae in "Excursion in Reality" succeeds where others fail because he has come to terms with the world as it is by managing to forget what he is doing from one day to the next. He prospers because he lives within the instantaneous amnesty of the truly functional. To meet the mercantile demands of the moment one cannot afford the cost of earlier allegiances. Simon Lent learns this lesson rather painfully from his full-time production associate and part-time lover, Miss Grits, whose policy it is to enter into a sexual liaison with whomever she happens to be working. This way she can fit her human needs into her job's demands. As far as she is concerned it is a matter of indifference who her lovers

are; they come and go, only her career as a continuity editor goes on as Simon discovers when she abruptly drops him because the studio has let him go. Her craft as continuity editor for Macrae's film studios provides an ironic comment on her adaptation to the directionless discontinuity in which she lives. Her life begins to resemble cinema. It has an illusory continuity like that achieved by the editor's ability to adroitly juxtapose pieces of film that are in reality quite discontinuous with one another.

The Loved One makes a similar point by contrasting two Englishmen in Hollywood -- one a failure, the other successful. The difference between the two men is measured by their respective attitudes toward the past and present. Sir Francis Hinsley, the failure, is given to reminiscences that "strayed back a quarter of a century and more to foggy London streets lately set free for all eternity from fear of the Zeppelin; to Harold Monro reading aloud at the Poetry Bookshop; Blunden's latest in the London Mercury;. . .tea with Gosse in Hanover Terrace." In contrast Sir Ambrose Abercrombie, an indisputable success among the English colony in Hollywood, "had a more adventurous past but he lived existentially. He thought of himself as he was at that moment, brooded fondly on each several excellence and rejoiced." Sir Ambrose proudly and fatuously announces that

I've always had two principles throughout all my life in motion-pictures: never do before the camera what you would not do at home and never do at home what you would not do before the camera.

Ambrose succeeds where Francis fails because he has been able to discard individual continuity and perspective and become a functioning part of the unwinding film of the present moment.

Perhaps the ordeal of Hinsley and his actress protégé in The Loved One best expresses the effects of being forced to live with a generalized sense of discontinuity. Juanita del Pablo is a Hollywood film actress known for her protean capacity to be put through one identity change after another in order to adapt her image to the fluctuations of public taste. Upon first arriving in Hollywood, she is turned over to Sir Francis Hinsley who names her and then equips her with an appropriate biography.

I named her. I made her an anti-Fascist refugee. I said she hated men because of her treatment by Franco's Moors. That was a new angle then. It caught on. And she was really quite good in her way, you know -- with a truly horrifying natural scowl. Her legs were never photogenique but we kept her in long shirts and used an understudy for the lower half in scenes of violence. I was proud of her and she was good for another ten years' work at least.

But now that the studios have decided to make only "healthy films this year to please the Catholic League of Decency," Juanita's image has become a liability.

So poor Juanita has to start at the beginning again as an Irish colleen. They've bleached her hair and dyed it vermilion. . . . She's working ten hours a day learning a brogue and to make it harder for the poor girl they've pulled all her teeth out. She never had to smile before and her own set was good enough for a snarl. Now she'll have to laugh roguishly all the time. That means dentures.

What identity, what integrity can one have in a land where laughing roguishly all the time means dentures? This is

classic Waugh: the sour juxtaposition of false exuberance with the dreary subterfuge that supports it.

But the dreariness has gotten to Sir Francis Hinsley. Profoundly disenchanted with the Hollywood ethos and what it has done to him, he can no longer execute his assignments with enthusiasm and dispatch. He procrastinates until finally

Juanita's agent was pressing the metaphysical point; did his client exist? Could you legally bind her to annihilate herself? Could you come to any agreement with her before she had acquired the ordinary marks of identity?

Juanita's case is not unique; the metaphysical point is always pressed in Waugh. Is it possible to preserve a coherent sense of identity in a culture that no longer believes in itself, its uniqueness or its destiny? For Francis Hinsley the answer is no. Unable to keep pace with the studio's mindless policy of ceaseless transformation, he finds that he himself has ceased to exist in its corporate eyes. Returning to work one day he discovers his name and belongings have been unceremoniously stripped from his office. There has been no warning, no formal discharge; he is simply treated as a non-person which -- pressing the metaphysical point -- is what he has become by accommodating himself, however reluctantly, to an enterprise that is, to use Waugh's words, "empty-headed and without any purpose at all." Without commitment beyond the opportunity of the moment there can be no sustenance for the civilized self.

And so Hinsley hangs himself.

Incoherence and the Subversive Detail

The fourth theme I want to discuss in this chapter -- what I have referred to as incoherence and the subversive detail -- appears less explicitly than the other three because it is diffused throughout Waugh's fiction expressed as a function of his generalized use of what he thought of as cinematic technique. As we have already seen in his critical essays, Waugh made cinema his model. He wrote of "the new habit of narrative" learned from film which, he added, might be "the only contribution the cinema is destined to make to the arts."<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising, then, that cinematic structure became an important part of his work. I have chosen three passages that will serve initially to illustrate my point. I begin with these passages because each unambiguously displays its debt to film. They are all versions of the same prototypical scene that recurs insistently throughout Waugh's fiction. Whatever the local peculiarities from one work to the next, this scene always involves the fixed central consciousness of a character who finds himself in the midst of an unreeling flux of confusion which he either futilely tries to manage or from which he impotently retreats. The first example comes from Waugh's earliest published fiction, "The Balance," in which Adam Doure is found recovering from a drunken suicide attempt.

He still wore the clothes in which he had slept, but in his intellectual dishevelment he had little concern for his appearance. All about him the shadows were beginning

to dissipate and give place to clearer images. He had breakfasted in a world of phantoms, in a great room full of uncomprehending eyes, protruding grotesquely from monstrous heads that lolled over steaming porridge; marionette waiters had pirouetted about him with uncouth gestures. All round him a macabre dance of shadows had reeled and flickered, and in and out of it Adam had picked his way, conscious only of one insistent need, percolating through to him from the world outside, of immediate escape from the scene upon which the bodiless harlequinade was played, into a third dimension beyond it.

And at length, as he walked by the river, the shapes of the design began to advance and recede, and the pattern about him and the shadows of the night before became planes and masses and arranged themselves into a perspective, and like the child in the nursery Adam began feeling his bruises.<sup>18</sup>

The second excerpt, taken from Vile Bodies, was previously considered in connection with Waugh's use of the techniques of abstract and surreal painting. It is Agatha Runcible's death scene in which she lies strapped to her hospital bed wildly hallucinating her own mental film of an automobile race that has gone out of control.

There was rarely more than a quarter of a mile of the black road to be seen at one time. It unrolled like a length of cinema film. At the edges was confusion; a fog spinning past; "Faster, faster," they shouted above the roar of the engine. The road rose suddenly and the white car soared up the sharp ascent without slackening of speed. At the summit of the hill there was a corner. Two cars had crept up, one on each side, and were closing in. "Faster," cried Miss Runcible. "Faster."

The third passage is found in the 1937 novel, Scoop. Lord Copper, the peremptory chief of London's largest newspaper, The Beast, suddenly finds himself about to address a banquet party with a speech grossly inappropriate to the ostensible guest of honor. The address that had been composed to dignify a man in his twenties must now serve for a rather

disreputable looking septugenarian of questionable sanity who has unaccountably installed himself in the seat of honor. "Lord Copper saw the words 'young in years' looming up at him; he swerved." As he glances "grimly through the pages ahead of him," the speech takes on the high-speed vehicular characteristics of Agatha Runcible's filmic hallucination.

For some time now his newspapers had been advocating a new form of driving test, by which the applicant for a license sat in a stationary car while a cinema film unfolded before his eyes a nightmare drive down a road full of obstacles. Lord Copper had personally inspected a device of the kind and it was thus that his speech now appeared to him.

These three scenes, so remarkably similar to one another, span the first eleven years of Waugh's career from his first story to fifth novel. As will become apparent, the features common to them constitute a structural unit that Waugh recreates with variations in almost everyone of his works. Consider the similarities. They each describe a swirling scene of confusion that flickers, reels and "unroll[s] like a length of cinema film" over and around a troubled consciousness rendered impotently immobile by the sheer unmanageability of the rushing clutter of sensations. In Waugh consciousness is always about to be submerged by "the radical instability" which Father Rothschild in Vile Bodies diagnoses as the central problem of the age. Like Adam Doure, Waugh's other characters find themselves pushed into a two dimensional world in which the usual distinctions between background and foreground, essential and incidental, evaporate like the "fog spinning past" Agatha Runcible as she lies

strapped helplessly to her bed. Peripheral details shove themselves into the foreground short-circuiting depth perspective and threatening to extinguish whatever diminished rational powers his characters have remaining to them. Although some characters think otherwise, the possibility of fitting contemporary experience into a coherent intellectual pattern has long since past. Without the civilized distance necessary to three-dimensional perspective, the individual -- like Paul Pennyfeather in Decline and Fall -- disappears into the "kaleidoscope of dimly discernible faces."

This suspension of the expected relationship between the central and peripheral is also apparent in A Handful of Dust in a scene that is not explicitly cinematic. This is the scene in which Tony Last struggles to keep the appearances of gentlemanly behavior in the absence of the principles upon which such behavior presumably rests. In order to expedite the divorce his wife desires, he must take a prostitute to a seaside resort where especially pre-assigned detectives will obligingly take evidence of his "infidelity." This episode shatters what remains of Tony's sense of the proprieties not only because his overprotected sensibility is offended by having to play this charade of intimacy, but also because he is forced to realize that his hired woman, whom he thinks hopelessly vulgar, has more genuine concern for her daughter than his wife ever displayed for their son. Knowing Tony's intentions are directed at the appearance of vice and not the deed, the woman avails herself of this

opportunity to bring her daughter to a resort. She does so over the detectives' disapproval that it "sets a nasty, respectable note bringing a kid into it." (Of course, in Waugh's inverted world, the respectable will reliably seem nasty.) In contrast, Tony's wife has spent a good deal of effort to keep her son at a distance so that she could carry on an affair undisturbed. It is during his mockery of vice at the resort that Tony realizes how far he has fallen from the dream of a principled world in which supposedly essential proprieties were unquestioningly observed if not always adhered to. Now he finds himself adrift in the contemporary nightmare of experience utterly refractory to any categories, moral or pragmatic. As he prepares to take his guest down to dinner, he calls to mind his duties as a host.

Tony . . . reminded himself that phantasmagoric, and even gruesome as the situation might seem to him, he was nevertheless a host, so that he knocked at the communicating door and passed with a calm manner into his guest's room; for a month now he had lived in a world suddenly bereft of order; it was as though the whole reasonable and decent constitution of things, the sum of all he had experienced or learned to expect, were an inconspicuous, inconsiderable object mislaid somewhere on the dressing table; no outrageous circumstance in which he found himself, no new mad thing brought to his notice could add a jot to the all-encompassing chaos that shrieked about his ears.

This scene is not explicitly cinematic in the way the first three are but it has the same structural features. Powerless to do more than observe the random, absurd details haphazardly clamoring for his attention, Tony becomes a still center encompassed by shrieking chaos. As in the

previous scenes, there has been a thoroughgoing violation of the expected relationships between the essential and the incidental as though Tony were watching a film that ignored the distinctions that should rationally prevail between foreground and background. The reasonable constitution of things gets mislaid like old cufflinks in the clutter of detail the value-free camera's eye casually takes in. There are no distinctions here; every sensation is as important and as unimportant as every other. We are reminded of the aerial view of the countryside in Vile Bodies from which roads and factories seem organically vital while men and women fade into the background, lifeless dots on a map. As Nina Blount watches passively from her plane window, she sickens with the disconcerting apprehension of what it means to live in a metaphysically levelled world where the animate and inanimate become indistinguishable from one another.

There is no question that Waugh systematically used film conventions to achieve the effects he wanted in his fiction. Consider, for instance, his review of Graham Greene's The Heart of the Matter:

Nor is there within the structure of the story an observer through whom the events are recorded and the emotions transmitted. It is as though out of an infinite length of film, sequences had been cut which, assembled, comprise an experience which is the reader's alone, without any correspondence to the experience of the protagonists. The writer has become director and producer. Indeed, the affinity to the film is everywhere apparent. It is the camera's eye which moves from the hotel balcony to the street below, picks out the policeman, follows him to his office, moves about the room from the

handcuffs on the wall to the broken rosary in the drawer, recording significant detail. It is the modern way of telling a story.<sup>19</sup>

This analysis of Greene's novel tells us at least as much about Waugh's fiction. He finds in his friend's novel the cinematic techniques he used in his own work: the ability to assemble narrative with associational montage rather than causal sequence; the studied neutrality of an unblinking camera eye that can register the central and the peripheral with equal intensity; the calculated deployment of "the significant detail," those close-up visual selections that can suddenly elevate incidental background materials to function as either metaphorical or metonymous signals that reinforce the narrative's conceptual organization.

It is this last strategy, the "significant detail," that I want to deal with here.

Martin Price reminds us that details in fiction are often "pulled between the demands of structure and the consistent texture of a plausible fictional world." He goes on to observe that "their nature is not unlike those of our own lives that are jointly to be explained by outward circumstance and inward motive." In order to achieve coherence, the novelist tends to employ details from his settings for their power to suggest inward motive and meaning.<sup>20</sup> In Fiction and the Camera Eye Alan Spiegel analyzes this use of detail in cinematic terms reminiscent of Waugh's discussion of significant detail. Using what at first appears to be the neutrality of a camera eye, the modern writer,

according to Spiegel, presents the narrative equivalent of a filmic close-up on a seemingly adventitious detail and then makes it contribute to the story's "undercurrent of interior resonance beneath the narrative surface." Spiegel goes on to say that this is a strategy "to resolve the dramatic incompatibility between an object's adventitious appearance as part of a chaotic and senseless material flux and its meaningful depths." <sup>21</sup> In other words, a writer will avail himself of the metaphoric possibility of a detail from his story's setting in order to reinforce his theme and achieve a unified effect. To take an obvious example, the snowfall that concludes James Joyce's The Dead is both real snow and an image of common mortality.

The authors cited by Price and Spiegel use detail to achieve artistic coherence. When Waugh uses a detail metaphorically, however, he is far more likely to make it reinforce a sense of incoherence and inward emptiness. His details typically contribute to the "chaotic and senseless material flux"; they generally carry a subversive message that speaks of a shallow world without lasting significance. Of course, this is not surprising in satire. As Alvin Kernan has demonstrated, satire often makes its point by accumulating a clutter of irredeemably confused particulars that overwhelm any possibility of coherent interpretation. Certainly Waugh provides enough examples to confirm Kernan's observation. One thinks of the catalogue of parties in Vile Bodies:

. . . Masked parties, Savage parties, Victorian parties, Greek parties, Wild West parties, Russian parties, Circus parties, parties where one had to dress as somebody else, almost naked parties in St. John's Wood, parties in flats and studios and houses and ships and hotels and night clubs, in windmills and swimming baths, tea parties at school where one ate muffins and meringues and tinned crab, parties at Oxford where one drank brown sherry and smoked Turkish cigarettes, dull dances in London and comic dances in Scotland and disgusting dances in Paris -- all that succession and repetition of massed humanity. . . . Those vile bodies . . .

But Waugh does not rely on such indiscriminate catalogues to suggest the incoherence of his world. He achieves a specifically subversive effect by carefully selecting apparently incidental details and treating them with cinematic logic. The following scene from Vile Bodies illustrates this quite clearly. Lord Metroland has just returned home from a conversation with Father Rothschild, who has tried to make him aware of the "radical instability" that besets the modern world.

By ill-fortune he arrived on the doorstep to find Peter Pastmaster fumbling with the lock, and they entered together. Lord Metroland noticed a tall hat on the table by the door. "Young Trumpington's, I suppose," he thought. His stepson did not once look at him, but made straight for the stairs, walking unsteadily, his hat on the back of his head, his umbrella still in his hand.

"Good night, Peter," said Lord Metroland.

"Oh, go to hell," said his stepson thickly, then turning on the stairs, he added, "I'm going abroad tomorrow for a few weeks. Will you tell my mother?"

"Have a good time," said Lord Metroland, "You'll find it just as cold everywhere, I'm afraid. Would you care to take the yacht? No one's using it."

"Oh, go to hell."

Lord Metroland went into the study to finish his cigar. It would be awkward if he met young Trumpington on the stairs. He sat down in a very comfortable chair. . . . A radical instability, Rothschild had said, radical

instability. . . . He looked round his study and saw shelves of books -- the Dictionary of National Biography, the Encyclopaedia Britannica in an early and very bulky edition, Who's Who, Debrett, Burke, Whitaker, several volumes of Hansard, some Blue Books and Atlases -- a safe in the corner painted green with a brass handle, his writing-table, his secretary's table, some very comfortable chairs and some very businesslike chairs, a tray with decanters and a plate of sandwiches, his evening mail laid out on the table . . . radical instability, indeed. How like poor old Outrage to let himself get taken in by that charlatan of a Jesuit.

He heard the front door open and shut behind Alastair Trumpington.

Then he rose and went quietly upstairs, leaving his cigar smouldering in the ash-tray, filling the study with fragrant smoke.

This passage is classically cinematic on Waugh's own terms. It selects visual close-ups from the surrounding details to advance the story quickly and economically without need of narrative comment. Pathetically stubborn in his need to believe all is right with his world, Metroland retreats to his study where he reassures himself that there is an ordered continuity to his existence by visually singling out from his book shelves the Dictionary of National Biography, Who's Who, the Encyclopedia Britannica, official publications of parliamentary proceedings, listings of the peerage and socially prominent, and maps of the world from among the rest of the objects in this carefully kept room. All these works establish one's place in the world by recording order and precedence and providing rational categories with which to organize experience. In his study Metroland seems to be at the center of a coherent, eminently manageable world, but young Trumpington's hat in the outer hall and the smoldering cigar left behind in the ash tray tell a very different story.

Waugh deploys his "significant details" to produce a filmic reading of this scene that subverts Metroland's pretension to an ordered existence. Trumpington's potently tall hat has cowed Metroland into retreat. He would rather surround himself with the comforting illusion of order than confront his wife's infidelity. When Trumpington departs, leaving the field clear once again, Metroland approaches his wife disarmed, his cigar left behind to burn itself out impotently among the bankrupt mementoes of a once orderly society. Waugh's narrator operates as would a skillful film editor marshalling the background decor of the scene to serve his intention. All the forces of order and tradition are no match for that incidental hat and cigar. The center cannot hold against the merely peripheral.

In Waugh's fiction the mind is almost always impotent when faced with the problem of experience. Paul Pennyfeather was able to handle the idea of drunkenness but completely unprepared to face the drunkard. Even the far more formidable Gilbert Pinfold does not bring experience under the categories of reason but rather retreats from it somewhat in the fashion of Lord Metroland but without his illusions. Looking at the world sub specie aeternitatis, Pinfold finds it "flat as a map," an alien landscape without order or precedence. While he comes "tumbling from his exalted point of observation" to confront "personal annoyance" -- "a bad bottle of wine, an impertinent stranger, or a fault in syntax" -- there is every indication that he is no match for

these peripheral invaders of his desired poise. After all, they have tumbled him "from his exalted point of observation." Certainly he has little chance of winning the battle on their terrain. "Like a cinema camera truck [ing] furiously forward," he bears down on "the offending object close-up with glaring lens; with the eyes of a drill sergeant inspecting an awkward squad, bulging with wrath that was half-facetious, and with half-simulated incredulity; like a drill sergeant he was absurd to many but to some rather formidable." With his half-facetious, half-simulated parody of a drill sergeant, Pinfold can hardly expect to quell the subversive details of the disorderly world. He can only return to his "exalted point of observation."

There are other characters who think they can manage the unprincipled scene of contemporary experience. In

Scoop we find Julia Stitch

still in bed although it was past eleven o'clock. Her normally mobile face was encased in clay, rigid and menacing as an Aztec mask. But she was not resting. Her secretary, Miss Holloway, sat at her side with account books, bills and correspondence. With one hand Mrs. Stitch was signing cheques; with the other she held the telephone to which, at the moment, she was dictating details of the costumes for a charity ballet. An elegant young man at the top of a stepladder was painting ruined castles on the ceiling. Josephine, the eight-year-old Stitch prodigy, sat on the foot of the bed construing her day's passage of Virgil. Mrs. Stitch's maid, Brittling, was reading her the clues of the morning crossword. She had been hard at it since half-past seven.

This is the cluttered scene of satire as Alvin Kernan describes it: the juxtaposition of high and low (translating Virgil and doing a crossword puzzle); the cultivated and

decayed (the "elegant young man . . . painting ruined castles on the ceiling"); and, above all, the indecorous tendency of these activities to spill over into each other's proper context so that they cease to be clearly distinguishable. As the novelist John Boot enters this scene, Julia congratulates him on his latest book. But her admiration of his book becomes confusingly entangled with her praise for the "elegant young" painter who has just executed, so to speak, a headless abbot on her ceiling.

'I absolutely loved Waste of Time. We read it aloud at Blakewell. The headless abbot is grand.'

'Headless abbot?'

'Not in Wasters. On Arthur's ceiling. I put it in the Prime Minister's bedroom.'

This headless inability to maintain distinctions results in the confusion of identity that precipitously sends the reclusive and startled William Boot to Africa rather than Julia's chosen candidate, John Boot.

Julia Stitch is one of a number of characters who constitute a variation on Waugh's standard portrayal of mind overwhelmed by confusion. These are the characters who behave as if they were still capable of managing the disintegrating world around them: Silenus sitting calmly at the center of the spinning wheel of modern life; the ubiquitous, all-knowing but remarkably ineffectual Father Rothschild in Vile Bodies stationed at the rail of a ship of fools "very few of them . . . unknown to the Jesuit, for it was his happy knack to remember everything that could possibly be learned about everyone who could possibly be of any

importance" while "high above his head swung Mrs. Melrose Ape's travel-worn Packard car" blotting out with its "dust of three continents, against the darkening sky" any possibility of imposing reason on the chaos that walks around him in the form of Mrs. Ape herself, the egregiously vulgar woman evangelist whose favorite hymn is "There ain't no flies on the Lamb of God"; the austerely aloof Mrs. Rattery in A Handful of Dust, under whose "fingers order grew out of chaos" but only for the briefest moment and only with a deck of playing cards that provide but a pale memory of an order more substantial. All of these figures blandly assume they can direct their circumstances from their privileged positions at the centers of their respective worlds. But, in truth, they are all equally subject to the same unruly currents that overwhelm characters like Paul Pennyfeather.

These still centers of consciousness surrounded by the subversive whirl of incoherent detail also serve as a gloss on Waugh's narrative strategy. Julia Stitch in her bed parallels Waugh's typically unflustered narrator at the center of a hectic and apparently aimless scene which he reports to his readers with the sublime detachment of one attentive to the spectacle of local amusements but without any concern for final meanings. She is an early version of Waugh's autobiographical Gilbert Pinfold; she hides behind her "rigid and menacing . . . Aztec mask" of clay as Pinfold hides behind his hard, bright cuirass of assumed pomposity. Both are would-be directorial figures reaching into their

surroundings with either a darting camera eye or a stream of peremptory commands. But their directorial style is not enough to impose order on the surrounding randomness in any but an ephemeral manner. Julia sends the wrong man to Africa and drives her sports car with so little control that she inadvertently runs it into an underground public lavatory. Pinfold tries to maintain his "exalted point of observation" behind his elaborate character armor but he cannot prevent hallucinations from flooding his mind. The world is always too much of an impossible jumble to be arranged with any sense of necessary order by either Waugh's characters or his narrators. They can retreat to seemingly safe vantage points, but, until the later novels, beginning with Work Suspended, they are uniformly impotent when confronted by the adventitious clutter that surrounds them. Paul Pennyfeather in Decline and Fall returns to Scone College, Lord Metroland in Vile Bodies retreats to his tradition-bound study, Tony Last in A Handful of Dust seeks refuge in his Victorian estate -- none of these characters has the strength to take action and organize their experience purposefully; they live in a world that seems to be unreeling furiously "like a length of cinema film" set at the wrong speed.

## Chapter VII - Notes

- 1 Sykes, pp. 55-56; The Diaries, p. 169.
- 2 "The Balance," pp. 253-91.
- 3 Evelyn Waugh, "Excursion in Reality," in Tactical Exercise (Boston: Little, Brown, 1954), pp. 53-69; Sykes, p. 171, reports on Waugh's profitable but unproductive association with film director Alexander Korda.
- 4 Lewis, Time and Western Man, pp. 211-230; Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 284-296.
- 5 McLuhan, p. 289.
- 6 Virginia Woolf, "The Movies and Reality," The New Republic, 4 August 1926, pp. 308-09.
- 7 Evelyn Waugh, "Why Hollywood is a Term of Disparagement," Daily Telegraph and Morning Post, 30 April 1947, collected in A Little Order, p. 39.
- 8 "Fan-Fare," p. 32.
- 9 "Why Hollywood is a Term of Disparagement," p. 38.
- 10 "Excursion in Reality," pp. 62, 64, 67, 68, 53-69.
- 11 Hauser, pp. 233-35; Spiegel, p. 32.
- 12 "The Balance," p. 278.
- 13 "Excursion in Reality," p. 56.
- 14 Lewis, p. 81.
- 15 Bergson, pp. 336-40.
- 16 "Why Hollywood is a Term of Disparagement," p. 38.
- 17 Waugh, "Felix Culpa?" p. 163.
- 18 "The Balance," p. 287.
- 19 "Felix Culpa?" pp. 163-63.
- 20 Martin Price, "The Irrelevant Detail and the Emergence of

Form," in Aspects of Narrative: Selected Papers from the English Institute, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 81.

21

Spiegel, pp. 92-93.

## Chapter VIII

Chromium Plating, Natural Sheepskin  
and the New Barbarians

A Handful of Dust opens under the heading, "Du Cote de Chez Beaver," where we meet Mrs. Beaver, interior decorator, furniture merchant, renovator of old buildings, landlord, and, more generally, promoter of whatever is profitably modern. She is especially dedicated to converting traditional homes into warrens of one-room flats to let. She sees herself filling "a long felt need" by providing "what people wanted . . . somewhere to dress and telephone." When Brenda Last brings this missionary of modern transience and anonymity to Tony's ancestral estate, Hetton Abbey, she feels no compunction about criticizing her host's residence. Shown the morning room, she declares it "appalling" and sets about planning its renovation in spite of the difficulties posed by its Gothic structure.

"I know exactly what Brenda wants. I don't think it will be impossible. I must think about it. As Veronica says, the structure does rather limit one . . . you know I think the only thing to do would be to disregard it altogether and find some treatment so definite that it carried the room if you see what I mean. . . . Supposing we covered the walls with white chromium

plating and had natural sheepskin carpet. . . . I wonder if that would be running you in for more than you meant to spend."

Part of the joke in this passage is Mrs. Beaver's pause in order to consider how best to resolve the problem of structure. In fact, chromium plating and natural sheepskin compose her uniform prescription for all interiors regardless of architectural style. And all England seems to be taking her medicine. Everywhere one looks in Waugh's fiction traditional buildings are being razed or renovated to make way for functional flats suited to the "base love," as Tony Last puts it, of a restless generation who have not the least inclination to consider the tradition and historical development architectural style implies. The space of their lives has contracted to whatever can take place in an austere functional bed-sitting-room walled with impersonal chrome. Marinetti would have approved of their acquiescence to a streamlined architecture of mechanized conformity. Tony Last, however, flees England in hopes of discovering a civilized city as yet untouched by Mrs. Beaver's special kind of technological barbarism. But, as he stumbles through uncharted Brazilian jungles, he comes to realize the futility of his quest in an hallucinatory insight.

"I will tell you what I have learned in the forest, where time is different. There is no City. Mrs. Beaver has covered it with chromium plating and converted it into flats."

Chromium plated rooms carpeted with natural sheepskin -- this unlikely juxtaposition of the ultra-modern and the

unadorned primitive is central to the vision of A Handful of Dust and all of Waugh's fiction. The modern and primitive are predictably yoked in Waugh.

We have already seen how Waugh links film with primitive elements so that wherever film making enters the plot of his narrative we can expect some reference will be made to the jungle. But beyond this simple coupling, film provides other means for bringing together the savage and civilized in the film editor's use of montage and visual counterpoint. At times Waugh employs the rapid cross-cutting technique of film so that we see in one paragraph a character stranded in Brazilian jungles by his tribal guides who have gone off to hunt pig and then in the next paragraph we are back in London listening to another character argue before parliament for a new pork import policy. At other times he attenuates his juxtapositions so that the counterpoint moves at a slower and subtler rhythm. Two examples will serve to illustrate what I mean, one from Black Mischief, the other from A Handful of Dust.

Black Mischief takes place in the African nation of Azania which has the misfortune to inherit for its new leader a disastrously enlightened Oxford graduate named Seth. The running gag in the novel concerns Seth's persistent attempts to transform Azania into Europe. Of course, his efforts only result in a zanier version of the European madhouse of the twentieth century. Seth commands boots be issued to his army and his troops gratefully make a supper of them. He decrees

the dissemination of Soviet birth-control literature and devices only to find that his people mistake his campaign. They think they are being warned against the dangers of sterility, a sensible enough interpretation given their particular economic circumstances. Then there is the Azanian family that has set up squalid living quarters in a broken down car which has been abandoned in the middle of what is supposed to be a main street of the country's major sea port. They have "set up house in the back, enclosing the space between the wheels with an intricate structure of rags, tin, mud and grass," which they share with their two goats. For all Seth's efforts to make Azania conform with his vision of the European twentieth century, at the end of the novel these resourceful and imperturbable homesteaders continue to block the road with their deteriorating carhouse. They are so immovable that "the new regime which has taken over since the collapse of Seth's utopian administration plans to build a new road around them. The situation presents a perfect image of the futility of grafting so-called progressive ideas to a culture unprepared for such change. But there is more to it than this. True to the pun in their nation's name, the Azanian squatters turn out to be an only slightly loonier version of another family in London. Before the novel's agent provocateur, Basil Seal, leaves England for Africa, he visits his friends, Sonia and Alastair Trumpington, whom he discovers in a crapulous state and still in bed at dinner time.

He drove to Montagu Square and was shown up to their room. They lay in a vast, low bed, with a backgammon board between them. Each had a separate telephone, on the tables at the side, and by the telephone a goblet of 'black velvet'. A bull terrier and chow flirted on their feet. There were other people in the room: one playing the gramophone, one reading, one trying Sonia's face things at the dressing-table. Sonia said, 'It's such a waste not going out after dark. We have to stay in all day because of duns.'

Alastair said, 'We can't have dinner with these infernal dogs all over the place.'

Sonia: 'You're a cheerful chap to be in bed with, aren't you?' and to the dog, 'Was oo called infernal woggie by owid man? Oh God, he's made a mess again.'

Basil remarks, "how dirty the bed is" and Sonia replies, "I know. It's Alastair's dog. Anyway, you're a nice one to talk about dirt." Then, having their food delivered, they proceed to dine together on the bed accompanied by the dogs and the mess. When Basil returns from Africa having been away for many months, the Trumpington's are still lounging about their apartment hung over from yet another night-before. Vaguely aware that there has been a revolution in Azania and an economic crisis in England, they protest they do not want to hear any more about either. The Trumpington's and their dogs are as squalidly immovable, as impervious to external influence as the Azanian family in their abandoned lorry with their goats. Living amidst their own filth and litter, both families are happily oblivious to political and economic events around them. They represent the slovenly intransigence of human physical life stripped of all ideological pretensions. As usual in Waugh the difference between primitive and civilized is made to seem negligible.

At every turn of its plot A Handful of Dust brings the

savage and civilized together by means of parallel and counterpoint. One instance of this counterpointing technique is particularly ingenious. It begins early in the novel but does not find its completion until the narrative is nearly over. Soon after the novel begins we meet Brenda Last, the bored and restless young woman who will leave her husband for her lover just days after her son's death in a riding accident. She appears at her dressing table holding an interview with her son's governess while she makes up her face. At one point the narrator observes that "Brenda spat in the eye black." While the act of spitting in one's mascara may not be unusual in itself, as a narrative detail singled out for close attention in the behavior of a woman of Brenda's type, the act is at least mildly startling, especially when we remember that she does it in the governess's presence. Why does the narrator select this detail rather than, say, Brenda's application of perfume, powder or rouge? Of course, this is another instance of what Waugh called the "significant detail." Once we have read the novel through, it becomes clear that Brenda's spitting appears where and when it does as one element in a network of signals to the reader. Considered in light of her subsequent behavior, her spitting fits together with her initial appearance in bed, her "quilt . . . littered with envelopes, letters and the daily papers." Despite her refined personal appearance, Brenda is a woman who litters, spits and seduces shamelessly in plain view of others. There

is about her an essential vulgarity that allows her to become a careless, utterly self-centered seductress calmly betraying her husband to take up with a man who possesses no other interest for her than his availability at the moment she desires some excitement outside her marriage.

Having selected this spitting incident for brief but special attention, the narrator moves on with the story. But then, some one hundred fifty pages later, the spitting episode finds its primitive parallel and, in so doing, expands to its full meaning. At the end of the novel, Tony Last, driven from England by what he considers the unspeakably barbarous demands of Brenda's divorce suit, searches for an ideal city in Brazil. During his travels he learns about "Cassiri . . . the local drink made of fermented cassava." Tony's guide explains that "it is made in an interesting way. The women chew the root up and spit it into a hollow tree-trunk." This reference to spitting Indian women both echoes and mocks the earlier scene with Brenda: the civilized woman had used her spit merely to aid her appearance while the Indian women use their saliva to produce something substantial. These two scenes form one strand in an elaborate network of juxtapositions, correspondences and parallels with which the novel collapses the distinctions between the civilized and the savage in much the same way Joseph Conrad had done in Heart of Darkness with his perverse images constructed so that the settings of Brussels and the Congo mirror one another in their common rapacity and

corruption.

Alvin Kernan shows that Waugh's fiction portrays a world in which the jungle is always about to reassert its priority by toppling the defensive walls that civilization has built to keep it out.<sup>1</sup> One can go a step further and say that Waugh takes a certain perverse enjoyment in using the wall that divides savagery from civilization as his vantage point. By means of aptly incongruous details and dislocating montage, he deliberately straddles this dividing wall. As he tells us in Ninety-two Days, it is especially at those intersections of the barbarous and the genteel that he finds his satiric inspiration.

there is a fascination in distant and barbarous places, and particularly in the boarderlands of conflicting cultures and states of development, where ideas, uprooted from their traditions, become oddly changed in transplantation. It is there that I find the experiences<sup>2</sup> vivid enough to demand translation into literary form.

His novels compulsively dramatize this borderland experience. In A Handful of Dust the illiterate and unscrupulous Mr. Todd forces Tony Last to read him the works of Dickens over and over. Although irredeemably barbarous in every other way, Mr. Todd prides himself for having a refined sensitivity to literature and responds unashamedly to Tony's readings with effusive sentimentality. Scoop dissects the palpable lunacy of applying European political categories to local mercenary squabbles in Africa. In The Loved One there is the spectacle of Sir Ambrose Abercrombie affecting the refinement of a deerstalker cap and Inverness cape in

California where sandals and open-necked shirts are considered formal dinner dress.

Gathering his travel writing for republication in 1946, Waugh quotes his own character Charles Ryder the protagonist of Brideshead Revisited as his spokesman. Like his creation Waugh decided as a young man to explore the wilderness leaving the sedate territories of Western Europe for a later day.

'Europe could wait. There would be a time for Europe,' I thought; 'all too soon the days would come when I needed a man at my side to put up my easel and carry my paints; when I could not venture more than an hour's journey from a good hotel; when I needed soft breezes and mellow sunshine all day long; then I would take my old eyes to Germany and Italy. Now, while I had the strength, I would go to the wild lands where man had deserted his post and the jungle was creeping back to its old strongholds.' Thus 'Charles Ryder'; thus myself. These were the years when Mr. Peter Fleming went to the Gobi Desert; Mr. Graham Greene to the Liberian hinterland; Robert Byron -- vital today, as of old, in our memories; all his exuberant zest in the opportunities of our time now, alas! tragically and untimely quenched -- to the ruins of Persia. We turned our backs on civilization. Had we known, we might have lingered with 'Palinurus'; had we known that all that seeming-solid, patiently built, gorgeously ornamented structure of Western life was to melt overnight like an ice-castle, leaving only a puddle of mud; had we known man was even then leaving his post. Instead, we set off on our various stern roads; I to the Tropics and the Arctic, with the belief that barbarism was a dodo to be stalked with a pinch of salt.<sup>3</sup>

This jaundiced and, perhaps, half-facetious vision of civilization's collapse finds increasingly bitter expression in Waugh's diaries where he writes in 1963:

It was fun thirty-five years ago to travel far and in great discomfort to meet people whose entire conception of life and manner of expression were alien. Now one has only to leave one's gates.<sup>4</sup>

In a 1962 diary entry he succinctly states his manner of dealing with this perception.

Abjuring the realm. To make an interior act of renunciation and to become a stranger in the world; to watch one's fellow countrymen, as one used to watch foreigners, curious of their habits, patient of their absurdities, indifferent to their animosities -- that is the<sup>5</sup> secret of happiness in his century of the common man.

The way to deal with the contemporary decline into barbarism is to remain imperturbably aloof, amused but detached like the unflappable narrative director of the early novels who creatively reassembles the materials of the primitive and modern in subversively entertaining montages.

When Waugh refers to "savage at home," he does not have in mind an Anthony Burgess nightmare of hooligan hordes rampaging through London streets. His new barbarians are far more dangerous. Mrs. Beaver and Mrs. Rattery in A Handful of Dust are not typical barbarians. Nor is Dr. Kenworthy in The Loved One. These people have come not only to raze the structures of Western tradition but also to replace them with quarters suitable to an entirely alien vision.

Waugh's mixture of fascination and repulsion for the borderlands of savagery and civilization finds its climactic realization in The Loved One when Dennis Barlow confronts the outrageous banality of Whispering Glades, Hollywood's prestigious burial grounds (modelled on Forest Lawn) where the dead go not to their rest but, according to the uniformly euphemistic speech of the mortuary hostesses, their slumber. He finds the place exerts a strange influence that arrests

his imagination.

Whispering Glades held him in thrall. In a zone of insecurity in the mind where none but the artist dare trespass, the tribes were mustering. Dennis, the frontiersman, could read the signs . . . . The graves were barely visible, marked only by little bronze plaques, many of them as green as the surrounding turf. Water played everywhere from a buried network of pipes, making a glittering rain-belt waist-high, out of which rose a host of bronze and Carrara statuary, allegorical, infantile or erotic. Here a bearded magician sought the future in the obscure depths of what seemed to be a plaster football. There a toddler clutched to its stony bosom a marble Mickey Mouse. A turn in the path disclosed Andromeda, naked and fettered in ribbons, gazing down her polished arm at a marble butterfly which had settled there. And all the while his literary sense was alert, like a hunting hound. There was something in Whispering Glades that was necessary to him, that only he could find.

This necessary something has to do with Whispering Glades being the ultimate meeting place of the barbarous and the civilized; here American enterprise and technology have managed to trash all of Western culture by trivializing it. Here people who obviously have little interest in Shakespeare quote Hamlet as though its hero had written a play on the wisdom of calmly resigning oneself to the inevitability of death. The Lake Isle of Innisfree is reproduced as an exotic improvement on lover's lane. ("It's named after a very fancy poem.") The sound of humming bees is provided by recording to remove the threat of being stung. Here a gravestone immortalizes the enterprising fruiterer who developed the stoneless peach. European churches are reproduced with their crosses conspicuously missing. In this land of the stingless bee, stoneless peach, and crossless church there is neither historical perspective nor contradiction, but only pleasant sensations.

Dennis, the artist, is a frontier-man reading the signs: the barbarians are already within the walls of civilization. They have taken the artifacts of the past and casually thrown them together in the jumbled junk heap of Whispering Glades. Art, literature, music, philosophy are no more than adornments to be arranged and altered for a moment's distracted pleasure. Whispering Glades is the image of final deracination. Far worse than ignoring the cultural past, the technological barbarians have converted it into an amusement park waxworks. Or, to alter the image, twentieth century man finds himself a primitive alien somehow set down on a planet he finds interesting but quite unintelligible to his radically foreshortened perspective.

Clearly Waugh was obsessed with the parallels to be drawn between savagery and the so-called civilization of the contemporary world. Why? Why is Dennis Barlow in The Loved One enthralled by Whispering Glades? Part of the answer is obvious: once Waugh renders the primitive and the modern indistinguishable, he has effectively deflated any claims the twentieth century may make for its superior achievements, whether cultural or technical. But more than this there is Waugh's concept of the primitive sensibility which he thinks has come to characterize our age. In Work Suspended Waugh's autobiographical character John Plant clarifies this distinction between the savage and the truly civilized mind and the respective worlds they create for themselves as he

reflects on their very different experiences of mourning.

For the civilized man there are none of those swift transitions of joy and pain which possess the savage; words form slowly like pus about his hurts; there are no clean wounds for him; first a numbness, then a long festering, then a scar ever ready to re-open. Not until they have assumed the livery of the defence can his emotions pass through the lines; sometimes they come massed in a wooden horse, sometimes as single spies, but there is always a Fifth Column among the garrison to receive them. Sabotage behind the lines, a blind raised and lowered at a lighted window, a wire cut, a bolt loosened, a file disordered -- that is how the civilized man is undone.<sup>6</sup>

Notice that Waugh conceives of the savage mind as one that lives possessed by the moment while the civilized mind filters and slowly develops its emotional awareness through the conventional forms provided by language and tradition. The savage's emotional pain may be swift and intense but it is also fleeting because it lacks the formal articulation that would give it meaningful continuity with the past and future. Or so Waugh conceives the primitive mind, which from all indications he thinks of as living in the eternal now of Bergsonian becoming. Momentaneous and self-forgetful, the primitive in Waugh's view is totally immersed in present sensation to the exclusion of any historical perspective that might give a progressive direction to his life. In A Handful of Dust Tony asks his Indian guides when they will finish the boats they are building. The answer is always "just now" regardless of how many more days the work requires. They speak, Waugh implies, as they live, in the present tense. But then so do Waugh's English characters: Captain Grimes whose only principle is to live in the moment "careless

of consequence"; Colonel Blount whose life comes to resemble a series of film frames each incommunicably self-sufficient as he drifts self-forgetfully from one moment to the next; the corporate executives like Sir James Macrae and Lord Copper whose success depends upon their easy ability to forget today what they had decided yesterday; Mrs. Rattery whose vagueness about her past and the location of her sons seems more a matter of pathological negligence than cool sophistication; and, more explicitly, Ambrose Abercrombie who "live[s] existentially" never thinking of himself as anything but what "he was at that moment."

Primitivism for Waugh is not a matter of a particular time or place. It exists wherever and whenever mind allows itself to acquiesce in the "confused roaring" of immediate sensation and surrenders the resources of literacy and reason that enable it to rise above the sensate moment to achieve perspective. He is not anthropologically concerned with the primitive in Africa or Brazil; he is, however, philosophically preoccupied with what he takes to be the growth of primitivism at home. Primitivism meant abandoning the classical perspective based on a metaphysic of fixed essences in favor of engaging the fluid experience of reality's vital becoming. Like Wyndham Lewis, Waugh thought this alternative epistemology dangerously decadent.

In fact the first half of the twentieth century heard some very sophisticated arguments favoring what Waugh thought of as a return to primitivism. Some of these grew out of

readings and misreadings of Bergson but there were other sources. Perhaps John Maynard Keynes best described the set of assumptions that helped these arguments gain acceptance among influential thinkers and writers, most especially those in the Bloomsbury circle. Writing in 1938 Keynes recalled how he and the other members of the Bloomsbury set came under the influence of G. E. Moore's Principia Ethica which, as they understood it, taught that

Nothing mattered except states of mind, our own and other people's of course, but chiefly our own. These states of mind were not associated with action or achievement or with consequences. They consisted in timeless, passionate states of contemplation and communion, largely unattached to 'before' and 'after'. Their value depended, in accordance with the principle of organic unity, on the state of affairs as a whole which could not be usefully analysed into parts. For example, the value of the state of mind of being in love did not depend merely on the nature of one's own emotions; but also on the worth of their object and on the reciprocity and nature of the object's emotions; but it did not depend, if I remember rightly, or did not depend much, on what happened, or how one felt about it, a year later . . . How did we know what states of mind were good? This was a matter of direct inspection, of direct unanalysable intuition about which it was useless and impossible to argue.

Keynes observes with the ironic humor that one reserves for the near-sightedness of one's own youth, that he and the others in his group conveniently disregarded the chapters of Moore's work that discussed practical morality. Although they were surely unlike Waugh's rascal Captain Grimes in every other respect, they shared with him the desire to go their own way "careless of consequence."

We were living in the specious present, nor had begun to play the games of consequences. . . . We entirely repudiated a personal liability on us to obey general

rules. We claimed the right to judge every individual case on its merits, and the wisdom, experience and self-control to do so successfully. This was a very important part of our faith, violently and aggressively held, and for the outer world it was our most obvious and dangerous characteristic. We repudiated entirely customary morals, conventions and traditional wisdom. We were, that is to say, in the strict sense of the term, immoralists. . . . In short, we repudiated all versions of the doctrine of original sin, of there being insane and irrational springs of wickedness in most men. We were not aware that civilization was a thin and precarious crust erected by the personality and the will of a very few, and only maintained by rules and conventions skilfully put across and guilefully preserved. We had no respect for traditional wisdom or the restraints of custom. We lacked reverence, as [D.H.] Lawrence observed -- and as Ludwig [Wittgenstein] also used to say -- for everything and everyone. It did not occur to us to respect the extraordinary accomplishment of our predecessors in the ordering of life (as it now seems to me to have been) or the elaborate framework which they had devised to protect this order.

In contrast to Keynes's Bloomsbury Waugh seems always and primarily to have been aware of civilization's precarious state. Indeed his keen awareness of its vulnerability may have been a function of his attraction to and participation in the life of passionate moments to which the Bloomsburians theoretically aspired. Certainly Waugh was no stranger to impulsive behavior. He caroused relentlessly and unashamedly and rarely forbade himself the luxury of outrage. In order to squelch charges of homosexuality levelled against his Oxford undergraduate club funded by Lloyd George, he accosted one of the statesman's representatives and assured him that his colleagues nearly to a man had on sight of an attractive woman a "complete orgasm."<sup>8</sup> During the war he was a man in his forties with a wife and children at home, yet he was known to refuse shelter and walk recklessly about in the

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open bombing raids. No, Waugh had a lively taste for living in the moment. There is no mistaking his fondness for many of his characters who regularly abandon themselves to impulse. Whatever his neurotic problems, Waugh was wise and whole enough to understand la nostalgie pour la boue, the periodic need to throw off the trammels of civilized decorum. What he objected to was the modern disposition to justify impulsive behavior on grounds of principle. When devotion to "states of mind" in "the specious present" without thought to consequences is regarded as a principle of conduct rather than a lapse from decorum, he thought the behavior that could be expected to follow will necessarily be subversive to civilization and any genuine conception of the self as a responsible agent living in historical continuity with the past and the future.

Brenda Last is Waugh's clearest example of the consequences of trying to live as if there were no consequences. While hardly a Bloomsbury intellectual, she is portrayed as one who has inherited the self-absorbed attitude described by Keynes and we are made to feel that she is barbarously determined to let nothing get in the way of her desire for intense experience, not even the death of her son. Bored with her marriage, she enters into a pointless affair with a dull young man. Like John Plant's description of the savage, she allows herself to be possessed by the whim of the moment. Having appropriated a lover, she manages to cajole her culpably innocent husband into letting her rent a one-

room flat in the city on the pretext of needing a place to stay while taking a course in economics. The flat enables her to conduct her liaison with relative ease and it soon becomes the center of her life. During one of her extended visits to London, her son, John Andrew, dies in a riding accident. Brenda takes this occasion to break with Tony. She correctly anticipates that without offspring their marriage is pointless and it is this pointlessness that Brenda chooses decisively, eagerly. Pointlessness suits Brenda; it justifies her behavior. In a world without purpose, pursuit of the intense moment, the vivid "state of mind," is not merely permissible, it is almost a moral obligation owed to the only authority that can possibly count: the authority of the self and its immediate desires.

When Brenda first makes veiled reference to her intended departure, Tony tries to replenish her hope in the future by naively suggesting that though their loss is tragic they can look forward to children yet to come: "We're both young. Of course we can never forget John. He'll always be our eldest son but . . ." Brenda, however, will not hear of a future of any kind especially one with more children: "Don't go on, Tony, please don't go on." She will have nothing to do with going on. To go on means to live responsibly, sustaining the continuity of past, present and future. But Brenda has elected to live in the shameless now of her immediate feelings unburdened by the dreary weight of before and afters. It is her emotions that count, nothing

else. With its anonymous, cool efficiency, her one-room, chrome-plated London flat houses the careless transience of the momentaneous life to which she aspires. She is so obsessed with "the specious present" of her emotional life that she cannot even respond to her son's death. When Tony's friend, Jock, first tells her of John Andrew's accident, she confuses her son's given name with her lover's, John Beaver. After Jock explains further, she realizes her mistake

She frowned, not at once taking in what he was saying. "John . . . John Andrew . . . I . . . Oh thank God . . ." Then she burst into tears.

She wept helplessly, turning round in the chair and pressing her forehead against its gilt back.

The chair's gilt back not only suggests Brenda's feeble attempt to cover up the enormity of her unspeakable gratitude, founded, as it is, upon the emotional betrayal of her son, it also points to the superficial nature of the life she has chosen to lead. She need not mourn John Andrew unduly. He belonged to Tony's world; he was the offspring who was to carry the family tradition from the past into the future. Wanting none of this, Brenda leaves Tony the evening following their son's funeral to attend a party with her lover. She cannot wait to declare her intensified feeling for him although to do so means she must figuratively step on her son's grave. "Until Wednesday, when I thought something had happened to you, I had no idea that I loved you." Wednesday was the day Brenda was told of her son's death. Pursuing the illusory satisfactions of a cheap story-book romance, she casually abandons both her past and her future. The

shabbiness of her dereliction is only surpassed by the insufferably boorish exchange that follows. In response to her solemn protestation of love, Beaver replies, "Well you've said it often enough." But this does not deter Brenda. "'I'm going to make you understand,' said Brenda. 'You clod.'" Of course they are both little better than clods; they have slipped into the amorphous mud of their emotional whims where they are content to abandon the moral burdens of a civilized consciousness and exist fecklessly in the immediacy of the passing moment. Brenda and Beaver recall the thoughtless, protean Captain Grimes: they go their way "careless of consequence." But Grimes is a charming figure of farce; set in a generally realistic story, Brenda and Beaver are neither charming nor amusing. Rather they are barbarously irresponsible. And they do not have even the excuse of a grand passion for their conduct; theirs is the most remarkably tepid of affairs.

In its closing A Handful of Dust uses a more explicit juxtaposition of the savage and civilized to portray the twentieth century's abdication of historical responsibility. This abdication results in the expulsion of the novel's characters from what Keynes referred to as "the game of consequences" into a form of primitive timelessness in which the mind surrenders itself to the oblivion of the present moment. Lost and delirious, Tony wanders through the Brazilian jungle tormented by hallucinatory visions in which England and the wilderness fuse indistinguishably. A vision

of Brenda appears to him wearing the soiled cotton gown indigenous to the women of the Indian tribe that had been guiding him through the jungle. The illusory Brenda reminds Tony that he must attend the regular Wednesday County Council meeting at Hetton. When Tony objects that it is not Wednesday, Brenda and the other characters who inhabit his delirium assure him repeatedly that "time is different in Brazil." England and the jungle have become so identified that the obstacle of distance does not even occur to Tony.

When we last see Tony, he has just discovered that his watch has been stolen as he lay two days in a drugged sleep induced by a preparation that had been urged upon him as a ceremonial Indian drink by his host and captor, Mr. Todd, who wants to keep Tony in his uncharted village so that he will have someone to read and reread the complete works of Dickens to him. Mr. Todd has given the watch to a search party while Tony slept out of sight. It will be used as evidence of Tony's death for anyone still concerned with his fate. With his official death accomplished, Tony wakes to the realization that he is trapped in one of the barbarous borderlands of the twentieth century where an illiterate half-caste can indulge a sentimental attachment to Dickens ("there are passages . . . I can never hear without the temptation to weep," Mr. Todd informs Tony) and a civilized young woman can insulate herself from her maternal feelings and responsibilities with the impenetrable armor of a chrom-

ium plated life-style.

With Tony's fate established, the scene shifts abruptly to Hetton Abbey in England where we learn

everything was early that year for it had been a mild winter. High overhead among its gargoyles and crockets the clock [at Hetton] chimed for the hour and solemnly struck fourteen. It was half past eight. The clock had been irregular lately.

The irregular clock at Hetton solemnly striking fourteen is of a piece with Tony's missing watch and the hallucinatory refrain that had assaulted him in the wilderness, "time is different in Brazil." Time is different everywhere. Tony and what he represents have been expelled from historical time just as decisively as the characters who have deliberately chosen to turn their backs on history. He and Hetton Abbey exist only as badly weathered artifacts of an earlier age that believed in its mission, its consequence and destiny. Tony's brother-in-law, an amateur archeologist, settles the matter when he remarks that he once "couldn't be interested in anything later than the Sumerian age" but now he finds "even the Christian era full of significance." From the modernist point of view, which Waugh implicitly satirizes, Western Europe is just one more culture; its fate is no more important than that of any other. It does not have a unique destiny but rather moves through the expected cyclical pattern of rise and fall. Like any other culture that has completed its cycle, Western civilization offers the archacologist an interesting dig but tells us little more about man than that his aspirations are finally futile.

And so Tony is deprived of his illusion that he has ever exerted temporal consequence. He discovers he had been living in a dream of historical destiny. There is no history for him any longer. His life will not form a link in the continuous development of a purposeful future; he will have no heirs to his estate. Doomed to the Sisyphean task of reading the entire works of Dickens over and over again to his Brazilian captor, Tony exemplifies all those decent, well-meaning people who avoid taking a real stand vis-à-vis the modern world. Tony had affected the forms of the Victorian gentleman without troubling himself to examine the assumptions upon which these forms are based. When Mr. Todd asks him if he believes in God, Tony replies, "I suppose so. I've never really thought about it much." Indeed, while at Hetton he attended church regularly but only as a matter of form. The point here is not so much whether he believed or not, but rather that he did not come to terms with the issue of belief that underlies the Victorian code to which he subscribes.

Having attempted to escape the present moment by retreating to a comforting illusion of what nineteenth century life was supposed to be, Tony finds himself lifted out of history. His grimly appropriate fate is to be locked in a repetitive circle of Dickensian grotesquery that mocks the make-believe world he had tried to establish for himself at Hetton Abbey.

## Chapter VIII - Notes

- 1 Alvin B. Kernan, "The Wall and the Jungle: The Early  
Novels of Evelyn Waugh," Yale Review 53 (Winter, 1963),  
pp. 199-202.
- 2 Ninety-Two Days (London, 1934), this quotation is taken  
from the excerpt published in When the Going Was Good  
(London, 1946; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951),  
p. 187.
- 3 When the Going Was Good, p. 8.
- 4 The Diaries, p. 791.
- 5 The Diaries, p. 787.
- 6 Work Suspended, pp. 157-58.
- 7 John Maynard Keynes, "My Early Beliefs," in Two Memoirs  
(New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1949), pp. 83-84, 95-100.
- 8 Claud Cockburn, "Evelyn Waugh's Lost Rabbit," The  
Atlantic Monthly, December 1973, p. 57.
- 9 Sykes, p. 267.

## Chapter IX

## "The Wisdom of the Eye"

At the close of A Handful of Dust we find that one of the younger inheritors of Tony Last's estate has carelessly left her two-stroke motorcycle in front of the entrance to Hetton Abbey. This observed detail seems innocent enough until we recall that it was the backfiring of a motorcycle that precipitated the accident which killed John Andrew, Tony's son. Far from innocent, the image of the motorcycle is placed where it is as a metaphor of everything that has gone wrong with the world in which Tony finds himself. As a closer examination of the circumstances of John Andrew's accident will demonstrate, the motorcycle's juxtaposition with the spurious Gothic architecture of Hetton Abbey presides over the novel as an emblem of futility.

Having learned to handle his new pony with a fair degree of competence, John Andrew is allowed to ride out with the adults to a traditional fox hunt. Among the members of the hunting party there is a Miss Ripon who, at her father's insistence, has mounted an unruly horse she does not feel confident of controlling. Her father wants to sell the horse

and thinks the fox hunt a good opportunity to display the animal. But, as the villagers observe, it is "a beast of a horse to ride" and "Miss Ripon had no business out on any horse." Another member of the party has come out on her two-stroke motorcycle. As they proceed along the road, they encounter a country bus. Miss Ripon's horse begins to shy but she keeps it under control until the motor bike, running in neutral gear to let her pass, suddenly backfires. The sound thoroughly panics Miss Ripon's horse. In its scramble to get away from the motorized vehicles, the horse knocks John from his own mount and kicks him in the head. The boy dies instantly. In the aftermath everyone agrees that "it was nobody's fault; it just happened." This absolving formula is repeated four times within as many pages thereby bringing special attention to itself. In one way it is just the simple truth: clearly no one intended John Andrew's death. In another way, however, we are made to feel that the characters who resort to his formula have an unwitting complicity with the forces that kill Tony's son and, in so doing, destroy the young father's dream of purposeful future. What are these forces so unquestioningly accepted that they can kill John Andrew with impunity? They are implied by the circumstances of the accident: the meeting of commercial interest (Mr. Ripon's insistence that his horse be displayed as a saleable commodity) and modern technology (the motorcycle and the bus.) The combined forces of the twentieth century abruptly and

irrevocably deprive Tony of his Victorian idyll. Mechanized speed and the manipulation of goods purely for profit -- neither is conducive to a code of gentlemanly values. Tony, the last gentleman as his surname suggests, fails to realize that he lives in a society that not only tolerates but encourages an ethos of immediate gratification which, in practical terms, translates as economic ruthlessness exacerbated by a carelessly managed technology. The novel's conclusion is unmistakable on this point. With Tony thought dead in Brazil, his ancestral estate has been taken over by the formerly impoverished branch of the Last family who have turned matters to account by scientifically breeding silver foxes in wire cages in preparation for market. So much for fox hunting, so much for tradition. (Waugh had already used caged foxes to satirize the decay of tradition in Decline and Fall in which he described the bumptious excesses of the Bollinger Club. "There is tradition behind the Bollinger; it numbers reigning kings among its past members. At the last dinner, three years ago, a fox had been brought in a cage and stoned to death with champagne bottles!") The twentieth century is expressed by backfiring motorcycles and caged foxes, explosive technology and exploitative commerce. These are the forces that destroy ancestral houses in order to make room for blocks of characterless on-and-two-room flats. The results are at once absolutely modern and perfectly primitive. In Brideshead Revisited Charles Ryder is informed that Anchorage House will be taken

down to be replaced by a building with "shops underneath and two-roomed flats above." Having just returned from his expedition in the Brazilian wilderness, he sees the demolition of traditional architecture in favor of contemporary efficiency housing as "just another jungle moving in."

In order to emphasize its dual nature as a talisman of careless savagery and reckless modernity, Waugh anticipates the closing image of the motorcycle in A Handful of Dust with another one that is set in the jungles of Brazil. At one point in his fevered wanderings through the wilderness, Tony comes to believe he is in the midst of a group of bicyclists wheeling around him. This scene echoes all those others in which a still consciousness finds itself helplessly caught in the middle of swirling confusion. There seems to be only one component missing to complete this archetypal scene: noise. Tony has become used to associating meaningless noise with the break down of order; earlier, in London, he had perceived the sense of futility closing in on him as an "all-encompassing chaos that shriek[s] about his ears." Conditioned as he is, he cannot resist advising the imaginary cyclists to get motor bikes because, as he explains, they are "much faster and noisier." For Waugh's purposes the motorcycle is an especially apt metaphor because it combines the acoustic primitivism of Decline and Fall's "confused roaring" with the technological speed of Silenus's pointlessly spinning wheel. Like the race cars in Vile Bodies, its barbarously vulgar noise is unredeemed by any

sense of civilized gain; its wheeling course suggests the circular futility of contemporary life that has lost its historical vision in the heat of immediate experience. Instead of the poised perspective of a linear tradition unfolding from an intelligible past into a purposeful future, contemporary life has devolved into a repetitive and meaningless circuit of sensations, a circuit that carries a message no more articulate than a roaring engine. Clearly, Waugh thought that this immersion in the present moment at the expense of the historical imagination a regression to a primitive state of mind. The scene of satire for Waugh is almost always filled with noise. His characters are routinely enveloped by one senseless uproar or another. Decline and Fall opens and closes with the "confused roaring" of "the English county families baying for broken glass." The central image of Vile Bodies is a wild auto race with engines whining at a pitch that drowns all possibility of intelligible conversation. And the last sentence of this novel tells of the acoustic circuit that encompasses the world of Waugh's satires: "And presently, like a circling typhoon, the sounds of battle began to return." The climax of Black Mischief occurs against the background of an African feast filled with tribal sounds: "round and round circled the dancers . . . tireless hands drumming out the rhythm; glistening backs heaving and shivering in the shadows." It is at this moment immersed in the aboriginal pulse beat that Basil Seal discovers he has inadvertently taken part in a

cannibal meal, the main course composed of the remains of his lover. In The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold the hallucinations that close in upon Pinfold taking over his life are always aural, never visual and that is precisely why he cannot deal with them. Guy Crouchback in The Sword of Honour trilogy considers the loud popular music played on the wireless by the enlisted men an assault on his peace of mind. In Waugh's fiction the civilized sensibility is constantly under attack by the incessant cacaphony of the modern world.

Waugh's treatment of auditory space was more than a fictional conceit. He fundamentally distrusted the world of the ear. His disdain for the sense of hearing was so exaggerated that in his diaries he wrote of deafness as a blessing.

The Church, in our last agony, anoints the organs of sense, sealing the ears against the assaults of sound. But nature, in God's Providence, does this long before. One has heard all the world has to say, and wants no more of it.<sup>1</sup>

Of all the senses the ear is most disconcerting to those like Waugh who are determined to keep the world at a distance. One can avert the eyes from what one does not want to see. To a limited degree, touch, taste and smell can be held isolate from undesirable contact. But the ear can neither be closed nor averted. As a sense organ the ear exists defenseless to its aural surrounding. It is the most passive of the senses, least able to exert control over its circumstances or to discriminate among its perceptions. Whatever

defensive measures one puts up, the world and its madness can always penetrate the self's fortress through the unguarded portals of the ears. Unless, of course, one has lost his sense of hearing. This is why Waugh did not merely celebrate his deafness, he used it as a weapon. Claude Cockburn records a particularly apt anecdote in this regard. It concerns Waugh's mischievous use of the out-sized ear trumpet he affected in his later years.

His ostentatious, self-dramatizing rejection of reality required, in middle life, an equally ostentatious symbol. He found it in the form of an enormous ear trumpet. He must, I suppose, have had it specially custom-built. For although in shape and general design it resembled the ear trumpets depicted in Victorian cartoons. . . it seemed larger than any ear trumpet anyone had ever used before. . . . The function of the ear trumpet was not simply to assist hearing. On the contrary, it was to emphasize and portray, in an unmistakable physical manner, the laborious difficulty its owner had in understanding any communication the modern world might be seeking to make to him.

It was both an advertisement of his personal attitude, a form of rebuke, and a weapon. I once saw it thus used, inflicting terrible wounds. . . .

He had come to London to attend some very high-toned literary lunch or dinner. The guest of honor and principal speaker was some pompous statesman, a member, I think, of the Cabinet, with unjustified pretensions as a scholar and writer. It was understood that he was going to use this feast as the vehicle or sounding board for a major pronouncement on the future of civilization or something of that kind. . . .

The chairman spoke briefly, and the trumpet seemed to be devouring his words. Then the guest of honor rose to speak, with all the confidence of a man who had won much acclaim for wit, wisdom, and polished oratory. The receiving end of the trumpet was trained upon him. He had been speaking for perhaps a minute when Evelyn was seen to be unscrewing the thing from his head. He removed it from his ear, placed its great bulk on the tablecloth in front of him, and sat gazing intently at his plate. The guest of honor could have dealt easily with some rude heckler. But the gesture with the trumpet utterly dismayed and discomfited him. He stared at the contraption with incredulity. He paused and slightly stammered. Probably for the first time in decades of

public speaking, he lost the thread of his discourse. His pronouncement to the nation rambled almost incoherently. The reporters present stopped taking notes. He sat down after speaking for less than half the time allotted to him. As he did so, Evelyn picked up the trumpet and began adjusting it once more to the listening position.<sup>2</sup>

And so, after a fashion, Waugh triumphed over the confused roaring.

Even as a young man he had little use for the world of the ear. Both Harold Acton and Christopher Sykes make it a special point of their respective accounts that for all his absorption in the esthetics of the eye, he had no parallel appreciation of music. Acton went so far as to write that this was the "one rift in our lute: he has no ear for music and can barely tell one tune from another."<sup>3</sup>

When Waugh imagines his most ghastly nightmare it is one in which the eye is held hostage, actually hostage, to the ear: a literate civilized man finds himself trapped in a pre-literate tribal setting because he can use his eyes to read aloud the works of Dickens that his captor must hear to appreciate. Tony Last's fate is a model of what Waugh fears is happening in the contemporary world: the fine discriminations of a literate, visual culture are in the process of being submerged by the featureless senseless life of a semi-literate, even illiterate, aural culture filled with the confused roaring of a technologically dependent people heedless of their origins in the generations that have preceded them.

I have been using Marshall McLuhan's distinction

between tribal and individual man because it best explains the significance of Tony Last's entrapment at the close of A Handful of Dust. McLuhan distinguishes between the literate and preliterate by demonstrating the differences in their modes of perception of both the world and themselves. The literate man tends to be visual, individualistic and detached while the preliterate is aural, communal and involved. The reasons for these differences are not hard to isolate. Literate man has been conditioned by his typographical environment to rely upon his eyes for the information that he reads silently and alone. His perception of his surroundings is subliminally shaped by the phonetic alphabet arranged linearly across the page with typographical uniformity. The easily manipulable code of this alphabet with which he represents reality suggests that the elements of the entire external world should also be as pliable to his will. McLuhan points out that this sense of technological mastery over the world's elements does not seem to exist among literate cultures that have developed ideographical or hieroglyphic alphabets in which signs originate with the attempt to visually represent their referents. In this situation men are more likely to feel a need to adapt themselves, as they do their signs, to the natural world about them. Western civilization, on the other hand, has grown up with a phonetic alphabet built on an assortment of arbitrary sounds that can be arranged and rearranged into word signs whose connection with the external world is generally a matter of consensual usage. Because of

its essentially arbitrary and potentially autotelic nature, this coding scheme encourages men to expect the outer world to fit into their systems rather than the other way round. McLuhan further argues that the linear uniformity of mechanical typography becomes the unconscious model of literate man's perception of space as a neutral continuously extended field in which every effect can be understood to logically follow its antecedent cause. The structural pattern of the printed page becomes the grid through which all else is perceived. The world opens to him as a series of controlled perspectives as he directs his vision from one specific point of view to another. The objects of this world, like print on a page, can be reassembled to suit his purposes. For the literate man the world is clearly an object out there to be perceived, evaluated and altered by himself as a detached, directorial subject. This emphasis on the separation of subject and object can create a strong sense of individuality. It can also induce feelings of alienation and impotence when, despite typographically conditioned expectations, the external world stubbornly resists human designs.

McLuhan's preliterate man, on the other hand, lives in a world of the ear. Because he must listen to his tribal community for the information he needs to survive. he tends to have a less highly developed sense of individuality; he is thoroughly immersed in the tribal group. McLuhan argues that the preliterate does not have the technological habit

of mind. Because his symbolic codes tend to echo or resemble the things they represent, he is conditioned to adapt himself to the natural world by various homoeopathic and totemic strategies unlike his literate counterpart who tends to expect nature to bend to purely human designs. In the preliterate world the ear is at least as important as the eye, if not more so. When one lives in or close to wilderness conditions where danger is more likely to be heard before it is seen, one's aural sensitivity will be necessarily more acute than that of a person living in a technologically domesticated environment. Consequently, space for preliterate man is not a series of indefinitely extensible perspectives into a continuously neutral field. Space is alive, vibrant, constantly surrounding and absorbing him with its ceaseless pulse of aural messages over which he has little control. Because he can neither shut off nor direct his aural world, the preliterate experiences his surroundings and himself as a field of interpenetration. He does not make the sharp distinction between subject and object common to literate, visual cultures. Relying on his ear for his information and safety, preliterate man is necessarily immersed in his experience to a degree that severely limits his capacity for the objective detachment required for analytical understanding and technological control of his environment.

McLuhan makes this comparison of aural and visual cultures in order to approach what he thinks is a change in

contemporary consciousness. His point is that in superseding the mechanical technology of the modern industrial world, electronic technology has created an all-encompassing information environment that is much closer to the preliterate than the literate sense of the world. The multiple sources of essential and peripheral information -- many of them transmitted aurally -- encircle contemporary man in an elaborate web that interconnects him with everyone else in what McLuhan calls the global village. McLuhan does not purport to evaluate this situation; he claims merely to describe it and tries to interpret what it means for man's sense of himself.<sup>4</sup>

The validity of McLuhan's speculations is not at question here. What is important is that the shift in cultural sensibility he describes is the same one Waugh portrays in his fiction long before either The Gutenberg Galaxy or Understanding Media. Unlike McLuhan, however, Waugh did evaluate the change. He clearly considered regressive what McLuhan would later describe as the return to auditory space. The world generated by this return to a primitive mode of consciousness encourages total immersion in immediate sensations. This Waugh felt could only lead to a sense of futility. Without the detachment necessary to rise above the sensate moment one is enmeshed in daily experiences without the leverage necessary to put them into any clear perspective. This is why so many of Waugh's novels take the standard Candide plot and give it a special twist by having

the innocent protagonist fall from an isolated, silent vantage point into the roaring confusion of the present moment. From Decline and Fall Waugh portrays the age's problem in terms of a fall from clear perspective into muddled sensation. The possibility of a purposeful vision depends upon having the will to detach, to abstract oneself from the immediate moment. This cannot be accomplished in the world of the ear where the borders between the self and its surroundings are indistinct. It is in the world of the eye that the individual can maintain the distance between subject and object necessary to a focused perspective.

The apprehension present in all Waugh's writing is that the contemporary world has abandoned the achievement of the traditional essentialist epistemology in favor of the confused roaring of acoustic primitivism in which the individual is lost in the communal mass. His work reports a collective lapse into an aboriginally amorphous state of inarticulate consciousness. Other writers in this century have sought redemption by attempting to close the breach between subject and object in order to recreate -- if only momentarily within the boundaries of their art -- the prelapsarian harmony celebrated by Bergson and portrayed by Proust, Woolf, and Joyce among others. For Waugh, however, the world is irretrievably fallen. There is no redemptive sustenance to be drawn from a rapprochement of subject and object. In fact, his blessed moments, when they occur, are almost always characterized by silent detachment. In

Decline and Fall Paul Pennyfeather finds the four weeks of solitary confinement he spends at Blackstone Gaol "among the happiest of [his] life." Of course, this is a satiric joke at the expense of the so-called real world. There are other moments, however, in which Waugh more seriously assesses the rewards of subjective isolation. There are three instances that are especially telling in this regard. The first comes from "The Balance", the second from The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold, and the third from his last novel Unconditional Surrender.

Adam Doure, the protagonist of "The Balance" recalls an incident from his seventh year in which he climbed to the top of some precariously balanced nursery furniture only to have it collapse beneath him precipitating a startling and painful fall to the floor.

Adam had been too well brought up to remember very much of his life in the days before he went to his private school, but this incident survived in his memory with a clearness, which increased as he became farther removed from it, as the first occasion on which he became conscious of ill as a subjective entity. His life up till this time had been so much bounded with warnings of danger that it seemed for a moment inconceivable that he could so easily have broken through into the realm of positive bodily harm. Indeed, so incompatible did it seem with all previous experience that it was some appreciable time before he could convince himself of the continuity of his existence; but for the wealth of Hebraic and mediaeval imagery with which the idea of life outside the body had become symbolized, he could in that moment easily have believed in his own bodily extinction and the unreality of all the sensible objects about him. Later he learned to regard these periods between his fall and the dismayed advent of help from below, as the first promptings towards that struggle for detachment in which he had not, without almost frantic endeavour, finally acknowledged defeat in the bedroom of the Oxford hotel.

At one point in The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold, Pinfold recalls

his wartime parachute training.

Once during the war he had gone on a parachute course which had ended ignominiously with his breaking a leg in his first drop, but he treasured as the most serene and exalted experience of his life the moment of liberation when he regained consciousness after the shock of the slipstream. A quarter of a minute before he had crouched over the open manhole in the floor of the machine, in dusk and deafening noise, trussed in harness, crowded by apprehensive fellow-tyros. Then the dispatching officer had signalled; down he had plunged into a moment of night, to come to himself in a silent sunlit heaven, gently supported by what had seemed irksome bonds, absolutely isolated. There were other parachutes all round him holding other swaying bodies; there was an instructor on the ground bawling advice through a loudspeaker; but Mr. Pinfold felt himself free of all human communication, the sole inhabitant of a private, delicious universe. The rapture was brief. Almost at once he knew he was not floating but falling; the field leaped up at him; a few seconds later he was lying on grass, entangled in cords, being shouted at, breathless, bruised, with a sharp pain in the shin. But in that moment of solitude prosaic, earthbound Mr. Pinfold had been one with hashish-eaters and Corybantes and Californian gurus, high on the back-stairs of mysticism.

Then, in 1961, the material that had gone into the making of Gilbert Pinfold's parachute jump reappears in Unconditional Surrender. Guy Crouchback, the protagonist of Waugh's last novel, makes his first and last parachute jump in the following passage.

The harness was more uncomfortable than it had seemed on the ground. They sat bowed and cramped, in twilight, noise, and the smell of petrol. At length the despatching officer and his sergeant opened the man-hole. 'Coming into the target area,' he warned. 'First pair ready.' . . .

Guy jumped. For a second, as the rush of air hit him, he lost consciousness. Then he came to himself, his senses purged of the noise and smell and throb of the machine. The hazy November sun enveloped him in golden light. His solitude was absolute.

He experienced rapture, something as near as his earthbound soul could reach to a foretaste of paradise, locum refrigerii, lucis et pacis. The aeroplane seemed as far distant as will, at the moment of death, the spinning earth. As though he had cast the constraining bonds of flesh and muscle and nerve, he found himself

floating free; the harness that had so irked him in the narrow, dusky, resounding carriage now almost imperceptibly supported him. He was a free spirit in an element as fresh as on the day of its creation.

All too soon the moment of ecstasy ceased.

Guy lands too heavily and breaks his leg.

There is a pattern common to these passages. In each a character falls through space in order to "come to himself" in a "moment of liberation" that detaches him from the "crowded" world of "deafening noise" filled with the "smell and throb of the machine." In this moment, "his senses purged" so that he recognizes the "unreality of sensible objects about him," his "struggle for detachment" leads him into "a private delicious universe" where he can be "absolutely isolated" in a "silent sunlit heaven" that "envelop[s] him in golden light." Then the moment passes and the sensible world rushes in upon him once more as he feels the pain of returning to earth. Salvation for Waugh meant escape from the complexities of the sensible world into the uncluttered, changeless realm of the mind finally freed from the gravity of the body. To be free one must escape the treachery of the physical world. Short of that, the pain, the noise, and the confusion always return.

The extreme dualism of Waugh's vision insists upon detachment as the way to salvation. This puts him at odds with other major writers of the twentieth century. Whereas other modernists try to awake from the nightmare of Western civilization's emphasis on the intellectual discriminations that divide the conceptualizing mind from the feeling self,

Waugh stands squarely and unashamedly for the Western essentialist tradition that distinguishes between the unreliable world of the senses and the incorruptible region of pure ideas, between sensation and perception, between the random flow of material existence and the purposefully organizing power of mind.

## Chapter IX. - Notes

- 1 The Diaries, p. 788.
- 2 Cockburn, p. 59.
- 3 Sykes, p. 106; Acton, p. 12.
- 4 McLuhan, pp. 22-55, 77-88.
- 5 "The Balance," p. 287.

## Chapter X

Fanatical Existence vs. Aesthetic Education

This study began by asserting that Waugh resisted what he thought to be the fashionable relativism that characterized contemporary literature and philosophy, that he created fiction that constituted an alternative to the modernist mainstream. As we have seen, he achieved his aim by using abstract art and film to parody what had become the standard themes of modernism in the first decades of the twentieth century. The point of his early novels was to illustrate the bankruptcy of a world view that had for its primary values subjective sincerity and passionate states of mind. For all their humor, these works invariably return to the sense of overriding futility that Waugh felt to be the condition of a society without the fixed coordinates which have traditionally shaped the development of the self. In his later fiction, however, Waugh attempted to break this circle of futility with realistic novels that offered some plausible alternatives to the bleakly purposeless modern world.

These works -- the unfinished Work Suspended, Brideshead Revisited, Helena, and The Sword of Honour -- are, of course, quite different from his satires, yet they share with these the same philosophical assumptions. They continue in their own way Waugh's resistance to conventional modernist pieties concerning the nature and function of art. To illustrate this point, we need only compare a representative passage from a writer like Virginia Woolf with one from Waugh. I have chosen the particular passages presented below for two reasons: 1) they seem to me to typify each writer's manner, and 2) they display these respective manners as applied to similar subjects -- each excerpt describes the interior of a house. The first passage is taken from Woolf's The Waves; the second, from Waugh's Brideshead Revisited.

The sun fell in sharp wedges inside the room. Whatever the light touched became dowered with a fanatical existence. A plate was like a white lake. A knife looked like a dagger of ice. Suddenly tumblers revealed themselves upheld by streaks of light. Tables and chairs rose to the surface as if they had been sunk under water and rose, filmed with red, orange, purple like the bloom on the skin of ripe fruit. The veins of the glaze of the china, the grain of the wood, the fibres of the matting became more and more finely engraved. Everything was without shadow. A jar was so green that the eye seemed sucked up through a funnel by its intensity and stuck to it like a limpet.<sup>1</sup>

It was an aesthetic education to live within those walls, to wander from room to room, from the Soanesque library to the Chinese drawing-room, adazzle with gilt pagodas and nodding mandarins, painted paper and Chippendale fret-work, from the Pompeian parlour to the great tapestry-hung hall which stood unchanged, as it had been designed two hundred fifty years before; to sit, hour after hour, in the pillared shade looking out on the terrace. . . .

The passage taken from The Waves exemplifies conventional modernism's attempt to raise ordinary experience to an occasion of extraordinary revelation. Woolf clearly wants us to see this room stripped of any preconceptions, as though tableware, chairs and tables had never existed before. Her language seeks to defamiliarize the setting by deliberately moving away from the habitual assumptions we have acquired over time and with which we unconsciously adjust our raw, unstructured sense experience so that what this experience reports of our external environment will fit our learned sense of how the world is supposed to be. After shifting us from the context we expect when dealing with rooms and their contents, Woolf attempts to recreate a moment of pure unconditioned sensation in which the naive eye -- as though untutored by previous experience of the physical world -- sees sunlight that has the solidity of wedges and streaks of light that can support tumblers. She wants us not just to see this room, but to feel its "fanatical existence" in this particular moment. Notice there is not one reference to either the style or the period of the furniture. She makes no attempt to place this room in its historical context. In fact, the language enforces the sense of world without duration at all. The tables and chairs have just risen to the surface as if from under water and now shimmer iridescently, newborn, in the glancing sunlight. Everything has just arrived and continues to pulse with the process of its birth: the sun has just fallen into the room; tumblers

"suddenly" reveal themselves; the wood grain and matting fibres are becoming "more and more finely engraved." What this room was before and what it will be afterward are for this moment irrelevant questions. There is only the all-consuming immediacy of the room itself. Woolf uses her language in an attempt to transform daily reality into a moment of salvation by creating a sensory experience so intense that it leaves no interval between perceiving subject and perceived object.

In his essay on G. E. Moore's influence on the Bloomsbury circle, John Maynard Keynes tells us that such experiences constituted for his friends what really mattered in life. These were the occasions for cultivating "timeless, passionate states of contemplation and communion, largely unattached to 'before' and 'after'." <sup>2</sup> In order to recreate this passionate state of mind, Woolf strives to fill the void between the perceiving self and the external world, reconnect mind with matter, and, in short, return to the edenic harmony between the individual and his environment. The result should ideally be a condition that precedes linguistic conceptualization and historical categories. As the eye, so captivated by the jar's intense green, becomes "stuck to it like a limpet," so subject and object become sealed in one of those timeless moments of blissful union that brings the desired peace of self-forgetfulness in which all seems suddenly, if inexplicably, right. This is what Bergson meant by durée, the unreflective experience in which

one feels oneself indisputably engaged with the very life of things and overcomes the alienation that exists intellectually between perceiver and perceived. The experience is intuitive rather than cognitive. One feels the truth of existence in the eternal now of becoming. It cannot be intellectually conceptualized and linguistically packaged for ready verbal communication to others. The artist, however, can attempt to recreate the conditions in which such an experience becomes available, even though he cannot rationally explain it. Obviously, neither the analytical nor the historical imagination is of any use here. Accordingly, neither enters into Woolf's description.

In contrast to Woolf's timeless room, Waugh's is thoroughly historical. He places each part, each object according to its style and period: the Soanesque library, the Chinese drawing room, the Chippendale fret-work, the Pompeian parlor. We are meant to see this suite of rooms through the categories of the historical imagination. However charming its immediate dazzle, it is, as Charles Ryder says of architecture elsewhere in the novel, more important in its duration beyond the moment of our perception. Its significance is in its continuity which we are invited to contemplate as Ryder has done "hour after hour, in the pillared shade looking out on the terrace." For architecture and art are not in Waugh's scheme the occasion for transcendence in which the beholder suddenly merges with his experience. Architecture is an "aesthetic education" in the

original sense of the word education: it leads one out of the darkness of self-absorption and subjectivity into a world of perspectives, perspectives dependent upon the discrete distance between the beholder and the beheld. Through these perspectives the individual attains a proportionate sense of his worth and his limits within the scheme of history. For Waugh there was no salvation to be had in this world through art or any other secular means. The modern return to a type of animistic union between mind and matter was, of course, anathema to him. This is why he insisted upon keeping clear the distinction between subject and object.

His resistance to the modern attempt to make art a substitute for religion is nowhere more apparent than in Brideshead Revisited. This resistance is not only evident in the novel's themes but also its style. While his earlier fiction is almost bare of figurative language, Brideshead Revisited is remarkable for its persistent, almost obsessive use of simile. The frequency and elaborate nature of these similes have led a number of critics to complain of the novel's inappropriately ornate style and express their disappointment that Waugh had given up the spare, direct prose that went so well with his ironic vision. But there is another way to look at this departure from the earlier style: in Brideshead Revisited the simile becomes the device with which Waugh opposes the assumptions that underlie conventional modernist writing. To illustrate, I have chosen

five of these similes using no particular principle of selection. They are listed below in the order they appear in the novel.

There is no candour in a story of early manhood which leaves out of account the home-sickness for nursery morality, the regrets and resolutions of amendment, the black hours which, like zero on the roulette table, turn up with roughly calculable regularity.

I knew him well in that mood of alertness and suspicion, like a deer suddenly lifting his head at the far notes of the hunt.

The subject was everywhere in the house like a fire deep in the hold of a ship, below the water-line, black and red in the darkness, coming to light in acrid wisps of smoke that curled up the ladders, crept between decks, oozed under hatches, hung in wreathes on the flats, billowed suddenly from the scuttles and air pipes.

Up, down and round the argument circled and swooped like a gull, now out to sea, out of sight, cloud-bound, among irrelevancies and repetitions, now right on the patch where the offal floated.

The indiscriminate chatter of praise all that crowded day had worked on me like a succession of advertisement hoardings on a long road, kilometre after kilometre between the poplars, commanding one to stay at some new hotel, so that when at the end of the drive, stiff and dusty, one arrives at the destination, it seems inevitable to turn into the yard under the name that had first bored, then angered one, and finally become an inseparable part of one's fatigue.

These selections constitute only a small sampling of the similes that appear throughout the novel. Notice that they tend to become more elaborate and extended as the novel progresses. Two questions arise: 1) why does Waugh return to the simile as his favored figure throughout this novel, and 2) why does he seem to be intent upon calling our attention to this esthetic decision by making these similes increasingly elabo-

rate? The answer to both questions lies, I think, in his reaction to the modernism of his predecessors.

To illustrate, let us compare Waugh's similes to Woolf's. In The Waves Woolf's figurative language does not point outward to the external world but rather inward to the subjective experience the external environment occasions. This is the "luminous halo," the "semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" of which she wrote it was "the task of the novelist to convey . . . with as little mixture of the alien and the external as possible."<sup>3</sup> In these comparisons the first terms, the objects that provoke simile and metaphor, are not nearly as important as the second terms -- the wedges of sunlight, the white lake, the dagger of ice. The point of this language is to appropriate externals in an ecstatic embrace of the imagination that cancels the distinction between the image and what it represents, between inner mind and outer reality.

Waugh's similes have the opposite effect. They never lead to any confusion between subject and object nor is there ever any doubt that the second term in these comparisons is subordinate to the first. However elaborately developed, the second term's purpose is always clearly illustrative. We are never in danger of fusing the two sides of the comparison in an instant of imaginative transcendence. Rather than transforming a familiar concrete object into some new and arresting sensation, the second term in these

comparisons is usually a visualization of a particular idea or process of a character's personal experience. The second term makes what is essentially private and unique, public and accessible. As we would never mistake a statue of a blindfolded, scale-carrying woman for justice itself, so, in the fifth simile above, would we never mistake the image of successive road-side advertising hoardings for the indiscriminate chatter of superficial praise that exhausts Charles Ryder.

Waugh's similes testify to his twin convictions that this is an irremediably fallen world and that the only way to make it bearable is to participate in the civilized endeavor to impose order on the "anarchic raw materials of life." He thinks of this endeavor as the ongoing cumulative effort of generations, the results of which can be best discerned in architecture which endures beyond the individual even as it shapes his life with the historical perspective it uniquely affords. This is why many of his similes are so elaborately constructed with an almost Homeric intricacy about them as they begin a comparison and then extend it through one permutation after another. (In the third simile above, for instance, a group of house guests anxiously avoid any open reference to the embarrassing alcoholism of their host's son only to find that the issue has become like a hidden fire in a ship's hold; the unspoken problem comes to light in acrid wisps of innuendo, creeps and oozes through conversational pauses and awkward silences, and then abruptly

billows when the pent-up pressure finds release in someone's exasperation.) Echoing the extended comparisons of the conventional epic, these similes are as traditional as they can be. They are of a piece with the classical attempt to make sense of things in a way that will be communicable not only to one's own generation but also to history. Typically Waugh's simile suggests the deliberation of architecture, his favored art; it holds the two poles of its comparison in plain view, discretely apart from one another, and invites detached contemplation of its poised artifice. Their verbal construction allows for the silent space between object and figure necessary for intellectual rather than intuitive apprehension. Beyond their illustrative and decorative functions, these similes speak of Waugh's belief in the civilizing power of the word that brings rational order into the confused roaring of our experience.

## Chapter X - Notes

- 1 Virginia Woolf, The Waves (1931; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 94.
- 2 Keynes, p. 83.
- 3 Woolf, Modern Fiction, p. 106.

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