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Introduction

Last Fall semester I had only a very vague idea of a thesis topic: with a broad interest in the conflict between romantic love and religion inspired in part by a summertime reading of Brideshead Revisited, I spent a few evenings sharing company with St. Augustine, Abelard and Eloise, and Julian of Norwich. My interest in serious religion was quickly satisfied. Soon after choosing to focus on twentieth century British Catholic novelists—Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, and Evelyn Waugh—I realized the extent to which my enjoyment of Waugh greatly surpassed that of all my other readings. Jabe, I told myself, if you are going to spend a year of your precious young time on a literature thesis, you had damn well better have fun. Evelyn Waugh it was.

His work is often noted for its contradictory nature. A devout Catholic, he was also somewhat of a misanthrope; across and within works he mixes bitter, hilarious satire with authentic, often quiet, human concern to a powerful effect that proves remarkably difficult to analyze. The distant narrator of many of his works and the romantic narrator of others both seem at odds with the public Waugh, a crotchety, outspoken conservative to whom critics often refer. Thus it was somewhat with the interest of finding a “new voice” in Waugh that I began my project. I did not find the voice I expected, but eight months, countless hours of reading and discussion, and many drafts later, my interest in the complex workings of Waugh’s work has only deepened, surely the sign of a successful topic choice.

While there have been numerous biographies of Evelyn Waugh in recent years,¹ with

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another due to be published in several months, there has been a notable dearth of full-length, or indeed even article-length, critical texts on Waugh’s work. This phenomenon can perhaps be explained in part by the seemingly autobiographical nature of his best-known novel, *Brideshead Revisited*, which was adapted in 1981 into an enduringly popular BBC miniseries and in 2008 into a full-length feature film. However, it is not only the popular imagination that seems to be captivated by Waugh’s life; numerous critics of Waugh attempt to understand his work through the lens of his biography, using details such as his conversion to Catholicism early in his career or his political writings and public statements to inform their readings of his novels.

The themes and qualities of Waugh’s novels are not easily unified across his career; the cynical work of his early career seem very much at odds with the sentimentality and overtly religious concerns of much of his later writings, of which *Brideshead Revisited* is the best-known example. Accordingly, Waugh’s career is often divided into two sections. The first section begins in 1928 with the publication of his first novel *Decline and Fall* and ends before the publication of *Brideshead Revisited* in 1945, while the second section begins with *Brideshead Revisited* and continues to the end of Waugh’s career, encompassing the historico-religious novel *Helena* and the Catholic war novels of the *Sword of Honour* trilogy. Attempts at reconciling these “two Waughs” recur throughout the criticism; many studies of Waugh as an author either read the later novels as representing Waugh’s “true concerns” and attempt to fit the early satires into this model, or dispense altogether with trying to unify the concerns of Waugh’s early and later works. According to James Carens, “in *Brideshead Revisited* Evelyn Waugh turned from the nihilistic rejection of his early satires to an affirmative commitment; to satisfy the other impulse of the artist-rebel, as Albert Camus has described him, Waugh affirmed a vision which

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he believed gave unity to life.” According to Frederick L. Beaty’s reading of *Brideshead Revisited*, Waugh’s “affirmative commitment” is a belief in God and Catholicism:

The chaos that surrounds [Waugh] becomes not only tolerable but meaningful as he views from a radically changed perspective a universe he once saw in ironic terms. Relativism, paradox, and indeterminacy give way before the conviction that an immanent, transcendent Deity is the ultimate reality.

Waugh’s enunciation of this positive credo marks a conscious turning away from philosophical irony— with its essentially skeptical vision—as the underlying world view for his fiction. The conclusion of *Brideshead Revisited* thus functions as an articulation of Waugh’s religious beliefs and a rejection of his earlier secular works; Beaty secures meaning in Waugh’s writing by aligning each novel with Waugh’s presumed personal philosophy.

In contrast, non-biographical criticism of Waugh often fails to find consistent themes or concerns across the novels. Michael Gorra articulates this phenomenon well in the following argument, which begins with criticism of Jeffrey Heath’s *The Picturesque Prison: Evelyn Waugh and His Writing*:

Like most of the explicitly Catholic criticism of Waugh, [Heath’s book] places too much weight upon his comic prefigurations of his later beliefs. Most treatments of Waugh as a satirist tend, similarly, to read his career backwards... A useful corrective to accounts of Waugh as either Catholic apologist or satirist is David Lodge’s argument in *Evelyn Waugh and His Writing*.

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Waugh\textsuperscript{6} that his early novels in particular contain “a mosaic of local comic and satiric effects rather than a consistent message.”\textsuperscript{7}

In this paper, I propose a different reading of Waugh: one that finds neither dogmatic affirmation nor disparate ingenious effects but finds rather the performance of a complex expression of the insecurity and energy of the modern world that disintegrates the traditional interpretation of Waugh’s work as strict ironic satire.


Chapter 1

Brideshead and the Wrecking Ball: The Unstable Structures of Evelyn Waugh

Virtually all critics writing about Waugh support in some way the argument that his novels are, at their core, structured around a binary understanding of the human world whose energy can be divided into two distinct and opposing kinds of forces. One example of this line of thought is the common interpretation of *Brideshead Revisited* as a novel about, as Frederick Beaty puts it, “the conflict between the material and spiritual realms.”\(^8\) Michael Gorra, similarly, sees in *Brideshead Revisited* Waugh’s “vision of the Roman church as civilization’s only defense against the terrors of the modern world.”\(^9\) In broader terms, Gorra argues, “his novels posit a world in which there are two clear and mutually exclusive alternatives, in which a character is either static or dynamic, Catholic or non-Catholic, innocent like Tony Last in *A Handful of Dust* or irresponsible like his wife.”\(^10\) Notably, Gorra’s articulation of this structure presents the specific qualities of Waugh’s binary oppositions as interchangeable pairs. The specific qualities mentioned—Catholicism, motion, innocence and irresponsibility—are defined as meaningful not because of the unique resonance of each within Waugh’s work but rather because each has an oppositional, partnered force against which it can be defined. To say that these different binaries can be reduced to a single model is of course an oversimplification—each binary mentioned above is present and significant in different ways in Waugh’s works—as Gorra himself realizes, but his grouping of them side by side in this way suggests the sort of reductive argumentation that drives much Waugh criticism.

Thus, Alvin Kernan’s discussion of the stone wall in *Helena* insists that the binary division in Waugh’s novel’s expresses the novelist’s understanding of human culture as a site of

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\(^8\) Beaty, p.165.  
\(^9\) Gorra, p. 201.  
\(^10\) Ibid., p. 205.
division, where order and meaning emerge from chaos:

While actual stone walls are not always present in Waugh’s scenes, the immaterial walls of culture are. The traditions, the social institutions, the ritual language, the buildings, the manners, the morals, the codes of service, the esthetic values, “all that seemingly solid, patiently built, gorgeously ornamented structure of Western Life,” are for the classicist like Waugh the walls protecting sense, order, and meaningful life from riot and savagery.11

Listing what he deems to be Waugh’s elements of society, Kernan emphasizes structure above all else. “Institutions,” “ritual,” “codes,” “morals,” here are all elements that unify and constrict diversity by providing models for how the entirety of society should behave; form and repetition are forces of stabilization. In contrast, “riot” and “savagery,” the forces to which Waugh’s culture is opposed, suggest violence and spontaneity; savagery in colonial terminology is defined precisely by its being Other, that is, different from a specific prioritized social norm. Separation, then, is the desired state of Waugh’s society: separation from what is Other—and thus chaotic and unknowable. In order to maintain itself, “meaningful life” must be entirely closed off from what is outside its defined boundaries.

These critics are not mistaken when they identify in Waugh’s work a binary opposition between order and chaos. Divisions of this kind are obviously present in the novels (although the categories they demarcate often overlap within and across novels), and Waugh’s satiric energy can certainly be read as a way of making apparent the conflict between these irreconcilably different forces. As Beaty writes of Waugh’s first, satiric novel Decline and Fall:

The series of riotous picaresque adventures that strip away Paul’s illusions about honor,
love, society, education, the church, the law, the prison system, and even human nature
details his fall from blissful naiveté to a painful awareness of evil. Although exposure to
the chaos of modern life forces him to question the behavioral codes of his stable, upper
middle-class background—precepts which he confidently assumed to be adequate and
appropriate for coping with any difficulties—the conflict between idealism and
dissillusionment is never wholly resolved.12

The force of Waugh’s satirical attacks on the amorality of modern culture in *Decline and Fall* is
read here as way of emphasizing the disparity between traditionally revered societal values and
institutions—“honor,” “love,” “the church,” “the law”—and the actual “chaos of modern life.”
Innocence, idealism, and the very structures of society itself are challenged by the modern world
in a conflict that manifests itself in the personal journey of the novel’s protagonist, Paul
Pennyfeather, across “idealism and disillusionment.” As Beaty recognizes, this binary conflict is
“never wholly resolved.” The novel’s satire is more concerned with describing and delineating
the processes of a broken society than it is with correcting them.

Certainly it is often in reference to the system of differences produced by the binary
division that individual elements of Waugh’s novels—such as characters or events—become
meaningful. Nevertheless, I want to argue here that critics have significantly underestimated the
complexity and ambivalence of the functions and effects of these binary oppositions. For while
such oppositions are crucial in generating meanings and structuring the novels, their stability is
regularly undermined as the novels unfold, a process that seems to have either been ignored or
underemphasized by most critics.

In this chapter I will discuss the presence of the binary division in three of Waugh’s

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12 Beaty, p. 32.
novels: Brideshead Revisited, A Handful of Dust, and Vile Bodies. Exploring both how these binary conflicts are central to these texts’ arguments and how these novels undermine those same crucial binaries, I will demonstrate that the works under consideration should not be limited to the context of Waugh’s supposed personal beliefs about society and religion. The three novels I will examine are usually interpreted as being concerned with the incapacity of modern values to maintain the stability of society and to provide personal fulfillment to the individual; the fixation of critics upon strict binary oppositions in Waugh’s work has supported these readings. However, by reading Waugh only within this binary framework we fail to recognize the full complexity of his work.

Jacques Derrida’s discussion of the problems of understanding human culture in terms of opposed binaries offers us a helpful point of view on the issue. In the following passage, he demonstrates the artificiality of the opposed definitions of “nature” and “culture”—generally understood to be mutually exclusive categories—by arguing that the incest prohibition Claude Levi-Strauss observed exists at once in both categories and in neither category, and thus dissolves the legitimacy of such binary categorizations:

Obviously, there is no scandal except in the interior of a system of concepts sanctioning the difference between nature and culture. In beginning his work with the factum of the incest-prohibition, Levi-Strauss thus puts himself in a position entailing that this difference, which has always been assumed to be self-evident, becomes obliterated or disputed. For, from the moment that the incest-prohibition can no longer be conceived within the nature/culture opposition, it can no longer be said that it is a scandalous fact, a nucleus of opacity within a network of transparent significations. The incest-prohibition is no longer a scandal one meets with or comes up against in the domain of traditional
concepts; it is something which escapes these concepts and certainly precedes them—
probably as the condition of their possibility. It could perhaps be said that the whole of
philosophical conceptualization, systematically relating itself to the nature/culture
opposition, is designed to leave in the domain of the unthinkable the very thing that
makes this conceptualization possible: the origin of the prohibition of incest.\textsuperscript{13}

The arbitrariness of the nature/culture opposition—and, indeed, all “philosophical
conceptualization”—is revealed by the observance of a node that resists this oppositional
categorization. In this chapter I will show the presence of such destabilizing nodes in Waugh’s
work, which challenge the traditional arguments about his novels by revealing from within the
insecurity and arbitrariness of their structures.

\textbf{Vile Bodies and Illusory Tradition}

\textit{Vile Bodies}, like many of Waugh’s novels, is built around a binary opposition between
modernity and tradition. Specifically, the novel describes the cultural conflicts of the “Bright
Young People”—as the party-going, morally disillusioned aristocratic youth of 1920s London
were called—with the generation of their parents, who struggle in the novel to maintain
confidence in their conservative values. This conflict between moral conservatism and modern
amorality is figured primarily in the novel through the binary division between stasis and motion;
the frenetic pace of the lifestyles of the young is repeatedly contrasted with their parents’ staunch
traditionalism. One of the novel’s two epigraphs, from Lewis Carroll’s \textit{Through the Looking
Glass}, alludes to the significance of \textit{motion} in the novel:

“Well in our country,” said Alice, still panting a little, “you’d generally get to
somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.”

“A slow sort of country!” said the Queen. “Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

Indeed, the novel consistently uses images of chaotic motion, beginning with a chapter about societal behavior during a stormy and tumultuous Channel crossing:

Sometimes the ship pitched and sometimes she rolled and sometimes she stood quite still and shivered all over, poised above an abyss of dark water; then she would go swooping down like a scenic railway train into a windless hollow and up again with a rush into the gale ...

“Oh,” said the Bright Young People. “Oh, oh, oh.”

“It’s just exactly like being inside a cocktail shaker,” said Miles Malpractice.

“Darling, your face—eau de Nil.”

“Too, too sick-making,” said Miss Runcible, with one of her rare flashes of accuracy.14

In this passage, movement is chaotic and directionless; the ship “pitches,” “rolls,” “swoops,” and “drops,” without ever seeming to progress. It is imbued almost with a terrible, violent life of its own—“like a terrier in a rabbit hole.” Even during the ship’s occasional moments of rest it shivers “all over” with tense energy. Juxtaposing the words of the Bright Young People with images of the boat, the novel seems to compare the chaos of their directionless lives with the turbulence of the ocean journey.

Similarly, the novel ends with a scene of the kinetic devastation of war, of “unrelieved desolation; a great expanse of mud in which every visible object was burnt or broken” (316).

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Critical interpretations of the novel often compare the chaos and horror of this battlefield to the moral, spiritual wasteland depicted in the earlier parts of the novel. Beaty, in the following passage, argues that this concluding scene of the novel is a figuration of Waugh’s primary argument in the novel about the threat posed to societal “coherence” by the moral disintegration of the modern age:

The last chapter of *Vile Bodies*, ironically entitled “Happy Ending,” represents the nadir of Waugh’s disillusionment with the society of his day ... As Adam, [the protagonist,] lost and forlorn, surveys the ruins of a gigantic battlefield, the values of Western civilization have suffered total collapse, and nothing in this modern wasteland has any significance or coherence. All norms seem to have been dissolved; and there are no longer contradictions to reconcile, judgments to suspend, or stands to take on any issues.¹⁵

In *Vile Bodies*, then, the chaos of modern amorality triumphs over tradition; the fact that this triumph occurs through an apocalyptic war suggests that the novel’s binary between the modern and the traditional exists specifically for the purpose of revealing the threat of modern values. There is not a single specific character that resists the binary definitions employed by the novel; rather, the binary is undermined through a series of individual textual moments in which representatives of ordered morality and tradition are consistently revealed to be as ignorant and as morally bankrupt as the Bright Young People.

Religious philosophy in the novel is embodied variously. Hypocrisy is presented by the cruel, rum-drinking, traveling American evangelist Mrs. Ape, whose urgings of repentance at one of Mrs. Metroland’s parties are unsurprisingly rebuffed, as well as by Mrs. Ape’s singing angels—Charity, Fortitude, Chastity, Humility, Prudence, etc.—who so rarely live up to their

¹⁵ Beaty, p. 66.
names. Religious confusion and opacity are personified in the Jesuit priest Father Rothschild, who as Terry Eagleton writes, “is offered as a centre of spiritual value, but a centre which is necessarily suggestive rather than realized, alluding obscurely to some privileged access to significant truths and inside information.” 16 His advice about politics, morals, and generational differences is insightful and correct, but utterly useless to himself and his colleagues:

“Wars don’t start nowadays because people want them. We long for peace, and fill our newspapers with conferences about disarmament and arbitration, but there is a radical instability in our whole world-order, and soon we shall all be walking into the jaws of destruction again, protesting our pacific intentions.”

“Well, you seem to know all about it,” said Mr. Outrage, “and I think I should have been told sooner. This will have to mean a coalition with that old windbag Brown, I suppose.”

“Anyhow,” said Lord Metroland, “I don’t see how all that explains why my stepson should drink like a fish and go about everywhere with a negress.”

“I think they’re connected, you know,” said Father Rothschild. “But it’s all very difficult.” (185)

The political and cultural figures Lord Metroland and Prime Minister Outrage (whose illicit sexual behavior far exceeds that of any member of the younger generation) demonstrate, in their complete incomprehension of Rothschild’s knowledge, even less philosophical stability than their religious counterpart. Upon hearing Rothschild’s prediction of war, Outrage acts indignant at not “having been told sooner,” but he is more distressed by imagining the inconvenience of a future meeting than he is by the ominous news itself; the primary concern of Lord Metroland’s

conservatism is the social appearance of his stepson. Father Rothschild himself admits to being utterly uncertain as to the broad significance of his own arguments. In other words, adherence to traditional values is revealed to be little more than a performance, a false pretense of representing specific values.

The unreliability of cultural traditions is revealed through, among other characters, Lottie Crump, the owner of Shepheard’s Hotel. The narrator describes the hotel as representing the values of the previous generation: “one can go to Shepheard’s parched with modernity any day, if Lottie likes one’s face, and still draw up, cool and uncontaminated, great, healing draughts from the well of Edwardian certainty” (40-41). This representation of “certainty” is revealed on the same page to be nothing more than a sham when the narrator admits “all you are likely to find in your room at Lottie’s is an empty champagne bottle or two and a crumpled camisole” (41). The stasis and security that Lottie’s seems to offer by its reference to bygone Edwardian culture offers upon close inspection the same chaotic revelry of sex and alcohol celebrated by the modern generation. In other words, as Eagleton notes, the power of traditionalism in the novel is entirely “suggestive.” In contrast with the fully realized and physically manifested energy of the modern, the substance of tradition is constantly alluded to but never shown. The entire category of “the traditional,” against which the modern category is defined and upon which the novel builds its entire moral argument, is revealed in this way to be completely nonexistent. The form of the novel—ostensibly a satire demonstrating the failure of modern values in contrast with traditional morality—does not represent its meaningful content. Modernity and tradition are revealed to be identical in substance (or lack thereof), since chaos and confusion underlie both categories, and the absoluteness of the distinction between them is undermined.

**Oppositional Places in A Handful of Dust**
Waugh’s novel *A Handful of Dust* about the disintegration of an upper class English marriage is similarly structured around a binary division that is ultimately subverted from within the novel itself. Its narrative progresses by developing an opposition between Tony Last, a young but traditional English aristocrat with great love and respect for the recycled forms and figures of the past (chief among these the countryside Gothic revival mansion which he inherited from his parents), and nearly everyone else in the novel, in particular his beautiful wife Brenda and her lover John Beaver. This opposition of characters represents the ideological conflict between traditionalism and modernism that structures the novel, a conflict which itself reflects the universal opposition between order and chaos.

However, the narrative resolution in *A Handful of Dust* does not resolve the problems posed by the novel’s oppositions; at its conclusion, both Tony and Brenda are entirely unhappy and isolated, albeit in different ways. Beaty argues that this unresolved opposition is used to reveal, ultimately, the societal need for a greater system of values:

Waugh’s outstanding success as an ironist in *A Handful of Dust* owes much to his ability to challenge the assumptions of both commercial and chivalric codes. By showing the disorder wrought through living according to either instinct or hollow tradition, the novel demonstrates, by negative implication, the need for something higher than man-made ideals.\(^{17}\)

Others have read *A Handful of Dust* as emphasizing society’s need for Catholicism to fill the modern moral vacuum:

*A Handful of Dust* ... is carefully built around a central idea: Waugh’s contention that alternatives to genuine Christianity (i.e., Catholicism) do not perform well in the modern world. Anglican church services dutifully attended at Hetton, Dickensian humanism that

\(^{17}\) Beaty, p. 110.
leaves Todd unmoved, and religious aesthetic debates such as the Gothic Revival discredit one another not simply by association but by their common failure to fill man's religious needs.  

Both of these interpretations view the binary opposition between modern, amoral chaos and traditional, structured values as central to the novel's function. I will argue, however, that, much as in Vile Bodies, the security of A Handful of Dust's structuring binary is undermined from within the novel itself.

In the novel, the differences between the categories of traditional and modern are articulated through the use of place. Characters are often concerned with physical spaces, particularly buildings and their decorations; relationships between a certain character and a specific place are often used to define and specify that character's role in relation to the novel's central binary structure. For example, both the first chapter, "Du Côté de Chez Beaver," and the second chapter, "English Gothic," open with descriptions of houses, architecture, and decoration, but to very different effects. The first chapter begins with a tale by Mrs. Beaver, who is John Beaver's mother, of a recent housefire and her excited assertions of how the rooms will need to be renovated (the situation presents a possible sales opportunity since Mrs. Beaver is an interior decorator):

"The fire never properly reached the bedrooms I am afraid. Still they are bound to need doing up, everything black with smoke and drenched in water and luckily they had that old-fashioned sort of extinguisher that ruins everything. One really cannot complain."  

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Two housemaids who were injured in the fire are mentioned, but only in passing; of far more interest is the status of the material belongings in the damaged rooms. We as readers might expect Mrs. Beaver, as a decorator, to show concern for the objects in the house due to her appreciation of their aesthetic or material value; somewhat surprisingly, however, she does not mourn the damage done to the rooms by the fire. Rather, she welcomes it, for the destruction of a room necessitates the room’s replacement. Objects, in other words, are valueless in and of themselves; they are meaningful only inasmuch as they present opportunities for personal advancement and profit. The burned house and its owners remain anonymous, a mark of their irrelevance as specific entities. They are significant only in their possible contributions to Mrs. Beaver’s business.

This opening scene offers an accurate indication of the content of the rest of the chapter, which is constituted of events illustrating the disrespect, cruelty, and selfishness that characterizes the world of the Beavers. In conversation with others, for example, Mrs. Beaver listens not out of interest in the other person, but with the goal of gaining useful knowledge:

“Mumsey, you are wonderful. I believe you know about everyone.”

“It’s a great help. All a matter of paying attention while people are talking.” (7)

To Mrs. Beaver, paying attention to others in conversation is a counterintuitive act, worthwhile only when one stands to gain something—when, for example, Beaver is able to gather information about his hosts for the weekend. Beaver’s invitations to lunch arrive only if a more-desired guest has canceled—his presence is never desired for its own sake; people interact with him in order to fill their empty spot at the restaurant table. Beaver belongs to Brat’s gentlemen’s club, but he is detested by all its members; Jock Grant-Menzies engages with Beaver only in order to get a free drink. In other words, the London world in which the Beavers live is one in
which people and objects only acquire value when they can be made to serve the personal gain of
an individual.

Yet even in this world the appearance of human concern lingers. The acts of
conversation, sharing meals, and belonging to a club all maintain the appearance of being sincere
social activities—that is, activities that have as their purpose the enjoyment of human
company. These appearances, however, are merely disguises for acts with selfish motivations.
The false appearances of the activities of this world are mirrored in the world’s materiality: “The
air of antiquity pervading Brat’s, derived from its elegant Georgian façade and finely paneled
rooms, was entirely spurious, for it was a club of recent origin, founded in the burst of
bonhommie immediately after the war” (9). Both the decoration of the club and the human
actions that take place within its walls resemble a once-authentic form of expression—in the
former case aesthetic, in the latter social—that has been reduced to mere appearance without any
substance or meaning.

The novel’s second chapter also begins by describing a building whose value has been
damaged: Tony Last’s home Hetton Abbey which according to the “county Guide Book” was
“formerly one of the notable houses of the country” but “was entirely rebuilt in 1864 in the
Gothic style and is now devoid of interest” (13). Although the chapters open with similar topics,
each chapter’s treatment of its subject is quite different; in fact, the broad similarity of the two
chapter openings—passages of houses followed by scenes of domesticity—only reinforces the
great differences between the characters of each chapter. Whereas Mrs. Beaver finds no
significance in a house or its decorations beyond their monetary values, Tony seeks to maintain
the value of Hetton absolutely, both on a personal level and in a broader societal context. Hetton
is described as being rather inconvenient to inhabit and maintain; its anachronistic architectural
components—"the central clock tower where quarterly chimes disturbed all but the heaviest sleepers," "the ecclesiastical gloom of the great hall," "the cavernous chill of the more remote corridors"—are more annoying than charming. But it is these peculiarities of Hetton that Tony finds to be so personally valuable because of their associations with his fond memories of childhood: "all these things with which he had grown up were a source of constant delight and exultation to Tony" (14). For Tony, the personal meaning of his home is embedded in both the past and in the future. He understands the house to be deeply connected to his own identity and that of his family, imagining his young son John Andrew maintaining the house in the future: "I hope John will be able to keep it on after me" (19). At the same time, Tony also sees Hetton from the perspective of his society and recognizes the unpopularity of its aesthetics. Despite this, Tony places unwavering faith in the societal value of his mansion: "They were not in the fashion, he fully realized. Twenty years ago people had liked half timber and old pewter; now it was urns and colonnades; but the time would come, perhaps in John Andrew's day, when opinion would reinstate Hetton in its proper place" (15). Tony does not use modern, popular societal values to define meaning; he believes instead in the absoluteness of tradition as a system of meaning.

These two sets of values—the traditional conservatism of Tony and the amoral modernism of the Beavers—are clearly opposed in one sense: whereas Tony finds value in an object through the relationship of that object to his perception of tradition, the Beavers derive meaning entirely from an object's immediate usefulness. The binary opposition formed by these two systems, expressed in part through a spatial rhetoric that associates the modern with the urban environment and traditionalism with Tony's rural mansion, structures the entire plot of the novel: Brenda's quite literal abandonment of Tony for modern London in the first half of the novel is perceived by Tony as a threat to his entire belief system; the second half of the novel
describes Tony’s ultimately futile attempts to maintain his faith in tradition, which is figured through his desperation to maintain Hetton. By using buildings and spaces to articulate these two different philosophies, the novel effectively forces us to compare them. Its description of Hetton as a once-authentic architectural structure rebuilt in an ugly, mock-Gothic style is remarkably similar to its description of Brat’s club discussed above. Both descriptions emphasize the falseness of the buildings—their presentation of an appearance without substance. In the same way that Beaver and Jock are ignorant of the falseness of their surroundings or that Brenda is unconcerned with the monotony and cheapness of her London flat, so too Tony fails to recognize the Gothic appearance of his beloved home as artificially constructed, inauthentic, and ultimately without value.

At the end of the novel, Tony confused and emotionally wrecked, has left England for South America on an expedition into the Amazon jungle. When his experienced guide perishes, Tony is imprisoned in a remote Indian village by the menacing, Mr. Todd, who forces Tony to read Dickens novels aloud to him. Brenda, meanwhile, is still living in London, but her relationship with Beaver has collapsed and she finds herself penniless and without friends. The novel juxtaposes scenes of these two characters, as if to suggest the thematic or moral convergence of their two ostensibly dissimilar worlds.

At the novel’s conclusion, both categories have led ultimately to despair; neither amoral modernism nor strict adherence to the values of the past is able to secure meaning and happiness. In the wake of the failure of his traditional values, the workings of chaos and order seem almost arbitrary to Tony:

For a month now he had lived in a world suddenly bereft of order; it was as though the whole reasonable and decent constitution of things, the sum of all he had experienced or
learned to expect, were an inconspicuous, inconsiderable object mislaid somewhere on the dressing table; no outrageous circumstance in which he found himself ... could add a jot to the all-encompassing chaos that shrieked about his ears. He smiled at Milly from the doorway. “Charming,” he said, “perfectly charming. Shall we go down to dinner?”

This passage demonstrates quite clearly the novel’s association between ideology and the binary of order and chaos. Following the collapse of his marriage Tony’s entire understanding of the world—his comprehension of its “order”—collapses as well; his valued traditions and beliefs, associated for so much of the novel with the grand mansion Hetton, have become in this passage “inconspicuous, inconsiderable objects.” In response, he tries desperately to maintain the security of tradition through his adherence to gentlemanly behavior, but his efforts are humorously transparent and ineffective. In other words, the binary between the traditional and the modern in A Handful of Dust exists precisely so that the novel can ultimately collapse it, revealing traditional values to be ultimately as empty as any offered by the modern world. It is this collapse that Beaty and Meckler read as arguing for the necessity of a transcendent system of meaning—“for something higher than man-made ideals.”

However, there is a character in A Handful of Dust who cannot be categorized within the novel’s binary structure and who thus escapes its collapse: Mrs. Rattery, Jock’s American mistress (or “the shameless blonde,” as Tony calls her) entirely resists binary placement. Most characters in the novel demonstrate an ideological alignment through their relationships with the spatial binary of the novel—that is, by identifying with the country or the city, or with modern or traditional architecture. Mrs. Rattery, however, refuses to participate in the novel’s logic of location, having renounced any national identity. She is displaced, without anywhere in
particular to belong: "she was American by origin, now totally denationalized, rich, without property or possessions, except those that would pack in five vast trunks" (131). Additionally, she entirely refuses passing judgment of any kind upon Hetton or, indeed, paying attention to it at all, saying: "I never notice houses much" (133). Tony himself, whose judgments about characters usually reflect their ideological stance, is completely taken aback by Mrs. Rattery’s cold pragmatism:

She was tall and erect, almost austere in helmet and overalls; not at all as Tony had imagined her. Vaguely, at the back of his mind he had secreted the slightly absurd expectation of a chorus girl, in silk shorts and brassière, popping out of an immense beribboned Easter Egg with a cry of 'Whooppee, boys." Mrs. Rattery’s greetings were deft and impersonal. (132)

The novel itself does not quite seem to know what to do with Mrs. Rattery; her function in the text is difficult to grasp. On a purely narrative level, she is conveniently present after John Andrew’s accidental death to provide company for Tony. However, her kindness to him does not represent an alignment with his values; she seems, rather, to represent a philosophical logic that the novel resists.

The functions of all other characters within the novel are structured around their relationships to certain spaces and philosophies but the novel is unable to restrict Mrs. Rattery in the same way. She bridges the gap between the modern and the traditional, being a character without respect for social norms or values—"periodically she was liable to bouts of morphine; then she gave up her bridge and remained for several days at a time alone in her hotel suite, refreshed at intervals with glasses of cold milk," (131)—who also proves most capable of all the characters in the novel of providing sincere compassion and understanding to Tony. In the
following passage she decides to stay with Tony at Hetton rather than fly to London with Jock:

“Better have something,” said Tony, and then, “It’s awful for Jock, having to tell Brenda. I wonder how long it will be before she arrives.”

There was something in Tony’s voice as he said this which made Mrs. Rattery ask, “What are you going to do while you’re waiting?”

“I don’t know. I suppose there will be things to see to.”

“Look here,” said Mrs. Rattery, “Jock had better go up by car. I’ll stay here until Lady Brenda comes.” (147)

Her kindness and sensitivity are surprising. The novel’s binary structure depends on its “modern” characters, such as the Beavers and other friends of Brenda, appearing to completely disregard traditional morality, in order to maintain the distinction between modern society and Tony’s traditionalism. It is thus highly problematic within the binary logic of the novel for Mrs. Rattery—a fully modern, sexually promiscuous, drug-addicted woman—to be the character in the novel most capable of sincere compassion. She is not defined by her relationship to a constructed system of organization—the way, for example, Tony and Brenda’s interactions with Hetton represent their relationship to an organizing binary division—but rather interacts directly with the abstract entities of order and chaos themselves:

(Mrs. Rattery sat intent over her game, moving little groups of cards adroitly backward 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, interrelated.) (150)

Mrs. Rattery’s philosophical role in the novel, in other words, cannot be reduced to the novel’s binary terms. The arguments of Beaty and Meckler about A Handful of Dust depend on the
novel's articulation of the triumph of chaos over both traditional and modern values. For Tony and Brenda this Mrs. Rattery, however, challenges the critics’ notions about the function of chaos in the novel. For Mrs. Rattery, chaos and order are not elemental forces that control and organize the world, operating above the level of human dealings; in fact she “deals” these forces quite literally as a deck of cards. Rather than conforming to the structured opposition between order and chaos, she structures these forces with her intention and agency. Through her transection of the opposition between the modern and the traditional, she makes the artificiality of these categories apparent; in the way she controls the forces of order and chaos that structure the novel, she undermines the very assumption that the novel’s argument seems to be built upon, namely that human effort is powerless against such elemental forces.

Catholicism and Secularity in *Brideshead Revisited*

*Brideshead Revisited* is known for being significantly different from Waugh’s previous novels. According to William Cook, when comparing the novel to its precursors, “the three most commonly noted [differences] are the first person narration, the ‘romantic’ tone, and the pronounced Catholic theme.” 20 It maintains a binary structure, in fact, due in part to these specific qualities, through which the novel generates conflicts of religion and time.

At first glance, the novel builds its comparisons and arguments upon the opposition between Catholicism and secularism, in that it depicts the personal journeys of various characters—in particular the protagonist and narrator Charles Ryder—across and between the categories defined in relation to religious knowledge and salvation. 21 While young Ryder at the beginning of the novel is ignorant of religious thought, he develops a curiosity about the beliefs

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21 Waugh himself famously described the theme of the novel as “the operation of divine grace on a group or diverse but closely connected characters.” *Brideshead Revisited*. Penguin Books, 2000, ix.
of his Catholic friend Sebastian Flyte and his family. Responding to what he understands as the negative psychological and emotional effects of Catholicism upon Sebastian, Ryder becomes an adamant (and, often, pugnacious) agnostic. And yet, at the novel’s conclusion, Ryder, looking back the memories of his youth, says a prayer (which he describes as “an ancient, newly learned form of words”\(^{22}\)), an action which suggests a recent conversion to Catholicism or, at least, a new respect for religious faith. Ryder’s transformation is perhaps only the most extreme case of a movement that is echoed in the lives of most of the novel’s other primary characters as well, who also move from one side of the religious binary to the other, from secularism to Catholicism: Sebastian, initially ambivalent about his family’s faith, ends up living in a monastery; his sister Julia Flyte renounces her love affair with Ryder in order to appease her Catholic conscience; and their father, Lord Marchmain, a lapsed Catholic, accepts the sacraments on his deathbed near the novel’s end. Through the actions and emotions of its characters, in other words, the novel expresses a movement towards Catholicism, presented as a necessary movement from personal emptiness to fulfillment. The meanings and values of the characters’ lives depend essentially on their relationship to this binary and, more specifically, on their ultimate choice to identify with the “correct” side. When the characters finally do identify with Catholicism, the novel promptly ends. *Brideshead Revisited*, in other words, seems to maintain this binary in order to ultimately favor one part of it over the other.

Although from this perspective Catholicism seems to be the primary concern of *Brideshead Revisited*, in fact the novel is equally (if not more) concerned with the problem of time, albeit in a more implicit, less immediately visible way. In the same way that the novel examines the way that personal meaning is generated in relation to religion and secularism, it

also examines the way personal meaning is derived with respect to time. The “revisiting” which constitutes the very title of the novel itself makes apparent the significance of time in the novel; a place one revisits, after all, is necessarily a place one has already been. Stripped of its own meaning, the present comes to be defined in reference to the past, a practice that is embedded in the novel’s very structure, in which a prologue and epilogue serve as a narrative “present” in relation to which the middle aged Ryder examines his past. The novel largely consists of Ryder’s memories of his college days at Oxford and his relationship with his eccentric classmate Sebastian Flyte and, subsequently, with his wealthy family. If we examine old Ryder’s memories and the specific problems of time explored in much of *Brideshead Revisited*—for example, Sebastian’s anxiety about the waning of his youth in the early novel and Ryder’s ways of relating his affair with Julia to time in the later parts of the novel—it becomes apparent that it is less Catholicism than temporality that is central to the novel. As we shall see, the turn to Catholicism at the novel’s end primarily occurs as a characterological response to the unanswerable questions posed by the human relation to time.

Different human relationships to time are explored in different parts of *Brideshead Revisited*; for example, the tone of the memory sequences in novel’s early chapters, in which Ryder and Sebastian become friends and spend a summer together at Brideshead Castle, celebrates the beauty of youth. The following passage describes part of a brief journey taken to Brideshead by Charles and Sebastian early in their friendship:

> It was about eleven when Sebastian, without warning, turned the car into a cart track and stopped. It was hot enough now to make us seek the shade. On a sheep-cropped knoll under a clump of elms we ate the strawberries and drank the wine—as Sebastian promised, they were delicious together—and we lit fat, Turkish cigarettes and lay on our
backs, Sebastian’s eyes on the leaves above him, mine on his profile, while the blue-grey smoke rose, untroubled by the wind, to the blue-green shadows of foliage, and sweet scent of the tobacco merged with the sweet summer scents around us and the fumes of the sweet, golden wine seemed to lift us a finger’s breadth above the turf and hold us suspended.

“Just the place to bury a crock of gold,” said Sebastian. “I should like to bury something precious in every place where I’ve been happy and then, when I was old and ugly and miserable, I could come back and dig it up and remember” (24).

This passage occurs at the very beginning of the novel’s first chapter, in medias res, before Sebastian has been fully introduced by the narrator; after this sequence the narrator moves to a point in the plot several weeks earlier in order to describe the genesis of his friendship with Sebastian. He returns, at the end of the first chapter, to describe the complete journey to Brideshead. In other words, this specific passage is singled out from the events that surround it temporally; it is the memory to which the narrator, old Ryder, first introduces us and thus is imbued with a certain kind of significance, as if it were the most important of old Ryder’s memories. This significance of this specific memory is understandable, since its content, particularly Sebastian’s awareness of the temporariness of present joy, resonates with our knowledge of old Ryder’s unhappiness. Through this resonance, young Sebastian’s words from the past seem almost to speak to the old Ryder of the present, whose prologue indicates the extent of his present depression: “whatever scenes of desolation lay ahead of us, I never feared one more brutal than this” (3). Thus this passage exemplifies the temporal logic at work in the first part of the novel, specifically, a logic that associates the past with happiness and the future with unhappiness.
The narrator’s prose here is remarkably sensuous, emphasizing the pleasure elicited by the various stimuli—the tastes of the fruit and wine, the coolness of the shade, the scents of the summer, Sebastian’s beauty—without any sense of consequence or cost. The narrator’s concerns are purely aesthetic and physical, located entirely in the present moment. These pleasures are, of course, experienced in the present for young Ryder, but having received them as readers in the context of old Ryder’s prologue, they perform for us a double duty; they exist both in the past as actual, realized experiences and in the present as memories of those absent pleasures.

Young Ryder in the memory is aware only of the present, so the happiness he feels is absolute; recollections of the dark past and concerns for the future are not present in his thoughts. But these concerns assert their presence in old Ryder’s memory through Sebastian instead. Whereas the narrator seems oblivious to the destructive effects of time on the sensations he relishes—that is, he seems either unaware of or unconcerned with the fact that summer lasts only a few months, that the joy of food and drink is transient, that physical beauty fades with age—Sebastian is keenly aware that his present joy will end. He imagines being able to use memory as a means to access his past happiness; he makes the present meaningful by referring it to a future, to a point when the joys of his present will no longer exist—much as old Ryder attempts to make the present meaningful by referring it to the past. Ultimately, the present is meaningful for Sebastian not because of any specific quality it possesses, but because of its very transience—because of the impending future that will replace it—and, simultaneously, because of its ability to be stored forever as a memory in the past. In other words, for Sebastian, the present is meaningful primarily because of its relation to what it is not: the past and the future.

Thus, at work in this passage are two unique ways of generating meaning: that of young Ryder, which finds value in the qualities of the present moment without reference to any other
period of time, and that of Sebastian and old Ryder, which makes the present meaningful only by relating it to a different moment in time. The following passage, an introduction to the fourth chapter of the novel, makes explicit the differences between these two types of evaluation:

The languor of Youth—how unique and quintessential it is! How quickly, how irrecoverably, lost! The zest, the generous affections, the illusions, the despair, all the traditional attributes of Youth—all save this—come and go with us through life; again and again in riper years we experience, under a new stimulus, what we thought had been finally left behind, the authentic impulse to action, the renewal of power and its concentration on a new object; again and again a new truth is revealed to us in whose light all our previous knowledge must be rearranged. These things are a part of life itself; but languor—the relaxation of yet unwearied sinews, the mind sequestered and self-regarding, the sun standing still in the heavens and the earth throbbing to our own pulse—that belongs to Youth alone and dies with it. (79)

The various images employed in old Ryder’s description of youthful “languor” suggests how his philosophical perspective has changed with age. In the passage, the philosophy of youth is characterized by a disregard for context: time has stopped, there is no moment except the present, the sun is “standing still in the heavens”; the individual mind is “sequestered and self-regarding,” that is, uninfluenced by its environment; the earth, the entire natural world, is made subordinate to the self’s “own pulse.” Youth conflates the passing present moment with the infinite, the self with the entire universe. Instead of creating meaning through temporal contextualization, extending the present into either the past or the future, youth finds a wealth of meaning in the brief present moment.

This passage demonstrates old Ryder’s obsession with the beauty of the past, an
obsession that mirrors young Sebastian’s. Even as a college youth, Sebastian affects a childlike demeanor, notable in his imaginary friendship with the teddy bear Aloysius. Cara, the mistress of Sebastian’s father Lord Marchmain, explains that Sebastian is “in love with his own childhood” (103). Ryder narrates how the beginning of his friendship with Sebastian was an experience almost of regression to an earlier age: “that summer term with Sebastian, it seemed as though I was being given a brief spell of what I had never known, a happy childhood … there was something of nursery freshness about us that fell little short of the joy of innocence” (45).

Ryder’s experiences with Sebastian are meaningful because he appreciates their natural, sensual essence without regarding their temporal state. His innocent joy is a joy of first experiences; the “childhood” he speaks of is authentic and inherent, in contrast with Sebastian’s artificial joy. As articulated above, even in his youth Sebastian understands happiness as belonging to the past; he views his present experiences as if from a miserable future looking back, making them valuable only in reference to another time and context. Perhaps most importantly, Sebastian’s fixation on the past and his childhood is not related to any specific incident; quite to the contrary, it is marked by its very lack of specificity, since the remembrance of a specific event could never compare in beauty to the ideal childhood that Sebastian remembers. The beauty of the past is contained not in the specific event remembered but rather in the act of remembering itself and in the way this act reveals the position occupied by the past (that is, the position of no longer existing, of being inaccessible).

These temporal evaluations reveal the novel’s distinctions between the categories of presence and absence, and life and mortality. In creating meaning from the present moment, one can either accept and celebrate what is quite literally present—beauty, physical sensations, emotions—as young Ryder does, or one can evaluate the present moment in relation to what is
absent, that is, the past or the future as do Sebastian and old Ryder. Present life can be celebrated or inevitable mortality can be mourned.

Although the presence of this temporal binary remains largely unproblematic in the first chapters of the novel, it ultimately becomes the driving force of the narrative. As Ryder becomes better friends with the Flyte family, and particularly with Sebastian’s strict Catholic mother Lady Marchmain, Sebastian begins to descend into alcoholism, paranoia, and depression. No direct cause is ever attributed to Sebastian’s deteriorating health; it is described as being vaguely related to Sebastian’s sense of his fading youth and innocence—to the loss of his ideal “Arcadia”—and to his family’s growing distrust of him. Ryder interprets Sebastian’s condition as a response to an invasion by the world upon Sebastian’s way of life:

By the blue waters and rustling palm of his own mind he was happy and harmless as a Polynesian; only when the big ship dropped anchor beyond the coral reef, and the cutter beached in the lagoon, and, up the golden slope that had never known the print of a boot there trod the grim invasion of trader, administrator, missionary, and tourist—only then was it time to disinter the archaic weapons of the tribe and sound the drums in the hills; or, more easily, to turn from the sunlit door and lie alone in the darkness, where the impotent, painted deities paraded the walls in vain, and cough his heart out among the rum bottles. (127)

This passage figures Sebastian’s illness as a binary conflict between nature and society, a conflict between the wish for a world of innocent, childhood joys and the inevitable intrusion into that world of the exploitative, corrupt ways of adult men. Sebastian represents in the novel the ideal of seeking meaning forever in the past (the metaphor used in the passage, one of the colonial oppression of tribal cultures, is appropriately archaic), an ideal that is constantly
undermined by Sebastian’s troubled family and his own habits. The ideal cannot possibly
maintain itself, and in this sense Sebastian’s fall is inevitable. Certainly it is described as such by
Sebastian:

“Really,” I said, “if you are going to embark on a solitary bout of drinking every time
you see a member of your family, it’s perfectly hopeless.”

“Oh yes,” said Sebastian with great sadness. “I know. It’s hopeless.” (142)

It is first and foremost time, not any specific human or societal effort, that forces children to
grow up and that forces Sebastian to relinquish his youth. The inevitability of time, represented
narratively by Sebastian’s inability to accept his own mortality, makes his unhappiness
inevitable.

In the second half of *Brideshead Revisited* young Ryder’s relationship to time becomes
highly problematic. Ryder, now an established architectural painter, has seen little of the Flyte
family in recent years. During a journey on an ocean liner from New York to London, however,
his encounters Sebastian’s beautiful sister Julia and the two begin a passionate love affair that
lasts several years. Ryder introduces the temporal concept of the “forerunner” in comparing his
past love for Sebastian to his present love for Julia, suggesting the former to be merely a
prediction of or preparation for the latter. Ryder initially uses the expression during his
conversions with Julia during their Atlantic crossing; when, months later, Julia voices her
concern that she, too, may only be the forerunner to some other love of Ryder’s yet to come, he
elaborates on the concept in private narration:

...perhaps all our loves are merely hints and symbols; a hill of many invisible crests;
doors that open as in a dream to reveal only a further stretch of carpet and another door;
perhaps you and I are types and this sadness which sometimes falls between us springs
from disappointment in our search, each straining through and beyond the other,

snatching a glimpse now and then of the shadow which turns the corner always a pace or
two ahead of us. (303)

What occurs here is a retroactive anticipation of the future, in which the inherent value of the
past is eliminated and its meaning is yielded to the present. Through this, the past becomes
significant only in relation to the present, inasmuch as it can be made to inform and have
predicted the present. Ryder describes this process quite explicitly in his towards Julia’s past: “I
learned it as one does learn the former—as it seems at the time, the preparatory—life of a woman
one loves, so that one thinks of oneself as part of it, directing it by devious ways, towards
oneself” (183). If we are to define the past as being mere “preparation” for the present, then by
extension we must understand our present as no more than a figuration of something even greater
that, being in the future, is necessarily nonexistent. Through this perspective meaning becomes
an arrow pointed unceasingly forward towards the unarrived future. The passage quoted above,
with its images of doors opening forever onto one another, suggests the fruitlessness of this
pursuit of temporal meaning; indeed, Ryder’s love for Julia is ultimately superseded by another
love and purpose, which he understands in the epilogue as having been the goal all along.

Julia recognizes the contradiction inherent in this understanding of time, in which
simultaneously the past defines the meaning of its future and that future serves as the goal to
which the past, as a “forerunner,” must surrender its value. Thus an unstable temporal system of
meaning is generated in which the present is entirely stripped of significance and meaning is
always located elsewhere. The present points backwards to the past for significance, but the
significance of the past is only revealed by what is yet to come. In this way, the provision of any
absolute knowledge and meaning by time becomes continually deferred, and the ability of time
to provide any security of meaning is thrown into doubt. The binary conflicts that are explored in
the early parts of *Brideshead Revisited* become unbalanced; absence and mortality seem to
prevail in the character’s lives, at the expense of the meaningful stability of the immanent
present.

The novel attempts to solve this difficult problem with Catholicism. Submitting to her
Catholic faith, Julia ends her relationship with Ryder, essentially appealing to divine intervention
in order to make sense of temporality. In the following passage Julia describes the guilt she feels
about her sin:

“Mummy dying with it; Christ dying with it, nailed hand and foot; hanging out the bed in
the night-nursery; hanging year after year in the dark little study at Farm Street with the
shining oilcloth; hanging in the dark church where only the old charwoman raises the
dust and one candle burns; hanging at noon, high among the crowds and the soldiers; no
comfort except a sponge of vinegar and the kind words of a thief; hanging for ever; never
the cool sepulchre and the grave clothes spread on the stone slab, never the oil and spices
in the dark cave; always the midday sun and the dice clicking for the seamless coat.”

(288)

Time is conflated in this passage. Julia’s sin exists at once with her mother and with Christ, who
lived nearly two millenniums before. Christ is both “hanging at noon” and “hanging for ever”—
the agony of his crucifixion occurs “always”—it is omnipresent in time—and its tremendous
significance is located both at a single moment and across the entire span of history. Julia’s sin,
of course, exists in her present self, but in another sense it has always existed, since Christ died
for it. Similarly, the crucifixion, despite being a specific historical event, exists across time with
equal significance, retaining its power “year after year.”
A similar treatment of time and religion occurs in Ryder's epilogue, in which he interprets the events of his life as having a divine purpose:

Something quite remote from anything the builders intended has come out of their work, and out of the fierce little human tragedy in which I played; something none of us thought about at the time: a small red flame—a beaten-copper lamp of deplorable design, relit before the beaten-copper doors of a tabernacle; the flame which the old knights saw from their tombs, which they saw put out; that flame burns again for other soldiers, far from home, farther, in heart, than Acre or Jerusalem. It could not have been lit but for the builders and the tragedians, and there I found it this morning, burning anew among the old stones. (351)

At the end of the novel, Ryder understands the same power to be acting in his life that acted in the lives of the knights of the Crusades hundreds of years before (suggested by the references to the cities of Acre and Jerusalem). This power burns “anew among the old stones,” that is, it resists time, remaining new despite the passing of years.

In the logic of Brideshead Revisited, religion possesses a power to resist time because it exists outside of time. Unlike human temporal meanings, which inevitably change with the passing of time, divine meanings extend through time and space remaining essentially the same. Ryder’s thought at the moment of Lord Marchmain’s last rites describes this quality of religious meaning: “All over the world people were on their knees before innumerable crosses, and here the drama was being played again by two men—by one man, rather, and he nearer death than life; the universal drama in which there is only one actor” (338). Divine power is both singular, having “only one actor,” and “universal”—the number of crosses and people is entirely irrelevant since God’s power extends across space and time without decreasing. The temporal
transcendence of this power provides a force that reconfigures the binary opposition between present life and inevitable mortality that functions in much of *Brideshead Revisited*; this opposition is transformed into a conflict in which God’s power resists the chaotic, destructive forces to which mortal man is subject.

This religious solution to the problem of time has a narrative finality, but its stability is undermined by the presence within the novel of another solution to the problem of time and mortality that works through the character Anthony Blanche, a friend of Sebastian from Oxford. From a purely narrative perspective, Blanche is a minor, even unnecessary character. His role in the novel is generally restricted the provider of knowledge and insight about other characters to Ryder. His perspective seems to come from outside the novel as he comments on the intentions and motivations of its characters like a prophet or a critic.

Blanche is introduced in the novel as “the ‘aesthete’ *par excellence,*” (32) that is to say, one who appreciates, in the words of Walter Pater, “art for art’s sake,”23 rather than for an externally-determined purpose. Blanche is also a representative of the Modernist literary and artistic movement, indicated by his quoting of T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*:

> After luncheon he stood on the balcony with a megaphone which had appeared surprisingly among the bric-à-brac of Sebastian’s room, and in languishing, sobbing tones recited passages from *The Waste Land* to the sweatered and muffled throng that was on its way to the river.

> “‘I, Tiresias, have foresuffered all,’ ” he sobbed to them from the Venetian arches.

(33)

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23 "High passions give one this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, political or religious enthusiasm, or the ‘enthusiasm of humanity.’ Only, be sure it is passion, that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art’s sake has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.” Pater, Walter. *Studies in the History of the Renaissance.* 1873.
Blanche is a character both entirely of the moment, belonging to the most contemporary aesthetic movement, (a movement that values the image and the moment without an ideological or moral context)\(^{24}\) and a character with privileged access to a transcendent knowledge, associated with the blind seer Tiresias of Ancient Greek mythology.

This role is developed in Blanche’s conversations with Ryder. Early in the novel Blanche plants sinister doubt in Ryder’s mind regarding the mysterious nature of Sebastian and his family: “now there, my dear, is a subject for the poet—for the poet of the future who must be also a psychoanalyst—and perhaps a diabolist, too” (53). In doing so Blanche reveals a remarkable understanding of human nature—he recognizes not only psychological conflict within the Flyte family, but moral and theological conflicts (suggested by his reference to “diabolism”) as well. His knowledge extends beyond a single realm into art, science, and religion, which at once both legitimizes and undermines his expertise; irony and sincerity are both apparent in his language. Blanche’s predictions are consistently accurate (he correctly predicts even the minute detail of Sebastian’s reaction to Ryders’s questions about his family) and it is Blanche who informs Ryder of Sebastian’s whereabouts in Africa when Ryder is seeking him.

However, although Blanche’s knowledge is respected—he is generally allowed to speak for pages without interruption—his character is described always as something other: “ageless as a lizard, foreign as a Martian,” (32); “he was indeed a nomad of no nationality” (46). Blanche is reptilian; he does not properly belong in the world—having no nationality, he might as well be from another planet—and he is “ageless,” transcending time, described by Ryder near the end of

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\(^{24}\) Imagist poets, for example (Imagism was a highly influential movement in early Modernist literature), strove to present “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time,” arguing “it is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.” Pound, Ezra. “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste.” _Poetry_. Vol. 1, No. 6, 1913. pp. 200-201.
the novel as being "not changed from when I last saw him; not, indeed, from when I first saw him" (269). Ryder finds Blanche’s sexuality threatening; he is disturbed by the gay bar Blanche takes him to during a conversation ("Well," I said, affecting an ease I was far from feeling in that den, "what have you been up to all these years?" [271]) Blanche’s sexuality, however, is as much an object of ridicule as it is a legitimate threat to normalcy. Early in the novel, he tells Ryder of being harassed by a group of college youths, who eventually “duck” him in the Mercury fountain in Oxford’s Great Quadrangle:

“...suddenly I was disturbed by such a bawling and caterwauling as you never heard, and there, down in the little piazza, I saw a mob of about twenty terrible young men, and do you know what they were chanting? ‘We want Blanche. We want Blanche,’ in a kind of litany. Such a public declaration!” (48)

The way Blanche’s homosexuality serves as both a source of menace and humor in the novel illustrates his resistance to the binaries that define other characters.

Most characters in *Brideshead Revisited* are securely defined in relation to Catholicism or by the way they associate with time, thus maintaining the security of these binaries upon which the novel’s ultimate argument depends. Characters such as Julia and Ryder admittedly shift between binary categories, but at any moment they are either securely in a category or moving towards one. Other characters in the novel, such as Lady Marchmain, remain in one category for the entirety of the novel. Entirely secular characters, such as Julia’s husband Rex Mottram and Ryder’s wife Celia, are often portrayed as ignorant and uncomprehending of the emotional and aesthetic problems that concern the major characters. Rex, for example, is described by Julia as “something absolutely modern and up-to-date that only this ghastly age could produce” (200).

Anthony Blanche, on the other hand, does not function in either of these ways. He is an ex-
Catholic character but expresses no remorse; in contrast with other secular characters, he is almost supernaturally observant and comprehending. The aestheticism he represents is analogous to young Ryder’s celebration of timeless beauty and sensation; however, whereas Ryder’s aesthetic joy is corrected by the novel (inasmuch as Ryder, as he ages, becomes disillusioned with beauty and turns to religion), Blanche’s is not. Time, mortality, and religion—the forces that structure the novel’s argument and manipulate its characters—are powerless over Blanche; his manifest sexual “otherness” in the novel is merely a reflection of his narrative otherness, which threatens the binary structure of the novel itself.

Moral articulation in Waugh’s novels is essentially dependent upon the development of conflicts between binary categories. Narratives progress and characters function through relating to these categories. However, we have seen in this chapter that within each novel considered exist moments that defy the structuring power of these binaries and, in doing so, reveal in Derridean fashion their arbitrariness and instability. As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, this destabilizing that occurs in the broad structures of the novels is present in the local use of language as well.
Chapter 2

“Oh, for words, words!” Waugh and the Escape of Language

The binary oppositions that structure the moral and social arguments expressed in Waugh’s novel have often been understood as absolute. However, as I have argued in the previous chapter, the novels in fact destabilize the very oppositions upon which they seem to be founded. In particular, I have focused on discrepancies between structure and substance in Waugh’s work; the stability of the novels’ narratives and arguments—which appear at first to present clear moral concerns organized through categorization—is not ultimately supported by their content, which reveals the artifice underlying the categories themselves and the conflicts they produce. Developing this line of thought further, this chapter will argue that throughout his novels Waugh demonstrates a fundamental ambiguity surrounding language that challenges traditional notions of linguistic meaning and representation.

Critics have regularly noted Waugh’s masterful use of language, and in particular irony, to describe the chaotic, contradictory state of the modern world. Beaty describes him as possessing “consummate skill as an ironist,” 25 and David Lodge, contrasting Waugh’s “objective” expressions of modern society with the “subjective” concerns of novelists such as Woolf and Joyce,” writes:

The disorderliness, the contingency, the collapse of value and meaning in contemporary life, are rendered dramatically through conversational nuances and ironic juxtaposition of scenes; narratively through the elimination or parody of cause and effect (events in Waugh’s novels are either gratuitous or grotesquely disproportional to their causes). 26

All irony reveals, to a certain extent, the instability of language; in sarcastic irony, for example,

25 Beaty, p. 8.
26 Lodge, David. p. 45.
words can be made to mean exactly the opposite of their literal definitions; characters in fiction and drama can often say one thing while be thinking another. The content of ironic language is rarely resides in the literal meanings of the words and phrases. However, I shall argue that Waugh’s work goes beyond traditional uses of irony and language to explore and depict the challenges of verbal expression and artistic representation.

The Problems of Representation

Artistic representation is a locus of uncertainty in Waugh’s novels. In A Handful of Dust, when Tony finds himself stranded in Mr. Todd’s village in South America, he is forced to read Dickens’ novels aloud all day. Artistic writing as a record of the past becomes problematized; Tony’s obsession with tradition and the forms of the past—most obviously the artificially recycled architectural forms of Hetton—is answered by the novel in his ultimate fate, that is, to incessantly encounter the represented textual forms of Dickens’ works. The artificiality of the novels is repeatedly emphasized by Mr. Todd’s unusual reactions and comments:

“He laughed loudly at all the jokes and at some passages which did not seem humorous to Tony, asking him to repeat them two or three times; and later at the descriptions of the sufferings of the outcasts in “Tom-all-alones” tears ran down his cheeks into his beard. His comments on the story were usually simple. “I think that Dedlock is a very proud man,” or, “Mrs. Jellyby 27 does not take enough care of her children.” (293)

In endless repetition the artifice of textual representation becomes horrifically apparent; even the most meaningful words add up to nothing when accumulated endlessly. Repeated jokes lose their humor; characters and narrative moments become stripped entirely of their textual meanings and

27 Jellyby and Dedlock appear in Dickens’ Bleak House, a novel about the seemingly infinite entanglements of British law procedure. A character named Miss Flite, who has an extensive collection of caged birds named after virtues and vices, also appears in the novel, drawing a tenuous connection between A Handful of Dust, Vile Bodies, with its angels named after Christian virtues, and Brideshead Revisited, in which members of the Flyte family play a significant role.
function instead as arbitrary details, illustrations of the problem of mindless adherence to tradition. Tony’s prison at the end of the novel—a maze of endless and meaningless representation from which there is no release—functions as his punishment for failing to distinguish between authentic meaning and false representation. To take an object’s meaning for granted in effect minimizes its potential to be actively meaningful. In the words of Roland Barthes, “those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere.”

In Brideshead Revisited problems of representation are explored in part through Ryder’s career as an architectural painter. Ryder initially associates his art with maintaining tradition and beauty—in other words, with stability. His first commission is to paint a series of canvases of Marchmain house, owned by the Flyte family, before it is destroyed to make room for “a block of flats” (217). This act of painting the house is described as an act of preservation. Although the actual house itself will be destroyed, its preserved image will allow its beauty to persist into the future. Ryder derives tremendous satisfaction from creating the paintings:

I was normally a slow and deliberate painter; that afternoon and all the next day after, I worked fast. I could do nothing wrong. At the end of each passage I paused, tense, afraid to start the next, fearing, like a gambler, that luck must turn and the pile be lost. Bit by bit, minute by minute, the thing came into being. There were no difficulties; the intricate multiplicity of light and colour became a whole; the right colour was where I wanted it on the palette; each brush stroke, as soon as it was compete, seemed to have been there always. (218)

Ryder perceives a natural “rightness” in his process of painting Marchmain House; the various elements of the painting become a proper “whole,” the individual brush strokes seem to be inevitable in their location and effect. This sense of inevitability with which Ryder views the

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painting—in which the finished painting seems “to have been there always”—suggests that the representation is actually coming to replace the actual object that inspired it; the painting represents the house so well that it seems almost to assume its entire history and significance. The representation is indistinguishable from what it represents.

Despite this initial pleasure in his work, with time and experience Ryder comes to understand his paintings of traditional English houses not as acts of preservation; rather, he sees the creation of each painting as a “presage of doom,” (227) as an act of preparation for the depicted house’s impending destruction. This treatment of painting is very different from Ryder’s initial experience of artistic representation. Painting, which Ryder previously associated with genuine expression, with the extension and transfer of life, has now become associated with death. In fact, Ryder’s early experiences of painting become a sort of artistic ideal: “I began to mourn the loss of something I had known in the drawing room of Marchmain House and once or twice since, the intensity and singleness and the belief that it was not all done by hand—in a word, inspiration” (227). Every painting, in other words, every attempt to represent authentically the reality of something beautiful, has become only a reminder of the seeming impossibility of genuine representation. Ryder wants his paintings to be realities, not representations “all done by hand.”

As a result of his disillusionment with painting, Ryder shifts from painting the crumbling mansions of England to painting the long-destroyed temples of dead civilizations in Central America:

I sought inspiration among gutted palaces and cloisters embowered in weed, derelict churches where vampire-bats hung in the dome like dry seed-pods and only the ants were ceaselessly astir tunneling in the rich stalls; cities where no road led, and mausoleums
where a single, aged family of Indians sheltered from the rains. (228)

In response to his own growing comprehension of the impossibility of representing the reality of existence, Ryder begins to attempt to represent the reality of death and destruction. He is inspired by “cities where no road led,” “gutted palaces,” and “derelict churches,”—in other words, by the decay of human works. In contrast with the houses of England, which are meaningful because of their familiarity and because of the specific meaning they have in relation to English society, the structures Ryder paints in Central America are meaningful precisely because of their unfamiliarity and meaninglessness, not just to the English people but to anybody. Precisely because the buildings are abandoned and misused (the mausoleum does not serve its original purpose but serves rather as shelter for a poor family) they are meaningful. Painting for Ryder is no longer an attempt to depict reality in itself—as were the early paintings of Marchmain House—but has become an attempt to illustrate the forces of mortality and time.

Ryder’s jungle paintings, however, are problematic in the novel. Although the series is critically acclaimed, Ryder views them as failures of any expression of personal growth or sincerity. He narrates, “despite this isolation and this long sojourn in a strange world, I remained unchanged, still a small part of myself pretending to be whole,” (229) and his wife Celia says of the paintings, “‘somehow I don’t feel they are quite you.’ ” (229) In other words, it seems the reality of the self cannot be represented or made meaningful in artistic terms; if anything, attempted representation of the self seems only to confuse. The astute Anthony Blanche recognizes this; he criticizes Ryder’s paintings as being nothing more than “a very naughty and very successful practical joke,” (273) and describes Ryder’s work as being composed of the same sort of “charm” that characterized Sebastian’s frivolous behavior as a student and that characterizes the entire Flyte family:
“I took you out to dinner to warn you of charm. I warned you expressly and in great detail of the Flyte family. Charm is the great English blight. It does not exist outside these damp islands. It spots and kills anything it touches. It kills love; it kills art; I greatly fear, my dear Charles, it has killed you.” (273)

The “charm” Blanche speaks of can perhaps be understood as pretense, as pretending to be something one is not. Sebastian’s childlike behavior in the early novel is the pretending of an innocence he does not possess, as suggested by his recognition of mortality discussed in the previous chapter.

Blanche, early in the novel, contrasts Lady Marchmain’s pious and unadorned beauty with the reality of her manipulative qualities:

“How does Lady Marchmain manage it? It is one of the questions of the age. You have seen her? Very, very beautiful; no artifice … it is extraordinary how large those eyes look and how the lids are veined blue where anyone else would have touched them with a finger-tip of paint … a voice as quiet as a prayer, and as powerful.” (54)

“And she meanwhile keeps a small gang of enslaved and emaciated prisoners for her exclusive enjoyment. She sucks their blood. You can see the tooth-marks all over Adrian Porson’s shoulders when he is bathing. And he, my dear, was the greatest, the only, poet of our time. He’s bled dry; there’s nothing left of him.” (56)

Blanche is, of course, being facetious when calling Lady Marchmain a vampire, but her actions are often destructive and her motives questionable. Her seeming lack of “artifice” in appearance, her “quiet voice” reminiscent of a “prayer,” disguise a woman whose Catholic family is disintegrated and resentful. The guilt and shame she impresses upon Sebastian for his alcoholism

29 Blanche’s apparent irony in dealing with serious matters, a verbal manifestation of the buffoon/prophet binary that characterizes him (discussed in the previous chapter), itself demonstrates the problematic relationship between form and content: his words in form are sarcastic and humorously exaggerated but in content prove to be true.
and immaturity in the first half of the novel are arguably what cause his rapid decline into illness; Lord Marchmain lives in Italy essentially in exile because of Lady Marchmain's influence in English society. Charm seems to be, in other words, a discrepancy between form and content, between what something seems or pretends to be, and what it actually is.

Blanche essentially accuses Ryder's paintings of inauthenticity; although in appearance they are "barbaric," "forceful" paintings about mortality and decay, in actuality they are "simple, creamy English charm, playing tigers" (273). Essentially, Blanche is problematizing the entire project of representation, making it quite clear that art can be one thing in form and something else entirely, or even nothing at all, in content. Ryder agrees with Blanche's evaluation of his paintings, saying "'You're quite right,' " but offers no elaborations or explanations. Old Ryder the narrator, who so often describes how young Ryder's understanding of various events came to change with time, completely ignores Blanche's remarks. In fact, with the end of the short scene in which Ryder and Blanche discuss the paintings in a gay bar, Blanche promptly disappears from the novel altogether (along with Ryder's artistic aspirations). The novel seems almost uncomfortable with Blanche's unapologetic insights into the challenges of authentic representation in art.

In fact, Waugh has remarked on his dissatisfaction with the authenticity of *Brideshead Revisited*; perhaps the novel's treatment of Blanche channels this anxiety. In his preface to the revised edition of *Brideshead Revisited* published in 1960, Waugh expresses unhappiness with both the sensuousness of some passages and with the seriousness of others:

> It was a bleak period of present privation and threatening disaster—the period of soya beans and Basic English—and in consequence the book is infused with a kind of gluttony, for food and wine, for the splendours of the recent past, and for rhetorical and
ornamental language, which now with a full stomach I find distasteful. I have modified
the grosser passages but not eliminated them because they are an essential part of the
book.\textsuperscript{30}

Both the celebration of sensual pleasure and the intrusion of divine Catholic power are, as
discussed in the previous chapter, essential to the function of \textit{Brideshead Revisited}, which is
structured around the distinction between these two forces. Waugh seems satisfied with the
overall effect of the novel, saying “Its theme … was perhaps presumptuously large, but I make
no apology for it,” expressing dissatisfaction instead with the novel’s “form, whose more glaring
defects may be blamed on the circumstances in which it was written.”\textsuperscript{31} Upon examination,
Waugh’s concern is strange: he describes the failure of the novel’s form while praising its
content, but can an artistic work succeed in articulating a “theme” while failing to maintain a
unified form through which to deliver that theme? The actual subject of his dissatisfaction is the
disunity of form and content—specifically, the fact that a novel intended to demonstrate “the
operation of divine grace”\textsuperscript{32} can include long passages devoted to physical delights and sensual
pleasure. Underlying Waugh’s obvious concern with the quality of the prose passages in question
is a broad concern about the instability of representation, about the disturbing possibility of
single passage performing two opposing functions. Representation in Waugh’s works is always
problematic. Form and content are never in a clear relationship; at times meaning is contained
within nonexistent form, at other times it seems the physical forms are themselves the most
meaningful content possible.

\textbf{The Unspoken Truth}

In many of the most significant textual moments in Waugh’s work, meaning is conveyed

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
not through ordinary linguistic representation but through the very failure of language to perform its ordinary function. Words in *Vile Bodies*, for example, are often stripped of their normal communicative power but succeed in producing meaning nonetheless. The gossip column “Mr. Chatterbox,” which plays a minor role in the plot of the novel, provides an instance of this.

Adam, the protagonist of the novel, takes over writing the column after Lord Simon Balcairn, the previous author, commits suicide. Legally forbidden from writing about actual people, Adam begins to invent characters to fill the gossip page, and attempts to influence the tastes of his readers through these imaginary socialites:

> A few days later he mentioned Captain Kerr-Stuart’s appearance at the Embassy “wearing, of course, the ultra-fashionable black suède shoes.” In a week he was gratified to notice that Johnny Hoop and Archie Schwert had both followed Captain Stuart-Kerr’s lead, while in a fortnight the big emporiums of ready-made clothes in Regent Street had transposed their tickets in the windows and arranged rows of black suède shoes on the silver step labeled “For evening wear.” (160)

Captain Kerr-Stuart does not exist; neither does the fashion of wearing black suede shoes (at least not until Adam invents it). Adam’s words do not initially represent either an existent truth or correspond to present reality. Merely by being articulated, however, the words are able to create the (non-)truths they appear or claim faithfully to re-present. Adam’s description is thus self-affirming; simply by existing and by *appearing to represent* an objective, meaningful reality, his words in effect generate that reality. This small example illustrates how language need not be fixed to any specific content—it must only appear to do so. Indeed, in this process the power of language lies precisely in its appearance; linguistic content becomes the appearance of content as such.
The reverse also holds true. Just as linguistic form can generate meaning without reference to external content, so too can meaningful content evade linguistic representation:

“What is not clear to me, sir,” said the Inspector, “is what prompted the young lady to swing on the chandelier. Not wishing to cause offence, sir, and begging your pardon, was she . . . ?”

“Yes,” said Judge Skimp, “she was.”

“Exactly,” said the Inspector. (83)

Exactly what it is the young lady “was” is never explicitly said. While we can imagine she was intoxicated in one way or another, this exchange refuses to verbally represent the meaning that is conveyed from Judge to Inspector—and yet meaningful content is conveyed nonetheless. Thus the absence of form in itself is a kind of meaningful content. The significance of what is not said—in this case, details and context about the young lady’s death—is multiplied by its seeming unutterability, thereby both making apparent the social and psychological force of the content as well as expanding the possibilities of what the unexpressed content might be. In this instance the absence of linguistic form does not preclude meaning, but rather conveys content whose defining feature is its inexpressibility.

Conversations in the novel, such as the following telephone conversation between Adam and Nina, his fiancé, at times seem to suffer at once from unnecessary verbosity and insufficient expression:

“You’re going to marry Ginger?”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

“Well?”
"I said, I see."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, that’s all, Nina."

"When shall I see you?"

"I don’t want ever to see you again."

"I see."

"Well?"

"I said, I see." (260-261)

Words are repeated, mimicked, thrown back and forth; with the exception of a few obvious phrases, the literal content of this conversation conveys very little, if any semantic meaning. Language is essentially hollowed out; words are voided of their meanings such that only their forms remain, and it is precisely and only through the very emptiness of the words—such as the phrase “I see” in the passage above—that the presence of inexpressible emotions can be conveyed. The failure of language indicates the presence of thoughts and feelings that transcend verbal expression—an intensity of jealousy, hatred, frustration, sadness, rage too strong for words. Behind the repetition of inane quarreling occurs an explosion of meaning, as the unspoken emotion released from the bounds of verbal meaning expands into a realm of infinite possibility.

This expansion of meaning occurs not only through the proliferation of words but through their omission. In the following passage, which takes place at one of Margot Metroland’s parties, two older women discuss the gossip columnist Lord Balcairn, who has come disguised with a false beard:

"Who is that very important young man?" asked Mrs. Blackwater of Lady Throbbing.
“I don’t know, dear. He bowed to you.”

“He bowed to you, dear.”

“How very nice … I wasn’t quite sure…. He reminds me a little of dear Prince Anrep.”

“It’s so nice in these days, isn’t it, dearest, to see someone who really looks … don’t you think?”

“You mean the beard?”

“The beard among other things, darling.” (132)

It is precisely because Mrs. Blackwater fails to fully articulate her thoughts verbally that this conversation is meaningful. Were she simply to provide an adjective describing her impression of the young man—handsome, experienced, mysterious, etc.—this would simply be an ordinary descriptive passage. Mrs. Blackwater, however, offers only an ellipsis. In a social sense, her omission is meaningful in that it conveys the sense of propriety that pervades this culture; she seems to have noticed something about the young man that is entirely inappropriate to mention in public conversation (her refusal to name specific traits seems highly significant). The effective censorship of her observation, however, serves only to multiply its obscenity, drawing our attention to the gaping hole in the text. What horror (or delight) could be so beyond expression? we wonder. The answer, of course, is that no actual revelation can possibly fill the infinitely expansive gap opened by this meta-linguistic moment.

*Vile Bodies* calls into question the relationship between words and referents, exploring how meaning can be conveyed through the absence of language and through the emptying out of words, a process which destabilizes the role of unambiguous “structured language.” In *A Handful of Dust*, the instability of language is employed as a means of depicting the illusoriness of order
in an ultimately chaotic world. Language functions similarly to “tradition” in the novel; it betrays the trust of the characters who depend on it. For example, in the following passage, which occurs while Tony is waiting for Brenda to receive the news of their son’s death, language is used to demonstrate the tremendous difference between reality and Tony’s perceptions:

Presently Tony said, “It’s going to be so much worse for Brenda. You see she’s got nothing else, much, except John. I’ve got her, and I love the house . . . but with Brenda John always came first . . . naturally . . . And then you know 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.”

“You can’t ever tell what’s going to hurt people.”

“But, you see, I know Brenda so well.” (148-149)

Tony claims that his words reveal his knowledge of his wife when in fact they do the opposite: they demonstrate precisely how poorly he knows Brenda. By “John,” Tony means, of course, of his and Brenda’s son John Andrew, but his words are true only in reference to John Beaver, Brenda’s lover. Tony’s words thus possess two meanings at once: they are ostensibly the words of a trusting and loving husband who cannot imagine his wife’s carelessness and infidelity—words Tony believes to be accurate but are in fact false—while the reader recognizes them as words that accurately describe Brenda’s love affair. He explains how little Brenda has seen of John (Andrew) when in fact she has been seeing little if not John (Beaver). Tony’s words are false in the sense in which he intends them but, ironically, they are true in a way that goes unacknowledged by him.

In many of the novel’s most significant and memorable moments language works similarly to how it works in the scene discussed above, in which the meanings of words are revealed to be shifting and ultimately ambiguous. In a pivotal scene in which Jock tells Brenda
of her son John Andrew’s death, she initially assumes her lover John Beaver, not John Andrew, has died. Her shock turns to relief upon realizing the truth:

She sat down on a hard little empire chair against the wall, perfectly still with her little hands folded in her lap, like a small well-brought-up child introduced into a room full of grown-ups. She said, “Tell me what happened? Why do you know about it first?”

“I’ve been down at Hetton since the week-end.”

“Hetton?”

“Don’t you remember? John was going hunting today.”

She frowned, not at once taking in what he was saying. “John … John Andrew … I … Oh thank God…” Then she burst into tears. (162)

The fact that two important people in Brenda’s life are both named John creates a pressure to compare them that would not exist otherwise—not only do both characters interact with Brenda in some way, and thus share a certain amount of meaningful content, but both are called by the same name and thus both share the same linguistic form.

In this extraordinary passage, the peculiarity inherent in the act of naming exposes a deeper arbitrariness of language. Slavoj Žižek, explaining Saul Kripke’s antidescriptivist philosophy of naming, articulates this point well:

If we ask the general public for an identifying description of ‘Kurt Gödel,’ the answer would be ‘the author of the proof of the incompleteness of arithmetic’; but suppose that the proof was written by another man, Schmidt, a friend of Gödel, and that Gödel murdered him and appropriated to himself the discovery of the proof mentioned; in this case, the name ‘Kurt Gödel’ would still refer to the same Gödel … the point is that the name ‘Gödel’ has been linked to a certain object (person) through a ‘primal baptism,’ and
this link holds even if the original identifying description proves false.\(^{33}\)

In other words, naming is the connection of meaningful content—a person’s identity—to the form of an entirely arbitrary signifier. The word “Jabe” refers, of course, to the individual by that name, but we can only know to associate the word “Jabe” with that particular individual if his name has already been established. This recursive process is essentially identical to the way words function in the linguistic system at large; in revealing this horrific recursion to us the passage makes us aware of the unreliability of all language.

This passage from *A Handful of Dust* forces us to compare John Andrew and John Beaver—they have the same name, they are competing for Brenda—so let us ask: in what ways are they different? By this point in the novel John Beaver has in many ways replaced John Andrew in Brenda’s life: she spends much more time with Beaver in London that she does with her family at Hetton, and she often treats Beaver like a child, scolding and advising him with an air of parental condescension: “You mustn’t ever ask questions like that. Will you try and remember?” (60) The most important difference between John Andrew and John Beaver is simply Brenda’s preference for one over the other, in this case, for her lover over her child. It is certainly not unimaginable for a mother’s attention to her child to decrease as she pursues a love affair, but the fact that Brenda’s child and her lover share the same first name draws attention to the way that John Beaver has effectively replaced John Andrew in Brenda’s life—John B. naturally following after John A. (this sequential alphabeticization, of course, leaves open the possibility of future lovers: John C., John D., and so forth).

The function of this textual moment is twofold. On one level, language in this passage reveals in a brutally sudden way the previously unidentifiable reality of Brenda’s emotions and psychology; the artificial linguistic comparison between two human individuals results in a very

genuine, if traumatic, comparison of their emotional worth to Brenda. At the same time the linguistic ambiguity between the two Johns reveals the insecurity of language and communication: the seemingly secure relationship between linguistic form—for example, the name “John”—and meaningful content (the ostensibly singular person named John) is revealed to be completely unreliable. Rather than introducing linguistic clarity the name instead expresses the intrusion of a constitutive ambiguity—of form’s complete lack of secure content—that makes this moment in the novel so powerful. Its meaning is neither fully linguistically represented nor fully unrepresented. In a paradox entirely typical of Waugh, John Andrew’s death comes to be represented most meaningfully through the very way it fails to be effectively represented.

Expressing the Inexpressible: Deleuzian Affect and Force

Besides exploring the limitations of linguistic representation, Waugh’s novels explore ways of going beyond traditional representation. Gilles Deleuze, in a lecture on Spinoza, distinguishes between the “idea,” which is “a representational mode of thought” that corresponds to an objective reality, and the “affect” is a “nonrepresentational mode of thought” that is related to the effects the idea has upon the subject:

Just now I had my head turned there, I saw that corner of the room, I turn… it’s another idea; I walk down a street where I know people, I say “Hello Pierre” and then I turn and say “Hello Paul.” … But what also happens? Our everyday life is not made up solely of ideas which succeed each other. Spinoza employs the term “automaton”: we are, he says, spiritual automata, that is to say it is less we who have the ideas than the ideas which are affirmed in us … There is something else, that is, something in me never ceases to vary. There is a regime of variation which is not the same thing as the succession of ideas themselves … I take up my example again: in the street I run into Pierre, for whom I feel
hostility, I pass by and say hello to Pierre, or perhaps I am afraid of him, and then I suddenly see Paul who is very charming, and I say hello to Paul reassuredly and contentedly.  

According to Deleuze, in addition to experiencing sequences of ideas, each of which represents some aspect of objective reality, the human subject also experiences a constant variation of *vis existendi*, the “force of existing,” and of *potentia agendi*, the “power of acting.” When encountering an individual on the street, I am not merely encountering in my consciousness the idea or the various characteristics of that person—all of which (his appearance, the way he speaks, the actions he performs) can be represented—but I am also affected emotionally, “spiritually,” by this person in a way that cannot be represented as an idea. It will be helpful to use this concept of *affect* in our reading of Waugh, in order to understand the ways his novels attempt to transcend that which is linguistically representable through a reevaluation of the relationship between form and content.

For example, in the passage from *A Handful of Dust* discussed above, in which Brenda comprehends the death of her son, the form of textual moment is the revelation of information about John Andrew’s death. In Deleuze’s terms, this can be called the idea of his death, something that is by definition rooted in objective reality. Although certainly not pleasant, this idea in itself is not extraordinary or traumatic, death being simply an unavoidable part of human existence. The content of this moment is primarily in its affect, in the power it exercises over Brenda. The affect does not mean or represent anything the way the idea does; it exists only as the traumatic experience itself: the force that causes the trauma, the sensation of experience itself, and its consequences. We are not encouraged to assume the specific emotional valence of Brenda’s tears; they could represent virtually anything—relief, guilt, grief—and thus they come

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34 Deleuze, Gilles. “Spinoza.” Translator: Timothy S. Murphy.
to represent pure elemental emotion itself, an expression of authentic “existing” and “acting” that
cannot be constrained by language or idea. The linguistic instability of the moment is essentially
inseparable from the emotional trauma.

The narrator in A Handful of Dust maintains a careful distance from the thoughts,
motivations, and emotions of the characters; we often hear their words and witness their actions,
but are rarely allowed glimpses into their interior selves. Rather than preventing emotional
engagement, however, this refusal to represent emotion as an idea in fact allows us as readers to
experience, more powerfully, emotion as an affect. The following passage describes an evening
Tony spends alone at Hetton while Brenda is in London with Beaver:

Tony went and sat alone in front of the library fire. [...] He dozed a little; then he went up
to change. At dinner he said, “Ambrose, when I’m alone I think in future I’ll have dinner
at a table in the library.” Afterwards he sat with a book in front of the fire, but he was
unable to read. At ten o’clock he scattered the logs in the fireplace before going upstairs.
He fastened the library windows and turned out the lights. That night he went into
Brenda’s empty room to sleep. (102)

This passage presents a series of very specific ideas: Tony napping in front of the fire, Tony
eating dinner, Tony going to bed in Brenda’s room. At face value these ideas do not represent
anything more than a specific Tony’s performance of these unremarkable actions; the entire
passage, however, conveys a remarkable sorrow and loneliness. These repetitive actions are not
themselves significant, but the fact that Tony passes the evening with these empty, meaningless
actions is; the sequence of meaningless actions ultimately make textually visible the affect of
loneliness acting upon Tony. Instead of sharing his meal and his evening with Brenda as he does
in the novel’s beginning, Tony eats dinner alone; he has nobody to talk to except a butler who
does not respond; he is distracted from his book by undescribed thoughts. Ordinary, inane actions—scattering the fireplace embers, switching off the lights before bed—are rendered in detail because these moments are affectively meaningful: to Tony presumably as reminders of how empty his life is without Brenda, to us in their stark contrast with Brenda’s busy life in London. Each is meaningful precisely for what it fails to represent, that is, a happy moment between Tony and Brenda. The content of this passage—Tony’s loneliness during a night without his wife—is not rendered explicitly in the verbal form of the passage; rather, the content exists in what is not said and exists in the affective force whose power it reveals.

How is this accomplished without the passage ever referencing Tony’s emotional state? This is again a problem of representing what cannot be represented; to represent emotion as words is to transform an affect—a subjective experience of varying, fluctuating force—into an idea, something objective and concrete. The affect cannot be represented; it can only be felt as force and energy, it can only be seen in its consequences. Deleuze, in his book *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, which examines the work of the British painter Francis Bacon, addresses a similar problem:

In art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces. For this reason no art is figurative. Paul Klee’s famous formula—“Not to render the visible, but to render visible”—means nothing else. The task of painting is defined as the attempt to render visible forces that are not themselves visible. […] How can time be painted, how can time be heard? And elementary forces such as pressure, inertia, weight, attraction, gravitation, germination—how can they be rendered?35

Emotional energy does not have a form and cannot be expressed in words; it is a goal of

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literature, however to “render visible,” to capture the forces of emotion. The same can be said of
the forces of order and chaos, or of the forces of pleasure, pain, and disgust.

Like *A Handful of Dust*, *Vile Bodies* is highly concerned with the limitations of
traditional representation in depicting force and energy; however, whereas the former is
concerned primarily with subjective emotional force, *Vile Bodies* is concerned with the chaotic
energy of the modern world and with the physical consequences of this energy on individuals. In
its portrayal of the chaotic energy of the modern world the novel draws attention to the
insufficiency of textual representation. The following passage, for example, describes the
reaction of Adam’s ex-fiancée Nina to the urban scenery visible from an airplane:

Nina looked down and saw inclined at an odd angle a horizon of straggling red
suburb; arterial roads dotted with little cars; factories, some of them working, others
empty and decaying; a disused canal; some distant hills sown with bungalows; wireless
masts and overhead power cables; men and women were indiscernible except as tiny
spots; they were marrying and shopping and making money and having children. The
scene lurched and tilted again as the aeroplane struck a current of air.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” said Nina. (284)

The uncentered, chaotic energy of society is physically manifested in the visible effects of
industrialization. The city seems to be both spontaneously generative and on the verge of
collapse, its energy is productive but monotonous and dissipative. That the hills are “sown with
bungalows” suggests the vitality of the suburb through comparison to agriculture; however, the
objects described are homes—“bungalows”—and for houses to be described as similar to a field
of identical plants suggests not only the speed and suddenness of their development but also their
cheapness and replaceability. Alongside the proliferation of suburbs, streets, and power cables
occurs a wasting; some factories decay as others function; a canal exists in “disuse.” Human beings are “indiscernible” as their physical or spiritual selves; they are defined instead by the actions they perform, by their function as cogs in the urban machine, “marrying and shopping and making money and having children.” This description of the urban environment demonstrates the patterns and behavior of energy in modern society; through the physical descriptions of the expanding city decaying from the inside, in which the individual human becomes a mere energetic function, we witness in a Deleuzian sense the textual capture of expansive, directionless, wasting urban energy. The comprehension of this energy so fills Nina with revulsion that she becomes physically ill (although her response is attributed, humorously, to the “lurch” of the airplane).

The parties that are so central to Vile Bodies demonstrate a similar wasteful expenditure of seemingly endless energy—“all that succession and repetition of massed humanity…. Those vile bodies…” (171). The violent war in the final chapter is the ultimate illustration of this Deleuzian energy. As the angel-turned-prostitute Chastity finishes telling her circular, repetitive story of sexual misadventure, the “circling typhoon” of battle returns, and the novel ends. The forces depicted in the violence of war and in the propulsion of Chastity across the globe are identical in their directionless circularity and their moral destitution; their primary difference is in magnitude. Chastity’s story is reminiscent of the novel’s broad narrative structure, which consists primarily Adam’s incessant, repetitive attempts to secure the finances to marry Nina; he spends much of the novel either attempting to find a “drunk major” to whom he loaned £1000 or

36 Adam summarizes the novel quite well in his statement “Oh Nina, what a lot of parties.” (170)
37 Chastity’s story moves her from England to Argentina, to North America, to Asia, and back to Europe, concluding: “Then I was in a tin hut with the girls, and then yesterday they had friends and I was alone, so I went for a walk, and when I came back the hut was gone and the girls were gone … and now I don’t rightly know where I am. My, isn’t war awful?” (320)
visiting Nina’s father Colonel Blount in the hopes of borrowing such a sum. The chaotic, circular actions that constitute *Vile Bodies*—the continuous parties, the endless successive journeys, the final war—are not meaningful metaphorically, through their representation of a specific philosophy or metaphysical argument, so much as they are meaningful metonymically, in the way they together partake in and reveal the exchange of invisible forces that act upon and through modern society and the individual lives that compose it. In fact, the novel very clearly distinguishes the metaphorical and philosophical representations it performs from its depiction of energy, emphasizing in particular the limitations of the former.

In a famous passage, from Adam and his friends’ visit to a motorcar race, the narrator uses types of cars as illustrations of specific philosophical categories:

The truth is that motor cars offer a very happy illustration of the metaphysical distinction between “being” and “becoming.” Some cars, mere vehicles with no purpose above bare locomotion...have definite “being” as much as their occupants. They are bought all screwed up and numbered and painted, and there they stay through various declensions of ownership, brightened now and then with a lick of paint or temporarily rejuvenated by the addition of some minor organ, but still maintaining their essential identity to the scrap heap.

Not so the real cars, that become masters of men; those vital creations of metal who exist solely for their own propulsion through space, for whom their drivers, clinging precariously at the steering wheel, are as important as his stenographer to a stock broker. These are in perpetual flux; a vortex of combining and disintegrating units... (227-228) Critics have often interpreted this passage in reference to specific cultural and philosophical movements. George McCartney argues “it seems safe to assume that Waugh intended the race
episode to satirize not only Bergson's creative evolution but also the Futurist's worship of speed, mechanism, and inhuman efficiency, or what [Wyndham] Lewis scornfully called the cult of 'automobilism,'”38 while Archie Loss notes of the cars: “their movement through space suggests the ‘vortex of combining and disintegrating units’ common to the Futurist and Vorticist vision.”39 Brooke Allen40 makes similar arguments about the relationship of this passage, and Vile Bodies as a whole, to the Futurist movement and to Bergsonian thought. I find this passage remarkable not because of the logical details of its philosophical arguments but rather because of the way it represents philosophical concerns so concretely as metaphor, or in other words, attempts to make clear the relationship between form (motorcar) and content (philosophy). The philosophical illustration that occurs is memorable precisely because it is so explicit, so obvious in its intentions. In Deleuzian terms, the passage attempts to “represent the forms” of the philosophical categories rather than to “capture their forces.” The fact that critics focus so intently on specific historical and cultural context in their readings of this passage illustrates precisely the limitations of metaphorical representation; the passage has become restricted in its meaning. By illustrating the broad terms “being” and “becoming” with the actions of motorcars, the passage limits both the significance of the philosophical terms and the significance of the cars. Brute force is no longer meaningful as immanent force itself but becomes significant only inasmuch as it illustrates an artificial concept.

Another passage from the novel, in which the hospitalized Agatha Runcible hallucinates about driving a racecar, provides, in contrast, an example of the power of nonrepresentational meaning:

There was rarely more than a quarter of a mile of black road to be seen at one time. It unrolled like a length of cinema film. At the edges was confusion; a fog spinning past; “Faster, faster,” they shouted above the roar of the engine. The road rose suddenly and the white car soared up the sharp ascent without slackening of speed. At the summit of the hill there was a corner. Two cars had crept up, one on each side, and were closing in.


Form and content ultimately merge in this passage. Unlike in the previous passage, no content is immediately presented. The significance of this text and indeed, of much of Waugh’s work, is in its powerful depiction of different but related nonverbal forces: the physical energy embodied by the hurtling cars is not restricted to the representation of a philosophical meaning; rather, it contributes to the frenetic societal energy present in the passage. Similarly, this societal energy—the roaring crowd, the voices of society, the character’s psychological urge to go “faster, faster,”—encourages the momentum of the physical race. These forces are, of course, related to others in the novel—the forces of industrialization, of war, of parties—but not in a restrictive metaphorical way. Relationships between these forces and meanings are shifting and dynamic; each is distinct, yet all are similar. The immanent energy of existence, Deleuze’s elementary, elemental forces, can only be represented in this allusive, free, nonrepresentational manner. Ultimately, through challenging traditional means of linguistic representation, Waugh broadens the scope of his work beyond the social and personal to address the nature of meaning and language.


Kernan, Alvin B. "The Wall and the Jungle: The Early Novels of Evelyn Waugh."


