

flattered his ego to feel privy to the domestic details of the aristocracy but perhaps the most significant element in his letters to Lady Mary is their persistent self-mockery: the half-serious presentation of himself as a loveless, down-at-heel adventurer running out of steam:

The evenings are v. dull as there is nowhere to go or to talk to [sic] except froggy soldiers & they don't talk to me much so I go most evenings & take my coffee in a brothel where I have formed an attachment to a young lady called Fatima. She is not at all Dutch in her ways. She is brown in colour and her face is tattooed all over with blue patterns v. pretty but does not play the piano beautifully, she has a gold tooth she is very proud of but as we can't talk each other's language there is not much to do in between rogering. I gave Fatima that milk ring you gave me, so now if you are angry I shant be able to send it back & be forgiven. I don't think F. thinks much of it as her taste runs to gold and silver.<sup>5</sup>

The milk ring story was a good touch. Here was Waugh in his old Madresfield identity: the 'Puck' of the household, the Basil Seal figure careless of others' feelings, property or gifts. Like Seal he is self-consciously 'naughty' and seeks, in nursery language, the forgiveness of the stern sister, the sanctuary of the nursery chair.

No playful sexual innuendo found its way into his letters to Katharine Asquith. To her he spoke not of reading Dalroy but de Foucauld, not of society gossip but of her son's success in winning a Balliol scholarship from a Catholic school (Ampleforth), not of travelling to Marrakesh in search of entertainment but of going to Jerusalem for Easter (he never got there). As his work progressed he felt increasingly anxious as to her reaction to the subject matter:

The novel drags on at 10,000 words a week. I have just killed a little boy at a lawn meet and made his mother commit adultery and his father get drunk so perhaps you won't like it after all.<sup>6</sup>

The week's break from his work (Marrakesh, Casa Blanca, Rabat, probably in early February) enabled him to return to his desk refreshed. By 10th February he could write to Peters saying that 45,000 words had been completed and dispatched to the typist. He was uncertain what might occur in the second half and equally uncertain as to whether serialisation would be possible. Peters seems to have been keen on the idea as a means of raising extra revenue. But Waugh, like John Plant, still felt that 'the delicate fibres of a story suffer when it is

5. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

7. Probably the section that now begins 'Chapter IV. English Gothic – II', p. 126.

chopped up'. Of all aesthetic principles, he held most strongly to the belief that the art of the novelist lay in his ability to conceive and complete a structure. He thought that the first section might stand on its own – and indeed it would have done. (It concluded with the now famous lines 'He had got into the habit of loving and trusting Brenda.') But he was unwilling to write another 5,000 words to 'complete' the serialised version of the novel if publication could not be guaranteed in both America and Britain.

This haggling over serialisation continued for some months. In the meantime he plodded on with the documentation of Tony's life after receiving Brenda's letter. Returned from his holiday he wrote to Lady Mary saying that he hoped to be finished within three weeks. But the composition of the next section proved more difficult than he had anticipated. By the end of February he was back in England with a substantial portion of his novel still unwritten.

We can only guess at the reasons for this hiatus. Perhaps it was simply induced by boredom. It seems more likely, though, that it was something to do with the subject matter. There was a strong, if oblique, element of autobiography in this work. As he had said, it was the first time he had attempted to describe 'real people' rather than 'eccentrics'. More importantly, it was the first time he had explored in detail the delicate subject of a wife's infidelity. It is arguable that the nagging sorrow of Evelyn Gardner's behaviour had at last spilled over from his experience into his fiction in unusually intimate fashion.

Waugh's previous literary strategy for describing infidelity had been to discipline himself into adopting a cool and humorous detachment which obstructed the reader's serious engagement with the characters. Here he was trying something new. So veiled had his irony been in *Vile Bodies* and *Black Mischief* that his outrage at a culturally degraded society had been mistaken for a celebration of anarchy. This time, it seems, he wanted to write a novel which would unequivocally establish him as a writer in T. S. Eliot's camp, defending civilisation against the barbarians. The detachment remains but, as Brigid Brophy said when reviewing the novel in 1964: 'It is the most open of Waugh's books about having a tragic intention.'<sup>8</sup> He was dredging the memory of his personal agony more deeply than he had dared before.

What distinguishes *A Handful of Dust* from his earlier work is Waugh's ability both to mock and to sympathise with his second-rate protagonists. There can be no tragedy without sympathetic involvement and he goes out of his way to establish grounds for Brenda's dissatisfaction. Tony is a prig and a bore, an amiable half-baked schoolboy living in a world of arrested development. The focus of the tragedy has moved beyond questions of personal culpability (although this remains a crucial issue), to centre on a more abstract, deep-rooted sickness in 'civilised' man. It is a world of 'nobody's fault' in which the characters are subject to forces

8. *NS*, 25 September, 1964, 450; *CH*, pp. 160–2.

beyond individual control. The only figures to escape this maelstrom of egotism are Mrs Rattery and the strange, reserved girl Tony meets on the ship to South America. In the manuscript the latter appears as 'Bernadette'. At the typescript stage he altered the name throughout to 'Thérèse', a clear indication, surely, that he had another 'original' in mind. The contrast between Brenda's promiscuity and Thérèse's virginal adherence to the letter of the Catholic creed seems to signal a conflict in Waugh's own mind between his need for a sexual relationship and his respect for Catholic values. The problem was irresolvable without re-marriage.

Any hopes for his future happiness, and they were few, hung in the balance. His encounters with prostitutes only irritated his wounded self-esteem. The glamorous public image of a boisterous and brilliant adventurer was a long way from the melancholy, *déraciné* figure, loveless despite many 'friends', whom he often felt himself to be. In truth he wanted only one thing beyond his art: a safe Catholic marriage, and it was precisely this which his religion might have withheld from him. The schizophrenic difference between his letters to Madresfield and Mells Manor was not the product of hypocrisy. Waugh was torn between a desire to immerse himself in the Catholic way of life, to settle down and become 'respectable', and a contradictory, self-defensive need to maintain, if refused this, at least the dilettante luxuries of the man of the world. These had begun to pall on turning thirty but it seemed that there might be no alternative.

It would not be surprising, then, if, having taken his story up to the point of Brenda's desertion, he had required a breathing-space. The subject-matter was cutting uncomfortably close to the bone and he had to maintain distance from his material in order to write well. (The manuscript shows clear signs of heavy re-writing and excision at this point.)<sup>9</sup> Back in England he isolated himself in the Easton Court Hotel but could not concentrate on the novel. He attempted editorial work and began planning his next book. Fiction was becoming both arduous and inadequate as a medium for his deepest beliefs. Writing to Peters from Chagford in late February, he had his mind occupied by many other projects than *A Handful of Dust*:

I am back & this is my address until the novel is finished.

I here return the dramatic version of *S. Blandish*<sup>10</sup> which I have kept too long. I don't see any possibilities in it.

9. This is an intriguing example of how deceptive the apparently 'clean' appearance of Waugh's early MSS can be. The first sheet of the new section is truncated and unusually free from alteration. This probably represents the rewriting of a heavily-corrected sheet; possibly several pages were boiled down into tighter form. It almost certainly signifies that Waugh's normal fluency was interrupted at this stage and that he found it difficult to begin the second section.
10. Enid Bagnold, *Serena Blandish or The Difficulty of Getting Married* by 'A Lady of Quality' (1924).

The name of the novel is A HANDFUL OF ASHES.

If you have your copy, could you send it to me here to put into order for book publication. I won't do anything about arranging it for serial until I hear from you. If those Americans wrongly called cosmopolitan take it there must be no monkeying with the text. The serial form, as I see it, would have an additional chapter of about 5,000 words, making 50,000 in all, at the end of the scene where Tony refuses to be divorced. The chapter will describe reconciliation. . . .

P.S. There was an article of mine about debunking the bush came out in December in a crook paper called *Oxford and Cambridge [Review]* and another in U.S.A. called, I think, *Virginia Quarterly*. If they have paid up could you let me have the cash, dough, tin, spondulicks, ready, oof, doings or whatever it is. Read *Decameron*<sup>11</sup> & see no possibility of modernisation. *V* sorry to have wasted so much of your time.

Want to write a 'Great Life' of Gregory the Great when novel is done. Perhaps you'd see what [Tom] Balston [of Duckworth's] will pay. Could you let me know how much advance I am likely to get on *Handful of Dust* & how soon? WHAT ABOUT THAT PORTRAIT OF EMPEROR OF ABYSSINIA MRS BRANDT STOLE.<sup>12</sup>

The letter is reproduced in full as it tells us so much about his working practice and the jocular relationship he had with Peters and Roughhead. 'Mrs Brandt' was Carol, the wife of his American agent, Carl Brandt. The pursuit of the Haile Selassie portrait continued unabated for over a year until it was finally returned. The *Oxford and Cambridge* was not a 'crook paper' at all but one run by Randolph Churchill to whom Roughhead had sold Waugh's article. His annoyance stemmed from the fact that they paid the agent only £7 after an oral promise of twenty guineas. Waugh wrote not for 'self-expression' but for money and he reacted strongly to those he believed to be trying to cheat him of his wages. As part of his elaborate network of private jokes with Peters he presented himself always as suspicious of 'literary people', a jobbing book-maker out to turn an honest shilling, proud of his craft but refusing entirely the priest-artist mantle of the Romantic heritage. He saw the willingness of gullible readers to confer near-divinity upon artists as yet another manifestation of the humanist fallacy.

The technical details are also interesting. Waugh happily committed his precious manuscripts to the post of any country he happened to be in. None of the pre-war material ever seems to have been mislaid. (In this instance, Waugh

11. Possibly a reference to Boccaccio but more probably to *The New Decameron* to which Waugh had contributed two stories: 'The Tutor's Tale: A House of Gentlefolks' (1927) and 'The Tutor's Tale: Miss Runcible's Sunday Morning' (1929). The *New Decameron* was an annual collection of stories published by Blackwell.
12. *Letters*, p. 87. Amory dates it 'March? 1934'. Peters's file suggests about 27 February, 1934; cf. *Catalogue*, E236, p. 107.

Sitwells, and Dianas Cooper and Guinness, he found himself outside the house on a warm July evening and at a loose end. It is with the details of that day that the diary picks up again after a gap of over a year:

... so I walked across Belgrave Square to see if anyone was at home at Halkyn House [the Beauchamp town house]. Hugh [Lygon] was in the library drinking gin. I asked why he was in London and he said he was going to Spitzbergen on Saturday with Sandy Glen who had come over to Madresfield for the day at Sibell [Lygon]'s Chepstow Races Party... I said I would go to Spitzbergen too. Then I went back [to the Savile Club, Piccadilly] to dress. While I was in my bath Sandy Glen rang up and came to see me. We had some champagne while I dressed. He said it was all right my going to Spitzbergen with him. I gave him £25 for fares and he gave me a list of things I should need.<sup>20</sup>

Two months of circulating luxuriously in 'Society' had rendered him corpulent and lethargic. Much as he loved the company of the rich he was impatient for change. Hugh Lygon's expedition offered escape and, possibly, danger. July in London was uncomfortably hot for a confirmed heliophobe; Spitzbergen was above the Arctic Circle.

The trip had been organised by Glen as an exploratory mission for the Oxford University Arctic Expedition of 1935-6. He wanted to find out if the trappers had husky dogs to sell and if they were of the quality required for long journeys over the polar ice and across the islands to the east and north. Spitzbergen, an island about the size of Wales, touched on 81°N and was one of the northernmost landfalls usually accessible during the summer because the Gulf Stream kept its harbours relatively ice-free. It had been sparsely populated since the seventeenth century but with the discovery of coal in the nineteenth, it had become a small exporter of fuel. The Russians and the Norwegians both maintained mines there. In 1934, Glen's interest in the place was also academic. Twenty-two years old and still an undergraduate, he was some nine years the junior of Waugh and Hugh Lygon. Another object in mounting the expedition was to write up during the following term his scientific observations as a thesis on the central, coal-bearing block of the island.

Other explorers had less altruistic aims. Offering the only available winter harbour in four hundred miles of Arctic Ocean between Cape Norway and Russia, Spitzbergen's vital strategic importance had not escaped the attention of the German Navy, and, without realising it, Waugh met one of their advance guard during this journey. While he was idling across Belgrave Square from one aristocratic household to another, sinking champagne in his club and producing twenty-five pounds for another casual foreign excursion, Britain was in the grips of the

20. *Diaries*, 5 July, 1934, p. 386.

Depression and Hitler firmly established as the Chancellor of Germany. No echoes of these momentous historical issues intrude upon his private record.

He had only a few days to prepare. A visit to Lillywhite's secured skis, an ice-axe and a balaclava helmet. Then he dashed to Holborn to purchase a sleeping bag and a cape-groundsheets. That night he dined with his parents but he did not stay:

Rang up the 43 and asked for Winnie. They said she had not yet arrived so I went to her flat. She put up a good show of being sorry for my departure.<sup>21</sup>

The 'Forty-Three' was the notorious night club run by Mrs Meyrick at 43 Gerard Street, described by Alec Waugh as 'half a speak-easy and half a brothel'.<sup>22</sup> It was much frequented by Waugh's contemporaries. The description of the 'Old Hundreth' in *A Handful of Dust* was modelled closely on it. Waugh used the place for late-night drinking and prostitutes. Winnie appears to have been his regular woman and he had already repaid her generosity by donating her name to the call-girl's child in his novel (and possibly by offering a direct portrait in *Milly*). Drunken conversations with loose women were unpleasantly familiar to Waugh at this time. He was not proud of this aspect of his existence. The diary entry for the next day reveals the tension he felt:

To Farm Street [Catholic Church] to confess Winnie. A few more purchases included birthday cake for Teresa. Waited at the Savile for parcels to arrive... Tom [Balston] came too. We drank gin and waited for news from Lillywhite's... Winnie sent me a telegram of good wishes. Nothing from Madresfield.<sup>23</sup>

He was still hoping that Teresa might change her mind and 'save' him. But no telegram came from her. He never forgot her birthday during the years of his infatuation. Some of the parcels included equipment for the expedition. Others were presents for Teresa which he arranged to have posted in relays on 9th July while he was away. The gifts did not carry his name: 'It is more fun for her that way.'<sup>24</sup>

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He wrote that entry aboard the *Princess Ragnhild* two days out from Newcastle. The trip thus far had been a success. On the train from St Pancras, Waugh had

21. *Ibid.*, 6 July, 1934, p. 386.

22. Alec Waugh, *The Fatal Gift* (W. H. Allen, 1973; Book Club Edition, 1973), p. 16.

23. *Diaries*, 7 July, 1934, p. 387.

24. *Ibid.*, 9 July, 1934, p. 388.

Waugh known it, he was sitting on a considerable 'scoop'. The young Germans were Herman Ritter and his wife Christine. They were on a mission for the German Navy, investigating the strategic importance of Spitzbergen. Ostensibly a trapper, Ritter's real business was to locate potential stations for U-boat refuelling. In 1939 his experience here allowed him to direct the capture of a whale factory in the Antarctic and, later, to command a German weather expedition to East Greenland. He was to be intimately involved in the massive Nazi war effort in the Arctic in the early years of the war but later defected to the Allies. By 1941, Glen himself was back in Spitzbergen as a naval officer helping to evacuate the Norwegian and Russian mines. In 1934 the island had seemed only a miserable wasteland to Waugh. Ritter's significance and the political movements of Europe went unnoticed.

\*

Back in England by late August, he was greeted by advance copies of *A Handful of Dust*. One of these he sent to Tom Driberg whose 'William Hickey' column in the *Daily Express* provided useful free publicity:

Here is my new novel. I hope you will like it. I think it is better than the others. At any rate the frontispiece might amuse you. I instructed the architect to design the worst possible eighteen-sixty and I think he has done well.

Just back from Spitzbergen which was hell - a fiasco very narrowly retrieved from disaster.<sup>38</sup>

The frontispiece was of Hettton Abbey. The 'worst possible eighteen-sixty' refers to its inglorious Gothic architecture. Driberg might have found it amusing in that the style of the building was reminiscent of Lancing College.

The novel was published on 4th September but Waugh's leit-motif of 'English Gothic' was something the reviewers unfortunately ignored. 'Unfortunately' because it was seen by him as a fundamental structural motif. He was, however, injured by this time to the low level of contemporary criticism and the book's instant popular success must have assuaged the miseries of Spitzbergen. Within days of being released it was in its third impression. The Book Society again chose it for its 'Book of the Month', ensuring substantial revenue. His financial problems, at least, were solved for the immediate future.

*A Handful of Dust* is now widely regarded as Waugh's masterpiece. He was praised for its quality. Strangely, there was no plethora of jubilant criticism. Most fiction were not widely recognised. The *TLS* again expressed a certain weariness

38. *Letters*, p. 88.

mixed this time with admiration for Waugh's technical expertise: 'Whether his study of futility is worth doing - and doing at such length - is a matter of opinion; but there can be nothing but praise for his consistency of outlook.'<sup>39</sup> Among the book's reviewers only William Plomer and Peter Quennell would rank as 'critics'. Where were the rest of Waugh's powerful literary backers?

The enigma is perhaps partly explained by the earlier serialisation of the novel in *Harper's Bazaar*. Readers in both England and America had been devouring it in five monthly instalments published under the title 'A Flat in London' with a different ending in which Tony returns from Brazil. Had the story become too well-known before the novel was published? Certainly it did not burst upon an eager public as had the earlier works. Christopher Sykes remembered meeting Cyril Connolly after he had read the first instalment. Connolly was distraught at what he took to be evidence of Waugh's failing powers. The book appeared then as a jolly country-house novel. Snobbery, Connolly thought, had ruined a great talent. He changed his mind later.

Only one reviewer attacked Waugh: Ernest Oldmeadow in the *Tablet*. Still smarting from the rebukes received in the *Black Mischief* debate, he was eager for revenge. A novel describing adultery, drunkenness and despair confirmed his sense of Waugh's unorthodoxy and he counselled 'his friends to spend no money and no time in acquiring and reading the book'.<sup>40</sup> He had hoped to see Mr Waugh 'turning over a completely new leaf' after the scandal of the previous year, but: 'He has not done so. His 1934 novel, although it is disfigured by coarse expressions, is free from the gross indecency and irreverence which made its forerunner abominable; but the forerunner has not been scratched by its owner. On the contrary, all unwithdrawn, unrevised and unrepented, it is loudly advertised in a whole page at the end of the new work.'<sup>41</sup> The Book Society's recommendations, he said, 'are a deplorable aiding and abetting of the men and women who have rapidly succeeded in fouling English literature. So we also have a Recommendation; namely that, unless and until a wholesome change takes place, the words 'Recommended by the Book Society' shall be regarded as what the Ministry of Agriculture calls a Notification of an Infected Area.'<sup>42</sup>

The rest of the review was equally poisonous: the novel is seen as only feebly satirical; its 'brutal finale' is 'sedulously and diabolically cruel'; any contempt expressed for the vicious is 'obscured by the snobbery... with which he fondly contemplates them'; the fun made of the Reverend Tendril would, the Editor felt, be gratuitously distressing to 'our Anglican friends', and religion in general 'is treated as if it were no longer even a matter for enquiry'.<sup>43</sup>

39. *TLS*, 6 September, 1934, 602; *CH*, pp. 149-50.

40. *Tablet*, 8 September, 1934, 10; *CH*, pp. 150-3.

41. *Ibid.*; *CH*, p. 150.

42. *Ibid.*; *CH*, p. 151.

43. *Ibid.*; *CH*, pp. 151-2.

Counselling modesty, charity and reticence, Oldmeadow revealed nothing but his own uncharitable pride. The disastrous inadequacy of his interpretation ought to have rendered it merely risible. But there was no mistaking the seriousness of this attack. It was an editorial, as was the first, not merely a review. Waugh was enraged and, again, offended to have had his good faith publicly impugned by a leading Catholic periodical. Perhaps this review did more than anything to turn him firmly in the direction of writing overtly apologetic books. No other Catholic paper reviewed *A Handful of Dust* at the time of publication. It was an ominous silence.

On this occasion, however, Waugh did not remain silent. As a gossip columnist, Driberg was interested in his friend's row with Oldmeadow. As a friend he had refrained from printing anything without Waugh's permission. The 'Open Letter' remained unpublished, the accusations of unorthodoxy unrebuked. Waugh had had enough. He gave Driberg the story and it seems that the journalist requested something quotable about the latest confrontation. Waugh responded briefly but with undisguised contempt for his assailant:

Enclosed statement re Meadow. If you think it worth printing to be used as it stands, fully, or not at all.

Evelyn.

#### TEXT

Two aspects of 'Tablet' article.

- a) an unfavourable criticism.
- b) a moral lecture.

The first is completely justifiable. A copy of my novel was sent to the 'Tablet' for review and the Editor is therefore entitled to give his opinion of its literary quality in any terms he thinks suitable.

In the second aspect he is in the position of a valet masquerading in his master's clothes.

Long employment by a prince of the Church has tempted him to ape his superiors, and, naturally enough, he gives an uncouth and impudent performance.<sup>44</sup>

In Waugh's defence, Peter Quennell in the *New Statesman* voiced the fears of many before the appearance of the novel: that *Black Mischief* had signalled a new 'solemnity' which threatened to spoil the 'exquisite comic equilibrium' of Waugh's early fiction. Quennell had felt that 'when the satirist gave way to the Catholic moralist' in these works, this 'detracted from the charm of otherwise extravagant

44. ALS to Tom Driberg, nd, from 14A Hampstead Lane, Highgate; reprinted *DE*, 11 September, 1934. Sykes (p. 123) mistakenly dates this 1932 and believes the comments to have been a reaction only to Oldmeadow's attack on *Black Mischief*. Following him I repeated the error in including the letter in the *Black Mischief* section of the *CH*, p. 140.

and light-hearted stories; in short, that his serious passages were out of tune.' Quennell, though, was delighted to find his fears unfounded and was shocked by the *Tablet's* accusations. 'Cruel *A Handful of Dust* certainly is; a more "moral" book – though Mr Waugh is too intelligent a novelist to append any explicit moral message – has seldom come my way. I rise from Mr Waugh's new novel as from a reading of one of the sterner and more uncompromising Fathers, convinced that human life is a chaos of inclinations and appetites, and that few appetites are strong enough to be worth gratifying.'<sup>45</sup>

Plomer, too, saw Waugh as 'moved chiefly by a kind of fascinated disgust' and delighted in the novel's literary economy: 'There is no waste, no whimsy and no padding; the book holds the attention throughout and is of exactly the right length. I think it would be a mistake to regard Mr Waugh's more surprising situations as farcical or far-fetched; they are on the whole extremely realistic, and charged with the irony that belongs to the commonplace but is rarely perceived.'<sup>46</sup>

Henry Yorke would have disagreed. In a remarkably frank letter he told his friend that 'The book was entirely spoilt for me by the end':

I don't think the Demerara trip is real at all, or rather I feel the end is so fantastic that it throws the rest out of proportion. Aren't you mixing two things together? The first part of the book is convincing, a real picture of people one has met and may at any moment meet again. . . . But then to let Tony be detained by some madman introduces an entirely fresh note and we are with phantasy with a ph at once. I was terrified towards the end thinking you would let him die of fever which to my mind would have been false but what you did to him was far worse. It seemed manufactured and not real.<sup>47</sup>

Yorke's terms of approbation reflect the social realist element of his own fiction. He was an *avant-garde* writer with left-wing sympathies, an empiricist. Waugh was none of these. Yorke's is the familiar argument about the imbalance between 'fantasy' and 'realism' hinted at by Quennell. But Waugh had an answer:

Very many thanks for your letter of criticism. You must remember that to me the savages come into the category of 'people one has met and may at any moment meet again.' I think they appear false to you largely because you don't really believe they exist. The reason they didn't take the stores was not dishonesty in any Sunday School sense.<sup>48</sup> I think it is

45. *NS*, 15 September, 1934, 329; *CH*, pp. 154–7.

46. *Spectator*, 14 September, 1934, 374; *CH*, pp. 153–4.

47. *Letters*, pp. 88–9; Sykes, p. 142.

48. Yorke had complained: 'To tell you the truth I was furious that the natives did not steal all the stores. I can't and won't believe that natives are honest, it's too much.' Quoted *Letters*, p. 89.

that they couldn't do two things at once. Going home meant going complete with their belongings – an act of theft, though not at all repugnant, would have been a different kind of action – and they were impelled by the mechanical mouse simply to go home.

I think I agree that the Todd episode is fantastic. It is a 'conceit' in the Webster manner – wishing to bring Tony to a sad end I made it an elaborate & improbable one. I think the sentimental episode with Thérèse in the ship is probably a mistake. But the Amazon stuff had to be there. The scheme was a Gothic man in the hands of savages – first Mrs Beaver etc. then the real ones, finally the silver foxes at Hetton. All that quest for city seems to me justifiable symbolism.

Best love to you both.<sup>49</sup>

The issues raised by this letter offer us an unusual insight into Waugh's technique. The 'conceit' of Tony's death is similar in form to that of Prudence's: a preconceived symbolic mechanism. The use of the phrase 'had to be there' and his rejection of certain incidents as superfluous again reflects his aesthetic obsession with a coherent structure in which the component parts should be mutually conducive to the effect of the whole. Most interesting, though, are his remarks on the *leit-motifs* of Gothicism and the City.

The latter is surely an ironic vision of the Catholic's allegiance to Rome and his spiritual odyssey towards the City of God. (The idea of the search for a lost city was probably prompted by Colonel Fawcett's quest in Fleming's *Brazilian Adventure*. The image had already been used in the 'Lunnon' of 'Out of Depth', and this story had been written shortly after reviewing Fleming's book.) Waugh's 'Fan-Fare' (1946) states that: '*A Handful of Dust* . . . dealt entirely with behaviour. It was humanist and contained all I had to say about humanism.'<sup>50</sup> His use of the term 'humanism' is eclectic. He seems to mean that vision of the world which places man, not God, at the centre of existence and which believes that 'knowledge', and thus 'progress', derive from the observation of behaviour. To Waugh this was egotism and heresy. He saw only the manifest and repeated failure of societies and individuals to control and improve their lives through rationalist 'uplift' and it was on these grounds that he rejected psychoanalysts, economists, politicians and fortune-tellers as fraudulent, substitute mystics. For a man with so strong a predisposition towards 'mystical habit of mind' he was remarkably intolerant of muddled thinking. He loathed emotive phrases and mystification. The validity of Catholic doctrine he saw as based on historical facts.

'I believe', he wrote in 1939, 'that man is, by nature, an exile and will never be self-sufficient or complete on this earth; that his chances of happiness and

49. *Letters*, p. 88. Amory reads 'fake' for 'false', 'own belongings' for 'belongings', '[motive]' for 'mouse' and 'a city' for 'city'.

50. 'Fan-Fare', *op. cit.*; *EAR*, pp. 300-4; *CH*, pp. 248-53.

virtue, here, remain more or less constant through the centuries and, generally speaking, are not much affected by . . . political and economic conditions . . .; that the anarchic elements in society are so strong that it is a whole-time task to keep the peace.<sup>51</sup> When he says to Yorke: 'You must remember that to me the savages come into the category of "people one has met and may at any moment meet again"', he does not simply mean that he has met South American Indians and that they did indeed behave like that. It is not so much a defence of verisimilitude as an allusion to his sceptical conservatism. The Indians are a metaphorical extension of man's essential savagery along with Mrs Beaver and the silver foxes. One might add that the book is filled with animals and animal images from Mrs Beaver gobbling her yoghurt to Jock Grant-Menzies' pigs and the parallel boar-hunt in the forest. The reader is never allowed to forget man's primal bestiality and the narrow borderline between wholeness and corruption, sanity and insanity. The vampire bats, as it were, hang constant and silent upon the mosquito netting waiting to suck the blood of any unwary traveller who for a moment relaxes his guard. Often with the lightest of touches – the game of animal snap after John Andrew's death, for instance – the *motif* is repeated.

When accused of distorting normality into fantasy Waugh would suggest that 'normality' was a fiction invented to disguise this essential savagery. His novel persistently suggests incongruities between various concepts of 'normal' behaviour: ('Sitting there clucking like a 'en," Albert reported, "and the little fellow lying dead upstairs")<sup>52</sup> And: "There's a man who's eaten two breakfasts and tries to drown his little girl"<sup>53</sup> It documents nothing more assiduously than the inability to communicate or share experience. Like the neurotic lovers in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the individual is locked in the prison of the self and the key thrown away. The gap between expression and meaning, between action and intention, is seen to yawn ever wider in those empty telephone conversations and, especially, in the exquisitely painful scene where Brenda misinterprets the death of her son for that of her lover and thanks God for her mistake.

God, of course, is the key that has been thrown away in this purely secular world. What Waugh offers us in *A Handful of Dust*, as in *Black Mischief*, is the humanist *reductio ad absurdum*, life without (or at least in ignorance of) God. The novel, as we have seen, 'began at the end' with 'The Man Who Liked Dickens':

... Then after the short story was published the idea kept working in my mind. I wanted to discover how the prisoner got there, and eventually

51. *Robbery Under Lam. The Mexican Object Lesson*, p. 16; *EAR*, p. 161.

52. *A Handful of Dust*, p. 113.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

the thing grew into a study of other sorts of savage at home and the civilized man's helpless plight among them.<sup>54</sup>

The theme of the threat to civilisation by 'anarchic elements' is familiar. There seems, though, to be a shift of emphasis here in the attribution of some kind of heroic status to the central figure. Brigid Brophy's remark about the book's 'tragic intention' appears to be supported by what Waugh told Yorke: that 'the scheme was a Gothic man in the hands of savages'. The obvious interpretation is to see Tony as the representative of high culture brutalised by barbarians and, undeniably, much of the book's emotional tension derives from the spectacle of Last's exploitation. The Gothic *motif*, however, offers a double irony and a rather different reading of Tony's character.

We might presume from the term 'Gothic man' that to Waugh the Gothic Revival represented a fascinating cultural regeneration, restoring the social ideal of chivalry and the aesthetic significance of architecture and decorative art. We know of his latter-day fascination with Victoriana and we are tempted to interpret Hetton Abbey, draughty and impractical as it is, as representing a vandalised ideal. But if this were so, why did he instruct the architect to design the 'worst possible eighteen-sixty' [my italics]? One answer is suggested by the manuscript.

This demonstrates that the original 'scheme' was changed at its inception. In the Guide Book description of Hetton (p. 14) 'Hetton Castle' has been altered to 'Hetton Abbey', 'the Castle' to 'the house' and 'fine paintings' to 'good portraits'. Later, an important excision appears. The paragraph describing Hetton beginning: 'They saw it all: the shuttered drawing-room, like a school speech hall, the cloistral passages, the dark inner courtyard, . . .' (p. 35) was originally prefaced by:

It was a huge building conceived in the late generation of the Gothic revival [*sic*] when the movement had lost its fantasy, and become structurally logical and stodgy.<sup>55</sup>

This was cut from the text, presumably at typescript stage. But as nothing is altered in the subsequent description, and as it perfectly concurs with his instructions to the 'architect', there is no reason to suppose that he had changed his mind. (He removed the passage, surely, because of its incongruously didactic tone. Many such revisions delete authorial intrusion. The description dictates the reader's

54. 'Fan-Fare', *op. cit.*; *EAR*, p. 303. Small changes were made to 'The Man Who Liked Dickens' (Last was 'Henty', Todd 'McMaster') but so skilful was Waugh's literary carpentry that he managed to join the novel to the tale almost without alteration. The bulk of the story's original typescript is incorporated into the MS, corresponding to the chapter 'Du Côté de Chez Todd'.

55. MS, p. 19.

opinion rather than allowing the image to speak for itself.) Quite clearly, the house and Tony's idealisation of it were intended to be second-rate.

During 1932 Waugh had briefly visited Spain and from Burgos had written to 'Bloggs' Baldwin:

I haven't seen any serious Gothic for some time so I thought I would spend Lent among Spanish cathedrals. Avila seems to me by far the most lovely. . . . I will discover all Gothic as the Gothic revivalists did. I mean living in Northern Europe so much, one's palate gets debauched by so much imitation and reproduction Gothic, that it is an effort to understand it when one meets the real thing. It must have been better to come to it straight from a classical civilization. By the way, did Ruskin ever visit Spain?<sup>56</sup>

The *Diaries* reveal a similar preoccupation with the Gothic Revival. Later that year, on his way to British Guiana he had noted that St John's Church in Bridgetown, Barbados, was '1830 Gothic of the best pre-Ruskin posh (?) kind. Pink coral rock with pitch-pine roof and cedar pillars; tomb of Paleologus'.<sup>57</sup>

Waugh, then, did not have unqualified respect for the Revival. He saw it as dividing into two quite distinct periods: pre- and post-Ruskin (late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and late nineteenth century). Hetton is placed firmly in the latter category of 'structurally logical and stodgy' architecture dispossessed of 'fantasy'.

Waugh's love of the early English Gothic Revival (and the real thing) is in keeping with his delight in Gaudi and *art nouveau* and has clear aesthetic connections with his earlier advocacy of the novels of Firbank. All represented art forms of cohesive structure, solid and well-wrought, objective and yet suffused with a lightness of touch, tinged with 'fantasy'. Tony's ideal represents not this but its opposite: the house is drab, impractical, 'stodgy', the product, like his bedroom, of arrested development. Hence the double irony: Waugh uses Tony as a foil to the barbarities of modern civilisation while refusing his ideology heroic status. He is lamentably weak, suffers from misplaced tolerance, and is a feeble shadow of the gentlemanness he supposes himself to represent. It is a book which rages against betrayals of trust and qualitative value but its society has long since decayed beyond the point where any sensible attachment to these ideals is (or was ever) possible in secular terms. Ultimately, as Quennell suggests, it is a book about the vanity of human wishes or, as Rose Macaulay put it in 1946: '*A Handful of Dust* seems to reach the climax of Mr Waugh's view of life as the meaningless

56. Unpublished ALS to Hon. Windham Baldwin, nd [probably late March, 1932], from Hotel Infanta Isabel, Burgos.

57. *Diaries*, 17 December, 1932, p. 358.

jigging of barbarous nitwits. Pleasure, sympathetic or ironic, in their absurdities has vanished: disgust has set in. . . .<sup>58</sup>

One final word about the manuscript of the novel: it further suggests both his technical obsession with 'structure' and his concern with being branded irreligious. The Gothic *leit-motif* of the chapter titles was a late revision. It first appears at the end of the very last section - 'English Gothic III' (MS, p. 112). Similarly, late revisions result in the references to Jock Menzies<sup>59</sup> as Brenda's former lover and an MP with special interests in pig farming. We see Waugh here meticulously embellishing his work, Jock's absurd remarks about swine suddenly becoming an important thematic parallel in the latter part of the book when his question in the House regarding the Basic Pig is cross-cut with the Amazonian boar-hunt. The 'Basic Pig', of course, could ultimately be seen as a veiled description of human nature.

Other corrections suggest his particular concern with the 'question of modesty' discussed in his Open Letter. He wanted it to be a 'good taste book' and to be accepted by Catholics as orthodox. Oldmeadow's attack on *Black Mischief* directly affected Waugh's style. In revising the typescript he altered the club where Tony meets Babs from a replica of Mrs Meyrick's speak-easy/brothel to a more vaguely described 'night club'. In his first draft the manuscript read: 'That's always the trouble with people when they have affaires [*sic*].' The last clause was changed to '... when they start walking out'. A more subtle revision concerns the way in which Waugh, wishing to convey the idea of Princess Abdul Akbar's sexual promiscuity, found himself, after a struggle, unable to state this directly. Instead, rather than abandon the idea, he used the word 'promiscuously' in an abstract adverbial sense to describe the furniture (bracketed words represent deletions):

The Princess's single room was [heavy with perfume and] [perfumed oriental promiscuity] furnished [with typically eastern] promiscuously. . . .<sup>60</sup>

There are several other such examples of his scrupulousness. Under the circumstances, it is not difficult to understand his fury at Oldmeadow's 'moral lecture'.

It would seem from his correspondence with Peters's office that Waugh was already inclined towards overtly apologetic writing before the publication of *A Handful of Dust*. Oldmeadow's review settled the matter. Sir Alexander Glen remembers Waugh stating during their miserable final trek on Spitzbergen that 'In the unlikely event of your getting us back I shall join the Church of Rome'. Glen was surprised to learn (in 1983) that Waugh had been a Catholic since

58. 'The Best and the Worst II. Evelyn Waugh', *Horizon*, December 1946, 367; *CH*, p. 158.  
 59. 'Jock Menzies' only became 'Jock Grant-Menzies' at typescript revision stage.  
 60. MS, p. 55.

1930. Perhaps it was simply another joke at the young man's expense. But it may also have been an indication of the novelist's desire publicly to reaffirm his faith. The fiasco of Spitzbergen had, he believed, confronted him with death and emphasised suffering as a universal condition. On his return the determination to write a 'great life' of a major Catholic figure remained constant, though the subject had by then changed from Pope Gregory to Edmund Campion. At the end of August he wrote to Roughhead explaining that he had privately signed a contract with Sheed and Ward, the Catholic publishers, and that the proceeds were to go to a Catholic charity. He was informing Roughhead officially so that Peters would not think he (Waugh) was avoiding the firm's commission.<sup>61</sup>

A letter to Lady Mary reveals the background to this decision more fully:

So I too am staying with my Boom [father]. At present it is all dignity & peace but I expect we shall soon have a quarrel & black each others eyes & tear our hair and flog each other with hunting crops like the lovely Lygon sisters.

I am going to spend a very studious autumn writing the life of a dead beast [priest]. I think I shall stay here so that I shall not be tempted to the demon at the Savile and to go out with whores & make myself ill as I do if I am away from good parents.

That good taste book I wrote about sponger [Murrrough O'Brien] is being a success and wherever I go people shout Long Live Bo & throw garlands of flowers in my path and I have a brass band to play to me in my bath.

My Alfred's [brother's] wife has just inherited a fortune and is looking for a Highclere [superlative house]. . . .

I have got fat again. I wish you could have seen me at the N. Pole I had great sex appeal - thin as Bartleet.

I have just had a letter asking for the Dutch rights of *Black Mischief*. What a difficult book it will be - bound upside down with the pages in wrong order & bits left out. . . .<sup>62</sup>

The last paragraph, of course, refers obliquely to Teresa Jungman. As an extension of this network of private jokes he dedicated the Dutch edition of *Black Mischief* to her.

The light-hearted tone here barely disguises Waugh's uncertainty. It was a period of great change for him. The letter was written from 14A Hampstead Lane, Highgate, his parents' new home. Underhill, for all its inadequacies, had at least carried associations of a happy childhood. Now even that was gone. This

61. Unpublished ALS to W. N. Roughhead, nd [c. 30 August, 1934], from Savile Club; *Catalogue*, E245, pp. 108-9.  
 62. *Letters*, p. 89. Alec Waugh had married Joan Chirnside in 1932; in 1934 she inherited a quarter of a million pounds.