

satire would, endorse them; it merely profits from the disparity they reveal. The irony of tone is Olympian rather than insular. It defends the author rather than any particular code of values or behaviour. The traveller's interest is impartial, his fastidiousness a mark of how remote he is from the touch of what he sees.

The American edition of *Labels* was called *A Bachelor Abroad*. Waugh was not in fact a bachelor at the time and Evelyn Gardner was with him on the trip, but this new title was in line with the persona he chose to adopt in writing the book. He is a man without ties; he can regard the absurdities of life around the Mediterranean – and later in Africa – as dispassionately as he regarded the absurdities of life in the worlds of *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*. Danger, disease and depravity are accepted with equal unconcern. Real events impinge no more sharply than fictional ones. In *Remote People* he appends a footnote about the tribal interest in telegraph wire. Having mentioned that the government dealt with a few men who may have been implicated in thefts by mutilating and then exhibiting them, he comments: 'no doubt the example was salutary, but the telegraph service remained very irregular' [RP 23]. The icy tone separates him from the creatures he describes as effectively as a sheet of sterilized glass. It is the same voice that we hear in his fiction. When a foreign commercial agent is knifed in Azania, Amurath responds by executing the culprits in front of the Anglican Cathedral – 'and with them two or three witnesses whose evidence was held to be unsatisfactory' [BM 13]. The episode is related with a suavity that leaves no room for indignation.

Only when Waugh's aesthetic sense is offended do we get a movement of revulsion. On the journey from Port Said to Malta he elects to travel second class – and soon regrets it. There are too many people, and moreover 'the three or four public seats were invariably occupied by mothers doing frightful things to their babies with jars of vaseline' [WGG 45]. It is the reaction – and language – of one of the Bright Young People. Waugh does not at this stage create an authorial perspective consistently separate from that of his characters. To do so would be to expose them to

judgement, and it is their immunity from judgement, like their immunity from pain, which is his line of defence.

Yet even in the pre-war novels this immunity is sometimes precarious. The substitution of aesthetic for moral terminology is not always a way of withdrawing from judgement. Take the account in *Black Mischief* of Prudence's afternoon rendezvous with Basil Seal. She goes into a shabby room rank with tobacco smoke. Unshaven, Basil rises to meet her.

He threw the butt of his Burma cheroot into the tin hip-bath which stood unemptied at the side of the bed; it sizzled and went out and floated throughout the afternoon, slowly unfurling in the soapy water.... Below, in the yard, Madame Youkoumian upbraided a goat. Strips of sunlight traversed the floor as an hour passed. In the bath water, the soggy stub of tobacco emanated a brown blot of juice. [BM 141]

Again our attention is directed towards what is aesthetically displeasing about the scene, but we have only to compare the effect of Balcairn's use of the word 'indelicate' to see the difference. Rather than acting as an evasion of moral judgement, this description is pressing hard towards one. Only the predominating mood of farce prevents it from being achieved.

In *A Handful of Dust* the pressure is predictably stronger. It is not just that the humour is more muted; the writer's detachment is under far greater strain from the autobiographical realities out of which he created the book. His presentation of a figure like Jenny Abdul Akbar conveys more than social distaste. Even the description of her eating muffins suggests a rapacity that goes beyond the physical:

'Muffins stand for so much,' said Jenny.

She ate heartily; often she ran her tongue over her lips, collecting crumbs that had become embedded there and melted butter from the muffin. One drop of butter fell on her chin and glittered there unobserved except by Tony. [HD 85]

With John Andrew, Tony's son, this unappealing character has an immediate success:

The Writings of Evelyn Waugh, Ian Littlewood (1983)

What a heavenly child...I love children. That has been my great tragedy. It was when he found I couldn't have children that the Moulay first showed the Other Side of his Nature. It wasn't my fault...you see my womb is out of place... [HD 87]

So powerfully charged with disgust, these images of vulgarity come close to delivering a moral judgement. As much as anything else, Brenda's infidelity is presented as a colossal, and partly conscious, failure of taste. The set into which she moves, presided over by Mrs Beaver, is characterized by a barbarity that reveals itself most obviously in the plans for transforming Hetton, Tony's country house. The fate of King's Thursday some years earlier was viewed with a much cooler irony, and it is hard not to see in Waugh's presentation of the aesthetic and emotional crudity of these people the embodiment of a criticism that is basically moral. The author's tone remains detached, but the involvement that underlies it is evident.

A Handful of Dust occupies a pivotal position in the development of Waugh's writing; it is poised between the carelessness of disengagement and the consolations of faith. The resulting sense that it is closer to the author's nerve ends than any of his other fiction makes us perceive the restraint of his tone as a singular triumph. Nevertheless, it marks an important revision in the outlook that prevailed through the earlier novels. Implicit in the book is a recognition that those attitudes of sophisticated detachment which had been part of the glamour of the social milieu to which he once aspired were, from the inside, potentially vicious.

The old positions were never entirely abandoned. In the sad introduction to his last book of travel reminiscences, Waugh speculates about the history of the Cook's representative in Paris: 'As happier men watch birds, I watch men. They are less attractive but more various.' [TA 18] The principle is still in essence defensive. As Waugh explained in his diary,

'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 secret of happiness in this century of the common man' [9 May 1962; *Diaries* 787]. But though an attitude of detachment might continue to attract him, it was not one that could be sustained indefinitely. *A Handful of Dust* had already exposed its limitations and in the later thirties two factors combined to weaken it. There was first the increasing pull of personal and domestic commitments and then, at the end of the decade, the demands made by the war. Both of these found a reflection in the work that followed Waugh's second marriage, and it is to a consideration of some of his later books that we must now turn.

'To write of someone loved, of oneself loving, above all of oneself being loved — how can these things be done with propriety? How can they be done at all?' [WS 151] The questions are asked in *Work Suspended*, the novel that was interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War, and they suggest the distance travelled since *Decline and Fall*. Bereavement and the process of falling in love are the respective concerns of the book's first and second parts, and in each we find the same recognition of the potential treachery of words. Of his grief John Plant says:

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 ready to receive them. [WS 130]

It is quite evidently a world of emotional pressures more intrusive than any dreamed of by earlier characters. Moreover, the defensive role of words is not to be relied on; their powers can betray. In both these passages, the one concerning

middle age the coming war seemed to offer a refuge in the pleasures of childhood and the glamour of bygone centuries. 'Pathans were Captain Truslove's business...' [MA 166]. Guy Crouchback, like Charles Ryder before him, is lured to battle by a trumpet call from the past.

Traditions of chivalry and social order are only one form of appeal. Both Crouchback and Ryder show a devotion to the past which extends beyond their attitude to soldiering. Their love affair with the army was in each case preceded by a human love affair that still dominates their outlook; for images of emotional happiness — for romance — they must again rely on the past.

Of all Waugh's novels *Brideshead Revisited* is the one that ventures furthest into the conventional territory of romantic love. Charles and Julia are brought together on a rough sea-crossing from New York. At the height of the storm the ship pitches them into an embrace:

cheek against cheek, her hair blowing across my eyes; the dark horizon of tumbling water, flashing now with gold, stood still above us, then came sweeping down till I was staring through Julia's dark hair into a wide and golden sky, and she was thrown forward on my heart, held up by my hands on the rail, her face still pressed to mine. [BR 248]

A few days later they take the train together from London to Brideshead:

Julia pulled off her hat and tossed it into the rack above her, and shook her night-dark hair with a little sigh of ease — a sigh fit for the pillow, the sinking firelight and a bedroom window open to the stars and the whisper of bare trees. [BR 261]

This is not a style of writing we expect in Waugh — not, at

least, without the saving grace of irony. 'Her night-dark hair' — the phrase has a Keatsian ring which twenty years earlier would have left its author chill with embarrassment. Because Sebastian and Julia exist as memories, the narrator can invest them with a radiance that actuality would too probably have denied them. The book's form as a memoir is offered in part-excuse for its romanticism.

Once outside the charmed circle of memory, sexual relationships, for most writers the natural source of romance, are, in the writings of Evelyn Waugh, rarely romantic. To think of them as such is to court disillusionment. It is what Tony Last does, first with Brenda — Lady Brenda — and then, briefly, with Thérèse de Vitry. The Gothic dream in which he has cast his wife as the 'lady faire' is an illusion that has no chance of survival in the world of reality. And when later Tony strikes up an acquaintance with Thérèse and presumes too far on the atmosphere of tropical romance, he is sharply reminded of the sterner conditions of the outside world. Her response on learning that he is already married is abrupt and unaccommodating.

Not that Waugh had any distaste for the conventional stage properties of romantic love. The storm at sea, the quiet evening from the ship's rail, lights reflected across tropical waters, night sounds, drenched hair, days of impossible summer, strawberries and wine under the tall elms — the list of images could be continued; and he was fully aware of their attraction. He was, however, as I stressed at the start, an ironist as well as a romantic; and few subjects are more vulnerable to irony than romantic love. Whatever the appeal of these images, he uses them only in two contexts — either as the consoling stuff of memory or as an ironic prelude to disillusionment. There are no love affairs that end happily in Waugh.

When Kätchen enters the pages of *Scoop* with her hair damp from the rain and a consumptive cough that publishes her kinship with the idealized cocottes of the nineteenth century, it is sure enough that William will fall in love with her, but equally sure that she will disillusion him. From Pennyfeather onwards, disappointment is the lot of all Waugh's heroes who fall in love. William's disappointment

is largely comic, Tony's is less so, Guy Crouchback's is scarcely comic at all; but in every case there is the same antagonism between the conditions of romance and those of reality. The image of Tony and Thérèse linking arms and looking out towards the shore can be indulged only because it is already mortgaged to the writer's irony — disillusionment is on the way; the image of Tony and Brenda sitting at the café and looking out towards the sea can be indulged only because it already enjoys the protection of the past — Tony knows it to be irrecoverable.

As these examples suggest, memories of romantic relationships are frequently entwined with memories of romantic places. If romance blossoms more freely in the past, it also tends to flourish abroad rather than at home. The lure of memory is comparable to — and often combined with — the lure of the exotic.

No part of the world demonstrates the appeal of this fusion more powerfully than the Mediterranean. For Mr Pinfold, as for many of his generation, it was 'that splendid enclosure which held all the world's history and half the happiest memories of his own life; of work and rest and battle, of aesthetic adventure, and of young love' [GP 100]. It is to this romantic region that Scott-King looks for escape from the austerities of post-war Britain:

Hot oil and garlic and spilled wine; luminous pinnacles above a dusky wall; fireworks at night, fountains at noonday...the shepherd's pipe on the scented hillside — all that travel agent ever sought to put in a folder, fumed in Scott-King's mind that drab morning. [WS 203]

These are familiar images in Waugh; they have the fragrance of a world set apart from the harsh ordinances of life as it is lived in those northern countries beyond the reach of the sun. Dreams of the south merge with a nostalgia that calls us back to the paradisaical landscape from which we were originally exiled. It is the romantic consummation. But this in itself can be a problem; the images that seethe in Scott-King's mind are overtaxed; they have already edged too far towards the travel agent's folder. It is, in an extreme form, the problem

that Waugh had indicated by calling his first travel book *Labels*; the images of the Mediterranean are too well-thumbed to be taken up without self-consciousness; as the property of every travel agent, their charm has inevitably been debased. The call of the Mediterranean persists, but only because it is also the call of 'all the world's history'.

After *Labels* there were to be no more travel books with a Mediterranean setting. In the Preface to *When the Going was Good* Waugh explains how he and others of his generation had set out for more distant places:

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. The route of *Remote People* was easy going; the *Nimety-Two Days* were more arduous. We have most of us marched and made camp since then, gone hungry and thirsty, lived where pistols are flou-rished and fired. At that time it seemed an ordeal, an initiation to manhood. [WGG 8]

The tone is an interesting mixture of the elegiac and the swashbuckling. It is hard to resist the suspicion that, like Walter Shandy's reaction to the death of his elder son, Waugh's rhetoric about the death of Robert Byron and the collapse of a civilization has quite out-distanced the emotion that gave rise to it. We do not have to know that Waugh in reality harboured a strong dislike for Robert Byron; the highly wrought phrases are in themselves a clear enough

How much of this glamour would have been apparent to the Port Said businessmen?

The point made earlier is worth emphasizing: to attack the clichés of a language is not necessarily to attack the language itself. When Waugh disparages Gibraltar or mocks the dogged tourists in the Serapeum, he is doing the first — deploying a facile irony to undercut a facile romanticism. As often as not, this is merely clearing the ground for his own romanticism; after all, the difference between finding glamour in the associations of Harar and finding it in those of the Sphinx is only one of fastidiousness. Waugh's objections to the latter are really no more than a purist's distaste for vulgarization — which is why his trip to Harar retains its appeal: Rimbaud sending guns to Menelik is an image for the connoisseur, Napoleon at the pyramids is not.



The second kind of attack on romanticism is far more radical than a youthful impatience of cliché; it constitutes a challenge to the language itself. What in the early books is mere sniping at absurdities tends later to give way to a more damaging sense that romanticism can in some circumstances become a form of corruption. This is familiar ground. In each chapter the final pages have charted a similar course; the author's detachment, his humour, and his romanticism are all, from the perspective I have taken, strategies of escape, and each of them is subject to the same kind of erosion. Frequently, episodes that illustrate the process for one will do so for the others. The unfurling cigar stub which marks the passage of love between Basil and Prudence is an image that challenges romanticism as well as questioning the author's detachment. So, at the end of the novel, when Mr Youkoumian closes his café, he puts up the shutters on romance as well as on humour.

Once again *A Handful of Dust* marks an exceptional stage in the argument, for we have here a novel that on one level presents itself as a direct critique of romantic attitudes. Is Hetton Abbey a castle from Arthurian legend or, as the

guidebook claims, 'devoid of interest'? Is Brenda 'the imprisoned princess of fairy story' or a vapid adulteress? Is Tony an explorer in the tradition of the Vikings who sailed to Byzantium or is he the dupe of a crook doctor? From the opening pages of the novel we are made aware of an insistent pressure from realities that in preceding books have scarcely impinged at all. Beaver's job — in an advertising agency — was lost in the slump; he now has an income of only £6 a week. The figure is exact. This is a world in which people are concerned with economy, where they sometimes take buses rather than taxis, where even Brenda travels third class to save money. (It is consistent that her pretext for going to London should be the study of economics.) No one here would think lightly of the thousand pounds that get tossed backwards and forwards in *Vile Bodies*. Money is at the root of Beaver's boredom at home, Brenda's imprisonment at Hetton, Tony's breach with her over the divorce. It is the mainspring, in one way or another, of much of the novel's action — a doubtful basis for romance.

Tony's attachment to Hetton is hopelessly at odds with this reality: the place is neither modern nor functional, and worst of all, it is uneconomic to maintain. The traditional concept of romance is out of date. 'Society' has translated it into terms more in keeping with the new order:

It had been an autumn of very sparse and meagre romance; only the most obvious people had parted or come together, and Brenda was filling a want long felt by those whose simple, vicarious pleasure it was to discuss the subject in bed over the telephone. For them her circumstances shed peculiar glamour; for five years she had been a legendary, almost ghostly name, the imprisoned princess of fairy story, and now that she had emerged there was more enchantment in the occurrence than in the mere change of habit of any other circumstance. Her very choice of partner gave the affair an appropriate touch of fantasy; Beaver, the joke figure they had all known and despised, suddenly caught up to her among the luminous clouds of deity. [HD 57]

It is ironic that Beaver should be lodged in Galahad when he visits Hetton; his role in this updated idyll is that of Lancelot. The affair with Brenda is 'society's' tarnished parody of the romantic world in which Tony actually lives, and when he is confronted by it the dream crumbles: 'there was now no armour glittering through the forest glades, no embroidered feet on the green sward; the cream and dappled unicorns had fled...' [HD 151].

The collapse of Tony's Gothic fantasy is an admission of defeat in the face of a modern world whose conditions deny the possibility of escape into romanticism. But the problem recurs; for the degrading elements of modern life that have destroyed the dream are precisely what make it necessary. Accordingly, Tony transfers his romantic vision to Dr Messinger's South American city. In his imagination this now takes on the Gothic aspect of Hetton and becomes the focus of his dreams of another order. But Mrs Beaver has got there first. It is, as Waugh remarked, a book 'on the theme of the betrayed romantic',⁸ and in his delirium Tony accepts the fulfilment of this theme:

There is no City. Mrs Beaver has covered it with chromium plating and converted it into flats. Three guineas a week, each with a separate bathroom. Very suitable for base love. And Polly will be there. She and Mrs Beaver under the fallen battlements... [HD 207]

Polly Cockpurse and Mrs Beaver are the doyennes of the new society; their storming of Tony's City is the final recognition that no escape is possible. His fate at the hands of Mr Todd is merely a confirmation of the part that has been his from the beginning. Reading Dickens among savages is a sardonic image of what Tony has been doing anyway in his attempt to maintain Hetton within the context of contemporary society. The appraisal of romanticism is complete: Tony's fantasies can offer no permanent refuge from the world in which he has to live. In part, they are responsible for his downfall.

⁸ Preface to the Second Uniform Edition, 1964.

And yet our sympathies are with him rather than with the forces that destroy him. By intercutting Tony's expedition through the jungle with events back in London, Waugh emphasizes the similarity of the two milieus. While the Macushi hunt bush pig, Grant-Menzies asks questions in Parliament about pig specifications; the British preoccupation with pork pies is counterpointed with the native consumption of roast pork. The identity of the two places is suggested by Tony's delirious remark that 'her Ladyship has gone to live in Brazil' — i.e. among savages. Grant-Menzies has it the wrong way round when he says to Brenda — significantly, while they are dancing at Anchorage House — 'The whole world is civilized now, isn't it...?' [HD 172] He should have said 'uncivilized'.

Waugh chose his words carefully when he described the book as 'a study of other sorts of savage at home and the civilized man's helpless plight among them' [LOR 33]. The point is surely clear: the ruined City over which Polly Cockpurse and Mrs Beaver have triumphed is not just the image of Tony's romantic dreams, it is the image of civilization. Tony is a slightly absurd figure, but he is also 'the civilized man', and his attachment to the values of civilization is inseparable from the romanticism that makes for his absurdity. To hanker after civilization at all in the world as it actually exists is to be convicted of romanticism. The book is a critique of Tony's attitudes but not necessarily, at this stage, a condemnation of them. Waugh recognizes that they are futile as a means of eluding modern social reality, but it is their failure that is regretted, not their attempt.

When *A Handful of Dust* first appeared in America, the magazine that was serializing it felt that the hero's fate was altogether too black and asked Waugh to supply a happy ending in its place.⁹ Obliging, he sent Tony Last back to England for a reconciliation with Brenda. But by

⁹ This, at least, is the version given by Christopher Sykes in *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography*. In his Preface to the Second Uniform Edition of the novel Waugh himself offered the more prosaic explanation that it could not be serialized with its original ending because this had already been published separately in America as a short story called 'The Man Who Liked Dickens'.

this time Tony has caught the idiom of his society; it is he who hires one of Mrs Beaver's flats now:

My idea is to use it when I come to London instead of my club. It will be cheaper and a great deal more convenient. But my wife may not see it in that light... in fact... [MrL 36]

'I quite understand,' replies Mrs Beaver. The implication cannot be missed. Waugh must have derived a certain enjoyment from providing his audience with its happy ending. What he has done is simply to take the triumph of barbarism one stage further: all his romanticism gone, a savage now among savages, Tony has finally succeeded in learning the law of the jungle.

Waugh's sympathy with the romantic viewpoint did not diminish in the years that followed; it was, if anything, augmented by the approach of the Second World War. *Put Out More Flags* is suffused with an exhilarating sense of heroic possibilities. But by the time of *Brideshead Revisited*, the author has returned to a position much closer to that of *A Handful of Dust*. Barbarism is everywhere triumphant. Ryder's nostalgic yearning for a lost civilization is presented with sympathy but without hope. The cigarette ends that collect in the fountain at Brideshead are part of a general process of degradation; the last refuges of nostalgia are being contaminated. Ryder's ideals about the war are long dead and his love for Julia has had to be surrendered to more imperious claims. Here and in the pessimistic satires that follow life within society seems to afford no ground for responses that have not been standardized. The modern State is upon us. There can be no question now of any perspective that seeks to make something romantic out of the conventional obligations of daily life.

And yet this is exactly what Guy Crouchback sets out to achieve at the beginning of the *Sword of Honour* trilogy. With the declaration of war his course becomes plain; he is called to arms not only by his duty as a Christian and an Englishman, but also by the appeal of what he takes to be a crusade against the Modern Age. In returning to England he

is taking his rightful place in a society that has been transfigured by romantic purpose. Life has been redeemed from futility — 'Eight years of shame and loneliness were ended,' [MA 12]

It is on this foundation that Guy proposes to reconstruct his life. By a fortuitous historical accident the perspectives of childhood seem suddenly to coincide with reality. Life has all the possibilities that in youth one had attributed to it; there is no need to escape or hide. Guy once used to imagine himself 'serving the last mass for the last Pope in a catacomb at the end of the world' [MA 16], but now the old embattled romanticism has been revitalized; it can become a way of living one's life rather than of escaping from it. 'Can I go myself, sir?' Guy asks, when told that a man is needed to lead the raid on Dakar. This really is a world in which men like Truslove embrace danger with a smile for the sake of their country.

Sadly, though, it turns out not to be; it turns out to be a world in which 'priests were spies and gallant friends proved traitors and his country was led blundering into dishonour' [OG 240]. The effort to see the war in the light of *Boy's Own* and *Chums* is a doomed attempt to recover what are, after all, the unreal — or at any rate, unrealizable — perspectives of childhood. Rugged in the mess, the 'happy adolescence', the prep school setting — such features of life as a Halberdier make their own comment.

It is while he is at Kut-al-Imara that Guy's illusions begin to fade. As part of the business of shoring them up he grows an imposing moustache and then, drawn by, amongst other things, 'the memory of countless German Uhlans in countless American films' [MA 105], he goes into an optician and purchases a monocle. His appearance is transformed: 'The man reflected to him had a cynical leer; he was every inch a junker.' But the way this is phrased — 'the man reflected to him' — suggests, what Guy himself later acknowledges, that the face is not really his own. Examining his moustaches in Bellamy's, he is uncertain:

True he had also seen them in the Halberdier mess, but on faces innocent of all guile, quite beyond suspicion.

It is again the pattern of the Immortality Ode. What Waugh regrets most is the carelessness of childhood — the privilege of a life that is lived without responsibility. For Knox this freedom may have been no more than a patent against seriousness — itself no small thing in a depressingly serious world — but for Waugh's fictional characters the possibilities were infinitely greater. If Basil Seal can get away with so much in *Black Mischief*, it is partly because the 'rather childish mouth' and the 'curiously childish' expression that are characteristic of him are the marks of someone who still enjoys the licence of the pre-adult world. As long as Alastair and Sonia spend their time playing happy families, the debt-collectors cannot touch them, for these have no place in the nursery. The claim to freedom made by the Bright Young People of *Vile Bodies* depended, as Waugh perceived, on a refusal to accept the high valuation traditionally put on adulthood. 'Always before,' he wrote in an early article for the *Evening Standard*, 'it has been the younger generation asserting the fact that they have grown up; today the more modest claim of my generation is that we are young.' [LOR 7] And so it is that, to Outrage's bewilderment, despite the fact that there is 'a whole civilization to be saved and remade...all they seem to do is to play the fool' [VB 131].

The degree of immunity conferred by childhood is ambiguously exploited in the portrait of Brenda Last. Throughout the novel she manages to retain something of the reader's sympathy largely because there is a vein of childish naivety in her responses that goes some way to convincing us that moral criticism would be inappropriate. 'Goodness,' she remarks when censorious gossip begins to circulate about her relationship with Beaver, 'people do think that young men are easily come by.' [HD 52] And later, down on her luck and unsupported by Jenny Abdul Akbar, "'Me? Oh, I'm all right,'" said Brenda, and she thought, "It might occur to her to sock a girl a meal once in a way." [HD 180] By phrases like this she pleads a sort of Benefit of Clergy; there is an implicit statement that she is not to be judged by the standards of the adult world. Any attempt at seriousness will stand convicted in advance of pomposity. Waugh by no

means lets her escape unscathed, but a few childish habits of speech and thought afford her a remarkable degree of protection.

In *Put Out More Flags* it is the similar possibility of relapsing into the language and manners of childhood that gives the relationship between Basil and Barbara its emotional charge and kindles it with a promise of freedom. As long as Basil is really only playing pirates, anything can be permitted. The schoolroom, as we observed in another context, is an alluring refuge. It is in the words of a schoolroom game that Guy's grandmother claims Santa Dulcina and it is to the schoolroom that Guy himself returns during his period of training in the army. That his hero should be a soldier of the stamp of Ritchie-Hook is altogether fitting: 'For this remarkable warrior the image of war was not hunting or shooting; it was the wet sponge on the door, the hedgehog in the bed; or rather, he saw war itself as a prodigious booby trap.' [MA 72]

In other words it was schoolboy fun. And it is this point of view that brings Ritchie-Hook into some sort of alignment with the protagonists of *Put Out More Flags*. The race of ghosts was so dear to Waugh because he saw them as a generation who had clung resolutely to the frivolous and stylish notion that life was a game. In preserving this attitude, the responses of childhood are one of the principal weapons. Alastair Trumpington is 'jealous as a schoolboy' when he first sees Peter in khaki, and having joined up himself returns eagerly to the trivial round of triumphs and disappointments associated with life at school. After a hard day's training he is asked by Sonia what he has been doing:

'I put down smoke,' said Alastair proudly. 'The whole advance was held up until I put down smoke.'

'Darling, you *are* clever. I've got a tinned beefsteak and kidney pudding for dinner.' [PF 133]

Waugh is mocking, but he is also indulgent. The race of ghosts is a race of children and Waugh's nostalgia for them is inextricable from his nostalgia for childhood.

nothing run of the mill about Cain's wife or the Old Testament miracles: 'No, it was something deeper than all that. *I couldn't understand why God had made the world at all.*' [DF 33] An echo of the author's own perception of things is unmistakable — and we have his suicide attempt a couple of years earlier to confirm it — but any sympathy with his character's dilemma is extinguished by Waugh's irony. Prendy's abandonment of the vicarage at Worthing is a sacrifice that cannot easily be invested with grandeur. To see this part of the book as a humorous way of broaching serious issues would be quite mistaken; rather, it is a humorous way of exorcizing them. The irony is not designed to introduce seriousness but to keep it out. And with it religion.

If hints of a graver purpose occasionally break the surface of *Vile Bodies*, they do so in spite of the dominant tone; they tend to be the points in the novel, like Father Rothschild's speech about Youth's 'fatal hunger for permanence', at which the writer's irony has momentarily given way. Such passages may be traces of an underlying earnestness, signs, in retrospect, of the later change in direction, but it would be perverse to make more of them. The amiable futility of the Bright Young People is no doubt a reflection of that world which Waugh was coming to find 'unintelligible and unendurable' without God, but the sober tones of the religious article are just what he was excluding from the novel. By the use of irony and humour he was attempting, on the contrary, to make this world, if not intelligible (which would be a boring project, anyway), at least endurable — and perhaps even attractive.

With *A Handful of Dust* we move into a different climate. The case has already been argued in the first three chapters: it is a book that deliberately puts far more strain than any previous one on the writer's habitual mechanisms of defence. Detachment is harder to maintain, humour more difficult to find, romanticism a more dangerous commitment. Though its importance is negative, religion becomes, for the first time, a subject for due consideration in one of the novels — a fact that is perhaps indicated by the title

Waugh borrowed from Eliot.³ With its 'flavour of the major prophets' it reflects a general concern in the book with the absence of any religious consolation. The point is given some emphasis:

Tony invariably wore a dark suit on Sundays and a stiff white collar. He went to church, where he sat in a large pitch-pine pew, put in by his great-grandfather at the time of rebuilding the house, furnished with very high crimson hassocks and a fireplace, complete with iron grate and a little poker which his father used to rattle when any point in the sermon excited his disapproval. Since his father's day a fire had not been laid there; Tony had it in mind to revive the practice next winter. On Christmas Day and Harvest Thanksgiving Tony read the lessons from the back of the brass eagle. [HD 29-30]

The routine is social rather than spiritual, but the author is fully alive to its appeal. Though it has none of the consolations of religion, Tony's Sunday is replete with those of inherited privilege and cultural tradition. It is part of a satisfying personal charade in which there are hints of Waugh himself:

Brenda teased him whenever she caught him posing as an upright, God-fearing gentleman of the old school and Tony saw the joke, but this did not at all diminish the pleasure he derived from his weekly routine. [HD 30]

While the service goes on Tony's mind is elsewhere, preoccupied with the more material question of bathrooms and lavatories.

Not surprisingly, when his son is killed it never occurs to him that the vicar's role could be more than a social one; the man's attempts to offer comfort are merely embarrassing: 'I only wanted to see him about arrangements. He tried to be comforting. It was very painful...after all the last thing one

³ The phrase is taken from a line in Part I of *The Waste Land*: 'I will show you fear in a handful of dust'.

wants to talk about at a time like this is religion.' [HD 115] But the best alternatives Last himself can find are animal snap and whisky. He is unequipped to deal with the business as it bears on his own emotions; his reaction is centrifugal — 'It will be ghastly for that Ripon girl,' 'It's awful for Jock,' 'It's going to be so much worse for Brenda.' Concerned more than anything for the feelings and convenience of other people, he reveals all the virtues of his social breeding and all its sad vacuity when unsupported by any profounder level of response.

There are hints in the last part of the book that the City of which he goes in search could shade easily enough into the City of God, but it is left to Helena to develop them. *A Handful of Dust* holds out no offer of Christian salvation; but it does show how inadequate the alternatives are. Immediately after Tony's disconcerting interview with the vicar, the novel turns to the waste land of fashionable London where Brenda is having her fortune told by a descendant of Madame Sosostris — from the sole of her foot. It is a scene of grotesque, half-serious superstition. In Mrs Beaver's vulgar substitute for religion Polly Cockpurse's house has become the temple and the fortune-teller a new priestess. But this modern cult is not altogether unfamiliar; if the new superstition is primarily a matter of social fashion, so also is the Sunday routine of Tony Last. The gestures he makes towards religion take a more venerable form, but they are no less completely defined in secular terms. His faith can provide no shelter when the illusion crumbles, because it is itself no more than another picturesque motif in the same Gothic dream. To be of any value, faith must be faith in something that stands outside the general decline.

'Change and decay in all around I see,' sings Uncle Theodore, but the following line remains unsung: 'O thou who changeest not, abide with me.' It has no place in *Scoop*, any more than in the earlier books, yet it sounds a clear response to those subterranean tremors of anxiety that have been sensible in Waugh's novels ever since the epilogue to *Decline and Fall*. Pastmaster's drunken meditation on how things have changed is echoed at some point in each of the succeeding novels — by Agatha Runcible, by Sonia, by Tony

and Brenda, or in *Put Out More Flags* by Angela Lyne. Only William Boot seems able to return unmarked to the same world from which he started; but then Boot Magna is itself set in a prospect of decay.

Against these intimations of unhappiness, the novelist, unaided by any god from the machine, has won a series of brilliantly precarious victories. Until *Brideshead Revisited* the 'fatal hunger for permanence' of the Bright Young People has been successfully conjured out of sight. But when change is taken to be synonymous with decline, the passage of the years must inevitably make this more difficult. Sooner or later the words of Uncle Theodore's hymn will have to be acknowledged as the only secure foundation from which to fight.

The implications of this become the prevailing theme of Waugh's writing from *Brideshead* onwards. It is notable, however, that this central image of the Church as a fixed and enduring resort in a world of change had already found its clearest expression some ten years earlier in a short story called 'Out of Depth'. Its relevance to our theme is such that it warrants separate consideration.



The story takes place in 1933, but its kernel is a dream of England in the twenty-fifth century. The country has reverted to barbarism: its buildings have fallen into ruin and its illiterate inhabitants move 'with the loping gait of savages' [MrL 131]. Blacks are now the dominant race. It is Waugh's vision of present trends at their calamitous point of fulfilment. Then suddenly, in the midst of this, as he begins to despair of his sanity, the hero comes upon a mission and sees outside it a black man dressed as a Dominican friar:

Rip knew that out of strangeness, there had come into being something familiar; a shape in the chaos. Something was being done. Something was being done that Rip knew; something that twenty-five centuries had not altered; something of his own childhood which survived the age of the world. [MrL 136]