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On the Sunday morning of his weekend visit to Hetton, John Beaver tells Brenda's fortune with cards.

Oh yes... there is going to be a sudden death which will cause you great pleasure and profit. In fact you are going to kill someone. I can't tell if it's a man or a woman... yes, a woman... then you are going to go on a long journey across the sea, marry six dark men and have eleven children, grow a beard and die. (36-37)

Brenda's response is: "Beast. And all this time I've been thinking it was serious" (37). In one sense it could not be more serious, for here, in typically refracted and grotesque form, is the novel in miniature, as well as the first in its menagerie of beasts. There is John Andrew's death, from which Brenda profits, or thinks she will profit, in her decision to leave her husband and her home; there is Tony's resultant long journey across the sea and later "stiff growth of beard" (173); there is Mr Todd's profligate and bigamous fathering of "most of the men and women" on his savannah (212); and there is Tony's presumed death and his actual living death. Here, too, is the first of the novel's skilfully patterned instances of card-games and fortune-telling (merging with the beast motif in the game of Animal Snap played out at the novel's centre), which derive from Madame Sosostriis in *The Waste Land* (1922), the text which Waugh evokes in the novel's title and epigraph.

Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* (1934), his fourth novel and widely agreed as his best, recounts the betrayal of Tony Last by his wife Brenda, bored after seven years of marriage and drifting into

adultery with the callow John Beaver. Tony's consequent refusal to play the expected role of guilty party leads to bitterly unexpected and cruelly ironic consequences at the novel's shocking end. This chapter will explore the relations between *A Handful of Dust* and its literary predecessors, in the realist as well as the modernist canon (Eliot, Conrad, Dickens, Flaubert). The first section will look at the range of ironic techniques deployed in the novel, their function and effect; the second section will consider the engagement of the reader's sympathies; and the third section will turn to intertextual and inter-canonical relations.

Waugh used the proleptic technique, as in Beaver's fortune-telling, locally and with more of a self-conscious shock-effect in his earlier novels. Notorious examples include the schoolboy Tangent asking "Am I going to die?" (*Decline* 71) after being wounded in the foot by a starting-pistol (he does) and Prudence replying "so you shall, my sweet" to Basil Seal's "I'd like to eat you" (*Mischief* 180) as they make love (he does). In *A Handful of Dust* these moments, rather than local and single, are multiple and cumulative and the effect is a more sombre inevitability, closer to the use of the technique in Shakespearean tragedy. So when, within half a dozen pages, John Andrew prays at church "Please God make me see the kill" (96), his father writes to his mother "I hope he doesn't break his neck" (101), his nanny says to him "You won't see any death" (102), and when he pleads to stay at the hunt with "there mayn't *be* another day. The world may come to an end" (104) – after these, the reader in effect knows that "John's fate was decided" (105) which are the words used moments before the catastrophe.

This is the first aspect of *A Handful of Dust* that calls for comment when thinking about its place in the canon. This chapter will examine its structural and formal intricacy, its extreme narrative economy, its highly patterned deployment of prolepsis, repetition, paralleling, juxtaposition and cutting-techniques (as in cinematic as well as dream-narrative), the wordplay behind the cool, understated surface of the prose (Mrs Beaver will "look about for another suitable house to split up"

(54)): in a word, its textural polish. For Waugh, issues of texture and structure were the key lessons from modernism, as he made clear in 1930: "Modern novelists taught by Mr James Joyce are at last realizing the importance of re-echoing and remodifying" (*Order* 83). The specific formal techniques, illustrated below in turn, have one end in common: to cause maximum pain for the reader. For instance, Mrs Rattery describes her elaborate solitarily played card-game as "heart-breaking" because of a "stubbornly congested patch at one corner", and this is a painful re-figuring of the congestion at the corner of the road that led to John Andrew's death six pages earlier. In the same heart-breaking game there is the "six of diamonds out of place" (112) and keen readers of early Eliot (as Waugh was) will connect that to the fortune-telling by cards in 'Fragment of a Prologue' where "the six" signifies "A quarrel. An estrangement. Separation of friends" (Eliot 125).

There's a ruthlessness about the deployment of irony in this novel that has analogues elsewhere in early Waugh but never to this relentlessness of effect, and it's a ruthlessness that corresponds to the ruthless plot and – in the nicest possible way - the ruthlessness of its characters. Images of eating and animality are threaded throughout, from Mrs Beaver, purveyor of chic, who "gobbled" her yoghurt, to Reggie St Cloud, member of the House of Lords, who spoke "blandly" and "ate in a ruthless manner" (7, 150, 149) . These are people who have learned what comes to Tony in his delirium: that it is necessary to "kill in the gentlest manner" (211). The textual ancestry of this depiction of well-mannered ruthlessness includes Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920), another bitterly realised social satire, where the tribal community of old New York expel their kinswoman by "taking life 'without effusion of blood'" (Wharton 201). The tribalism in *A Handful of Dust* is a harshly portrayed version of the Bright Young Things in Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930): here it's "Polly and Daisy and Angela and all the gang of gossips" (59). Gossip, for this tribal gang, is relayed by telephone, as in Polly's first question on the telephone after her party: "'Good morning, darling, what's the dirt today?'" (53) The Wharton novel, set in the 1870s, was probably the first to include the telephone as emblematic of modernity. The emotional impact of Waugh's novel, anticipated in this respect, but

only in a limited way, by *Vile Bodies*, is significantly structured by telephone conversations, examined in more detail below, and which together emblemise the impersonalised communication of modern man.

None of Waugh's early novels are long but many writers would have made this novel more ample, leisurely and discursive. This is a function of the extreme economy of the narrative voice. Ian Littlewood refers, in relation to narrator as well as characters, to the "refusal to be shocked, disoriented, embarrassed or involved" (14). The stripping back of scene setting, for instance, to the two word paragraph "Next morning" (124) after the horror of John Andrew's death enacts a kind of distaste for narrative itself in its usual elaborations. In the ancestry here is Eliot's 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' with the austere first lines of its stanzas, "Twelve o'clock", "Half-past one" (Eliot 26), as well as the two word paragraphs "He travelled" and "He returned" in the penultimate chapter of Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (*Education* 411). The moments leading up to John Andrew's death are introduced by the extraordinary words, "Then this happened" (105), which seem almost brutally awkward, as if refusing to play by the normal narrative rules. David Lodge writes of Waugh's "vision of... anarchy" remaining "objective – morally, emotionally, and (perhaps most important) stylistically" (5). The economy is developed from Waugh's earlier three novels but it has much more point and attack here, enacting a response to the stripping back of feelings, communications and human relations that the novel dramatises. Martin Stannard puts it well: the novel "documents nothing more assiduously than the inability to communicate or share experience" (Stannard 379).

One unsettling technique Waugh deploys in terms of economy is to exclude passages of dialogue which, in retrospect, the reader knows must have taken place and which carry crucial plot developments. Thus when Beaver returns after his visit to Hetton and casually tells his mother that Brenda "talked of taking a flat in London" (40) we feel betrayed in having to learn that through him. The same effect is achieved on New Year's Eve when, after Tony went home early from a party,

“Beaver and Brenda returned together in the back of a car” (64). Next morning Brenda tells Tony of her plan to attend lectures in London. This must have been hatched during those intimacies. *Madame Bovary* (1857) comes instantly to mind: that is, Emma’s notorious back of a carriage trip with Leon through the streets of Rouen and the spurious piano-lessons which then regularise their sexual liaisons. But the economy of Waugh’s narrative denies us access to what Flaubert allows his readers.

The narrative economy in *A Handful of Dust* extends to the issue of mere syntax and sentence structure. To the novel’s opening question (Beaver’s “Was anyone hurt?”) his mother replies: “No one, I am thankful to say”, said Mrs Beaver, “except two housemaids who lost their heads and jumped through a glass roof into the paved court. They were in no danger.” (7)

The syntax, and particularly the deliberate placing of “said Mrs Beaver”, which has the effect of relegating what follows to an afterthought, enacts the cruel indifference to housemaids, dehumanises them. It’s worth a moment to add that cruel indifference to maids and servants is not Mrs Beaver’s prerogative only: in one of the novel’s more casual details of plot, Brenda casually dismisses Grimshawe, her long-standing personal maid, in the middle of the 1930s slump, as soon as she acquires the flat. And the repellent Dan, in Brighton, repels because of his first statement, an order to the hotel staff: “Take em up and get em unpacked and quick about it” (140).

The answering of a question with “no one” is echoed thirty pages later when, this time, Beaver is the object of the enquiry. Brenda’s sister asks her “Who’s been to stay?” and Brenda replies: “No one. We had a friend of Tony’s called Mr Beaver last weekend” (41). We’re invited to compare the brutal indifference in the one example to the guilty evasion in the other, where the afterthought is a pretence: in terms of Brenda’s wilful indifference towards Tony and his feelings, the comparison becomes even more pointed. It is, after all, Mrs Beaver alone who realises that it was time Brenda

“began to be bored” (9). And as soon as young married women’s boredom is mentioned we’re taken to *Bovary* again: as soon as he meets her, Rodolphe recognises Emma’s boredom.

These two instances of “no one” proleptically point forward to the painfully repeated, almost choric refrain at John Andrew’s death: “‘It wasn’t anyone’s fault’, they said” (107). This follows the novel’s most famous sentence: “Everyone agreed that it was nobody’s fault” (106). Those last two words were the original title of *Little Dorrit* (1857), which Tony is about to read when we last see him. In the doctor’s words, “no one to blame, though” (107), which takes us to Emma Bovary’s suicide letter: “Let no one be blamed” (*Bovary* 282).

Two further syntactically strategic sentences provide an economical demonstration of the casually callous world of Brenda’s associates. “‘God, what a party’, said Marjorie, waving brightly to them all” (42). The second example has Brenda and her women friends returning from Hetton with the button-holes that Tony had been at pains to select, despite his distaste for them. As above, the adverbial phrase pretends to be a mere appendage: “‘My poor Brenda’, said Veronica, unpinning her carnation and throwing it from the window into the side of the road” (84).

The instances of proleptic patterning, to which we now turn, act like a kind of grip on the novel’s sub-structure, with the effect of making the protagonists seem trapped in the impersonal machine that is the novel’s form. At the start of the Hetton scenes Brenda, reading Tony the serial from the newspaper, catches him out not listening and says: “I *knew* it [...] I shall never read to you again” (20). This light joke has a long reach, connecting as it does to Tony trying to threaten Mr Todd with: “I have read for the last time” (218). It’s the clash of tones, reflected in the stiff attempt at formality in Tony’s language, which includes the quiet play on his own name, that is so jarring. The comic telephone exchanges between the drunken Tony and Jock and the resentful Brenda, though providing a fortunate excuse for her affair, are themselves anticipated by the scene in which Brenda calls Beaver after their first evening together, getting him out of bed and up and down two flights of

stairs just to say good night to him (“goodnight, bless you”), which he clearly resents (52). “Goodnight, you sweet” (60) is what Brenda later says on the telephone to Tony.

The much-celebrated mistaking of names at the novel’s heart where Brenda hears the news of John Andrew’s death and, realising that it is not John Beaver, says “Oh, thank God” and then bursts into tears (119) is itself proleptically prepared for, its impact thus sharpened further. With the news of the death on its way to Brenda, Tony says to Mrs Rattery: “with Brenda John always came first... naturally” (that last word is particularly loaded) and “she’s seen so little of John lately. She’s been in London such a lot. I’m afraid that’s going to hurt her” (110). Waugh is also at pains to prepare in a particular way for the scene, with important consequences for the reader’s sympathies when we hear that Brenda has “been worrying all day thinking [Beaver]’s had an accident” (117): it’s as if this goes at least some way to allow for her terrible mistake later.

Getting names wrong is a bitter joke hitherto associated with Jenny Abdul Akbar, whose predatory interest in Tony emerges as an indifference to learning his name (she calls him Teddy); furthermore she calls John Andrew Johnny-boy and later Little Jimmy. John Andrew says to her: “You are funny with names” (89). The sentence carries a sharp charge when his mother is funny with names in a very different sense. A further twist of the knife has Brenda herself, discussing Jenny’s efforts with Tony and John Andrew’s startlingly eroticised fascination for her, saying: “She’s got the wrong chap” (91). At the news of the death she gets the wrong chap. The childish slang, as always in Waugh, has bitter force, as in the chapter-heading ‘Hard Cheese on Tony’. “Nasty medicine” (212), says Tony, when Mr Todd, a father-figure, makes him take it; the childish slang is touching, as Tony then begins to cry, but it also returns us to Mrs Beaver and her gobbled morning-yoghurt, and saying to her son: “Heavens, how nasty this stuff is. I wish you’d take to it” (7).

In terms of repetitions, once we read that Brenda, in kissing, rubs against Tony’s cheek in “a way she had” (19) it becomes almost a matter of logical necessity that within thirty pages she will kiss Beaver

and rub against his cheek in “the way she had” (49), the shift from “a” to “the” quietly underlining the betrayal. In a perceptive article, Ann Pasternak Slater calls this an example of “the right thing in the wrong place” (Pasternak Slater 52). Brenda’s way of kissing is described as “like a cat” (19) and, later, Jenny proposes curling up in front of Tony “like a cat” (87). In terms of literary ancestry, Jenny has a “sharp red tongue” (86), is the only character who is heard speaking “sharply” (89), and is observed running her tongue over her lips while collecting melted butter. All this takes us to the cat in Eliot’s ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’ which “Slips out its tongue / And devours a morsel of rancid butter” (Eliot 27). The sharp red tongue and the predatory sexual appetite are vampiric, and in this way Jenny prepares us for the vampire-bats in the Amazon.

When the third chapter (‘Hard Cheese on Tony’) ends with the observation that Tony “had got into the habit of loving and trusting Brenda” (126) the expectation is that the phrase will be repeated, though that hardly prepares the reader for the incongruity of it being attached to Tony’s divorce lawyer, after the wounding understatement, “It was thought convenient that Brenda should appear as the plaintiff (On the novel and divorce-law reform see Lurcock in Works Cited.) The lawyer warns Tony that they must prepare for all contingencies, “for he had not had Tony’s opportunities to contract the habit of loving and trusting Brenda” (131). The endearment “my beauty” is used twice in his novel, and to my knowledge nowhere else in Waugh. Brenda says it to Beaver (60), thereby masculinising herself as Emma Bovary does with Leon whom she treats as a mistress; it’s a very painful repetition when Ben then says it to John Andrew (102), who says he likes Ben “*far* more” than his mother (25).

The paralleling technique can have a startling effect. There’s a provocative parallel set up between Marjorie’s malevolent and “very unrepaying” Pekinese dog Djinn (the name takes us back to Emma Bovary’s beautifully sleek and communicative greyhound Djali) and the benevolent but maligned Colonel Inch. Djinn is seen “gazing moodily at the asphalt”; he then “got lost and was found a few

yards away [...] staring at a shred of waste paper" (41). (Emma's Djali, of course, gets genuinely lost and disappears from the novel.) Colonel Inch would regularly lose his own hunt and be "found [...] morosely nibbling ginger-nut biscuits", "quite lost" and "staring about him in the deepening twilight" (101).

Reggie St Cloud and Therese de Vitre are bizarre reflections of each other. Reggie "carried his burden of flesh as though he was not yet used to it; as though it had been buckled on to him that morning for the first time and he were still experimenting for its better adjustment; there was an instability in his gait" (147). This "fat young man" (150), representative of all that is holding Tony down, is as it were transfigured into the 18 year-old Therese, representative of all that might, in a different kind of novel, set Tony free: she "had not long outgrown her schoolgirl plumpness and she moved with an air of exultance, as though she had lately shed an encumbrance and was not yet fatigued by the other burdens that would succeed it" (166). In a particularly unsettling way, Milly's daughter Winnie, dubbed by Jock "the Awful Child of popular fiction" (136), is a transfigured John Andrew of whom the doctor who attends after his death says he was "awfully fond" (107).

"Transfigured" is the word that is used for Tony's vision of the mythical City – "a transfigured Hetton" (164) – and trans-figuring becomes the structural principle driving the extraordinary pages that cut between the Brazilian jungle where Tony is in delirium and London, the un-transfigurable city, obstinately real, unlike Eliot's London, the "Unreal City" (Eliot 65). The cutting is done to cause maximum pain and, again, it's the economy of the method, the stripping back of the usual narrative baggage, that does the work. The cutting technique has been anticipated earlier in the novel by telephone scenes. On the first evening in her flat Brenda phones Tony, who has sent her flowers.

"It wasn't you, was it?"

"Yes... as a matter of fact."

“Darling, I did so hope it was... how like you.”

“Three minutes, please.”

“Must stop now.”

“When are you coming back?”

“Almost at once. Good night, my sweet.”

“What a lot of talk”, said Beaver.

Beaver had been “playfully” trying to disconnect this call (60). At the start of the disastrous evening in London a message from Brenda summons Tony to the telephone in his club: “Darling”, he said. “Is that Mr Last? I’ve got a message here from Lady Brenda”. (69) The “darling” who speaks is Beaver. After that drunken evening Brenda phones and Tony tries to get her to cancel one of her appointments:

“You couldn’t possibly chuck lunch or one of the lectures?”

“Not possibly, darling.”

“I see. You are an angel to be so sweet about last night.”

“Nothing could have been so fortunate,” Brenda said. (78)

And we realise with a jar that she’s then speaking to Beaver and the telephone has been put down; but we have no idea by whom or when.

The juxtapositions and cutting between Brazil and England have the sharpest effect once Tony develops fever. In the jungle “It was late afternoon when [Tony] first saw Brenda [...] But she did not answer him. She sat as she used often to sit when she came back from London, huddled over her

bowl of bread and milk" (195-96). This points forward to Mr Todd avoiding Tony's request for a boat to leave: "Mr Todd bent over the plate [...] but made no reply" (216).

The most jarring of these cuts comes when Tony in Brazil and Brenda in London are shown simultaneously crying, both helpless and alone. It is doubly poignant as the two of them are merged in a common activity, as if children bonded in a common misery ("lying there, wrapped in his blanket, he began to cry" (201)): as if truly together for the first and last time in the novel. The cut that then occurs is quite dazzling in its literalising of Tony's delirium: "Now at last she broke down and turning over buried her face in the pillow, in an agony of resentment and self-pity. // In Brazil she wore a ragged cotton gown of the same pattern as Rosa's. It was not unbecoming. Tony watched her for some time before he spoke." (202) It's as if the narrative is determined to be so scrupulously, gravely neutral as to be relinquished of its obligation to comment or evaluate at all. This is narrative as absence. In the light of our final example, another moment in *A Sentimental Education* comes to mind. "Now the mob was attacking the guard-house at the Chateau d'Eau, to liberate fifty prisoners who were not there" (*Education* 285-286). When Mr Todd finds the wildly delirious Tony the narrative observes: "Then he began to talk to someone at Mr Todd's side, who was not there" (210).

2

A Handful of Dust should be assessed by the extent to which Waugh is able to evoke sympathy from the reader not only for Tony but also for Brenda. The range of ironic techniques explored above may seem to preclude, for the reader, anything other than a sense of futility in a bleakly cold, albeit brilliantly executed and often wildly funny, cruel black comedy. A book written (first in Russian) just a year earlier, Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* (1932), another novel in the European adultery

tradition – man leaves wife and daughter for young schemer, daughter dies, he stays with his mistress, he eventually dies in grotesque circumstances – is just that, a cold and cruel black comedy in comparison with the Waugh and with the canonical Nabokov novels that followed it.

The issue of sympathy in *A Handful of Dust* is delicately balanced from the start. In the second chapter Brenda listens to Tony soliloquising about Hetton:

“It’s a definite part of English life which would be a serious loss if...” Then Tony stopped short in his speech and looked at the bed. Brenda had turned on her face and only the top of her head appeared above the sheets.

“Oh God,” she said into the pillow. “What have I done?”

“I say, am I being pompous again?” (21)

That last question is typically revisited when Tony asks Milly in Brighton “am I being a bore?” (140). Once Tony and Brenda have made up, the narrative adds: “(These scenes of domestic playfulness had been more or less continuous in Tony and Brenda’s life for seven years.)” (21) Brenda’s submerged cry is her Emma Bovary moment, her version of the anguished ““Why in the world did I ever get married?”” which Emma “would ask herself again and again” in her solitary walks with Djali during the first months of her marriage (41). For Brenda the sting in those delicately tonal brackets is the last two words that give a sudden and painful glimpse of her life – how she has been acting with what are later called her “pretty ways” (27) – for seven years. After “What have I done?”, and the clear sign that this is a question Brenda, like Emma, has asked again and again, and for so long, it comes as a surprise to read, in George McCartney’s well-regarded book on Waugh’s ambivalent relationship with modernism, the assessment that there is nothing in the novel “to indicate what Brenda may be feeling beyond a vague boredom” (McCartney 81).

Brenda is 26: she was courted by Tony aged 18 and married him aged 19. Mrs Beaver says “people used to be mad about her when she was a girl” (9) and her obtuse and sentimental mother says she was always “excitable” (130). Brenda talks of having given “girlish” speeches for the Mayor (20). There’s no mention of her father, beyond a mention of his name. The suggestion is that she has been indulged as the beautiful teenager (the more beautiful and the older of two sisters) and that this continues to be her role in her marriage. The reader sees no sign of her as a maternal presence for her son. Indeed, she sometimes seems hardly solid at all, which is the word used about her “more solid” sister (40); Mrs Beaver refers to her “very fair, underwater look” (9) and, in a remarkable parenthesis which again is tonal and shows the influence of early Eliot, she is “(a nereid emerging from fathomless depths of clear water)” (19). In contrast, George McCartney reads this as evidence of Brenda being “provocatively opaque” (McCartney 81). Elsewhere she is “fresh and fragile” (40), as if the second word naturally follows from the first.

Used to being indulged, courted, as if etherialised, she drifts into the affair with Beaver, on an impulse, as if as a game – “I happen to have a fancy for him, that’s all” (52) – a game in which she will play for once the dominant partner or parent, teaching both Beaver and Tony the rules as she goes along. She refers to Beaver as a “cub” (53) and calls herself, a year older than he, “an old married woman” (48). Beaver appropriately says to her “You are one for making people learn things” (78). In a telling instance of this new game it’s said that “Brenda had begun to forget how amusing [Tony] could be” (96). In effect, she’s a child with a new toy. After exhausting days in London she becomes a “waif” (40), a “Barnardo case”, and is pictured “nursing her bread and milk” (45), which is her son’s evening meal. At the news of John’s death she’s “like a small well-brought-up child introduced into a room full of grown-ups” (118). This has important consequences for our sympathies, especially when she is increasingly abandoned by Beaver and her friends - “It was August and she was entirely alone” (201) – and ends in despair and crying like an abandoned child.

Tony and Beaver are also not properly adult. Beaver lives with “mumsy” (7) and she easily persuades him (in effect) to leave Brenda. In a detail that comes close to eliciting some indirect sympathy for this “rather pathetic” young man (41), we hear of the objects in his bedroom, none of them really his, kept in “symmetrical order”, all of which “had stood in his father’s dressing-room” and all “suggestive of expensive Edwardian masculinity” (8). This is a mother’s-boy with an aggressively masculine father whose dominance he still, almost literally, lives under. In a very telling detail Beaver is said to write with “a large school-girlish hand” (63). His father’s objects are evoked again a few pages later when we hear of the parallel objects in Tony’s bedroom and the contrast has some poignancy: Tony has amassed objects “representative of every phase of his adolescence” (18). The list presented includes a photograph of Brenda and John after the christening, and this too is subsumed as belonging to a phase of his adolescence as if Tony is still in it.

The glimpses we are given of Tony’s early life, as the novel moves towards its ending – those bracketed fragments of memory, one of them nicely described by Valentine Cunningham as of “pre-lapsarian cycling holidays” (Cunningham 352) – have the effect of structuring our sense of Tony as still held within those moments. They increase our sense of his isolation, as if he is a victim not only of the plot and the ironic patterns explored above, but of his own past and, in particular, his own inherited pseudo-Victorian ideals. The two roles that betray Tony most painfully have been well described by Jed Esty in a fine study of modernism and national culture: “first as a manor house gentleman in the era of suburbanization, then as a would-be jungle hero in the era of imperial decline” (Esty 222).

Tony’s “madly feudal” attachment to Hetton (41), with his sense of “duty towards one’s employees, and towards the place too” (21), is (as the use of “one” suggests) also a kind of game that he has inherited from his ancestors, seriously felt, but one that has him “posing as an upright, God-fearing gentleman of the old school”. Brenda “teased him” on such occasions and “Tony saw the joke” (32),

but that's the role he plays and it's part of his pseudo-medieval and Victorian-Gothic refusal of real adulthood. That said, Stannard's description of this decent man, alone in the novel in being devoted to family and home, as "lamentably weak" seems, in the light of his principled refusal to play the role expected of him by Brenda's family, very severe (Stannard 381).

The bedrooms in the Victorian-Gothic Hetton have Arthurian names, and it's not difficult to see the ironic appropriateness of these to the protagonists who sleep in them, or to connect the Arthurian Grail-legend with Tony's medieval-inspired search for the lost City. But the most poignant detail has Tony returning to Hetton after the debacle in London and its chastening aftermath: "That night he went into Brenda's empty room to sleep" (79). The room is Guinevere where his parents were said to be "inseparable" (18). In effect, this is the sad little boy climbing into his parents' (empty) bed, from his own bedroom where as a child he was "subject to nightmares" (18). It also takes us again to Tony, alone, lost and sick in Brazil: "lying there, wrapped in his blanket, he began to cry", benightmared by a "constant company of phantoms" (201). And within a few pages he will enter his final nightmare with the last of what Jeffrey Heath in his important book calls "mimicking shadows" (Heath 46), a parent from whom he will never escape.

This sense of the protagonists being children, locked into their various games (Animal Snap the most telling miniature version), makes one ask if there are any proper adults among the protagonists. There is one, Mrs Rattery, dubbed the Shameless Blonde but a skilled aviator, horse-rider (she rides astride like a man, and earlier she joins the workmen stripping the ceiling), whisky-drinker and solitary card-player, detached, self-sufficient, benevolently indifferent and in a sense presiding over the novel as proxy-novelist. What follows is another very expressive use of parentheses.

(Mrs Rattery sat intent over her game, moving little groups of cards adroitly backwards and forwards about the table like shuttles across a loom; under her fingers order grew out of

chaos; she established sequence and precedence; the symbols before her became coherent, inter-related.) (111)

Mrs Rattery represents Waugh as novelist and, in the ironic way we can have expected, her literary ancestors include the ageless and sexless Tiresias presiding over *The Waste Land*, and the ominously knitting Fate-women at the start of *Heart of Darkness*.

3

Early Eliot in literary modernism and *Madame Bovary* in literary realism are the ancestors with which this novel seems most concerned to align itself. Dickens can be seen as a more anxiously felt literary-Oedipal father, with his novelistic roots in the Gothic. Waugh read or probably re-read *The Waste Land* and other early Eliot poems in 1926 and found them “marvellously good” (*Diaries* 242). In 1930 Waugh praised his friend Henry Green’s novel *Living* (1929) in connection with Eliot:

I see in *Living* very much the same technical apparatus at work as in many of Mr T.S.Eliot’s poems – particularly in the narrative passages of *The Waste Land* and the two *Fragments of an Agon*. (*Order* 83)

The second fragment has Sweeney saying to Doris “Yes I’d eat you” in a “nice little [...] stew” (Eliot 130). This is a source for *Black Mischief* (1932) where Basil Seal eats his lover Prudence – in a cannibal stew. And four years after the novel, Waugh is describing the streets of London as fit only to serve “as vast ashtrays for the stubs of a million typists” (*Order* 61), where the language is Eliot’s. But that disgust for raw humanity, pervasive in Eliot, sounds strident and unconvincing in Waugh: the instinctive sympathy that the novel finds for its protagonists in their suffering, explored above, is

where Waugh and Eliot diverge. This sympathy in the novel is what William Myers calls the “sudden intrusion of the human element”, and it’s a human sympathy that is conspicuously absent from *The Waste Land* (Myers 42)

Nonetheless, the novel’s title invites the reader to consider its world as un-regenerative, barren and dessicated, a world whose genie (Djinn) stares at a shred of waste paper, a world where Madame Sosostriis sees in her Tarot cards “crowds of people walking round in a ring” (Eliot 64) and the delirious Tony angrily objects that his (non-existent) listeners are “walking round in a circle” (211). It’s a world desperate for a sign, as in Eliot’s “We would see a sign!” (Eliot 39) and in Waugh’s choric “But there was no sign [...] But there was no sign” (198). There is no sign of a village, let alone a City to replace Tony’s lost Gothic world that had “come to grief” and from which “the cream and dappled unicorns had fled” (153). Eliot, desperate to “redeem / the time” had “jewelled unicorns draw[ing] by the gilded hearse” (Eliot 100).

The novel’s epigraph from *The Waste Land* (“fear in a handful of dust”) suggests a mortality-terror (ashes to ashes, dust to dust) and a more generalised intimation of terror as the only appropriate response to the attenuations, entrapments and anomie that Waugh’s novel articulates. This generalised terror was noticed by Waugh’s most astute early critic, Edmund Wilson, when he described it as “the whole motivation of the book but of which the characters are not shown to be conscious and upon which one cannot put one’s finger in any specific passage” (Wilson 143). The debt to Eliot also includes the novel’s relations with the earlier modernist *Heart of Darkness* (1902) which provides the epigraph for *The Hollow Men* (“Mistah Kurtz – he dead”) (Eliot 87). The Conrad novel stayed with Waugh through his career; its influence is also clear in the autobiographical *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957) where a journey on board ship turns into an allegorical journey into Pinfold’s dark inner demons. Jerome Meckier, among many other readers, links Waugh, Dickens and

Conrad together, connecting for instance Tony's shattering disillusion, his "epiphany" (Meckier 186), with Kurtz's last terrible words.

Mr Todd is a version of Mr Kurtz, as the names suggest (Tod is German for death, and Kurtz suggests curt or short: though Kurtz is very tall and Tony's death will be very long). Kurtz can be read as mere eloquence, a voice in a hollow body: "he electrified large meetings [...] He could get himself to believe anything – anything" (Conrad 104). Kurtz is in effect an embodiment of the performative principle, a "barren darkness" hidden in "the magnificence folds of eloquence" (85). He's very pointedly described as "essentially a great musician" (89). He's also like a novelist, one that could electrify large meetings with his eloquence (Dickens as actor, say): he is mouth as compulsive performance. Mr Todd is in effect an embodiment of reception theory, a "flagrantly Dickensian character [...] demanding to be feasted on Dickens to the end of his days" (Myers 45). Despite his parental power over Tony, Todd is also a grotesque return to the obstinately demanding Winnie, the Awful Child. As Jonathan Greenberg argues in a psychoanalytic reading, Todd is "infantile and needy; he demands to be read to like a stubborn child" (Goldberg 364): he is mouth as insatiable neediness.

Put another way, Kurtz is man as modernist emptiness and Todd is, as Douglas Lane Patey adroitly observes when noticing the "metaliterary turn" at the novel's close, an ironic representation of realism's "ideal humanist reader [...] whose emotional receptivity and sympathetic understanding" are "exactly what Dickens trusted would foster [...] moral amelioration" (Patey 123). But there is nothing morally ameliorated about the murderously insane Mr Todd. This issue has been most tellingly expressed by Jed Esty in terms of imperialism:

Waugh cuts right to the absurdity of a culture that is frozen into repetitions of a nineteenth-century identity disseminated to every corner of the planet. Last's fate as a zombified reader

captures one aspect of the British empire's legacy to English culture: a forced diet of the fetishized markers of a vanishing Englishness. (Esty 222)

The debt to *Bovary* is less easy to anchor in Waugh's biography but it seems clear that Waugh's ambitious fourth novel is designed to lock directly into the European novel's treatment of adultery as the master-plot of plots. The contention here is that the ambitiousness and distinction of this novel asks us to connect it not with others by Waugh (and any serious assessment of Waugh and the canon is hampered by what has to be recognised as the *Brideshead* factor – the sentimentalised Oxbridge snobbery of that novel signifying 'Evelyn Waugh' in the popular cultural imagination) but with two very different early 20th century novels, Wharton's realist *The Age of Innocence* (1920), satiric and edgily nostalgic, and Ford's modernist masterpiece *The Good Soldier* (1915), where adultery and a disappearing culture are subtly counterpointed in richly ironic narrative complexity. Writing his novel, Waugh knew how good it was and how different from his first three novels: "I peg away at the novel which seems to me faultless of its kind. Very difficult to write because for the first time I am trying to deal with normal people instead of eccentrics". (*Letters* 83)

"Normal people" reminds us of the Flaubertian ambition to realise, with sympathy as well as disgust, the sheer ordinariness of boredom and habit and the flight from them into fantasy and game-playing. The name Beaver itself seems chosen, not only as an ironic evocation of animals famous for building homes, whereas the gobbling Mrs Beaver – nicely described as "perpetually busy with a fretful rodent voracity" (Garnett 110) - looks to split up houses, but also as flickering wordplay on the word "Bovary". The connection with *Bovary* and boredom is clear from the start and there's a delicate allusion on the very first page. We hear of housemaids breaking glass while Mrs Beaver gobbles her nasty morning yoghurt with a spoon: this is an attenuated and impoverished version of the scene at La Vaubyessard in *Madame Bovary* where a servant breaks window-panes while Emma is in rapture "eating a maraschino ice [...] her eyes half-closed, the spoon between her teeth" (47).

Compared to the grand fantasies and voluptuously eroticized passions of Emma's early relations with Rodolphe and then with Leon, Brenda like, eventually, Emma finds herself "rediscovering, in adultery, all the banality of marriage" (*Bovary* 258). "But it was only Brenda" (181) is the response in the Beaver household when Brenda phones towards the end.

In emotional as well as socio-political and economic terms this is a world in "slump" (8), the word used in reference to Beaver's unemployability. When Beaver asks his mother to get Brenda a job and is asked why he replies "Just like everybody else, short of money and nothing to do" (180). This is not a novel that deals with the raw realities of the economic depression of the mid 1930s but there is a deft current of submerged reference to its human cost. Reading the newspaper to Tony at the start of the novel Brenda casually refers to "Two more chaps in gas ovens" (20): a historian of the period notes that "Home Office statistics in the early 1930s indicated that two unemployed men were committing suicide every day" (Stevenson 287). And in one of the novel's bleakest sentences, "All over England people were waking up, queasy and despondent" (19).

The novel of the 1930s is haunted by the search for the father, as exemplified, at the start of the period, by Henry Green's *Living* (1929), a novel that delivers, in idiosyncratic modernist brilliance and with sympathetic intensity, the raw realities of working-class lives (Jacobs 392-93). Towards the end of that novel, as a young couple are journeying to find the man's father, the woman's substitute-father is seen restlessly unable to read *Little Dorrit*.

Dickens' powerful indictment of imprisoned hopes, the dark heart of Victorianism, is the novel that Tony is about to read to Mr Todd after we learn of his now terminally imprisoned hopes. Dickens frames Waugh's novel, from Pecksniff, mentioned derisively at the start of the second chapter, to *Dorrit* at its climax in Brazil. Dickens for Waugh was, in effect, a signifier for his own father, Arthur Waugh, publisher of the Dickens novels for Chapman and Hall. Modernism and Eliot, as Stannard observes, were deployed by Waugh as "the language of reaction against his father" (82). Arthur used

to read Dickens to his family. Tony used to read to Brenda till she admitted it was “torture to her” (214). Tony used to read to his son. Mr Todd’s father used to read Dickens to him. But there are no functioning father-figures in *A Handful of Dust*. Reggie St Cloud, the “Head of the Family”, spends his time “desecrating” tombs (147). The Reverend Tendril is a comic irrelevance (and his niece’s motor bicycle was the catalyst for John Andrew’s death): in his most extreme delirium Tony is pointedly said to be “caught up in [...] tendrils” (205). So it is all too appropriate that the absent father is materialised as Mr Todd, father of “most of the men and women”, with Tony as the son, “the old boy” as the gang of women called him, tortured by having to read to “the old man” (212, 68, 214). And the novel that he is reading ends with a young couple walking in the streets of the City, “inseparable and blessed” (Dickens 688): free from prison, in love, and married.

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