

## A Question of Influence and Experience: A Response to Edward Lobb\*

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Edward Lobb's stimulating essay is a welcome addition to the criticism concerning Evelyn Waugh's fourth novel, *A Handful of Dust* (1934), thought by many to be his best. While some reviewers felt that the book contains "an uneasy mixture of realism and symbolism," Professor Lobb suggests that "many of these difficulties disappear when *A Handful of Dust* is read in terms of its cultural allusions and references to other writers, particularly Conrad and Eliot" (130). Citing Jerome Meckier's essay "Why the Man Who Liked Dickens Reads Dickens Instead of Conrad: Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*" (1980), Professor Lobb disagrees with Professor Meckier's conclusion that "Waugh connects Dickens with Conrad and satirizes both as instances of that recurring aberration which relies on the innermost humanity of man and accepts as irrevocable a secularized world" (Meckier 187). Instead, Professor Lobb argues, Waugh appreciated Conrad's "clear-eyed recognition that the twentieth century could not long maintain the fiction of moral values without a basis in belief," and the authors' agreement "makes the extended reference to *Heart of Darkness* in *A Handful of Dust* largely sympathetic" (136). An authority on T. S. Eliot, Professor Lobb finds that *A Handful of Dust* is "sympathetic to Eliot's depiction of spiritual quest [in *The Waste Land*] but blackly comic in its depiction of the protagonist and his fate" (138). Waugh's hero, Tony Last, "joins an expedition to find a lost city in Brazil, and, when the expedition goes disastrously wrong, is rescued and captured by the illiterate Mr. Todd, who forces him to read aloud the novels of Dick-

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\*Reference: Edward Lobb, "Waugh Among the Modernists: Allusion and Theme in *A Handful of Dust*," *Connotations* 13.1-2 (2003/2004): 130-44.

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

ens over and over" (Lobb 130-31). Thus, Professor Lobb concludes, *A Handful of Dust* fits into

the pessimistic modern tradition of cultural analysis of which Conrad and Eliot were the most brilliant representatives [...]. Tony's fate in the jungles of Brazil is not [...] an aberration in an otherwise realistic novel, but a macabre and allusive image of humanism's dead end and a tribute to two of Waugh's literary fathers. (143)

The resolution of *A Handful of Dust* remains a subject of critical debate. Shortly before Professor Lobb's essay appeared, Jonathan Greenberg published "'Was Anyone Hurt?' The Ends of Satire in *A Handful of Dust*" (2003). Professors Greenberg and Lobb both defend Waugh's choice of an ending by drawing on other writers. Professor Lobb characterizes Waugh as the heir of a literary tradition, while Professor Greenberg invokes Sigmund Freud and his idea of the uncanny: "a psychoanalytic reading can help not only to establish thematic parallels between two parts of the novel, but also to explain why Waugh's novel breaks out of the confines of the drawing room, literally and figuratively" (362). Both Greenberg and Lobb cite the objections of Waugh's friend Henry Yorke: that the "fantastic" ending "throws the rest out of proportion," that Waugh is "mixing two things together," and that readers are left "in phantasy with a ph" (Lobb 134). Professors Greenberg and Lobb also quote parts of Waugh's response: he agreed that the ending is "fantastic" but wanted "to bring Tony to a sad end" and "made it an elaborate & improbable one." Tony's fate fulfilled Waugh's "scheme [of] a Gothic man in the hands of savages" (*Letters* 88). I would also defend the ending of *A Handful of Dust* with two additional arguments, both suggested by Waugh himself.

First, Henry Yorke, who published novels under the pseudonym Henry Green, was not the most likely person to appreciate Waugh's fantasy. As Waugh wrote to Yorke, "the savages [...] appear fake to you largely because you don't really believe they exist" (*Letters* 88). James Gindin observes that Green's novels "suggest no transforma-

tions" (133), with their "deliberate limitations of perspective and subject matter" (135); Green's characters, moreover, are "reluctant to move or travel" (150). No wonder Yorke disapproved of Tony's sudden journey to South America and his imprisonment by an illiterate maniac.

Second, Waugh had a scheme for the novel. As Tony moves closer to his improbable fate, Waugh prepares his readers to accept it. Once he has gone into the bush, Tony comes down with fever. Delirious, he recalls most of the characters and events referred to in the previous 200 pages, and combines them in ways that can only be described as uncanny. At the end of chapter V, "In Search of a City," Tony imagines that he sees "the ramparts and battlements of the City" and that he hears "trumpets [...] sounding along the walls, saluting his arrival" (*Handful* 233). Professor Lobb quotes this passage at length, and contrasts Tony with Conrad's Marlow. I would add that by the time Tony stumbles into the hands of his captor, the readers are prepared for anything. Though our reasons differ, Professors Greenberg, Lobb and I agree that Waugh's ending is justified.

The editor of Waugh's essays, Donat Gallagher, believes that placing Waugh in literary and cultural contexts is the most important task ahead in Waugh studies. Professor Lobb's essay is quite useful in this respect, as it explains Waugh's relationship with Conrad and Eliot. To Waugh specialists, however, it seems unlikely that *A Handful of Dust* is in part a reaction to *Heart of Darkness*. One of Waugh's biographers, Martin Stannard, points out that there is "no evidence of Waugh's having read *Heart of Darkness*" (267), a statement that Douglas Lane Patey confirms (101). In February 1931, Waugh visited the Congo and found conditions much like those described in *Heart of Darkness*. He kept a diary and wrote a book about his travels, *Remote People* (1931), but he never refers to Conrad (*Diaries* 351-53; *Waugh Abroad* 349-64). In late 1932 and early 1933, moreover, Waugh made a journey to South America like that of Tony Last in *A Handful of Dust*, described in his *Diaries* (354-85) and a travel book, *Ninety-Two Days* (1934). In British Guiana, Waugh stayed with a crazed rancher named Christie (*Waugh*

*Abroad* 431-36), and Waugh sensed "how easily" Christie could have kept him as a prisoner (*Essays* 303). Three weeks later in Brazil, Waugh wrote a short story, "The Man Who Liked Dickens" (1933), which became the penultimate chapter in *A Handful of Dust* (*Diaries* 371-72). In 1946, Waugh wrote that he had "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" (*Essays* 303). In 1949, Waugh wrote that he did not read Conrad "often or with any great enjoyment" (Doyle 10).

Since the origins of *A Handful of Dust* are well known, there is no need to repeat them, except to dispel the impression that the novel is largely derived from other literature. According to Professor Lobb, the similarities between *Heart of Darkness* and *A Handful of Dust* are "obvious enough," as they both include "an encounter with a sinister, possibly mad European who tyrannizes over the natives" (132). In *A Handful of Dust*, however, Tony asks his captor, Mr. Todd, if he is English. Mr. Todd replies that his "father was—at least a Barbadian," but his "mother was an Indian" (239). Whereas Mr. Kurtz is European, Mr. Todd is a colonial of mixed race; like Mr. Christie, whose face had, according to Waugh, "unmistakable negro structure" (*Waugh Abroad* 432-33). An Indian mother was more appropriate for the novel, because she taught her son that there is "medicine for everything in the forest" (*Handful* 239). Thus Mr. Todd is not only able to help Tony recover from fever, but is also able to knock Tony unconscious for two days, so that Tony evades the search party that is looking for him. Even if Waugh had read *Heart of Darkness*, the many differences between the two books weaken the case for Conrad's influence.

Professor Lobb, however, misses one opportunity to strengthen his case. He uses the 1964 revised edition of *A Handful of Dust*, as Robert Murray Davis does in *Evelyn Waugh, Writer* (1981). This edition includes, "as a curiosity," an "alternative ending" written by Waugh for the version of the novel serialized in *Harper's Bazaar*. Since "The Man Who Liked Dickens" had already appeared as a short story, the magazine insisted on a different resolution ("Preface," *Handful*). In the

alternative ending, Tony never meets Mr. Todd: he returns to England and keeps the flat his wife used to commit adultery, presumably because Tony is arranging his own acts of infidelity. According to Professor Lobb, Waugh sees “the Conradian alternatives—nihilism or the lie—[as] responses to the loss of religious faith” (136). Marlow lies to Kurtz’s Intended at the end of *Heart of Darkness*, but Tony’s life at Hetton Abbey in *A Handful of Dust* is an example of “the *unconscious* lie (Dickensian sentiment and/or the belief that moral values are self-evident),” which “encourages passivity and drift” (Lobb 136). Professor Lobb considers Tony “[e]motionally and mentally incapable of nihilism or of real faith” (136); but, in the alternative ending, Tony embraces nihilism, bent on the same sort of behavior that has caused his wife’s pregnancy. The two endings of *A Handful of Dust* correspond to the Conradian alternatives of nihilism or the lie, though the case for Conrad’s influence remains only circumstantial.

Professor Lobb’s case for Eliot’s influence on *A Handful of Dust* is stronger, and he makes a number of intriguing points that I can only gloss. According to Professor Lobb, “the relationship of Brenda and Tony throughout *A Handful of Dust* is intended to refer thematically to the impotent-king motif and dramatically to the weak husband/strong wife scenes in *The Waste Land*” (138). It is perhaps worth adding that Brenda and her sister Marjorie were before marriage known as “the lovely Rex [‘king’] sisters” (*Handful* 44). Professor Lobb suggests that Tony’s quest to find “the City” stems from the same theme in *The Waste Land* (142). When Tony enters Mr. Todd’s ranch and imagines himself at last in the City, Professor Lobb describes the scene as a “pretty, Pre-Raphaelite dream” (137) and provides an endnote: “Waugh wrote a book on the Pre-Raphaelites (1926), and the resemblance of this imagined scene to the pseudo-medieval landscapes of the school is not accidental” (144). Professor Lobb’s connection is astute, but he is too generous to call *P. R. B.* a book. Waugh’s subtitle is accurate: *An Essay on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, 1847-1854*, privately printed in a tiny edition of 25 pages. There is more evidence of Waugh’s abiding interest in the Pre-Raphaelites, such as his first real

book, *Rossetti: His Life and Works* (1928), or his eventual acquisition of Pre-Raphaelite paintings: Rossetti's *Spirit of the Rainbow*, Holman Hunt's *Oriana*, and "a version of *The Woodman's Child* by Arthur Hughes" (Hastings 532). *Ninety-Two Days* also has a Pre-Raphaelite quality: Waugh imagines that the object of his journey, Boa Vista in Brazil, is a city of "fountains and flowering shrubs," with "dark beauties languorous on balconies" (*Waugh Abroad* 459). When the city turns out to be only a "ramshackle huddle of buildings" (*Waugh Abroad* 456), the Boa Vista of Waugh's imagination is "toppled over with trumpets like Jericho" (*Waugh Abroad* 459). Waugh's own journey to Boa Vista clearly inspired Tony Last's quest and realization that "There is no City" (*Handful* 238), though Waugh himself had followed Colonel P. H. Fawcett and Peter Fleming. In 1925, Fawcett went to Brazil to find a lost city and disappeared; Fleming tried to find Fawcett and wrote about the experience in *Brazilian Adventure* (1933). *The Waste Land* may have stimulated Waugh's interest in the quest for the City, but the poem was only one of several influences.

In his letter to Henry Yorke, Waugh explains that the ending of *A Handful of Dust* is "a 'conceit' in the Webster manner" (*Letters* 88). Professor Lobb does not quote this remark, but it may be another link to *The Waste Land*. In his notes, Eliot refers three times to John Webster, twice to his tragedy *The White Devil*. Shakespeare merits only two references, both to *The Tempest* (Eliot 47-54). Perhaps Eliot was responsible for Waugh's interest in Webster.

After quoting the end of *The Waste Land*, Professor Lobb observes that "Waugh ends *A Handful of Dust* in similarly equivocal fashion" (140). With Tony presumed dead, his cousins inherit his estate, and

cousin Teddy is Tony reborn, complete with illusions and devotion to Hetton; the cycle is set to begin again. But the poor cousins are more enterprising than Tony, and Teddy has chosen the famously uncomfortable "Galahad" as his bedroom (253). Perhaps, like his namesake, he will be a faithful questing knight and find the Grail; perhaps Last will be a verb, not an adjective, and the family will endure. As in Eliot, the reader's decision about the ending says much about his or her spiritual outlook. (Lobb 140)

This reading is unusually hopeful; Professor Meckier, for instance, sees the end of the novel as a “downward spiral,” a combination of “purposelessness and unstoppable descent” (187). The prospects at Hetton seem bleak. On the morning of Tony’s memorial service, “the clock chimed for the hour and solemnly struck fourteen.” The servants have been reduced to a “skeleton staff,” and the dining room and library have been “added to the state apartments which were kept locked and shuttered” (*Handful* 250). Nevertheless, Waugh’s early novels generally conclude in ominous but ambiguous ways, and Professor Lobb does well to counter the often lugubrious interpretations of *A Handful of Dust*.

Although I do not believe that everything in Waugh’s fiction can be explained by his life and nonfiction, I do believe it is essential to be familiar with Waugh’s life and nonfiction when interpreting his fiction. By focusing on Waugh’s relationship with Conrad and Eliot, Professor Lobb has provided a fresh interpretation of *A Handful of Dust*. I am doubtful about Waugh’s debt to Conrad, which is unsupported in biographies of Waugh, nonfiction by Waugh, and other sources. I would, however, welcome Professor Lobb’s reading of *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), a novel that includes a quotation from *The Waste Land*, another journey to South America, an allusion to Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, and a reference to a Pre-Raphaelite painting, Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience*.

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