

Waugh's Conrad and Victorian Gothic: A Reply to Martin Stannard and John Howard Wilson*

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I am delighted that my article on Waugh, Conrad and Eliot has prompted such detailed, erudite, and thoughtful responses from Martin Stannard, Waugh's biographer, and John Howard Wilson, the editor of the *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter and Studies*. There is too much in their contributions for me to respond to point by point, so I shall concentrate on the major points of contention and the issues to which they give rise. Much of Dr. Stannard's response, in particular, deals with matters such as the relation of the novel to Peter Fleming's *Brazilian Adventure* and to the different stages of Victorian Gothic; while very interesting in themselves, these do not, I believe, affect my reading of *A Handful of Dust*, and I shall touch on them only in passing.

Dr. Wilson cites the first volume of Martin Stannard's authoritative biography of Waugh to point out that there is "no evidence that Waugh ever read *Heart of Darkness*" (207), and Stannard himself explains Waugh's reading habits in support of the same claim (185); both also point out that Waugh makes no mention of Conrad in describing his own African and South American travels in *Remote People* and *Ninety-Two Days* (191, 207). I read the two volumes of Dr. Stannard's biography with great pleasure when they first appeared, and should certainly have mentioned the lack of a clear line of connection

*Reference: Martin Stannard, "In Search of a City: Civilization, Humanism and English Gothic in *A Handful of Dust*," *Connotations* 14.1-3 (2004/2005): 183-204; John Howard Wilson, "A Question of Influence and Experience: A Response to Edward Lobb," *Connotations* 14.1-3 (2004/2005): 205-12; Edward Lobb, "Waugh Among the Modernists: Allusion and Theme in *A Handful of Dust*," *Connotations* 13.1-2 (2003/2004): 130-44. All three will be referred to parenthetically by page number.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/deblobb01312.htm>>.

between Conrad and Waugh. Dr. Stannard and others have done vitally important work in treating Waugh as a major writer about whom we should know as much as possible, including his reading, and I apologize for the omission. At the same time, I did not and do not regard the lack of this line of connection as damaging to my argument. First, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Stannard himself notes scrupulously that “it is quite *possible* that Waugh had never read Conrad’s novella” (185; emphasis added), which leaves the issue open, and I cannot think of any writer whose life is so well chronicled that we know everything he or she read. Second, Stannard acknowledges Waugh’s statement that he was “not a devotee” of Conrad (184), with its implied admission of at least some familiarity, and draws attention to one specific, striking parallel between *Heart of Darkness* and one of Waugh’s short stories (191). Third, the note by Robert Doyle to which Dr. Wilson alludes (208) seems not merely to imply but to confirm that Waugh had some knowledge of Conrad.

It seems permissible, then, to proceed on the assumption that Waugh had read *Heart of Darkness*. Even if he had not, Dr. Stannard himself brings up an ingenious way of arguing for Conrad’s presence in *A Handful of Dust*. He mentions that Waugh might have developed “an aversion to Conrad’s work without reading it,” perhaps when he heard Conrad discussed by others (186). Stannard is talking here about Waugh’s antipathy, not conscious use, but goes on to mention that Waugh did allude to Proust in *A Handful of Dust* without, by his own account, having read *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Two of the chapter titles in the novel (“Du Côté de Chez Beaver” and “Du Côté de Chez Todd”) echo *Du côté de chez Swann*. In the first edition of *A Handful of Dust*, from which Stannard quotes, the titles were printed as “A Côté de [...],” a schoolboy error in French silently corrected in subsequent editions. We are therefore inclined to credit Waugh when he denies having read Proust, and it is open to us to imagine that he could have used Conrad in the same way. I prefer, however, the simpler and still tenable explanation that Waugh had in fact read *Heart of Darkness*.

The issue of Victorian Gothic architecture is complicated in a different way. Dr. Stannard discriminates among the stages of Victorian Gothic and points out that Waugh admired Pugin's work but despised the later style of Victorian Gothic, of which Hetton embodies the worst features (194). My own reference to Pugin was not intended to suggest that all Victorian Gothic was the same or that "Victorian Gothic' in general was anathema to Waugh" (194); it was simply a reminder that the style was in fact popularised by Pugin (131). Stannard argues that "[a]esthetic and spiritual values [...] were linked in Waugh's mind" (193), and this is certainly true in the Ruskinian sense that architecture, for example, expresses the underlying ethos of a civilization. It does not follow from this, however, that aesthetic and moral *perception* necessarily go hand in hand, and I think Stannard places undue emphasis on Tony's inability to tell the difference between "the artistic vitality of early Gothic revival [...] and the fakery of Hetton" (195). If Tony had been aesthetically perceptive and remained as obtuse in all other areas of life as he is in the novel we have, the outcome would be the same. The point of Hetton in *novelistic* terms—as an image in an artistic narrative rather than an item in Waugh's own system of belief—is surely that Tony's great-grandfather tore down a genuine Gothic building and replaced it with a building in an artificial, synthetic style, and that Tony's way of life is similarly unauthentic. This would remain true if the second Hetton had been designed by Pugin himself. The grotesqueness of the great-grandfather's act of vandalism is underscored by making the house as ugly as possible, and Waugh carefully associates it with the Victorian sentimentality of Dickens, as I mentioned in a footnote (144), but the point would be the same regardless of the architect.

All of this matters, I believe, because Dr. Stannard's emphasis on Waugh's linking of European civilization with Catholic Christianity tends to limit unnecessarily the meaning and force of the novel:

Reality for Waugh [...] is the idea that the supernatural is the real—but only the supernatural as mediated by the Catholic Church. All other attempts to engage with the mystical [...] are lampooned: black magicians, fortune tellers, Moslems, Buddhists, Anglicans. (192)

In Waugh's work as a whole, including the travel books, this is certainly true, and it perhaps reflects the more combative side of Catholicism in general and of English Catholicism in particular from the time of Newman and Manning to that of Chesterton and Belloc. In *A Handful of Dust*, however, it is largely implicit, except for the pointed satire of fortune-telling, and rightly so: *romans à thèse* are seldom good novels, and Waugh himself would admit that there were genuinely spiritual people in other religions, and many spiritually comatose Catholics. The Reverend Tendril is an absurd figure, and may have represented in Waugh's mind an antiquated, tepid, and useless Anglicanism, but he seems remarkably like everyone else in *A Handful of Dust*, doing by rote what has long ceased to have any real meaning for himself or for other people; his sermons are no more ridiculous than Tony's unthinking attendance at church or the casual and passionless adulteries of Brenda and her friends. In a world where no-one takes responsibility for anything and "Everyone agree[s] that it was nobody's fault,"¹ Tony's problem is not his apathetic nominal Anglicanism, but his general passivity and obliviousness.

To this Dr. Stannard might well reply that the two are inseparable in Waugh's mind, and—since he knows as much about Waugh's mind as anyone alive—I would not argue with him. My point is simply that what finds its way *into the novel* is not an argument about the decline of Europe after the Reformation, but a critique of what I referred to in my essay as the unconscious lie. Stannard seems to agree that Waugh generally keeps his ideology out of his fiction: "He writes, as it were, Catholic novels by negative suggestion, describing the anarchy of a world attempting to maintain its sanity in ignorance, or in rejection, of the True Faith" (192). As an analysis of modernity, *A Handful of Dust* is as relentless and elegiac as *The Good Soldier* (another novel on which Dr. Stannard is an acknowledged expert), and it never fails to have a tremendous impact on students, most of them emphatically secular, who are confronted with their own unacknowledged assumptions and lies.

Both Dr. Stannard and Dr. Wilson speak at times as if I had attempted to diminish the originality of *A Handful of Dust* by linking it with Conrad. Stannard suggests that the “‘sources’ of that novel” are to be found not in Conrad but in a political Catholicism (190), and Wilson seeks to “dispel the impression that the novel is largely derived from other literature” (208). I certainly had no intention of diminishing Waugh’s originality; the novel is entirely fresh in conception and execution, like Eliot’s *Waste Land*, and, like Eliot’s poem, is enriched rather than diminished by its allusions. Later in his essay, Stannard writes:

Had Waugh never become a Catholic, Tony Last’s revelation that “there is no City” might legitimately be read alongside “Mistah Kurtz, he dead” as a statement of epistemological collapse. But there was only one epistemology for Conrad, that of Western scepticism, where for Waugh there were two: that of the rational world with its delusions of Progress, and that of theology [...]. (201)

I agree with this generally, setting aside the matter of Conrad’s much-debated later “affirmation.” My point about Waugh’s use of Conrad was simply that Waugh could admire and share the melancholy Pole’s analysis of the rootlessness of Western morality in our time and Marlow’s refusal to close his eyes to it. That Waugh found a way to move beyond despair is a biographical fact, but not part of the structure of *A Handful of Dust*. Faced with the only alternatives possible for him, Tony reverts to Victorian sentimentality and what Waugh saw as Dickensian dishonesty. His fate at the hands of Mr. Todd is condign.²

I do not feel, finally, that Dr. Stannard, Dr. Wilson and I disagree very much in our reading of the novel as such. I acknowledge their points about Waugh’s ideas and have been engaged and enlightened by their scholarship and sensitivity to Waugh’s words and ideas. As Martin Stannard concludes, the great virtue of all engaging criticism is its ability to stimulate discussion.

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NOTES

¹Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1966) 121.

²I am grateful to Dr. Wilson for pointing out my error about Mr. Todd's race. I used the word "European" not as an indicator of Todd's actual origins, but as an admittedly careless synonym for "Caucasian." I did so because I remembered Tony's assumption that Todd was English (Waugh 239), presumably because of his appearance. It seems clear, when one reads the scene, that Todd is half-Caucasian and half-Indian.