

In Search of a City: Civilization, Humanism and English Gothic in *A Handful of Dust**

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Edward Lobb's essay, "Waugh Among the Modernists: Allusion and Theme in *A Handful of Dust*," raises interesting questions about Evelyn Waugh's intellectual history. Developing the 1980s work of Jerome Meckier,¹ Jeffrey Heath² and Terry Eagleton,³ Dr Lobb suggests several *hommages* to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and to Eliot's *The Waste Land*. "A *Handful of Dust*," Dr Lobb states, "is about the cost of idealism and the futility of nostalgia" (131). Along the way there is an argument about Waugh's rejection of humanism, his attitudes to Victorian Gothic and to Dickens, the opposition of town and country, the allusions to Malory, the concept of the City of God and the genre of the quest narrative. Ultimately the novel is read, quite reasonably, as "a burlesque of the questing-knight theme" that "provides sardonic versions of some of the incidents and characters in *The Waste Land*" (139).

Dr Lobb's essay, then, represents an intriguing amalgam of allusions to critical sources that assumes Waugh's engagement with *Heart of Darkness* and *The Waste Land*. In the poststructuralist, postmodern world the author and his opinions are dead, the text is an immaterial weave of signifiers, biographers are anathema, and it might be argued that Dr Lobb's kind of criticism is rather old-fashioned. On the other hand, it might be seen as an example of 'post-theory' writing or, indeed, as a product of new historicism. Taking it on its own terms, as an attempt to restore the cultural backdrop to, and intertextual allusions in, a major modernist novel, it makes good, if not entirely

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original, reading. But taking it on its own terms, taking, for instance, the assumptions about Waugh's reading as being based on 'fact,' we are also entitled to examine the biographical data and to ask whether these assumptions are valid.

There is no problem here with *The Waste Land*. The novel's title clearly alludes to it and there is an epigraph quoting from the poem. We know that Waugh was a close friend of Harold Acton at Oxford where the latter famously bellowed the poem through a megaphone at the 'hearties' on their way to rowing or rugby. Waugh produced a cartoon of his doing this, associated himself at that stage with Acton's set of homosexual aesthetes, and presented a sympathetic image of Anthony Blanche, complete with megaphone and Eliot, in *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). Although it is also true that Waugh never had any great feeling for poetry, and for modernist poetry in particular, there is no question that he knew *The Waste Land* well and that it had a considerable impact on him. This engagement with modernist writing led Waugh, through Acton, towards the Sitwells rather than to Pound or Joyce and, through his own studies in the history of art, to the theories of Roger Fry rather than to Picasso or Braque. It did not, however, lead him to Conrad. Had Waugh known Graham Greene at Oxford, this might have been the case. But he didn't and it wasn't.

In the first volume of my biography, I stated that "There is no evidence of Waugh's having read *Heart of Darkness*"⁴ but, on reading Dr Lobb, and thinking that I might have missed something, I checked the sources again: the published letters and diaries, Donat Gallagher's *Essays, Articles and Reviews*.⁵ Nothing. Then I went to Robert Murray Davis's catalogue of the Waugh archive at Texas⁶ and to the comprehensive bibliography of Waugh's work.⁷ In the catalogue I found three references to Conrad. The first in a 1961 letter to Jocelyn Brooke mentions that Waugh had once lived in the Bishopsbourne house where Conrad died (E10, p. 68). The second and third are related: a 1957 letter from John Lehmann asking Waugh to contribute to a Conrad symposium and Waugh's reply by return, declining on the grounds that he was not a devotee (F27, 306; E74, 302). In Davis's

Section I, "Marginalia," there is no record of Waugh's having annotated any of Conrad's books. Finally, I went to my own files of unpublished and unrecorded correspondence. Nothing. On the basis of this evidence at least, it would seem unlikely that Waugh had engaged with Conrad's writing.

Does this matter? To be fair to Dr Lobb, he does not argue that Waugh *liked* Conrad's work. Quite the reverse. "Waugh, the Catholic convert," we read, "could not endorse Conrad's vision of nothingness [...]" (132-33). Nevertheless, the suggestion that Waugh was influenced by Conrad is everywhere implicit: "The surface parallels are obvious enough: a dangerous river journey, an encounter with a sinister, possibly mad European who tyrannises over [sic] the natives, and a revelation. It is the differences between the two narratives, however, which reveal Waugh's themes and the reasons for the allusions" (132). The suggestion here is that Waugh is in part carefully re-writing *Heart of Darkness* and that his "allusions" are essential to the intertextual play of *A Handful of Dust*. In fact, it is quite possible that Waugh had never read Conrad's novella. Extraordinary as this might seem, one has to remember that his reading in contemporary literature was far from comprehensive and that his eclectic approach is not unusual among working writers. He read the work of his friends—Harold Acton, John Betjeman, Robert Byron, Cyril Connolly, Henry Green, Graham Greene, Nancy Mitford, Anthony Powell etc.—and he read extensively among other authors to make money by reviewing. He read books on art history and architecture for pleasure. The rest of his time he spent writing, travelling or just enjoying himself. As a rule, he did not much care for reading. If he disliked authors, no matter how distinguished, he would not dutifully plough through them, let alone make allusions to their work. And he apparently disliked Conrad. He also for most of his career stayed away from Ford Madox Ford and Henry James, Greene's other two Masters, only coming round to James in his last decade as the solace of his declining years. As to Joyce and the other 'High Modernists,' Waugh, like Larkin, thought they indulged their neuroses in a kind of literary madness.

How, we might ask, could Waugh arrive at an aversion to Conrad's work without reading it? In responding to this, one must either concede that at some stage, perhaps at school, he had dipped into one or other of the books. But it is equally possible that he simply did not like the sound of them when he heard others debating their themes. Waugh would, of course, have got his *Heart of Darkness* pre-digested through *The Waste Land* and Eliot's poems generally. He would have known the plot-line, and he might have been parodying some of it in "The Man Who Liked Dickens," the short story he wrote in Brazil during February 1933.⁸ Shortly afterwards he echoed it in a 1933 time-travel story, "Out of Depth,"⁹ in which a forty-three-year-old American, Rip Van Winkle, born a Catholic, has become a fashionable agnostic and is transported to the primitive civilization of the twenty-fifth century. The source of *A Handful of Dust* was, Waugh said, his own "The Man Who Liked Dickens": "The idea came quite naturally from the experience of visiting [in British Guiana] a lonely settler [Mr Christie] of that kind and reflecting how easily he could hold me prisoner." After it was published: "the idea kept working in my mind. I wanted to discover how the prisoner got there, and eventually the thing grew into a study of other sorts of savage at home and the civilized man's helpless plight among them." Thus the novel "began at the end,"¹⁰ and so skilful was Waugh's literary carpentry that he managed to join the majority of the novel to the tale almost without alteration ("Henty" becomes "Tony Last"; "McMaster," "Todd"). The bulk of the story's original typescript is dovetailed into the MS, corresponding to the chapter "A Côté de Chez Todd" (an allusion to Proust, another author Waugh claimed not to have read).

There is no reference to Conrad here, then,—unless we see "Todd" (or 'Tod,' meaning 'death' in German) as a nod towards "Kurtz" ('kurz' meaning 'short' in German)—and none in Waugh's response to Henry Yorke's criticism of the "A Côté [...]" chapter. Yorke felt that this section was "fantastic" and threw the credibility of the rest "out of proportion." Up to that point, he commented, the novel was "a real picture of people one has met and may at any moment meet again

[...].” After it, we enter “phantasy with a ph [...]. I was terrified that at the end 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.”¹¹ Waugh replied: “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 agreed that the Todd episode was “fantastic”: “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 a city seems to me justifiable symbolism.”¹²

Presumably the “quest for a city” was intended to act as a parodic *leit-motif* echoing the Christian soul’s search for the city of God. This idea, and its relation to class-consciousness in Waugh’s fiction, has been brilliantly developed by Frank Kermode in an essay that Dr Lobb, rather oddly, does not cite.¹³ Nevertheless, if we are in search of a source for the theme, in addition to the long history of Christian poetry and fiction, there is one much closer to hand than *Heart of Darkness* or, indeed, *The Waste Land*.

On 25 April 1925, Lieutenant-Colonel P. H. Fawcett, D.S.O., had set off with his son and another young Englishman, Raleigh Rimmell, into the unexplored interior of the Matto Grosso. Fawcett, a war hero of legendary courage and endurance, was a character from *Boy’s Own* or the *Wide World Magazine* sprung to life, and his exploit captured the imagination of the British and American public. A Portuguese document from 1743 had come into his hands recording an expedition to the heart of the Central Plateau and the discovery of a lost city. Fawcett and his two companions were on a quest to find it—and disappeared without trace. The last dispatch from him was dated 30 May 1925. From that time until 1933 and beyond, the mystery obsessed the Press on both sides of the Atlantic. Apocryphal reports came back of sightings. Further expeditions were launched to discover the truth, one including Waugh’s distant friend, Peter Fleming (brother of Ian). Fleming sailed for Brazil in June 1932, six months before Waugh’s departure for British Guiana. Both were intending to

defray expenses by writing travel books and were thus in a sense in direct competition. Both were writing against the backdrop of Fawcett, about whom: "Enough legend has grown up [...] to form a new and separate branch of folk-lore."¹⁴

Fleming wrote,

I found myself committed to a venture for which Rider Haggard might have written the plot and Conrad designed the scenery. [...]

In 1927 the Colonel's fate offered a fascinating field for speculation. Was he alive? Was he the captive of an Indian tribe? Had he been made a god? Had he voluntarily renounced civilization in favour of the jungle? These and many other alternatives were debated hotly. They are still being debated today; before me lies an article from a Sunday newspaper of recent date, headed "Is Jack Fawcett Buddha?"¹⁵

It would seem clear from this that Fleming *had* read *Heart of Darkness* (he had achieved a First in English Literature at Oxford) and that he was ready to invoke Conrad as context for his own story. On the other hand, his record is light-hearted and anti-heroic. The privations, he says in the Foreword, were slight. The only thing his party discovered was an unknown tributary to a tributary of the Amazon. The temptation to vamp up the "Terrors of the Jungle," "all the paraphernalia of tropical mumbo jumbo,"¹⁶ had been resisted.

When Fleming's *Brazilian Adventure* appeared in August 1933, Waugh reviewed it for the *Spectator*.¹⁷ He found it, he said, "an arresting and absorbing book" and devoted his first paragraph to providing quotable eulogy. Waugh was sure, he said, that the book would secure "a very wide success." As the review progresses, however, it becomes clear that he finds the constant self-consciousness about not falling into the trap of romancing the jungle rather tiresome, and the second part about the return journey and Major Pingle far more engaging. Having returned in February, Waugh had put off writing his own travel book, *Ninety-Two Days* (1934),¹⁸ for five months, partly because he had little or no enthusiasm for recording "a journey of the greatest misery,"¹⁹ partly because he returned to even more misery—Ernest Oldmeadow, editor of the *Tablet*, had defamed *Black*

Mischief (1932) as a “disgrace to anybody professing the Catholic name,”²⁰ and the case for the annulment of Waugh’s first marriage, in which he and his ex-wife had to appear, was coming before the ecclesiastical court—but also, perhaps, because he was soon faced by Fleming’s account of a trek across similar territory, and one which would plainly become a best-seller. Fleming’s expedition is recounted as a public-school romp with the sang-froid of a sceptical sahib unimpressed by danger.

At twenty-four, Fleming had already lived in China and America, was an experienced huntsman and skier. In his prefatory photograph, he stands handsomely casual in open-necked shirt, one hand in his trouser pocket, and with a pipe gripped between the white teeth of a welcoming smile: a man’s man but gentle. He had taken leave from his job as Literary Editor of the *Spectator* to search for Fawcett, was in the company of two other Old Etonians of equally pugnacious self-confidence and courage, and was in Brazil as *The Times’s* special correspondent. Waugh’s journey was to nearby wilderness but could scarcely have been more different. It was an escape from depression (his offer of marriage to Teresa Jungman had just been refused) into further depression. Fleming was in congenial company; Waugh was alone. Fleming took keen interest in flora and fauna, had a gift for landscape description, and this book thrills with the *joie de vivre* of youth: wading up rivers through piranhas, sting ray and alligators, perched in a tree with a prairie fire raging round his feet, striking out across country in which the local Indians were terrified and against the advice of Pingle, their ostensible ‘leader’ who had himself turned back. Waugh’s trip was more gloomy and penitential. Nothing much “happened” in either excursion but where to Fleming everything was “amusing,” to Waugh very little was. The landscape passed him by as a dreary panorama of barbarism. Yet he had to make his living from writing and his attempts to write short travel pieces for *The Passing Show* in a 1933 series entitled “I Step Off the Map,” had been unsuccessful. Fleming’s boyish enthusiasm seems to grate. The display of

his public-school humour “expresses an attitude of mind that seriously cramps a work of literature.”²¹

In short, Waugh felt much older than Fleming, although the age-gap between them was just five years, and deemed himself a more serious literary craftsman. “I Step Off the Map” had more than literal significance to Waugh, who was moving beyond the cartographical limits of Western humanism which produced Fleming’s attitude of mind, and into which he was contentedly re-absorbed on his return. What attracts Waugh in *Brazilian Adventure* is the portrait of Pingle, the false leader who effectively leaves Fleming to die in the interior, having impounded his mail, money and revolver. Pingle is like a malicious and cowardly Captain Grimes from *Decline and Fall* (1928), or Youkoumian from *Black Mischief* (1932), a chimerical figure offering hope of security and authority, who is simultaneously insecure, egotistical, governed entirely by self-preservation in the material world. “Where is Pingle now?”²² Waugh demands. And the answer is (metaphorically) everywhere apparent in his own writing. Pingle is ubiquitous as a totem of the failure of rationalism. Waugh, it seems, was intrigued by Pingle as the archetype of the con-man, just as he was intrigued by Jagger in “The Man Who Liked Dickens” (“Kakophilos” in the revised 1936 text), and the fraudulent magician not unlike Alastair Crowley in “Out of Depth” who transports Rip to the future wasteland. Waugh had met his own Fawcett in Christie, his own Pingle in Mr Bain and Dr Roth. Pingle, Bain and Roth, it seems, provided material for the creation of Dr Messinger in *A Handful of Dust*. The quest for the “sources” of that novel, then, might not lead us to Conrad but rather to a political Catholicism that sees the True Church as the only bulwark against chaos.

In *Ninety-Two Days* Waugh says:

For myself and many better than me, there is a fascination in distant and barbarous places, and particularly in the borderlands of conflicting cultures and states of development, where ideas, uprooted from their traditions, become oddly changed in transplantation. It is there that I find the experience vivid enough to demand translation into literary form.²³

This denotes a major difference between Waugh's writing and Fleming's. Where Fleming floats gaily through potential disaster on a raft of fashionable scepticism, what he encounters rarely throws into relief the parallel barbarities of his homeland. *Brazilian Adventure* is peppered with literary references but they are occasional decorations, showings-off. And in terms of developing a critique of the view from Western Eyes, Waugh is clearly closer to Conrad than to his contemporary. It might seem strange, then, that no mention of Conrad is made throughout *Ninety-Two Days* or *Remote People* (1931), Waugh's earlier travelogue detailing a visit to Africa, including a river journey on the Congo. But it is not strange. Waugh's cultural focus opposed Conrad's. Even if we suppose that Waugh *had* read *Heart of Darkness* at some stage (and, it must be admitted, there is one striking parallel in "Out of Depth," where Rip has his head measured with callipers), the fact of his refusing to acknowledge Conrad's work as an influence suggests an alternative interpretation to Dr Lobb's. Far from making *hommages* to Conrad, Waugh was rejecting him out of hand. Waugh's Congo journey was not one towards the heart of darkness and the fascination of the abominable. Rather it was an escape from cultural deprivation, an attempt to return to the security of Christian civilization, a critique of that aspect of his own culture which had abandoned the transcendental truths of Catholicism and settled for the absurdities of the material world alone or for half-baked mysticism.

In his public letter defending *Black Mischief* against Oldmeadow's attack, Waugh wrote:

The story deals with the conflict of civilization, with all its attendant and deplorable ills, and barbarism. The plan of my book was to keep the darker aspect of barbarism continuously and unobtrusively present, a black and mischievous background against which the civilized and semi-civilized characters performed their parts [...].²⁴

This might be said to characterise the structure of all of Waugh's pre-war novels after *Decline and Fall*, and although an aspect of this can be related to Conrad's scenarios, the basic proposition is quite different.

Where Conrad leads us away from the delusions and hypocrisies of Christian civilization (the “whited sepulchre” of Brussels in *Heart of Darkness*, the necessary lie to the Intended), Waugh has an implicit alternative ideology that is not subject to epistemological collapse. 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. Reality for Waugh is not the misty, shifting perspectives of Conrad’s impressionist existentialism, or even Marlow’s rivets (the attention to work as a salve to the agony of dissolution). It 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 (and here, as Dr Lobb suggests, Mme. Sosostriis from *The Waste Land* was a crucial image) are lampooned: black magicians, fortune tellers, Moslems, Buddhists, Anglicans. The priest at the mission is the only one who can rescue Rip. Tony Last’s watery Anglicanism cannot save him from madness and alienation. But by implication, it is possible to be saved, where in Conrad’s fiction it is not.

Dr Lobb therefore draws our attention to the concept of “civilization”: “[the] whole world is not civilized in the way Jock [Grant-Menzies] means, as Tony is about to discover, and ‘civilization’ in the twentieth century is an increasingly problematic term” (132). Indeed: and as “[t]his brings us to [...] Conrad, whose dismantling of ‘civilization’ resonates through all twentieth-century literature” (132), it is worth pausing here to discuss Waugh’s understanding of this term and its relation to the Gothic, humanism and Victorianism.

Shortly after his religious conversion in September 1930, Waugh wrote an article explaining his views on “civilization.” “In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” he wrote, “the choice before any educated European was between Christianity [...] and [...] a polite and highly attractive scepticism.” No longer. It had taken two centuries, he says, for people to realise the “real nature of this loss of faith” and the situation was now similar to that in the early middle ages where the choice was “between Christianity and Chaos”:

Today we can see it on all sides as the active negation of all that Western culture has stood for. Civilization—and by this I do not mean talking cinemas and tinned food, nor even surgery and hygienic houses, but the whole moral and artistic organization of Europe—has not in itself the power of survival. It came into being through Christianity, and without it has no significance or power to command allegiance. [...] It is no longer possible, as it was in the time of Gibbon, to accept the benefits of civilization and at the same time deny the supernatural basis on which it rests. [...] Christianity [...] is in greater need of combative strength than it has been for centuries.²⁵

Using this as the basis of his argument, he goes on to state that “Christianity exists in its most complete and vital form in the Roman Catholic Church.”²⁶ Aesthetic and spiritual values, then, were linked in Waugh’s mind and he was in the business of defending both through his defence of Catholicism, the essential focus for him of all these questions and the repository of transhistorical truths. Decline and fall were no longer the subject for jokes. “Civilization” had nothing to do with material ‘progress.’ Conrad’s brand of “attractive scepticism” led simply to anarchy.

In analysing *A Handful of Dust*, Dr Lobb rightly draws attention to the imagery of Victorian Gothic architecture, seeing this as an ironical structural motif. Three sections of the novel are, after all, entitled “English Gothic.” This Dr Lobb links to “the bankruptcy of what Waugh called ‘humanism’—the system of social restraints and secular moral codes severed from the Judeo-Christian tradition which gave rise to them” (132-33). This is fair enough as a ball-park generalisation. The devil, however, lies in the detail: the definition of “Gothic” and of “humanism.” If one is to use these terms regarding Waugh, one must also acknowledge that his understanding of them did not always tally with their generally accepted definition. The ‘Gothic’ and the ‘humanist,’ for instance, did not necessarily signify to him something negative just as the ‘civilized’ in contemporary liberal terms might not connote anything positive.

I have written at length about the Gothic motif in *A Handful of Dust*²⁷ and won’t repeat the argument in detail. The important point is that Waugh admired medieval Gothic and the early Gothic Revival in

Britain; he despised post-Ruskin Gothic. In the MS of *A Handful of Dust*, the Guide Book description of Hetton Abbey was carefully revised. "Hetton Castle" has been altered to "Hetton Abbey," "the Castle" to "the house," and "fine paintings" to "good portraits." In other words, Waugh was playing down the original conception of the house as some kind of Brideshead, a focus of aesthetic value. More interesting, though, is a passage which appears in the MS but which was presumably cut at TS stage: "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" (MS 19). In a letter, Waugh referred to instructions to the "architect," i.e. the artist, who had drawn the frontispiece aerial view of Hetton. Waugh had asked him to design "the worst possible 1860"²⁸ and thought he had done an excellent job. We cannot simply assume, as Dr Lobb appears to, that "Victorian Gothic" in general was anathema to Waugh as "the synthetic revivalist style popularised by A. N. W. Pugin" (131). In fact, Waugh was a great admirer of Pugin. The point is that Pugin's original conception had been appropriated by the corporate dullardry of Victorian architects, and that Tony cannot tell the difference.

Similar distinctions are necessary when discussing Waugh's use of the word 'humanism.' In response to Oldmeadow's attacks (he abused *A Handful of Dust*, too), Waugh determined to present himself unequivocally as a Catholic apologist by next writing a biography of an English Jesuit martyr and donating the proceeds to Campion Hall, Oxford. *Edmund Campion* (1935) opens with a gruesome image of the shrunken Queen Elizabeth I on the point of death and then tracks back through her thoughts to Campion's story. He is described as a brilliant young Oxford tutor in the heyday of Elizabethan material expansion when the University was emerging from the middle ages "into the spacious, luminous world of Catholic humanism." This world was made possible by the international connections of the Catholic faith. In these terms, Erasmus and Sir Thomas More were both humanists and both remained Catholics. This humanism,

however, was qualitatively different from the humanism of the Protestant reformers, of Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I. While the Church held “undisputed authority,” it could tolerate “a little speculative fancy in her philosophers, a pagan exuberance of taste in her artists.” Post-Reformation, however, it was “driven to defend the basis and essential structure of her faith.” This is what the book is really about: that, thanks to Campion and his fellows, Catholicism has remained “something historically and continuously English, seeking to recover only what has been taken from it by theft [...]”²⁹ And this is what *A Handful of Dust* is really about, although there is no mention of Catholicism in the novel beyond Tony’s brief interlude with Thérèse on the boat to Brazil, an incident Waugh rather regretted including as sentimental.

How can this be, and what does all this have to do with ‘English Gothic’ and humanism? It can be because Waugh was presenting a negative image of a purely secular world, or, at least, a world whose sense of theology was diluted by the humanism of the Reformers. *A Handful of Dust* started out, he told Lady Mary Lygon, as a book about adultery.³⁰ As it progressed, that theme broadened and sexual adultery (as in *The Waste Land*) became emblematic of other kinds of cultural dilution and fragmentation: the demolition of grand houses in London to make way for service flats such as the one in which Brenda prosecutes her loveless affair with Beaver; Tony’s (and the vicar’s) compromised, effete Anglicanism; the death of John Andrew and Brenda’s relief that it is her son rather than her lover who has been killed; Princess Abdul Akbar’s offering her sexual services to cheer Tony up. Throughout, the essential moral and social fabric of pre-Reformation Catholicism is seen to have disintegrated, and this is symbolised by Tony’s inability to distinguish between real Gothic, the artistic vitality of the early Gothic revival, and the fakery of Hetton. So when Waugh says in 1946 that *A Handful of Dust* “dealt entirely with behaviour. It was humanist and contained all I had to say about humanism,”³¹ he uses the term ‘humanism’ in the post-Reformation sense of rationalism in a secular society.

It is in this light that he also interprets late Gothic revival and the works of Dickens. Waugh, as we now know, was an avid collector of Victorian furniture and subject paintings, thought British painting had been in terminal decline since Augustus Egg, and had no time for Picasso or abstraction. In the light of this, we might have expected him to admire the great Victorian novelists. But he didn't. He thought them cumbersome sentimentalists deluded by the ideology of Progress which in Britain had been tailored round the dummy of flexible (and thus feeble) Anglican theology. Victorianism thus becomes a complex trope in Waugh's writing. In 1932, he delivered a radio broadcast clearly aimed at his father, Arthur Waugh, a figure of Pickwickian geniality to his colleagues, editor of the Nonesuch edition of Dickens, and Managing Director of Chapman & Hall, Dickens's publishers. It was in a series "To an Unnamed Listener" to which Arthur contributed the following week with "To a Young Man." Waugh's was "To an Old Man":

[...] particularly I should like to ask you [i.e. 'an old man'] what it must have felt like to live in an age of Progress. But that is now a word that must be dismissed from our conversation before anything of real interest can be said. I daresay that this comes less easily to you than to me because belief in Progress—that is to say in a process of inarrestable, beneficial change, was an essential part of your education. You were told that man was a perfectible being already well set on the last phase of his ascent from ape to angel, that he would yearly become healthier, wealthier and wiser until, somewhere about the period we are now living, he would have attained a condition of unimpaired knowledge and dignity and habitual, ecstatic self-esteem.³²

The argument against his father and Dickens, then, is an argument against Social Darwinism that seemed particularly absurd in the wake of the First World War and in the middle of the Depression. It is thus also an attack on the purely materialist construction of 'civilization.' But it is more than this. It is implicitly also an argument against the Reformation whose fragmentation of what Waugh saw as a sensibly coherent European culture had adulterated humankind's grasp on the supernatural as the real.

If we now return to the questions raised earlier, to the supposed influence of Conrad, the definitions of civilization, Gothic and of humanism, we might have a clearer perspective on the ideas that lay behind *A Handful of Dust*. One matter Dr Lobb deals with very well is what he terms the novel's "cultural amnesia" (141), and he goes on to quote a passage describing Jenny Abdul Akbar's London flat:

The Princess's single room was furnished promiscuously and with truly Eastern disregard for the right properties of things; swords meant to adorn the state robes of a Moorish caid were swung from the picture rail; mats made for prayer were strewn on the divan; the carpet on the floor had been made in Bokhara as a wall covering; while over the dressing-table was draped a shawl made in Yokahama for sale to cruise-passengers; an octagonal table from Port Said held a Tibetan Buddha of pale soapstone; six ivory elephants from Bombay stood along the top of the radiator. Other cultures, too, were represented by a set of Lalique bottles and powder boxes, a phallic fetish from Senegal, a Dutch copper bowl, a waste-paper basket made of varnished aquatints, a golliwog presented at the gala dinner of a seaside hotel, a dozen or so framed photographs of the Princess, a garden scene ingeniously constructed in pieces of coloured wood, a radio set in fumed oak, Tudor style. In so small a room the effect was distracting. (131, qtd 141)

Dr Lobb's comment on this extract is perceptive: "In its mixing of sacred and secular, this scene echoes Part II of *The Waste Land*, in which 'sevenbranched candelabra' are used profanely to illuminate a woman's dressing-table (ll. 77-85); in its embrace of high and low from various cultures, the deracinated jumble of 'fragments [...] shored against my ruins' looks back to the macaronic concluding lines of *The Waste Land* and forward to Tony's culturally and morally incoherent view of the City" (142). This makes perfectly good sense (setting aside the question of whether "fragments" can be "deracinated"). But it could have been so much more powerful an argument had closer attention been paid to the details of both texts.

A student once pointed out to me that Eliot's boudoir scene with its overblown decoration and sense of oppressive 'luxury' might not necessarily be describing the opulence of the Cleopatra figure. It might equally serve as the description of a brothel. She could be a

queen or a whore or both. Thus 'luxury' here becomes double-edged in the new and the old sense of the word. Indeed the whole section shivers with Eliot's sexual neurosis displaced by way of mock-heroic satire onto the socially dysfunctional. And the same might be said of Waugh's description which hinges, crucially, on that double-edged adverb "promiscuously."

Corrections to the MS suggest that he struggled with how to express his subject's libertinage, and in the following quotation, bracketed words represent deletions: "The Princess's single room was [heavy with perfume] [perfumed oriental promiscuity] furnished [with typically eastern] promiscuously [...]." ³³ From this it would seem that the original conception ("heavy with perfume") was even closer to Eliot's original. But it would also seem that, sensitive to Oldmeadow's accusations of licentiousness, Waugh was determined to avoid any hint of titillation. The resulting construction, however, is perfect, causing that crucial adverb to wobble etymologically and to suggest promiscuity both in sexual relations and in taste. The two discourses are related, interdependent. It is not simply that there is a jumble of high and low, sacred and profane. There is also an appeal to absolute aesthetic and moral standards, to "the right properties of things." The room is an assortment of contemporary popular art—the Lalique bottles (Art Deco), the garden scene of wooden mosaic (Edwardian English), the Tudor-style radio in fumed oak (an hilarious echo of the Edwardian fad for Tudor-style everything from suburban houses to new pubs to the notion of 'Elizabethanism' as essentially English)—with the detritus of the Princess's travels (the swords, shawls, mats, elephants, the Buddha). Everything is in its wrong place (the ivory elephants will crack on the radiator) and promiscuously distributed without discrimination. It is, like Tony's bedroom, a chaos of cultural signifiers but it is, also like Tony's room, the reflection of an infantile mind. And it is that sense of vulnerability which rescues the satire of both Waugh and Eliot from sneering. One might note that other Eliot reference to the "divan," recalling Tiresias's melancholy, empathetic overview of having "foresuffered" all that swims into his view

"[e]nacted on that same divan or bed."³⁴ Waugh's final euphemism is, again, precisely judged. To describe this scene as merely "distracting" is in one sense coyly comic, in another, tragic. Distraction—from the kind of intellectual suicide registered by the room, from the "right properties" of things aesthetic and moral, from the supernatural as the real—is what this mess signifies.

In Waugh's vision, as in Conrad's, the material is rendered phantasmagoric, and the phantasmagoric, real. But where Conrad, or rather Marlow, cannot distinguish between the lie and the truth, between the impression and the 'fact,' Waugh believes it to be imperative to do so. As Marlow approaches the heart of darkness, the Western certainties with which he began his expedition, melt; the very physicality of the world begins to disintegrate. In Waugh, Tony's nightmares in the jungle are both delusions and metaphors for the truth he could not face at home. In the famous hallucinatory scene quoted by Dr Lobb (136-37), the image of the Lost City dazzles our anti-hero with ramparts and battlements, music and something like a pageant. Dr Lobb's comment on this is, again, apposite: "This is a pretty, Pre-raphaelite dream—Hetton without problems, Camelot without adultery, the City of God without Doctrine, all imposed upon an alien culture about which Tony knows nothing. The sacred is mixed with the profane, the familiar with the exotic, and belief is irrelevant in this sentimental vision of the ideal" (137). The argument is that Tony, like Marlow and Kurtz, has his moment of revelation on realising that "There is no city," albeit during his delirium and with no textual guarantee that he remembers this when recovered. But this is somehow unsatisfactory if the conclusion is that, because "Like Kafka's baffled protagonists, Tony undergoes his trials without any sense of their meaning" (137), the revelation of meaninglessness can be aligned to that in *Heart of Darkness*. It is unsatisfactory because it fails to acknowledge a level of irony implicit in the Catholic consciousness that produced this work. It is not that there is no City. It is merely that Tony's essentially secular mind can only conceive of it in terms of "a pretty, Pre-Raphaelite dream."

It might amuse readers to learn that the scene in question appears to have been partially borrowed from Fleming rather than from Conrad:

I fell asleep, to dream that, in the office of that august weekly journal [the *Spectator*] from which it was now certain that I should outstay my leave, I was commissioning Miss Ethel M. Dell (who wore, I noticed, a beard) to write an obituary of Major Pingle. I said that I was authorised to offer her a pyjama jacket and two metres of tobacco: not more. "Not more," I kept repeating, until she took offence and changed into the Headmaster of Eton.³⁵

Waugh does much more with it, of course. Where Fleming is dozing off contentedly, the account of Tony's delusions hovers painfully between farce and nightmare. But the correspondence is striking and it might just be possible that Waugh was parodying Fleming here, his literariness, his boyish enthusiasm, the regression to the childhood figure of authority, the headmaster of Eton, who seems to have appeared in order to reprimand offensive behaviour towards women.

More interesting as a parallel, though, is a passage from *Ninety-Two Days*:

Already in the few hours of my sojourn there, the Boa Vista of my imagination had come to grief. Gone, engulfed in earthquake, uprooted by a tornado and tossed sky-high like chaff in the wind, scorched up with brimstone like Gomorrah, toppled over with trumpets like Jericho, ploughed like Carthage, bought, demolished and transported brick by brick to another continent as though it had taken the fancy of Mr Hearst; tall Troy was down.³⁶

Set this alongside a much-quoted passage from *A Handful of Dust*:

A whole Gothic world had come to grief ... there was now no armour glittering through the forest glades, no embroidered feet on the green sward; the cream and dappled unicorn had fled ...³⁷

Waugh is surely not mocking himself in the first extract, although the mock-heroic narrative of fiasco and anti-climax was very much in the 'modern' style of travel writing. Fleming does it all the time. These texts persistently make copy from nothing happening, predicted

delights and solaces failing to materialise. The “tall Troy” reference comes (slightly mangled) from D. G. Rossetti, the subject of Waugh’s first book and something of an aesthetic hero. It would be easy to read the *Ninety-Two Days* passage as an overdone joke or simply as pompous. But it might be as well to recall, while we are in the business of restoring historical context to the novel, that it was the first in which Waugh dealt directly with the most painful event in his life, and the one which led to his becoming a Catholic: the desertion of his first wife.

Waugh knew only too well the sense of utter desolation felt by Tony who “had got into the habit of loving and trusting Brenda,”³⁸ and *A Handful of Dust*, like *Brideshead Revisited*, is an unusually personal book for Waugh. It may be “about the cost of idealism and the futility of nostalgia,” but it is also about the need for idealism and the writer’s nostalgia for a world in which it once existed. When Evelyn Gardner left Waugh, his sense of the collapse of the known world was exactly like Tony’s. “I did not know,” he wrote to Harold Acton at the time, “it was possible to be so miserable & live but I am told that this is a common experience.”³⁹ His novel translates the banality of that experience into something both epic and uniquely painful but also temporary and farcical *sub specie aeternitatis*. It speaks of how it is possible to be so miserable and still to live.

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, the Queen of the Sciences as it was known in Campion’s day. When Waugh explained that *A Handful of Dust* said all he had to say about humanism, he quickly moved on to speak of *Brideshead*. The former, he remarked, used to be his favourite. No longer. *Brideshead* was “vastly more ambitious.” Why? Because it demonstrated “a preoccupation with style and the attempt to represent man more fully, which, to me, means only one thing, man

in his relation to God."⁴⁰ It was no more popular a view of literary aesthetics in 1946 than it is now. Edmund Wilson promptly withdrew his support and critics talk of Waugh's faith as an enabling myth, like his idea of the British aristocracy, as an embarrassment when dealing with an otherwise brilliant observer of human folly. But there his faith is, and it is there by implication as much in *A Handful of Dust* as it is explicit in his post-war fiction. It is legitimate to detect parallels between any literary works to demonstrate elements of the *zeitgeist*. It is a different order of debate to detect the influence of one work on another where no influence is recorded in literary history. Here we are in the realms of deconstruction rather than of new historicism, and Dr Lobb's essay appears not to embrace the sliding signifier with enthusiasm. Does this mean that it is a 'bad' essay, misinformed, naïve? Not a bit of it. It is lively, fluently written and astutely argued. As with all engaging criticism battling to make connections, its great virtue is that it prompts discussion.

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NOTES

¹"Why the Man Who Loved Dickens Reads Dickens Instead of Conrad: Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*," *Novel* 13.2 (1980): 171-87.

²*The Picturesque Prison: Evelyn Waugh and His Writing* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1983).

³"Evelyn Waugh and the Upper-Class Novel," *Critical Essays on Evelyn Waugh*, ed. James F. Carens (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987).

⁴*Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years: 1903-1939* (London: Dent, 1986; New York: Norton, 1987) 267.

⁵*The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh* (London: Methuen, 1983). Cited hereafter as *EAR*.

⁶*A Catalogue of the Evelyn Waugh Collection At the Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin* (Troy, NY: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1981).

⁷Robert Murray Davis, Paul A. Doyle, Donat Gallagher, Charles E. Linck, and Winnifred M. Boggards, eds., *A Bibliography of Evelyn Waugh* (Troy, NY: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1986).

⁸"The Man Who Liked Dickens," *Hearst's International* combined with *Cosmopolitan* Sept. 1933: 54-57, 127-30.

⁹"Out of Depth—An Experiment Begun in Shaftesbury Avenue and Ended in Time," *Harper's Bazaar* Mar. 1933: 46-48, 106.

¹⁰"Fan-Fare," *Life* 8 Apr. 1946; repr. *EAR*, 300-04, 303.

¹¹See Mark Amory (ed.), *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980) n1, 88-89. Cited hereafter as *Letters*.

¹²*Letters* 88.

¹³"Mr Waugh's Cities," *Encounter* 15 (Nov. 1960): 63-66, 68-70. Waugh replied to this essay: "Evelyn Waugh Replies," *Encounter* 15 (Dec. 1960): 83: "Your review [sic] [...] imputes to me the absurd and blasphemous opinion that divine grace is 'confined' to the highest and lowest class."

¹⁴Peter Fleming, *Brazilian Adventure* (London: Cape, 1933; repr. World Books, 1940) 98.

¹⁵Fleming 18, 26.

¹⁶Fleming 9.

¹⁷"Mr Fleming in Brazil," *Spectator* 11 Aug. 1933: 195-96; repr. *EAR* 136-38.

¹⁸*Ninety-Two Days: The Account of a Tropical Journey Through British Guiana and Part of Brazil* (London: Duckworth, 1934; New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1934).

¹⁹Letter to Henry Yorke [May 1933], *Letters* 71.

²⁰*Tablet* 7 Jan. 1933: 10. The *Tablet* was an official organ of the Catholic faith, the personal property of the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, and to have his good faith impugned there (and in an editorial rather than a book review) shocked and infuriated Waugh. See *The Early Years* 336-42.

²¹"Mr Fleming in Brazil," *EAR* 137.

²²"Mr Fleming in Brazil," 138.

²³*Ninety-Two Days* 13-14.

²⁴"An Open Letter to His Eminence the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster," written 1933, first published in *Letters* 72-78, 77.

²⁵"Converted to Rome [...]," *Daily Express* 20 Oct. 1930; *EAR* 103-05, 103-04.

²⁶"Converted to Rome [...]," 104.

²⁷*The Early Years* 380-82.

²⁸Letter to Tom Driberg [Sept. 1934], *Letters* 88.

²⁹*Edmund Campion: Jesuit and Martyr* (London: Longman, 1935) 13, 14, 54.

³⁰*Letters* 84.

³¹"Fan-Fare," *EAR* 304.

³²"To an Unnamed Old Man," Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Texas, TS, 1-2.

³³MS 55.

³⁴T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922), "III. The Fire Sermon," 243-44.

³⁵*Brazilian Adventure* 202.

³⁶*Ninety-Two Days* 120.

³⁷*A Handful of Dust* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1934; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951 and 1966) 151.

³⁸*A Handful of Dust* 125.

³⁹Sept. 1929, *Letters* 38.

⁴⁰"Fan-Fare," *EAR* 302.