

THE COMIC SPIRIT IN THE NOVELS
OF EVELYN WAUGH

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PREFACE

Arriving at a definition of comedy is the first objective in this thesis. Here, a distinction has been made between satiric comedy which is gained at the expense of people caught in an incongruous or ludicrous situation and the comedy that identifies and, perhaps, sympathizes with the individuals and their circumstances.

In the first chapter I point out the differences between these two kinds of comedy. The first kind, the satiric, is by far the more extensively used by Waugh in his response to the events of the twentieth century. I suggest, however, that Waugh's comic method changes in his novels so that the second kind of comedy, the sympathetic kind, becomes equally, if not more, prominent in his later works.

The remaining chapters trace this development in Waugh's comic style. The novels which I have selected to exemplify his satiric comedy are Decline and Fall, Vile Bodies, and Black Mischief. A Handful of Dust has been selected as the turning point in his development. Finally, the three books of the war-trilogy, Men At Arms, Officers and Gentlemen, and Unconditional Surrender have been dealt with to show the second, more sympathetic comic treatment of character and situation.

CHAPTER I
THE IDEA OF COMEDY

From 1928 with the appearance of his first novel Decline and Fall, Waugh's role as a satirist has been examined. Shocking even as they delighted, the outrageous fortunes and fates given to his characters more often than not presented the reader with a question: where, in the whirligig worlds his people inhabited, did Waugh's own values lie? The satiric mask of complete detachment from the lives of his earlier heroes led to numerous speculations on Waugh's own values.

A number of critics could see only the religious standpoint from which Waugh wrote. Peter Green sums up this attitude when he writes that "Waugh is a convinced Roman Catholic who examines social mores from an explicitly religious viewpoint."¹ More frequently, however, critics have asserted that Waugh was dedicated to the sense of order invested in England's fading aristocracy. Nigel Dennis called him "the pillar of Anchorage House,"² Anchorage House being one of the last outposts of the landed gentry,

¹Peter Green, "Du Côté de Chez Waugh", A Review of English Literature, II (April, 1961), 90.

²Nigel Dennis, "Evelyn Waugh: The Pillar of Anchorage House", Partisan Review, X (July-August, 1943), 350-61.

while more elaborately, James F. Carens stated that

There is about this middle-class writer's dedication to the great house and to the aristocrats who built it something of the same quality of feeling that exists in the poetry of Yeats, another middle-class worshipper of the aristocracy and of the orderly life of its houses. Often Waugh's descriptions of these relics of the past remind the reader of the lines by Yeats, "So let her bridegroom bring her to a house, where all's accustomed, ceremonious," which invest tradition, custom, ceremony, and order with a beauty at once aesthetic and nobly moral.³

In themselves entirely accurate, such statements most often fail to take into account the most important quality of Waugh's work: his comedy. For Waugh's writing is funny. From instances of thigh-slapping farce to subtle and shifting tones of irony, Waugh's comic spirit is his tough response to a world gone rotten.

I shall attempt in this paper to show how the comic spirit develops in the novels of Evelyn Waugh. It sounds contradictory to examine the comic spirit of his novels when all of them contain the materials from which tragedy would more likely be created: a world of spiritual aridity and of fruitless search, either for certitude of values or simple sensual pleasures. Also, since much of Waugh's humour is gained at the expense of human aberrations--all forms of duplicity, avarice, lust and inhumanity--a kind of anarchy lies at the base of his comedy.

³James F. Carens, The Satiric Art of Evelyn Waugh (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), p.25.

There is no doubt that his view of life is critical, one of alarm and horror at receding values of civilization, but the aesthetic response to that view is comic at the same time that it is critical.

The greater part of Waugh's comedy falls into this category of critical or satirical comedy. However, in his development, Waugh's methods changed. The detached observer whose cool glance and comment provided such devastating comedy in the early novels becomes more sympathetic and committed to those characters, however ineffectual they might be, whose values he might have shared. Before the novels themselves are discussed, some distinctions about comedy will be made to provide the necessary framework by which Waugh's work will be analyzed. Because his novels are a reflection and a product of the modern age, this first chapter will also include a brief but necessary look at the spirit of the times which produced a new genre of literature and sharpened the edge of Waugh's comic spirit.

The question of what constitutes comedy is a serious, often downright disheartening one. The many theories about what it is--Edmund Bergler categorizes over fifty variant theories of comedy!⁴--attest to the elusive qualities of comedy. Still, some definition

⁴Edmund Bergler, Laughter and The Sense of Humour. (New York: Intercontinental Medical Book Corporation, 1956).

is necessary. Perhaps, one of the most obvious aspects of comedy is that "the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human."⁵ Equally apparent as a source of comedy is the quality of incongruity, the lack of harmony between parts, or the difference between that which is unexpected and unusual and that which is common and ordinary.

Another quality of the comic which is useful for the discussion in this paper is that described by Henri Bergson:

...equally worthy of notice [is] the absence of feeling which usually accompanies laughter. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion....To produce the whole of its effect, the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple.⁶

However, although Bergson claims that the comic makes its appeal to the intelligence, his definition applies more appropriately to satirical comedy, where the incongruity of a situation is the result of human folly. A person may respond in a number of ways to a situation, and his reaction will be determined by his personal involvement in it. When he considers objectively the folly of people in a situation, he laughs at them and satirical comedy is the result.

Generally, critics insist on a separation between

⁵Henri Bergson, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, Trans. by C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1911), p. 3.

⁶Ibid., p. 5.

satirical comedy and non-satirical comedy and this distinction is central to the discussion of Waugh's developing comedy. Leonard Feinberg contends that satirical comedy is created by the writer's scepticism about things, not his delight in them.⁷ George Meredith, in his On Comedy, insists on the distinction between satire and comedy:

You may estimate your capacity for comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love without loving them less; and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes... If you detect the ridicule, and your kindness is killed by it, you are slipping into the grasp of satire.⁸

As opposed to 'pure' comedy, satirical comedy does not provide any catharsis, for the release which the laughter of satire might give often disappears due to the uncomfortable feeling which the reader gets that he is laughing at something absurd which ultimately rests within himself. When a person ceases to consider himself superior to that which he views, if he sees himself as participating, albeit vicariously, in the situation that his intelligence perceives as ludicrous, he has moved beyond the range of satirical comedy.

The comic figures in Waugh's earlier novels are

⁷Leonard Feinberg, Introduction to Satire, (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1967), p. 216.

⁸George Meredith, "On Comedy", Miscellaneous Prose, in The Works of George Meredith, (Memorial Edition; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), p. 41.

generally figures of extreme caricature used to expose the malice and greed of others. Since emotional sterility is their dominant quality, they allow a sense of superiority to the reader and all emotional identification with them is nullified. However, once the reader's detachment or anesthesia of the heart is lost and an emotional involvement--pity, anger, sorrow--is introduced towards the characters, the comedy moves out of the range of satire.

When a reader becomes emotionally involved with the characters, the lines between the ludicrous and the pathetic may become blurred, and a multiple rather than a single response occurs. Such an inability of the reader to distinguish between the farce and the pathos of the lives of Waugh's characters has resulted in an ambivalent response to many situations. How, for instance, should one react to Brenda Last's exclamation, "...oh, thank God..." when she discovers it is her son and not her lover who has been killed in a hunting accident? Should the reader be amused or horrified when he learns that Prudence Courtenay has been eaten by cannibals? The basic absurdity of many of the situations which Waugh describes elicits our laughter; when the horror or tragedy of the situation becomes more apparent, it is no longer funny. In such instances, tragedy becomes fused with the most hilarious farce. Eugene Ionesco, of

the same generation as Waugh and with a similar awareness of the comedy of life's tragedy, describes this lack of distinction between the comic and the tragic:

"I have never been able to understand the difference that is made between the comic and the tragic. As the comic is the intuition of the absurd, it seems to me more conducive to despair than the tragic. Humour makes us conscious, with a free lucidity, of the tragic or desultory condition of man...humour is the only possibility we possess of detaching ourselves--yet only after we have surmounted, assimilated, taken cognizance of it--from our tragicomic human condition, the malaise of being. To become conscious of what is horrifying and to laugh at it is to become master of that which is horrifying... the comic alone is capable of giving us strength to bear the tragedy of existence."⁹

Waugh himself admitted the lack of distinction that exists between comedy and tragedy when he stated that "my problem has been to distill comedy and sometimes tragedy from the knockabout farce of people's outward behaviour."¹⁰

Thus, it appears that comedy and tragedy are more closely related than would seem so at first glance. Both comedy and tragedy are based on seeing the futility of doing a thing and, at the same time, the necessity of doing it. Both require an emotional commitment, whereas satire insists on a lack of it.

Tragedy seems to get at the common predicament and show the individual man as tragic not only for what he is as

⁹Quoted in Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, 1961), p. 133.

¹⁰Quoted in Frederick Stopp, Evelyn Waugh: Portrait of An Artist (London: Chapman and Hall, 1958), p. 77.

a person but as a member of our own species, doomed by the nature of things to sadness and defeat. Sympathetic comedy seems to alleviate the sorrow by emphasizing that each man has his share of a common fate. The comic experience is humane, calling forth a sense of the richness of life, willing participating--an acceptance of the full responsibility of being human...¹¹

This, then, is the difference between satiric comedy and sympathetic comedy: instead of a lack of emotion on which satiric comedy depends, sympathetic comedy relies on a participation or sharing in the incongruous situation. When the bystander or reader realizes that he is part of the situation, that he, too, is the butt of the joke, then the wider meaning of comedy has been gained. William Saroyan's book entitled The Human Comedy contains no particular malice or satire; here, "human comedy" is a synonym for life itself.

The change in Waugh's style is a movement from the comedy of satire to the comedy of tragedy, a movement from static figures of satiric comedy to human characters of tragedy and comedy. This development--the change of laughter of the mind to laughter of the heart--is the theme of this paper. Initially, the ethos of Waugh's early novels is one that delights in absurd and incongruous situations; the reader is invited to laugh at people and their follies. For Waugh, the incongruity of life, the conflict between an ideal world and the actual present, provided an exuberant comic

¹¹ Bernard Schilling, The Comic Spirit (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965), pp. 16-17.

situation, one that was best resolved in comic terms.

As Waugh developed, his methods changed; personal and social, religious and political sentiments became more noticeable. As a true comic artist, Waugh observed those strains of sentiment but did not allow them to go untouched. If his sympathies were increasingly engaged, at the same time his view of the satiric and comic would not permit those fictitious characters who held his beliefs to exist unscathed. Those of his characters who view the world as other than a wantonly brutal one and trust that a benign nature will somehow prevail against injustice suffer precisely because they too innocently and naively trust. On the other hand, in Waugh's absurd, terrifying world, those characters who have the power to survive are not moral pillars but rather exploiters and scoundrels. Such dichotomy has resulted in, as Malcolm Bradbury puts it, "a permanent difficulty about picking up Waugh's tone."¹² As tempered as his critical comedy becomes, the thrusts of the satirical stiletto continue to draw blood throughout the entirety of his fiction right up to the final statement in his last work,

¹²Malcolm Bradbury, Evelyn Waugh, Writers and Critics (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1964), p. 4.

Unconditional Surrender.¹³ In spite of the deepening shadows within the comic framework, the comic muse never deserts Waugh. Less preposterous, dependent more on irony, the comedy of his later fiction moves to the kind that is sympathetic with human life.

In the preceding pages I have tried to indicate the distinction between satirical and non-satirical comedy, suggesting that the degree of emotional involvement determines the category of comedy. The lack of definite demarcation between these boundaries is nowhere better observed than in the modern movement in literature known as the literature of the Absurd which was fostered by the same milieu as Waugh's novels. When Ionesco, one of the major figures of this movement, defined the absurd as

"that which is devoid of purpose...Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."¹⁴

he was also describing the pervading spirit of modern times.

¹³"Elderberry remembered that Box-Bender had had trouble with his own son. What had it been? Divorce? Debt? No, something odder than that. He'd gone into a monastery. With unusual delicacy Elderberry did not raise the question." Evelyn Waugh, Unconditional Surrender. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 239.

¹⁴Quoted in Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. xix.

This sense of purposeless, futile existence lies at the heart of all Waugh's novels, and as stated earlier, all of them contain a world of spiritual aridity and fruitless search. After the destruction of the First World War, the modern age was characterized at both personal and national levels by anxiety and insecurity, qualities attributable to the far-reaching consequences of social upheavals such as war and depression, of the rise and dominance of deterministic philosophies of Marxism and Freudianism, and of the psychological and anthropological approaches to human life that declared the relativity and limitations of personal and social values.

It was the hollow world of T.S. Eliot's hollow men; it was the futile searching of the characters of Aldous Huxley, Waugh's satiric contemporary. Huxley's novels, in fact, enunciate the sense of futility which characterized the decades following World War I. And, like the works of Eliot and Huxley, Waugh's fiction also contains this view of the modern age, with its search for order and stability in a man-centered universe. Like Huxley, Waugh responded in his early novels by pointing out the comedy and satirizing the lives of the desperately gay people of the modern era.

But Waugh's writing is not just a variation of Huxley's. His response to the times, although comic, is unlike Huxley's,

firmly based in the belief that people are morally responsible for their actions. In his world, causation has not been suspended,

. . . and his characters suffer the punishments their acts deserve. They pay not only for their sins, but for their silliness, their indifference, and their ignorance as well.¹⁵

As his characters gain greater depth, and hence are able to suffer more, they also obtain greater understanding of the meaning of their own lives as a small but integral part of the entire order of things. The realization of evil in the world and the necessity of reconciling their own moral values to it become, in Waugh's last novels, his major theme.

Essentially, Waugh's comedy remains critical since the misfortunes suffered by the main characters are a result of the callous or selfish behaviour of other people. But the development of the central characters in the later novels is such that they recognize their own part in the whole scheme of life, and, by seeing their role, are able to accept the errors and weaknesses of others. In Waugh's last novels, the grim absurdity of war-time living is alleviated for Guy Crouchback, the main character, by his own increasing sympathy for weak humanity. In this war-trilogy, the satirical comedy continues unremitting, but the total effect of the

¹⁵R. J. Vorhees, "Evelyn Waugh Revisited", South Atlantic Quarterly, L (July, 1951), 396.

book is that of satirical comedy ameliorated by the comedy of sympathy for, and the acceptance of, human fallibility.

In this first chapter, a set of terms and a frame of reference have been given for the discussion of the comic spirit in the novels of Waugh. The subsequent chapters of this thesis will deal with his comedy as it develops through his novels. The books which have been selected for intensive examination are Decline and Fall, Vile Bodies, Black Mischief, A Handful of Dust, and the three novels of the war-trilogy, Sword of Honour.

The thesis of this paper is that there is a development in the comic spirit of Waugh's works: it moves beyond the comedy of satire and the experience of the early exuberant comedy to a comic experience that is an intermingling of laughter and sadness, one that is at once critical and sympathetic. In tracing the comic spirit as it develops throughout his fiction, this paper will point out the recurrent elements of his style, reveal his critical evaluation of and response to the modern world, and suggest that the range of his comic ingenuity ranks him among the major comic writers of the first half of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EARLY NOVELS

Waugh's first three novels, Decline and Fall, Vile Bodies, and Black Mischief, provide all the elements that create his comic world: a central figure who is caught in ludicrous circumstances he cannot control; the supra-mortals who live beyond the arbitrariness of fate; and the comic resolution of the hero's plight. For Waugh, the comic framework also becomes the means by which his critical view of society is given. In the progression of his comic style, there becomes discernible a definite shift in tone from the criticism that is merely implied in Decline and Fall to an intensified and direct critical commentary in Vile Bodies and Black Mischief.

The comic framework of Decline and Fall (1928), like that of Waugh's subsequent novels, is provided by the situation of an utterly passive, innocent person in a riot of events over which he has no influence or control. The comedy arises from sophisticated experience looking on with laughing indulgence at naïvete and innocence as Paul Pennyfeather is expelled from Oxford through no fault of his own, takes a teaching job in a fourth-rate boys' school, falls in love with the rich socialite mother of one of his students

and moves with her to her London home. Unaware that she owns a white-slave enterprise, he undertakes to do a small job for her, is arrested, sentenced to jail for seven years, released from prison through a rigged plan, and finally reinstated at Oxford as his own cousin.

The reversals of Paul's life seem to be the result of a malign, or at least extremely arbitrary, fate but are actually the result of unscrupulous human motives and selfish deed. However, the complete neutrality of Waugh's treatment maintains the comic tone. For instance, Paul's expulsion from Oxford after having been stripped of a major portion of his clothes by some drunken college seniors may seem a blatant miscarriage of justice. Waugh's treatment of the scene is blandly sophisticated and comic:

Next morning there was a lovely College meeting.

"Two hundred and thirty pounds," murmured the Domestic Bursar ecstatically, "not counting the damage! That means five evenings, with what we have already collected. Five evenings of Founder's port!"

"The case of Pennyfeather," the Master was saying, "seems to be quite a different matter altogether. He ran the whole length of the quadrangle, you say, without his trousers. It is unseemly. It is more: it is indecent. In fact, I am almost prepared to say that it is flagrantly indecent. It is not the conduct we expect of a scholar."

"Perhaps if we fined him really heavily?" suggested the Junior Dean.

"I very much doubt whether he could pay. I understand he is not well off. Without trousers, indeed! And at that time of night! I think we should do far better to get rid of him altogether. That sort of young man does College no good."¹

¹Evelyn Waugh, Decline and Fall (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1937), p. 13. All future references will be the form: Decline.

The unusual adjective 'lovely' to describe the meeting establishes the comic note, and the happiness of the college authorities in collecting their fines goes unremarked as far as any explicit criticism is concerned. The comic tone is furthered by Paul's lack of resistance to their decision:

"God damn and blast them all to hell," said Paul meekly to himself as he drove to the station, and then he felt rather ashamed, because he rarely swore.²

There is a similar lack of remonstrance on his part when his legal guardian withholds from him his inheritance:

"Have I no legal right to any money at all?" asked Paul.

"None whatever, my dear boy," said his guardian quite cheerfully...

That spring Paul's guardian's daughter had two new evening frocks and, thus glorified, became engaged to a well-conducted young man in the Office of Works.³

The blithe tone with which Waugh presents this 'fait accompli' and the suspension of moral judgment set the pattern for most of the events of Paul's life and the comic tone of the book.

The methods by which Waugh emphasizes the comic focus of the book over the satirical one are the hallmarks of his comic technique. His unsympathetic treatment of character, his refusal to make judgments for his reader about decidedly questionable actions, the brisk pace and lightness with which flagrant events are related, and the

²Decline, p. 14.

³Decline, p. 16.

unquestionable delight taken in fantastic creatures and extravagant behaviour all combine to mitigate the criticism of society. In spite of the criticism of modern society which is implicit in Decline and Fall, this novel, with its exuberant delight in characters and events, is easily the most comic of Waugh's novels.

The most obvious and, probably, effective method by which the sting of satire is toned down to become comedy is the detachment Waugh has towards his central figure, Paul Pennyfeather. Just as Paul himself is emotionally unaffected by the adverse situations of his life, Waugh's concern for his fate is also minimal. Despite the flux and loss and betrayal with which his life abounds, Paul is never even slightly pathetic. Not only is there no personal power or will to establish justice or gain restitution for his losses, there also is no pain in the misfortunes which befall him. He had never anticipated any great success in his career and thus is quite content to return to his quiet life at Oxford. Even though Paul has been the victim of social injustice, Waugh does not allow him to emerge as a martyr for the cause of justice. His losses are not permitted to be seen as real losses nor his sufferings as really painful and his imprisonment becomes a kind of blessing in disguise.

The next four weeks of solitary confinement were among the happiest of Paul's life. The physical comforts were certainly meagre, but at the Ritz Paul had learned to appreciate the inadequacy of purely physical comfort. It was so exhilarating, he found, never to have to make any decision on any subject, to be wholly relieved from the smallest consideration of time, meals, or clothes, to have no anxiety ever about what kind of impression he was making; in fact, to be free.⁴

No pity is elicited or expected by these calmly-related events. Though we may be sympathetic to the helplessness of Paul, he never becomes a hero in any sense of the word, one whose self-consciousness portrays a real person or whose fate we feel any anxiety for. His character has been so lightly drawn as to appear made of cardboard, his emotions so lightly defined that his misfortunes cannot really be called misfortunes at all.⁵ Waugh interrupts the action to admit quite candidly that his detachment from Paul, the "anaesthesia of the heart" which Bergson claimed necessary for comedy, is a deliberate stylistic manoeuvre:

In fact, the whole of this book is really an account of the mysterious disappearance of Paul Pennyfeather, so that readers must not complain if the shadow which took his name does not amply fill the important part

⁴Decline, p. 170.

⁵The incompleteness of character is more clearly seen when one compares the book with the movie version of Decline and Fall (entitled "Decline and Fall of a Birdwatcher"). Although the movie adheres closely to the novel in episode and dialogue, as soon as the two-dimensional Paul Pennyfeather of the book was transformed to the real person on the screen, the distance or detachment to him was lost, thus making him appear not just helpless but rather stupid.

of hero for which he was originally cast. . . . Paul Pennyfeather would never have made a hero, and the only interest about him arises from the unusual series of events of which his shadow was witness.⁶

Waugh strengthens the comic effect by maintaining what we have seen to be his characteristic tight control over implicit criticism of society and individual conduct. The actions of Margot Beste-Chetwynde are openly corrupt and she is directly responsible for Paul's prison sentence, yet her delightful qualities are not diminished by moral evaluation. In the following passage it is possible to discern a developing condemnation of Margot's actions, for in her crimes she is "grossly culpable." The ideals of honour and justice are no longer only implicitly suggested but openly debated:

In his six weeks of solitude and grave consideration he had failed to make up his mind about Margot Beste-Chetwynde; it was torn and distracted by two conflicting methods of thought. On the one side was the dead weight of precept, inherited from generations of schoolmasters and divines. According to these, the problem was difficult but not insoluble. He had 'done the right thing' in shielding the woman: so much was clear, but Margot had not quite filled the place assigned to her, for in this case she was grossly culpable, and he was shielding her, not from misfortune or injustice, but from the consequence of her crimes; he felt that Margot had got him into a row and ought jolly well to own up and face the music.⁷

⁶Decline, pp. 122-3.

⁷Decline, p. 187.

Here, Waugh's method is fully operational. The moralizing tone which could so easily break through--and almost does--is not permitted to continue. With a deft, light touch, Waugh shifts that tone:

How lovely Margot was, Paul reflected, even in this absurd photograph, this grey-and-black smudge of ink! Even the most hardened criminal there--he was serving his third sentence for blackmail--laid down his cards for a moment and remarked upon how the whole carriage seemed to be flooded with the delectable savour of the Champs-Elysees in early June. "Funny," he said, "I thought I smelt scent." And that set them off talking about women.⁸

With this easy transition to a comic tone, Waugh does not permit Paul any lengthy cogitation that might gain him sympathy and thereby shift the tone of the episode from comedy to criticism and moral evaluation.

The steady control which Waugh maintains over the two-dimensionality of his figures, and hence, the detachment which created the comedy of the book, is carried over to the pace at which events occur. Again, just as Paul is not allowed to reflect too long or too deeply on his misfortunes in order that he remain a comic figure, the implied criticism of egregious incidents is muted by the briskness of Waugh's pace. Shocking events, the result of mindless

⁸Decline, pp. 188-9.

or selfish behaviour, are thrust upon the reader and then dropped without further comment. The juxtaposition, without further development or criticism, of macabre incidents amid commonplace circumstances is farcical simply because human culpability is never allowed to emerge as the cause of pain or injury.

Everybody else, however, was there [at the marriage of Captain Grimes and Miss Fagan] except little Lord Tangent, whose foot was being amputated at a local nursing home.⁹

Little Lord Tangent's foot needs to be amputated because he has carelessly been shot in the leg by one of the drunken masters at the sports' day. The irresponsibility of the master, Mr. Prendergast, and indifference of others including Tangent's mother to the accident border on brutality, but again, Waugh does no more than allude to the incident before he moves on. Because direct criticism is absent and the reader's attention moves quickly to less shocking events, the brutality of the situation remains comic, more incongruous or ludicrous than ugly or painful. The violent death of Prendergast--his head is sawed off by a monomaniac in prison--is presented in such a nonchalant way that the response is comic:

⁹Decline, p. 105.

The hymn was the recognized time for the exchange of gossip. . . .

"O God, our help in ages past," sang Paul. "Where's Prendergast to-day?"

"What, ain't you 'eard? 'e's been done in,"
"And our eternal home."¹⁰

Deeper reflection might see this episode as horrifying but "from all points of view it was lucky [*italics mine*] that the madman had chosen Mr. Prendergast for attack."¹¹ There is no one, in Waugh's treatment, who mourns for Prendergast and the thought of his death is swallowed up quickly by "the benefits of the happy reversion to tradition"¹² that result from his death. A major part of Waugh's comedy relies on such extraordinary events involving injury and death and yet there is little pathos in them simply because the focus of attention moves quickly on to another detail.

Besides the fast-paced movement of episodes, there is yet another element which diminishes the critical response in favour of a comic one. This is the obvious delight taken in the misfortunes of Paul Pennyfeather and the extraordinary people he meets. The passivity of Paul, we have seen, provides one kind of comic characterization, but there is another kind to be found in dynamic people like Margot-Beste-Chetwynde, Paul's fiancée, and Captain Grimes, his colleague at Llanabba Castle. Despite her open

¹⁰Decline, p. 183.

¹¹Decline, p. 184.

¹²Decline, p. 184.

flaunting of social conventions, Margot is intended to charm the reader just as she charms Paul and Dr. Fagan, for wherever she appears, the sun breaks through and there is a scent of flowers in the air.

...an enormous limousine of dove-grey and silver stole soundlessly on to the field, ...

...like the first breath of spring in the Champs-Elysees, came Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde--two lizard-skin feet, silk legs, chinchilla body, a tight little black hat, pinned with platinum and diamonds, and the high invariable voice that may be heard in any Ritz Hotel from New York to Budapest.

..."Dear Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde!" said Dr. Fagan; "dear, dear, Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde!"¹³

Even Paul's little stint in prison does not call much attention to her immorality; if anything, Waugh appears to be delighting in her freshness and freedom and criticizing anything that would bind or destroy them, be it public school or prison.

It was impossible to imprison the Margot who had committed the crime. If some one had to suffer that the public might be discouraged from providing poor Mrs. Grimes with the only employment for which civilization had prepared her, then it had better be Paul than that other woman with Margot's name, for anyone who has been in an English public school will always feel comparatively at home in prison.¹⁴

An even more indefatigable figure is Captain Grimes who gets himself into trouble at every turn of his life.

¹³Decline, p. 75.

¹⁴Decline, p. 188.

Quite deliberately he involves himself in bigamy and white slavery, managing always to elude the authorities who seek to curtail his exuberance. He emerges triumphant, like Shakespeare's Falstaff and Dickens' Micawber, when lesser figures have been destroyed. His disregard for personal safety or social approval takes him beyond the laws which govern lesser mortals, so that the lawless, amoral world through which he moves is the polar extreme of the limitedness of Paul's life. Unlike Paul, Grimes refuses to accept his situation as unalterable and disappears only to pop up elsewhere:

He was a life force. Sentenced to death in Flanders, he popped up in Wales; drowned in Wales, he emerged in South America; engulfed in the dark mystery of Egdon Mire, he would rise again somewhere at some time, shaking from his limbs the musty integuments of the tomb. Surely he had followed in the Bacchic train of distant Arcady, and played on the reeds of myth by forgotten streams, and taught the childish satyrs the art of love? Had he not suffered unscathed the fearful dooms of all the offended gods, of all the histories, fire, brimstone, and yawning earthquakes, plague, and pestilence? Had he not stood, like the Pompeian sentry, while the Citadels of the Plain fell to ruin about his ears? Had he not, like some grease-covered Channel-swimmer, breasted the waves of the Deluge? Had he not moved unseen when the darkness covered the waters?¹⁵

Waugh's delight in Captain Grimes is obvious in the rhythmic cadences of those parallel lines. The lyricism of the life-essences to which Grimes is compared, from the satyrs of Arcady to the brooding mysterious force of earth's creation, indicate Waugh's own enjoyment of this immortal

¹⁵Decline, p. 169.

figure. The critical concern with Grimes' conduct is suspended by the sheer delight taken in his amoral deeds. With Dr. Fagan, the reader might well exclaim, "I look forward to each new fiasco with the utmost relish,"¹⁶ for the reader's anticipation of a new episode in Paul's life is bound up largely in the hope of meeting again immortals like Grimes. In this novel, Waugh does not disappoint the reader. Each new situation of confusion for Paul brings with it the indestructible Captain Grimes, one of the major sources of comedy in the book.

In these first pages, I have attempted to indicate the elements that are basic to Waugh's comic style. In the rest of his work, Waugh uses these elements for both comedy and criticism, but in Decline and Fall, the critical focus is almost completely obscured by the comic emphasis on characters and events. The lack of critical comment, the fast-moving sequence of events, the delight in extraordinary characters, and the comic resolution to the hero's plight where the distinction between good fortune and calamity is negligible, all serve to emphasize the comedy of Decline and Fall.

In the later works, the hero learns about human

¹⁶Decline, p. 61.

folly with more pain than Paul, and Waugh does not allow the hero's dilemma to be resolved as easily as in Decline and Fall. Only in Scoop does the comic spirit approach that of Decline and Fall; in subsequent works, while the same ingredients for a comic world recur, proportions are altered. Darker undertones become more apparent. In Vile Bodies, one observes the slight shift of emphasis which brings Waugh and the reader to a closer involvement with the main characters and a more pointed criticism of society.

Vile Bodies (1930) follows close on the heels of Decline and Fall in similarity of focus and style. Taking over where Decline and Fall left off with the activities of Margot Beste-Chetwynde Metroland, Paul Pennyfeather's onetime amour, Vile Bodies is closely concerned with the antics of other members of the Mayfair set, the Bright Young People of the late 1920's. Again, the central figure is a rather passive young man who oscillates between fortune and misfortune, the two often being indistinguishable, and again, the same brisk pace continues and similar fantastic characters as those in Decline and Fall recur. Like Paul Pennyfeather, Adam Fenwick-Symes finds himself at the mercy of officials intent on 'preserving decency', loses the girl he loves to another man, and is constantly ejected from any favourable circumstances.

However, important divergences from Decline and Fall are noted in Vile Bodies with the result that the comic spirit is somewhat bruised by the critical focus. The tone of amused sophistication looking at innocence in Waugh's

first novel becomes slightly altered as Waugh gives more emphasis to the sense of futility at the heart of that sophisticated brightness. The entire merry-go-round effect of Vile Bodies from the quotation in the foreword--"Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place"--to the delirious "faster...faster..." of Agatha Runcible before she dies at the book's end carries an underlying sense of frustration and despair which alters the comic tones considerably.

Both the comedy and the criticism of society emerge from the framework of the book's events, which, for the most part, are the audacious parties by which the younger set attempts to find amusement and diversion from their boredom:

(...Masked parties, Savage parties, Victorian parties, Greek parties, Wild West parties, Russian parties, Circus parties, parties where one had to dress as somebody else, almost naked parties in St. John's Wood, parties in flats and studios and houses and ships and hotels and night clubs, in windmills, and swimming-baths, tea parties at school where one ate muffins and meringues and tinned crab, parties at Oxford where one drank brown sherry and smoked Turkish cigarettes, dull dances in London and comic dances in Paris--all that succession and repetition of massed humanity--Those vile bodies...)17

Their bored, blase attitude towards these parties, ironically coupled with anxiety that they might be missed in the next

¹⁷Evelyn Waugh, Vile Bodies (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1938), p. 123. All future references will be in the form: Vile.

day's social columns, provides the basic social comedy of Vile Bodies. Waugh's treatment of Mayfair set is as urbane and stylish as the set itself. His comment on their fruitless search for new sensation maintains the comic note:

"...the Hon. Miles Malpractice was dressed as a Red Indian. [one of the columnists dictates] He is at present living in the house of his brother, Lord Throbbing, at which yesterday's party was held. His choice of costume was particularly--what shall I say? hullo, yes--was particularly piquant, italics, since the latest reports of Lord Throbbing say that he is living in a log shack in Canada which he built with his own hands, aided by one Red Indian servant, stop. . . ."

You see, that was the kind of party Archie Schwert's party was. [italics mine]¹⁸

Moving through these parties is the figure of Adam Fenwick-Symes, successor to Paul Pennyfeather in his reticence and misfortunes. More spirited and resourceful than ever Paul Pennyfeather was, Adam is a delightful character. A rather ordinary person, he has just had the manuscript for his book confiscated by customs officials and has therefore had to inform his fiancée, Nina Blount, that he will not be able to marry her. When he visits Nina's father to obtain the money to do so and receives a cheque for £ 1000, the reader is able to share his delight in his good fortune:

It does not befall many young men to be given a thousand pounds by a complete stranger twice on successive evenings. Adam laughed aloud in the Rector's

¹⁸Vile, pp. 51-2.

car as they drove to the station. The Rector, who had been in the middle of writing a sermon and resented with daily increasing feeling Colonel Blount's neighbourly appropriation of his car and himself, kept his eyes fixed on the streaming windscreen, pretending not to notice. Adam laughed all the way to Aylesbury, sitting and holding his knees and shaking all over. The Rector could hardly bring himself to say good night when they parted in the station yard.¹⁹

and

He looked at the hats on the table. Clearly there was quite a party. Two or three silk hats of people who had dressed early, the rest soft and black like his own. Then he began to dance again, jigging to himself in simple high spirits.²⁰

A brief, disconcerting note, though still within the context of comic enjoyment, arises when Adam learns that the cheque he has received is signed "Charlie Chaplin" and is worthless.

"I say, Nina," said Adam after some time, "we shan't be able to get married after all."

"No, I'm afraid not."

"It is a bore, isn't it?"

Later he said, "I expect that parson thought I was dotty too."

And later, "As a matter of fact, it's rather a good joke, don't you think?"

"I think it's divine."²¹

The casual jargon of their conversation and their acceptance of events makes the loss not too painful, so that the dominant tone is still one of comedy. The farce of subsequent

¹⁹vile, pp. 75-6.

²⁰vile, p. 78.

²¹vile, p. 83.

events maintains the comic structure and style, as Adam begins to use circumstances to his own advantage. After the regular columnist has committed suicide, Adam takes the job of gossip columnist for "The Daily Beast" and is quite successful at it. His articles about fabricated people and events are not intended to gull people as much as to satisfy the readers' "vicarious inquisitiveness into the lives of others."²²

He invented a sculptor called Provna, the son of a Polish nobleman, who lived in a top floor studio in Grosvenor House. Most of his work (which was all in private hands) was constructed in cork, vulcanite and steel. The Metropolitan Museum at New York, Mr. Chatterbox learned, had been negotiating for some time to purchase a specimen, but so far had been unable to outbid the collectors.

Such is the power of the Press, that soon after this a steady output of early Provnas began to travel from Warsaw to Bond Street and from Bond Street to California.²³

Just as Waugh used Paul Pennyfeather, he also uses Adam for both comic and critical purposes. However unlike Paul Pennyfeather who was always an outsider looking in on the action, Adam becomes both participant in and critic of the mad round of entertainments in Vile Bodies. Instead of acting as Paul did as a kind of catalyst by which others' selfish motives were revealed, Adam is the person in whom Waugh

²²Vile, p. 111.

²³Vile, p. 112.

exposes the spiritual vacuity with which he charges modern society. The comic tone of witty, sophisticated manners becomes altered by a tone of pathos that emerges from Adam's desire to have some degree of permanence and certitude in his life:

"Nina," said Adam, "let's get married soon, don't you think?"

"Yes, it's a bore not being married."

"...I don't know if it sounds absurd," said Adam, "but I do feel that a marriage ought to go on--for quite a long time, I mean. D'you feel that too, at all?"²⁴

"Yes, it's one of the things about a marriage!"²⁴

The depth of character given to Adam is an important aspect in the development of Waugh's comic spirit. When an author creates a three-dimensional figure, he is seeking, in fact, to call up emotional responses in the reader, and those responses may be fatal to the emotional detachment necessary for comic enjoyment. Unlike Paul Pennyfeather who is never described as having any emotion, Adam is deeply hurt when he thinks about Nina's engagement to another man, and even confesses "I'm desperate about it. I'm thinking of committing suicide."²⁵ Beyond this personal loss, Adam articulates the sense of instability that characterizes the lives of all his friends and which he had sought to alter by marrying Nina. A short conversation between Adam

²⁴Vile, p. 123.

²⁵Vile, p. 210.

and Nina reveals his despondency at the emptiness of their lives and the inability to find purpose or direction:

"Adam, darling, what's the matter?"
 "I don't know. ...Nina, do you ever feel that things simply can't go on much longer?"
 "What d'you mean by things--us or everything?"
 "Everything."
 . . .
 "Don't let's talk any more, Nina, d'you mind?"
 Later he said: "I'd give anything in the world for something different."
 "Different from me or different from everything?"
 "Different from everything...only I've got nothing... what's the good of talking..."
 "Oh, Adam, my dearest..."
 "Yes?"
 "Nothing."26

It is worth noting that in the episode in Decline and Fall similar to this where Paul Pennyfeather muses about his life, Waugh neatly sidesteps the pathos which could emerge by moving on to a comic situation. In Vile Bodies he does not provide an alternate comic response. This episode ends on the note of Adam's despair unresolved by any comic shift. The pathos of his sadness lingers, not heavily, but firmly enough to alter the comic tone. Consequently, there is a greater emotional involvement on the part of both writer and reader: Waugh is beginning to deanesthetize the heart, in Vile Bodies.

This undercurrent of despair is discernible close beneath the brittle comic surface of Vile Bodies. It is revealed in the frequent comment of "oh, how bored I feel" at the endless succession of similar parties, and it cuts

²⁶Vile, p. 192.

through the ludicrous reason and nature of Simon Balcairn's suicide when he is no longer able to come up with suitable gossip for his column.

He finished the watery dregs of the cocktail shaker and went into the kitchen. He shut the door and the window and opened the door of the gas oven. Inside it was very black and dirty and smelled of meat. He spread a sheet of newspaper on the lowest tray and lay down, resting his head. Then he noticed that by some mischance he had chosen Vanburgh's gossip-page in the Morning Despatch. He put in another sheet. (There were crumbs on the floor.) Then he turned on the gas. It came surprisingly with a loud roar; the wind of it stirred his hair and the remaining particles of his beard. At first he held his breath. Then he thought that was silly and gave a sniff. The sniff made him cough, and coughing made him breathe, and breathing made him feel very ill; but soon he fell into a coma and presently died.²⁷

His lack of emotion, the continuation at this late stage of his petty rivalry with the columnist Vanburgh, and the ignoble coughing before his death keep this scene within the comic mode, but the "watery dregs" of his cocktail and the black and dirty oven are details that make his suicide less than comic. The desperation behind Simon's death, like the desperation of the wild ride of Agatha Runcible's delirium,

Another frightful corner. The car leant over on two wheels, tugging outwards; it was drawn across the road until it was within a few inches of the bank. One ought to brake down at the corners, but one couldn't

²⁷Vile, p. 106.

see them coming lying flat on one's back like this.
The back wheels wouldn't hold the road at this speed.
Skidding all over the place.

"Faster. Faster."²⁸

characterizes the search of all the Bright Young Things and cuts through the comic aspect of their lives. The tension that arises from this awareness of the desperation and the futility of their search marks the most important deviation from the comedy of Decline and Fall.

Another change in Waugh's comic methods is noticeable in his use of extraordinary characters who live outside the pale of ordinary mortals. In Decline and Fall the amoral and indestructible figure of Captain Grimes was intended only for comic enjoyment. In Vile Bodies another such immortal figure emerges but his role has an added dimension of critical importance. Differing from his treatment of Captain Grimes, Waugh uses Father Rothschild to voice his criticism of society. Father Rothschild is an omnipresent, all-wise Jesuit priest whose vast knowledge and power makes him appear, at times, quite sinister. Through him Waugh provides a rationale for the behaviour of the young people which did much to make critics insist that Waugh really identified with them:

"I know very few young people, but it seems to me that they are all possessed with an almost fatal hunger for permanence. People aren't content just to muddle along nowadays...And this word 'bogus' they all use...They won't make the best of a bad job nowadays...These young people have got hold of another end of the stick, and

²⁸Vile, p. 200

for all we know it may be the right one. They say, 'If a thing's not worth doing well, it's not worth doing at all.' It makes everything very difficult for them."²⁹

This defense by Father Rothschild is sound enough to stand as Waugh's direct explanation, and perhaps approbation, of the young generation. And yet, the seriousness of tone is abated by the gargoyle-like figure of Father Rothschild who, immediately after delivering this profound observation,

pulled on a pair of overall trousers in the forecourt and, mounting his motor-cycle, disappeared into the night, for he had many people to see and much business to transact before he went to bed.³⁰

The seriousness of his words and the comedy of his appearance and actions create a shifting tone between comedy and criticism. Unlike the purely comic existence of Grimes, Father Rothschild has become a spokesman for Waugh in his critical treatment of society.

Waugh makes extensive use of Rothschild, both for comic and critical purposes in that he has access to all levels and areas of society. He becomes both foil to and critic of the younger and older generations showing that spiritual emptiness is characteristic at both levels. Although there is a good deal of comedy at the expense of

²⁹Vile, p. 132.

³⁰Vile, p. 133.

the younger generation, Waugh does not fail to indicate the spiritual and moral vacuity of the older one. Even though they are severely critical of their offspring, the wealthy socialites and businessmen and politicians of that "fine phalanx of the passing order"³¹ are observed scrambling about in their own intrigues. Lord Metroland avoids an embarrassing situation by waiting in the library for his wife's lover to leave the house rather than risk meeting him on the stairs; Fanny Throbbing and Kitty Blackwater sadly reminisce about torrid love affairs they once had; the Prime Minister, Mr. Outrage, conducts a furtive affair with a Japanese baroness. These various episodes intersperse the activities of the Young People, each reflecting the other and emphasizing the sterility and futility of their lives.

Much has been said of Waugh's approval of either the Young People or the Passing Order. Nigel Dennis places Waugh in the middle of the older disapproving generation when he calls Waugh "the pillar of Anchorage House."³² But the hypocrisy and immorality of that set as revealed by Waugh would lead one to question such identification and sympathy. On the other hand, Stephen Marcus suggests that Waugh identified with the mad capers of the Bright Young Things:

³¹Vile, p. 130.

³²Nigel Dennis, "Evelyn Waugh: The Pillar of Anchorage House," Partisan Review, X (July-August, 1943), pp. 350-61.

Nothing is more patent that he [Waugh] loved the Hon. Agatha Runcible who disappeared in the company of a racing car and ended in a drunken delirium in a nursing home, or that he loved Lady Metroland, proprietress of an international chain of brothels...³³

Obviously, Waugh could enjoy the comedy of their absurd lives, but in spite of his delight in them, he saw the tragic direction in which they were heading. The dizzy pace suggested initially in the foreword of the book--

"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"--

culminates in their arrival on the biggest battlefield in the history of the world, a scene of "unrelieved desolation;"

a great expanse of mud in which every visible object was burnt or broken. Sounds of firing thundered from beyond the horizon, and somewhere above the grey clouds there were aeroplanes. . . .It was growing dark.³⁴

The change in tone that is created by the ultimate picture of "that sad scene" off-sets, to a large extent, the social comedy of the book. This sombre tone never cancels the comedy of incident and style but it is dominant enough to make the central focus a very ambivalent one.

The tensions that are raised in Vile Bodies by the interacting forces of comedy and criticism are indicative of the trend of Waugh's comic spirit. In his next novel, Black Mischief, they are intensified as a more caustic comedy arises from the most brutal events and Waugh's

³³Stephen Marcus, "Evelyn Waugh and the Art Entertainment," Partisan Review, XXI (Summer, 1956), pp. 349-50.

³⁴vile, p. 221.

criticism of modern society becomes almost directly stated.

The comedy of Black Mischief (1932) rests in Waugh's satirical attack on the spiritual and moral emptiness of Western civilization which is being threatened by nothing less than barbarism itself. Through the mock-epic tone and the continuous contrast between dynamic barbarism and sluggish, complacent civilization, Waugh deflates the belief that civilization is secure from any attack. The comic spirit of this novel, unlike the exuberant delight of Decline and Fall and the comic sophistication of Vile Bodies, gives way to a kind of malicious enjoyment of savagery and defeat. A minor detail in the first few pages of the book indicates how Waugh's theme of militant savagery threatening a sterile civilization is presented in a tough comic manner:

A punitive force was landed, composed half of European, half of mainland native troops. Amurath [the native leader] marched out against them with his new army and drove them in hopeless rout to the seashore where they were massacred under the guns of their own fleet.³⁵

The unexpected and unintended assistance of the enemy results in an ironic success for the native army, comic in its brisk way, but it also suggests that Western civilization has been defeated by its blindness to its own vulnerability.

³⁵Evelyn Waugh, Black Mischief (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1938), p. 13. All future references will be in the form: Black.

The theme of Black Mischief is almost identical to that of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Conrad's story shows that the darkness at the jungle's core may be no more frightening than the darkness at the heart of civilized man who exploits another for his own gain. Waugh uses the barbaric tribes of Africa to suggest that barbarism is threatening to invade--if it has not already done so--and conquer Western civilization. The spiritual weakness of civilization, Waugh contends, is being threatened by real savagery just as the jungle growth literally threatens to cover the roads and buildings of Matodi, and savage treatment awaits anyone who strays beyond the city limits.

Gardens ran wild and roofs fell into disrepair. The grass huts of the Sakuyu began to appear on the more remote estates. Groups of Wanda and Sakuyu came into town and swaggered insolently about the bazaars; an Arab party returning from one of the country villas was ambushed and murdered within a mile of the walls. There were rumours of a general massacre, planned in the hills.³⁶

In both Conrad's book and in Black Mischief, the attempts to introduce modern conveniences into jungle life prove fruitless. But it is worth observing how Conrad and Waugh differ in the working-out of their theme. Conrad's description creates a mood of foreboding and ugliness for Marlowe, the narrator, as he steps into the jungle:

³⁶Black, p. 10.

"...an undersized railway-truck was lying on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty nails. To the left a clump of trees made a shady spot, where dark things seemed to stir feebly

"A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. ...each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking."³⁷

In Black Mischief when Basil Seal arrives in Matodi, he too sees a gang of convicts and a derelict motor-car, symbol of civilization's industrial advances:

A gang of convicts, chained neck to neck, were struggling to shift a rusty motor-car which lay on its side blocking the roadWhite ants had devoured the tyres; various pieces of mechanism had been removed from time to time to repair other engines. A Sakuyu family had set up house in the back, enclosing the space between the wheels with an intricate structure of rags, tin, mud and grass.³⁸

There is a tremendous difference in the treatment of these two episodes. Unlike Conrad's sombre description which suggests death and putrefaction--for the natives who are being exploited--Waugh's tone suggests the vitality and energy of the native with his resourcefulness to use things for his own purposes. Waugh's jungle not only defies intrusion by the weak Western civilization but its savage strength is quite capable of filling up the hollowness within the shell of civilization.

³⁷Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1902), pp. 53-4.

³⁸Black, pp. 93-4.

Night was alive with beasts and devils and the spirits of dead enemies; before its power Seth's ancestors had receded, slid away from its attack, abandoning in retreat all the baggage of Individuality; they had lain six or seven in a hut; between them and night only a wall of mud and a ceiling of thatched grass; warm, naked bodies breathing in the darkness an arm's reach apart, indivisibly unified so that they ceased to be six or seven blacks and became one person of more than human stature, less vulnerable to the peril that walked near them.³⁹

The hollowness of civilization, both spiritual and moral, is seen first in the representatives of Western civilization who have moved into the jungle of Azania. The insipidity of the British minister, his "ill-success in diplomatic life attributable rather to inattention than to incapacity,"⁴⁰ the casual sexual liaisons of his daughter and also those of the French minister's wife, together with their placid entertainments of croquet, bagatelle, and tea-drinking really stand little chance before dynamic savagery.

"More tea, Bishop? I want to talk to you some time about David's confirmation. He's getting such an independent mind, I'm sometimes quite frightened what he'll say next."

"I wonder if you know anything about this cable. I can't make head or tail of it. It isn't in any of the usual codes. Kt to QR₃CH."

"Yes, they're all right. It's a move in the chess game Percy's playing with Babbit at the F. O. He was wondering what had become of it."

"Poor Mrs. Walsh. Looking quite done up. I'm sure the altitude isn't good for her."

³⁹Black, p. 26.

⁴⁰Black, p. 51.

"I'm sure Uppingham is just the place for David."
 "More tea, Bishop? I'm sure you must be tired after
 your ride."

Sixty miles southward in the Ukaka pass bloody bands of Sakuyu warriors played hide-and-seeK among the rocks, chivvying the last fugitives of the army of Seyid, while behind them down the gorge, from cave villages of incalculable antiquity, the women crept out to rob the dead.⁴¹

The wide gulf between the two kinds of games, chess and bloody hide-and-seeK, does not augur well for the chess players, but here the comic tone is maintained by the simultaneity of the two kinds of sport and the suggestion of mischief that would result if they came in contact.

From the 'little England' in the middle of the jungle Waugh moves directly to England itself to show that the polite, innocuous, and sterile life of the British representatives in Azania is the same as that of London. Whereas Lady Courtenay, the British minister's wife in Azania, devotes herself to gardening:

The bags came out from London laden with bulbs and cuttings and soon there sprang up round the Legation a luxuriant English garden; lilac and lavender, privet box, grass walks and croquet lawn, rockeries and wildernesses, herbaceous borders, bowers of rambler roses, puddles of water-lilies and an immature maze.⁴²

in London, the main concerns of Lady Seal are her son's

⁴¹Black, pp. 56-7.

⁴²Black, p. 50.

future and the details of her dinner parties:

. . .Lady Seal, who dispatched engraved cards a month in advance, supplied defections from a secondary list one week later, fidgeted with place cards and a leather board as soon as the acceptances began to arrive, borrowed her sister's chef and her daughter's footmen and on the morning of the party exhausted herself utterly by trotting all over her house in Lowndes Square arranging flowers. Then at half-past five when she was satisfied that all was ready she would retire to bed and doze for two hours in her darkened room; her maid would call her with cachet Faivre and clear China tea; a touch of ammonia in the bath; a touch of rouge on the cheeks; lavender water behind the ears; half an hour before the glass, fiddling with her jewel case while her hair was being done; final conference with the butler; then a happy smile in the drawing room for all who were less than twenty minutes late. The menu always included lobster cream, saddle of mutton and brown-bread ice, and there were silver gilt dishes ranged down the table holding a special kind of bonbon...⁴³

In both cases the comic tones emerge from Waugh's light mockery of their fussiness. In the wider context, however, their bother over such trifles suggests their inability to cope with the greater concern of threatening barbarism. In fact, Lady Seal doesn't even know what to do about her son Basil and loses herself in sentimental dreams about his future:

He would generally have papers to go through before changing for dinner. They would dine together and afterwards go out to the theatre or cinema. He would eat with good appetite, having lunched quickly and economically at some place near his work. Quite often

⁴³Black, p. 76.

she would entertain for him, small young people's parties of six or eight--intelligent, presentable men of his own age, pretty, well-bred girls. During the season he would go to two dances a week, and leave them early...⁴⁴

Ironically, Basil Seal represents the very savagery that Lady Seal cannot see or imagine:

Presently Basil came back from telephoning. He stood in the doorway, a glass of whiskey in one hand, looking insolently round the room, his head back, chin forward, shoulders rounded, dark hair over his forehead, contemptuous grey eyes over grey pouches, a proud, rather childish mouth, a scar on one cheek.

"My word, he is a corker," remarked one of the girls.⁴⁵

His role in London and in Azania is actually quite minor; he makes no major decisions and does not really affect the outcome of the plot. Through his exploitation of his girlfriend and stealing from his mother, his purpose is to show that savage elements have already infiltrated to the centre of London. The fact that Emperor Seth chooses him as his Minister of Modernization to help bring civilization to Azania is both highly ironic and ludicrous.

Emperor Seth's intentions of making Azania a modern state through the introduction of modern measures create the basic comic plot of the book. Blinded by the ideals of "Progress and the New Age. . . Light and Speed and Strength, Steel and Steam, Youth, Today and Tomorrow,"⁴⁶ Seth attempts to implement such measures as boots and a

⁴⁴Black, p. 83.

⁴⁵Black, p. 71.

⁴⁶Black, p. 40.

tank for the army, modern architecture, kindness to animals, and birth control. The results of these ambitious projects serve to mock the ambitions themselves, for the innovations either fail because they are incapable of being implemented or succeed for the reason opposite to what they were intended.

Seth learns from his general that "a fat lot that [the tank] was...The whole thing was red hot after five miles. It came in handy in the end though. ...used as a punishment cell."⁴⁷ The army boots which the same general had rejected as impractical for jungle wear are actually put to good use:

"So the boots went down all right with your men after all, Connolly." [says Basil Seal]

"They went down."

"No cases of lameness yet, I hope?"

"The General leant over in his saddle and smiled pleasantly. "No cases of lameness," he replied. "One or two of bellyache, though. I'm just writing a report on the matter to the Commissioner of Supplies--that's our friend Youkoumian, isn't it? You see, my adjutant made rather a silly mistake. He hadn't had much truck with boots before and the silly fellow thought they were extra rations. My men ate the whole bag of tricks last night."⁴⁸

The project of kindness to animals is not very successful either, as Mildred Porch, an active reformer, writes her husband from Matodi that she "Fed doggies in market-place. Children tried to take food from doggies. Greedy little

⁴⁷Black, p. 132.

⁴⁸Black, pp. 137-8.

wretches."⁴⁹ The farce of the birth control project further mocks the attempts of Seth to modernize Azania for the juju, or contraceptive apparatus, is successful because it is mistakenly believed to increase fertility:

Interest in the pictures was unbounded; all over the island woolly heads were nodding, black hands pointing, tongues clicking against filed teeth in unsyntactical dialects. Nowhere was there any doubt about the meaning of the beautiful new pictures.

See: on right hand: there is rich man: smoke pipe like big chief: but his wife she no good: sit eating meat: and rich man no good: he only one son.

See: on left hand: poor man: not much to eat: but his wife she very good, work hard in field: man be good too: eleven children: one very mad, very holy. And in the middle: Emperor's juju. Make you like that good man with eleven children.

And as a result, despite admonitions from squire and vicar, the peasantry began pouring into town for the gala, eagerly awaiting initiation to the fine new magic of virility and fecundity.⁵⁰

Besides the comedy of these incidents, Waugh's continuous use of the mock-epic further punctures the heroic pretensions of Seth's civilizing programme. In the opening passage of the book, we can see how the mock-epic style creates a comic effect at the same time that it presents Waugh's critical focus:

"We, Seth, Emperor of Azania, Chief of the Chiefs of Sakuyu, Lord of Wanda and Tyrant of the Seas, Bachelor of the Arts of Oxford University, being in this the

⁴⁹Black, p. 157.

⁵⁰Black, pp. 146-7.

twenty-fourth year of our life, summoned by the wisdom of Almighty God and the unanimous voice of our people to the throne of our ancestors, do hereby proclaim..." Seth paused in his dictation and gazed out across the harbour where in the fresh breeze of early morning the last dhow was setting sail for the open sea. "Rats", he said; "stinking curs. They are all running away."⁵¹

The 'rats' are running away because they believe Seth's troops have lost the final battle for control of Azania and that if they stick around much longer, they will be massacred. In view of the plots and counter-plots and midnight assassinations, that concern is not overly-imaginative, for the situation is one bordering anarchy. Indeed, the lack of news from the hills where the battle is being fought makes Seth's "amnesty and free pardon to all those... subjects recently seduced from their loyalty"⁵² rather premature. All of his proposals, though, are premature and erratically instituted, and his short-sightedness to the condition of his country prevents him from ever being taken seriously as a tragic hero:

It was as though Seth's imagination like a volcanic lake had in the moment of success become suddenly swollen by the irruption of unsuspected subterranean streams until it darkened and seethed and overflowed its margins in a thousand turbulent cascades. The earnest and rather puzzled young man became capricious and volatile; ideas bubbled up within him...⁵³

What Seth is seeking to impose on Azania is not a culture or a sense of civilization, or even a self-identity, but

⁵¹Black, p. 7.

⁵²Black, p. 8.

⁵³Black, p. 148.

rather, Waugh reminds us, the catchwords and popular slogans of twentieth century Western civilization, "a confused sediment of phrase and theory, scraps of learning half understood and fantastically translated."⁵⁴

Seth's attempts would be tragic if his aims were seriously undertaken or even presented to us in a sympathetic manner by Waugh. The continuous deflation, however, of those attempts renders Seth a comic figure, one whose goal was ludicrous to begin with. Seth's diminishing importance in Azanian affairs and the indirect presentation of his death removes the element of pity from his fate. The introduction of Mildred Porch, a zealous S.P.C.A.'er, through whom we see the revolution and feel the discomfort of the hot tarnished iron roof, provides the detachment of comedy to the deposition of Seth as emperor.

The parapet was a low one and the ladies were obliged to lie full length in positions of extreme discomfort. Dame Mildred slid out her arm for a cushion and hastily withdrew it as a third burst of firing broke out as though on purpose to frustrate her action. Presently silence fell, more frightening than the tumult. Dame Mildred spoke in an awed whisper.

"Sarah, that was a bullet."

"I know. Do be quiet or they'll start again."

. . .
Dim recollections of some scouting games played peaceably in somewhat different circumstances among Girl Guides in the bracken of Epping prompted Dame

⁵⁴Black, p. 148.

Mildred to remove her topee and, holding it at arm's length, expose it over the edge of their rampart. The silence of the stricken field was unbroken. Slowly, with infinite caution, she raised her head.

"For heaven's sake, take care, Mildred. Snipers."
But everything was quiet...⁵⁵

In the confusion of these two genteel British ladies, the reader temporarily loses sight of Seth, and the ensuing feast at his cremation further removes the reader's awareness of his dismal end. After the feast, Basil Seal recognizes the pillar-box red beret of Prudence Courtenay which the headman of Moshu is holding:

"Where did you get it?"

"Pretty hat. It came in the great bird. The white woman wore it. On her head like this." He giggled weakly and pulled it askew over his glistening pate.

"But the white woman. Where is she?"

But the headman was lapsing into coma. He said "Pretty" again and turned up sightless eyes.

Basil shook him violently. "Speak, you old fool. Where is the white woman?"

The headman grunted and stirred; then a flicker of consciousness revived in him. He raised his head.

"The white woman? Why, here," he patted his distended paunch. "You and I and the big chiefs--we have just eaten her."

Then he fell forward into a sound sleep.⁵⁶

Just as the savages, including Basil Seal, have swallowed Prudence--perhaps suggesting that the civilization which she represents is in threat of being swallowed by savagery--the subsequent description of the jungle swallows up the horror of the feast, leaving only the incongruity of the event.

⁵⁵Black, p. 192.

⁵⁶Black, p. 230.

Round and round circled the dancers, ochre and blood and sweat glistening in the firelight; the wise men's headgear swayed high above them, leopards' feet and snake skins, amulets and necklaces, lions' teeth and the shrivelled bodies of bats and toads, jigging and spinning. Tireless hands drumming out the rhythm; glistening backs heaving and shivering in the shadows.

Later, a little after midnight, it began to rain.⁵⁷

The jungle asserts its priority, and a weak Western civilization, like Seth's sentimental concern for correct form, stands little chance before the aggression of jungle barbarism.

Black Mischief continues along the developing lines of Waugh's comic treatment, which we have been tracing. The tension in Black Mischief is "more deeply defined" as Bradbury says, "than anything in the earlier novels":⁵⁸ it is the tension that results from the interplay of comic and critical elements. The difficulties of having to choose between civilization and barbarism, of sympathizing with Seth and enjoying his setbacks, of being both repulsed by and attracted to Basil Seal's ability to adapt, are responsible for that tension which is never resolved except in the comic response. The grim humour of sexual laxness, political murder, and cannibalism becomes, at times, almost too grim for comedy. Waugh's technique of allowing incidents or conversations to provide their own comment has also changed considerably. There is no mistaking Waugh's intention in the scene in which young Prudence Courtenay visits Basil ostensibly to gather

⁵⁷Black, p. 230

⁵⁸Malcolm Bradbury, Evelyn Waugh, p. 53.

new material for her literary effort, Panorama of Life:

Basil, in shirt sleeves, rose from the deck chair to greet her. He threw the butt of his Burma cheroot into the tin hip bath which stood unemptied at the side of the bed; it sizzled and went out and floated throughout the afternoon, slowly unfurling in the soapy water. He bolted the door...At first neither spoke. Presently she said, "You might have shaved," and then, "please help me with my boots."

Below, in the yard, Madame Youkoumian upbraided a goat. Strips of sunlight traversed the floor as an hour passed. In the bath water, the soggy stub of tobacco emanated a brown blot of juice.⁵⁹

Although their relationship is traced without other comment or analysis, Waugh's technique of the objective correlative is unmistakably designed to provoke disgust.

Such an impression of revulsion was not discernible in Decline and Fall and only fleetingly glimpsed in Vile Bodies. It is this type of disconcerting implicit personal commentary that inevitably cuts through the comic tone and increases the existing tensions of character and plot in Black Mischief. Ultimately, these tensions created by the satirical approach remain as unresolved as the precarious order which is established in Azania.

In his next novel, the tensions increase as the former detachment to two-dimensional characters is replaced by a sympathetic involvement with his main characters. The comic framework of a chaotic world is still maintained but

⁵⁹Black, p. 141.

the awareness of impending tragedy alters the tone of comic events. This next novel, A Handful of Dust, becomes balanced on an equipoise of comic absurdity and tragic resolution and marks the turning point in Waugh's comic style.

CHAPTER THREE

THE COMEDY IN A HANDFUL OF DUST

Although the events of Waugh's first three novels would easily have lent themselves to a severe indictment of modern Western society, and in spite of varying degrees of tension arising from implied criticism of that society, it was the comic vision of Waugh which predominated throughout. In these novels, the comic effect was maintained, to a large degree, by the detachment of the author to his hero's misfortunes. Only briefly did Waugh allow serious or pathetic tones to cut through the unabashedly comic treatment of character and event.

In A Handful of Dust (1934), the comic framework with its unexpected turns and unusual resolutions continues but now with an added degree of tension. The former detachment from the hero is altered as Tony Last arouses a serious concern on the part of the reader. Tony's hopes and dreams which are given lengthy attention in the first half of the book are crushed by the deception of his wife and the death of his son, and there arises the possibility of impending tragedy.

However, in spite of the pathos that develops, Waugh's

comic vision is not abandoned as his methods and style continue to operate at the level of comedy. In A Handful of Dust where the serious treatment and effects of the death of Tony's son and the break-up of his marriage bring the story to a point that is a whisker short of being tragic, Waugh's comic methods still dominate. His non-moralizing tone and urbane treatment of events redirect the tragic or pathetic tones, and the increased reliance on romanticized description works with double effect to offset comically the very seriousness that it creates. Then too, the irony within seemingly-tragic events, especially Tony's end in the South American jungle reading Dickens to a madman, creates an ambivalence in the work which prevents the critical focus or tragic element from dominating.

Waugh's treatment of the central character changes radically from that in the earlier books. Tony Last is Waugh's first hero in any true sense of the word simply because he is so fully-developed. Thirty years old, happily married, and the father of a six-year old son, he lives comfortably and contentedly at Hetton Abbey, his old Gothic home where his possessions are "things of tender memory and proud possession."¹ Even before we have met him,

¹Evelyn Waugh, A Handful of Dust (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1951), p. 15. All future references will be in the form: Hand.

it is said of him that "Tony Last's one of the happiest men I know. He's got just enough money, loves the place, one son he's crazy about, devoted wife, not a worry in the world."²

Content with his lot, he assumes that his wife shares his love for Hetton and his sense of responsibility as a landowner even though his wife's difference in attitude is soon apparent:

"...One has a duty towards one's employees, and towards the place too. It's a definite part of English life which would be a serious loss if..." Then Tony stopped short in his speech and looked at the bed. Brenda had turned on her face and only the top of her head appeared above the sheets.

"Oh God," she said into the pillow. "What have I done?"³

Bored with her life at Hetton, Brenda Last is soon involved in an affair with a dull, sponging young man named John Beaver. Her lengthy stays in London as she pursues her adulterous affair give pain to Tony as he admits to a keen sense of emptiness, "you know I've felt low for weeks now... bloody low."⁴ The reader can sympathize with his loneliness and might easily be induced to feel resentment towards Brenda when she uses Tony's generous concern for her to establish herself in London.

²Hand., p. 12.

³Hand., p. 18.

⁴Hand., p. 51.

That such resentment never arises is due to Waugh's control over all the characters of the book. In spite of the sympathetic treatment of Tony--more so than ever given to Paul Pennyfeather or Adam Fenwick-Symes, Waugh also treats the other characters sympathetically. The lax morality of Brenda and her friends is dealt with through a carefully established moral neutrality. Tony's sense of loss is obvious, but Brenda is not, therefore, made into a villain. She, like Tony, is more fully developed than any of Waugh's former characters and more attention than is necessary for mere plot progression is given to her affair with Beaver. She can be both wily and compassionate, fickle and sensitive, and her defense of John Beaver allows him to be seen with greater understanding also:

"He's second rate and a snob and, I should think, as cold as a fish, but I happen to have a fancy for him, that's all...besides I'm not sure he's altogether awful... he's got that odious mother whom he adores...and he's always been very poor. I don't think he's had a fair deal. I heard allabout it last night. He got engaged once but they couldn't get married because of money and since then he's never had a proper affair with anyone decent...he's got to be taught a whole lot of things. That's part of his attraction."⁵

The awkward, slightly tender advances and hesitations of both of them mitigate the critical moral judgment of her adulterous affair that would work to Tony's advantage.

⁵Hand., p. 51.

They were awkward when Marjorie left, for in the week that they had been apart, each had, in thought, grown more intimate with the other than any actual occurrence warranted. Had Beaver been more experienced, he might have crossed to where Brenda was sitting on the arm of a chair, and made love to her at once; and probably he would have got away with it. Instead he remarked in an easy manner, "I suppose we ought to be going too."

.....

When they sat in the taxi Beaver knew at once that Brenda wished him to make love to her. But he decided it was time she took the lead. So he sat at a distance from her and commented on an old house that was being demolished to make way for a block of flats.

"Shut up," said Brenda. "Come here."

When he had kissed her, she rubbed against his cheek in the way she had.⁶

The delight and interest of London society in their affair provides a focus for satire; but again, the urbane, comic presentation, like that of the presentation of manners and entertainments in Vile Bodies, removes the moralizing tone thus, to a great extent, absolving them:

It had been an autumn of very sparse and meagre romance; only the most obvious people had parted or come together, and Brenda was filling a want long felt by those whose simple, vicarious pleasure it was to discuss the subject in bed over the telephone. For them her circumstances shed peculiar glamour; for five years she had been a legendary, almost ghostly name, the imprisoned princess of fairy story, and now that she had emerged there was more enchantment in the occurrence than in the mere change of habit of any other circumspect wife. Her very choice of partner gave the affair an appropriate touch of fantasy; Beaver, the joke figure they had all known and despised, suddenly caught up to among the luminous

⁶Hand, pp. 46, 47-8.

clouds of deity...The choice of Beaver raised the whole escapade into a realm of poetry for Polly and Daisy and Angela and all the gang of gossips.⁷

Waugh's embellished and romanticized description of the affair transmutes it from an escapade of immorality to delightful, sophisticated comedy, while the eager delight of Brenda's friends and their casual attitude towards Tony--"hard cheese on Tony," says Brenda's sister⁸--further removes the moral scale that might be invoked against their actions.

A kind of comic balance is established between the stylish actions and blasé attitude of the London set and the unreal fantasy of Tony's world. Both are comical by themselves, one through utter naïvete and the other in its extreme sophistication. The meeting of these two worlds results in high comedy that neither favours nor condemns either side. When Brenda brings some of her friends to Hetton for a weekend visit, and particularly to give Tony a chance to become interested in another woman, Princess Jenny Abdul Akbar, the incongruity of the confrontation is farcical:

"I expect you'd like to see your room," said Tony.
 "They'll bring tea soon."
 "No, I'll stay here. I like just to curl up like a

⁷Hand., pp. 57-8.

⁸Hand., p. 57.

cat in front of the fire, and if you're nice to me I'll purr, and if you're cruel I shall pretend not to notice-- just like a cat...Shall I purr, Teddy?"

"Er...yes...do, please, if that's what you like doing."

.....

"Ah, here comes tea at last," said Tony. "I hope you allow yourself to eat muffins. So many of our guests nowadays are on a diet. I think muffins one of the few things that make the English winter endurable."

"Muffins stand for so much," said Jenny.

She ate heartily; often she ran her tongue over her lips, collecting crumbs that had become embedded there and melted butter from the muffin. One drop of butter fell on her chin and glittered there unobserved except by Tony. It was a relief to him when John Andrew was brought in.⁹

This propositioning of innocence by experience that results in Tony's discomfiture and the small detail of butter that mars the complete sophistication of Jenny are not intended to favour one side over the other but rather to show Waugh's appreciation of all the comic ramifications in a scene.

The meeting of the two sides is a good comic situation but it has additional significance to it: in the context of the plot, it also presages the victory of animality and prosaic reality over the idealism and poetry of Tony's dream. Just prior to the arrival of Brenda and her friends, " a thin mist lay breast high over the park; the turrets and battlements of the abbey stood grey and flat; the boiler man

⁹Hand., p. 85.

was hauling down the flag on the main tower."¹⁰

The flag is hauled down on Tony's dream with the death of his son John Andrew. This death, the central event of the book and the first in Waugh's novels to carry any sense of tragedy, presents a sharp contrast to the comic tone which has been established earlier. Unlike the death of Lord Tangent in Decline and Fall which was referred to only in passing and lamented by no one (not even his mother!), the death of John Andrew is significant because of the close attention he has received and the effect it has on other people:

Colonel Inch stopped hunting for the day and sent the hounds back to the kennels. The voices were hushed which, five minutes before, had been proclaiming that they knew it for a fact, Last had given orders to shoot every fox on the place. Later, after their baths, they made up for it in criticism of Miss Ripon's father, but at the moment everyone was shocked and silent. [*italics mine.*]¹¹

The delightful qualities of his young character and our awareness of Tony's hopes for him make his death an exceptionally sombre event in the comic framework. And despite Tony's reported "matter-of-fact" approach to the details of the funeral arrangements, his sadness and disbelief are real enough to intensify further the tragic mood:

¹⁰Hand., p. 78.

¹¹Hand., p. 105.

"Look here," said Mrs. Rattery, "Jock had better go up by car. I'll stay here until Lady Brenda comes."

"It would be awful for you."

"No, I'll stay."

Tony said, "I suppose it's ridiculous of me, but I wish you would...I mean, won't it be awful for you? I am all in a muddle. It's so hard to believe yet that it really happened."¹²

Out of the tragic mood established by the death emerges the criticism of both Tony's fantasy and the moral and spiritual emptiness of the London set. Waugh's critical focus is on the absence of an ordering principle in their lives, but again the criticism emerges in a complex and subtly comic way. A standard of judgment, but only faintly and lightly referred to, is glimpsed in the person of Mrs. Rattery, a deus ex machina who arrives by aeroplane and as suddenly disappears. Mrs. Rattery recalls the figure of Father Rothschild, in Vile Bodies, whose role was both comic and critical. Initially, she provides an element of comedy to the situation. Expecting "a chorus girl, in silk shorts and brassiere, popping out of an immense beribboned Easter egg with a cry of 'Whoopee, boys,'" ¹³ Tony is rather surprised when her "tall and erect, almost austere" figure steps out of the airplane which she flies (again, not too unlike Father Rothschild's trusty motor-cycle).

More important, she introduces a moral scale by which the extent of the chaos around her is more fully exposed. Her mysterious, serene manner suggests a higher principle

¹²Hand., p. 108.

¹³Hand., p. 98.

of order that is absent from the lives of Tony and Brenda. But again, the higher moral standard by which the present chaos can be judged is presented with restraint and lightly, over a deck of cards in fact:

(Mrs. Rattery sat intent over her game, moving little groups of cards adroitly backwards and forwards about the table like shuttles across a loom; under her fingers order grew out of chaos; she established sequence and precedence; the symbols before her became coherent, interrelated.)¹⁴

The moral apparatus is further played down in the continuation of the scene as Mrs. Rattery attempts to take Tony's thoughts off his loss and his concern for Brenda.

In the game of animal snap which she plays with Tony, a number of elements are at work, all subtly interacting through Waugh's deft control for an effect that is extravagant and tender, critical and comic:

They each took a pack and began dealing. Soon a pair of eights appeared. "Bow-wow," said Mrs. Rattery, scooping in the cards.

Another pair, "Bow-wow," said Mrs. Rattery. "You know you aren't putting your heart into this."

"Oh," said Tony. "Coop-coop-coop."

Presently he said again, "Coop-coop-coop."

"Don't be dumb," said Mrs. Rattery, "that isn't a pair..."

They were still playing when Albert came in to draw the curtains. Tony had only two cards left which he turned over regularly; Mrs. Rattery was obliged to divide hers, they were too many to hold. They stopped playing when they found that Albert was in the room.

¹⁴Hand., p. 110.

"What must that man have thought?" said Tony, when he had gone out.

("Sitting there clucking like a 'en," Albert reported, "and the little fellow lying dead upstairs.")¹⁵

The absence of a sustaining spiritual core in Tony's fantasy ("after all the last thing one wants to talk about at a time like this is religion")¹⁶ is apparent in his retreat to the childhood game. Again, Waugh's criticism is controlled by the comic presentation as the comedy of Tony's "clucking like a 'en" blurs the directness of the scene's critical focus. The immediate shift to prosaic matters which follows their game--collecting the cards into their separate packs and having tea (Mrs. Rattery requests whiskey)--then levels off the comedy of the scene so that the whole episode closes in a very matter-of-fact tone.

The death of his son is not the only loss that Tony will experience. Still sorrowing, he is stunned by Brenda's request for a divorce. His bewilderment, unlike that of Pennyfeather or Fenwick-Symes when setbacks cropped up in their lives, is not quickly shaken off or passed over into some new development. Waugh permits Tony's confusion to intensify, thus arousing further the reader's sympathy:

Tony had not slept much lately. He could not prevent himself, when alone, from rehearsing over and over in his mind all that had happened since Beaver's visit to

¹⁵Hand., pp. 112-3.

¹⁶Hand., p. 115.

Hetton; searching for clues he had missed at the time; wondering where something he had said or done might have changed the course of events; going back further to his earliest acquaintance with Brenda to find indications that should have made him more ready to understand the change that had come over her; reliving scene after scene in the last eight years of his life. All this kept him awake.¹⁷

But again, the complete control of the author over the emotional direction of the book is evident as Tony's pain in the passage quoted above is juxtaposed with the farce of events that revolve about the divorce proceedings at Brighton.

The whole weekend, ostensibly so illicit, is, on one hand, a satirical commentary on the ridiculous necessity of providing evidence for a divorce; it is also one of the most comic episodes in the book. The sympathy which Waugh creates for Tony is, by itself, fully developed and deliberate:

...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 circumstances in which he found himself, no new, mad thing brought to his notice, could add a jot to the all-encompassing chaos that shrieked about his ears.¹⁸

However, the pathos of his situation is juxtaposed with the absurdity of escorting Milly, his sulky 'co-respondent', to parties and having to be witnessed in compromising situations

¹⁷Hand., p. 132.

¹⁸Hand., pp. 137-8.

with her.

Tony got into bed beside Milly and pulled the dressing gown tight round his throat. "Does that look all right?"

"Love's young dream," said Milly.

"All right, then. I'll ring the bell."

When the tray had been brought, Tony got out of bed and put on his things. "So much for my infidelity," he said. "It is curious to reflect that this will be described in the papers as 'intimacy.'"¹⁹

The weekend's events become more ludicrous on account of the presence of Milly's unruly eight-year old daughter whom Tony is forced to look after:

Tony took Winnie to the beach. The wind had got up and a heavy sea was pounding on the shingle.

"This little girl would like to bathe," said Tony.

"No bathing for children to-day," said the beach attendant.

"The very idea," said various onlookers. "Does he want to drown the child?" "He's no business to be trusted with children." "Unnatural beast."

"But I want to bathe," said Winnie. "You said I could bathe if you had two breakfasts."

The people who had clustered round to witness Tony's discomfort, looked at one another askance. "Two breakfasts? Wanting to let the child bathe? The man's balmy."

"Never mind," said Tony. "We'll go on the pier."

Several of the crowd followed them round the slots, curious to see what new enormity this mad father might attempt. "There's a man who's eaten two breakfasts and tries to drown his little girl," they informed other spectators, sceptically observing his attempts to amuse Winnie with skee-ball. Tony's conduct confirmed the view of human nature derived from the weekly newspapers which they had all been reading that morning.²⁰

The discrepancy between the appearance and reality of the relationship of Tony and Milly and the incongruity between Tony's painful thoughts and the frustrating business of

¹⁹Hand., pp. 143-4.

²⁰Hand., p. 144.

trying to pacify a little girl changes the reader's sympathetic attachment to comic detachment and the sombre mood is shifted to comic absurdity.

Waugh's method of dealing with Tony consists of elevating him in the reader's estimation by providing him with values that one can admire and sympathize with and then showing how those values are insubstantial. At the outset of the book, in spite of being teased, Tony's devotion to his duties as a country squire and English gentleman are sympathetically treated. In the course of events, Tony becomes more seriously committed to his search for the world of order and beauty which he has lost. Waugh indicates this increasing concern by intensifying his use of romantic and poetic description. A number of romanticized descriptions like the following one have already been quoted to indicate the seriousness of Tony's quest and to create a concern for his happiness:

A whole Gothic world had come to grief...there was now no armour glittering through the forest glades, no embroidered feet on the green sward; the cream and dappled unicorns had fled...²¹

But such highly-charged romantic descriptions as this are, in fact, a double-edged weapon which Waugh delights in using. Not only do these poetic descriptions create a concern for Tony, but also, they mock the very poignancy which they create. Just as in Black Mischief the epic tone of Emperor Seth served to mock his pretentious speeches and

²¹Hand., p. 151.

innovations; Tony's illusions are revealed through extravagant description as totally incapable of being realized. Thus, the visions of "gilded cupolas and spires of alabaster in the sunlight" are suitable for childhood or delirium; as actuality, they are mocked by their own description.

For some days now Tony had been thoughtless about the events of the immediate past. His mind was occupied with the City, the Shining, the Many Watered, the Bright Feathered, the Aromatic Jam. He had a clear picture of it in his mind. It was Gothic in character, all vanes and pinnacles, gargoyles, battlements, groining and tracery, pavilions and terraces, a transfigured Hetton, pennons and banners floating on the sweet breeze, everything luminous and translucent; a coral citadel crowning a green hill-top sown with daisies, among groves and streams; a tapestry landscape filled with heraldic and fabulous animals and symmetrical, disproportionate blossom.²²

The insubstantial nature of Tony's dream is indicated by the contrast of it to the reality within the next line, "The ship tossed and tunnelled through the dark waters towards this radiant sanctuary." For the remainder of the trip, Tony does not allow any immediate reality, either storm by night or romance by day, to interfere seriously with his dream of

...Carpet and canopy, tapestry and velvet, portcullis and bastion, waterfowl on the moat and kingcups along its margin, peacocks trailing their finery across the lawns; high overhead in a sky of sapphire and swansdown silver vells chiming in a turret of alabaster.²³

²²Hand., p. 160.

²³Hand., pp. 161-2.

The highly romantic nature of Tony's dream, which is indicated by the excessive use of poetic description, serves to bring about Tony's downfall. By the same token, the triumph of animality and amorality is presented in terms of immediate or prosaic reality. For example, the whining of the dogs in the ship's cargo on the way to South America can be seen as mocking Tony's dream, ("Kind of mournful the way they go on," a fellow passenger comments²⁴), but it represents the opposite side of the coin to his romantic fantasy. Throughout the book, the animals that appear are a very mundane kind of reality but they are substantial enough to show the emptiness of Tony's firmly held dream and in the end, triumph over it. He is mocked by various forms of animalism, both the human kind in London which he never notices, the real kind in the whining dogs aboard ship, and even a comic sort in the game of animal snap which he loses to Mrs. Rattery. The animalism of London society is as mindless as the horse that killed John Andrew and as blameless, in Waugh's neutral presentation, as the fox which was being hunted.

At the book's end, animality triumphs. Like the fox that has lost its tail and is little bothered by that loss, the animality of London also continues merrily. Brenda Last and Jock Grant-Menzies marry while Mrs. Beaver continues

²⁵Hand., p. 221.

to supply her customers with modern interior furnishings. The impoverished relatives who have inherited Tony's estate are able to cage wild animals, hoping and presumably succeeding in making a profit from them:

The silver-fox farm was behind the stables; a long double row of wire cages; they had wire floors covered with earth and cinders to prevent the animals digging their way out. They lived in pairs; some were moderately tame but it was unwise to rely upon them. Teddy and Ben Hacket--who helped with them--had been badly bitten more than once that winter.

They ran up to the doors when they saw Teddy come with the rabbits. The vixen who had lost her brush seemed little worse for her accident.

Teddy surveyed his charges with pride and affection. It was by means of them that he hoped one day to restore Hetton to the glory that it had enjoyed in the days of his cousin Tony.²⁵

The new residents at Hetton have no airy vision of beauty and glory, rather a very practical outlook. Because they are aware of the animalism about them and do not trust it, ("some were moderately tame but it was unwise to rely on them"), one assumes that their life at Hetton, though prosaic, will be successful.

Tony's sentimental and aristocratic values, admirable though they might be, are not able to stand up against the dynamic animality which in Waugh's comic vision appears necessary for survival. Because Tony's vision is blinkered

²⁵Hand., p. 221.

by his fantasy, he does not recognize the amorality of London society. Yet, there is a moment of truth for him when the fatuity of his former dreams becomes clear. When Brenda asks him for alimony that will necessitate the sale of Hetton, "his mind had suddenly become clearer on many points that had puzzled him. A whole Gothic world had come to grief...."²⁶ At this point the novel could move into the realm of tragedy, for at the moment that Tony gains insight into the truth about himself and his situation, he could become a tragic figure:

At the moment when a character becomes aware of the web of folly or madness which is suffocating him, or when he suddenly turns in upon himself and sees with horror the corruption which is destroying his soul, then satire has been abandoned and the realm of tragedy is entered.²⁷

Aware of his own character and his situation, the tragic hero must then move out into action which he knows will defeat him. Tony's decision that follows his insight is an inversion of the tragic formula for after becoming aware of his illusions, he merely exchanges them for another set. With Dr. Messinger, an archaeologist, he sets out for the jungles of South America in search of another Shining City to replace his dream one at Hetton. Having retreated

²⁶Hand., p. 151.

²⁷Stephen Jay Greenblatt, Three Modern Satirists (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 25.

from dreams that were unable to stand up against the amoral society of London, he remains a comic figure by moving into deeper personal fantasies. The irony of his search for a new Hetton, ("Gothic in character, all vanes and pinnacles, gargoyles, battlements, groining and tracery, pavilions and terraces, a transfigured Hetton"), is that his quest for it simply takes him from one jungle to another.²⁸ Here, ironically in delirium, he sees the falsity of his dream:

"...I know you are friends of my wife and that is why you will not listen to me. But be careful. She will say nothing cruel, she will not raise her voice, there will be no hard words. She hopes you will be great friends afterwards as before. But she will leave you. She will go away quietly during the night. She will take her hammock and her rations of farine...Listen to me. I know I am not clever but that is no reason why we should forget all courtesy. Let us kill in the gentlest manner. I will tell you what I have learned in the forest, where time is different. There is no City. Mrs. Beaver has covered it with chromium plating and converted it into flats." [*italics mine*].²⁹

²⁸That there should be no mistaking the similarity of the two jungles--London and South America--is indicated by the titles of two chapters in the book. The setting of "Du Côté de Chez Beaver" is London and the setting of "Du Côté de Chez Todd" is the Amazon jungle. These titles call to mind the similar wording by Marcel Proust in Remembrance of Things Past; there Marcel, the narrator, realized that the two ways--by Swann and Guermantes--which seemed so different and opposite, ultimately joined as the end of one path crossed over to the other. In Waugh's book, Tony Last takes a path away from the jungles of London only to find himself in another one.

²⁹Hand., pp. 206-7.

"There is no City" is realized in delirium, but when Tony is nursed back to health, he again takes up his illusions, daydreaming about his re-entry into the 'civilized' world and regained happiness with Brenda. However, this dream is not to materialize either for he remains prisoner to Mr. Todd's desire to hear the novels of Dickens read to him. Tony, who had formerly enjoyed reading to a bored Brenda, now has an attentive audience. The final absurd irony of his situation is that in Dickens' novels he is able to meet again the very world of Victorian England which has so long figured in his life.

This fate, one of the most ludicrous and macabre given to any of Waugh's characters, is a mixture of ironic and comic absurdity. The emotional control with which Waugh has presented Tony's fate and the criticism of the ineffectual nature of his dream removes the ending from the range of tragedy. The return to the immediacy of practical considerations--finding another husband, obtaining a new commission for interior decorating, making Hetton an economic success--reasserts Waugh's comic vision with the triumph of animality and amorality.

The integration of romantic, symbolic, and satiric elements and the balance of tragic events in this comically-directed world combine for a work that is truly unique.

The lack of any definitely applied standard by which the moral and spiritual sterility of Waugh's characters may be judged allows the comic vision to dominate. Waugh's basic theme of the spiritual and moral wasteland of modern society--the title is taken from T. S. Eliot's poem The Waste Land--is not allowed to overshadow his comic intention. Edmund Wilson indicates Waugh's success in restraining the tragic elements or critical focus which could so easily dominate the book's action:

Except on the title page, the author nowhere mentions this fear. Yet he manages to convey from beginning to end, from the comfortable country house to the clearing in the Brazilian jungle, the impression of a terror, of a feeling that the bottom is just about to drop out of things, which is the whole motivation of the book but of which the characters are not shown to be conscious and upon which one cannot put one's finger in any specific passage.³⁰

That the feeling of terror never fully emerges even though the bottom does drop out is due to Waugh's mode of comic presentation where moral judgments are restrained and total sympathy or identification with the hero is withheld. Nonetheless, the pathos that emerges from the half-real, half-cardboard figure of Tony Last and the possible tragic consequences of a spiritually deficient society create a distinctive departure from the comic omniscience of the

³⁰Edmund Wilson, Classics and Commercialism: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties (New York; Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1950), p. 143.

author in the earlier works.

Although Waugh returned in later novels to his early comic style and techniques, A Handful of Dust remains a watershed in his literary career utilizing the best aspects of his early comic style and anticipating his later works. The prolonged sympathetic treatment of character, the implication of a spiritual void capable of defeating his characters, and the reliance on romantic description for a realistic portrayal of character and situation look forward to the seriousness of Brideshead Revisited(1945). More important, the combination of these serious elements and his subtly-operating comic methods anticipate the war-trilogy Sword of Honour, the culmination of his methods and style.

CHAPTER FOUR

FIN DE LIGNE

Thus far, in the development of Waugh's style, this paper has been concerned with showing the increasing 'realness' of the central character, involving both his awareness of his situation and his attempts to cope with it. In Waugh's final work, the wartrilogy Sword of Honour¹, the former setting of chaos is carried on into World War II, the realization of the "biggest battlefield in the history of the world" predicted in Vile Bodies.² Now however, Waugh's hero emerges as a fully developed human being (a development which requires three full-length novels). Guy Crouchback is keenly sensitive to the loss of ideals and hope that results from various deceptions and betrayals, whereas his counterparts in Decline and Fall, Vile Bodies, and Black Mischief never displayed any deep or intense human emotion. Like his predecessors, Crouchback goes through the cycle of optimism, disillusionment, and defeat. However,

¹Sword of Honour (1965) is Waugh's recension of the three novels Men at Arms (1952), Officers and Gentlemen (1955), and Unconditional Surrender (1961). Although the original structural divisions were effaced and the work divided into eleven chapters, Sword of Honour remains the unified account of Guy Crouchback's experiences in the war. For purposes of clarity and because some minor details have been omitted in the single volume (there is no mention of either Captain Truslove or General Miltiades), the individual works have been used for discussion in this paper.

²Vile., p. 220.

the cyclical pattern of the trilogy is that of a widening spiral for as Guy moves through his seasons of hope and despair, he gains, more than any previous hero of Waugh, an understanding of his own role and his responsibility in events that have defeated him.

In the earlier works, the comedy was social and artificial, never actually touching real or important human qualities but concentrating, rather, on superficialities. Even in A Handful of Dust, despite the uneasy feeling that a vital nerve had been touched, Tony Last's fantasies and unrealistic attitude towards his plight rendered him ludicrous and undeserving of total sympathy. In the war-trilogy, Guy Crouchback is a fully-developed person who recognizes his own culpability and does not evade the truths presented to him about himself. Satire is still present, but it is qualified and off-set, as was not the case in the previous works, by the central figure's involvement in events: in the earlier works the protagonist, essentially two-dimensional ("shadow" as Waugh called Paul Pennyfeather)³, was unable to appraise these events, or see himself objectively. Guy, on the other hand, sees his own part in the war and learns that he, too, must accept the responsibility for events. Waugh allows Guy to gain this wider view of life, to see that in the incongruity

³Decline., p. 122.

of life's patterns, comedy and tragedy are inextricably linked. With this development, the critical comedy of the earlier works moves into the range of sympathetic comedy; with Sword of Honour Waugh has traversed the entire range of comedy.

Intricately and inseparably linked with each other, each of the three books that comprise Sword of Honour has a development and tone both similar to, yet distinct from, the earlier works. At first glance, Men at Arms appears to follow in the comic mode of Decline and Fall where the importance of the central figure is diminished by greater-than-life figures about him, and the reader, together with that central figure, is invited to enjoy the ludicrous situations which those figures create. The extended comic episodes involving Apthorpe and Brigadier Ritchie-Hook recollect the antics of Captain Grimes, while the passive attendance of Guy Crouchback at their war-games is similar to that of the unresisting Paul Pennyfeather to the manipulations of Captain Grimes and Margot Beste-Chetwynde. At the beginning of this first novel of the trilogy, war is seen as something distant, something like a game.

England declared war but it made no change in Guy's routine of appeals and interviews. No bombs fell. There was no rain of poison or fire. Bones were still broken after dark. That was all.⁴

No one in England considers the possibility of losing the war,

⁴Evelyn Waugh, Men at Arms (London: Chapman & Hall, 1952), p. 21. All future references to this book will be in the form: Men.

and the military preparations for this giant sporting event are simply farcical.

The conclusion of Men at Arms and the whole of the next book Officers and Gentlemen pull the comic strands together for a severe criticism of the notion that war is either sporting or glorious. Blatant opportunism and personal self-advancement at almost all levels override personal and national moral codes, and war is seen as a succession of incomprehensible actions and aimless, contradictory commands and manoeuvres. Waugh's tone becomes increasingly "sombre" and pessimistic as Guy's deepening involvement in the war reveals a greater awareness of the tragedy of war, of "the old ambiguous world, where priests were spies and gallant friends proved traitors and his country was led blundering into dishonour."⁵

The final book, Unconditional Surrender, is, at one level, the most pessimistic of the three as Guy moves to the edge of suicidal despair. The satire on human selfishness and brutality that was part of Waugh's comedy in his earlier works remains. Now, a degree of sympathy is added to the central character's awareness of human folly. Confronted with situations that demand self-sacrifice and personal commitment, Guy Crouchback learns something about the contradictions within his own nature and the unforeseeable

⁵Evelyn Waugh, Officers and Gentlemen (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 240. All future references to this book will be in the form: Off.

ironies of life. His own view of life widens as his criticism is joined by compassion. With his decision to accept his former wife's unborn illegitimate child, Guy moves beyond the range of those early comic heroes of Waugh who were used mainly to voice Waugh's criticism of the times. In this final novel, the comic "no", the rejection of human foibles which marked the satire of the earlier works, is linked with a positive statement about the humane, and the sympathetic acceptance of that which is human.

At the outset of Men at Arms, one is immediately aware that the satirical vision of Waugh has been modified to a more realistic and traditional novel form by the seriousness of theme and sympathetic treatment of character. Like Charles Ryder in Brideshead Revisited and not unlike Tony Last in A Handful of Dust, the central figure Guy Crouchback finds himself living in a time when values and morals are in flux and in a world to which he feels a keen sense of alienation:

For eight years Guy, already set apart from his fellows by his own deep wound, that unstaunched, internal draining away of life and love, had been deprived of the loyalties which should have sustained him.⁶

.....

He was not loved, Guy knew, either by his household or in the town. He was accepted and respected but he was not simpatico.⁷

In this novel, unlike his earlier ones, Waugh no

⁶Men., p. 41.

⁷Men., p. 9.

longer refuses to make judgments for his reader. He articulates much of his criticism through Guy. Guy's view of the war as a moral cause,

The enemy at last was plain in view, huge and hateful,⁸
all disguise cast off. It was the Modern Age in arms.

becomes a standard by which other casual and selfish attitudes to the war are exposed and rejected. In the scramble for exciting or influential positions, there appears little concern for the reason for going to war:

Russia invaded Poland. Guy found no sympathy among old soldiers for his own hot indignation.

"My dear fellow, we've got quite enough on our hands as it is. We can't go to war with the whole world."

"Then why go to war at all? If all we want is prosperity, the hardest bargain Hitler made would be preferable to victory. If we are concerned with justice the Russians are as guilty as the Germans."

"Justice?" said the old soldiers. "Justice?"⁹

Even when the realities of defeat and the possibilities of invasion are established, various motives of personal gain continue to outweigh the importance of military duties. When England has just suffered the defeat of Dunkirk and one of Guy's fellow Halberdiers requests leave so that he and his girlfriend may participate in a dance competition for which they have been practising for three years, Guy wonders about the nation's attitude in general towards the war. "Was this the already advertised spirit of Dunkirk?"¹⁰ he asks, voicing Waugh's own criticism of the abdication of responsibility and duty.

⁸Men., p. 5.

⁹Men., p. 21.

¹⁰Men., p. 260.

In Men at Arms, despite the pungent critical note and the pessimistic tone of Guy's personal life, Waugh's comic vision continues to assert itself in the events and characters which he singles out and in the comic discrepancy which attends expectation and result. Indeed, Men at Arms provides some of the best comedy of Waugh's entire writing. As in earlier works where he delighted in introducing unusual characters in the story--even though they might not necessarily further the plot--here too, Waugh excels in character portraiture. One such minor but representative comic cameo is Chatty Corner, the expert on gorillas who turns up at a Halberdier party:

The identity of Chatty Corner was apparent to all without introduction; a brown man with grizzled hair en brosse stood morosely at Apthorpe's side. It was easy to see how he had gained a footing among the gorillas; easy, too, to recognize English irony in his nickname. He swung his head from side to side, gazing about him from under shaggy brows as though seeking some high path by which he could swing himself aloft and lie cradled in solitude among the rafters. Not till the band struck up "the Roast Beef of Old England" did Chatty seem at ease. Then he beamed, nodded and gibbered confidentially into Apthorpe's ear.¹¹

Chatty is not necessary either for the development of Waugh's theme or for the furthering of the plot and though he is "led away and never seen again,"¹² he remains a superb example of Waugh's comic method.

In Men at Arms such minor comic portraits are overshadowed, as is Guy himself for a large part of the time, by

¹¹Men., pp. 86-7.

¹²Men., p. 89.

the two figures who are "shadows thrown more than life-size on the retina of the inward eye."¹³ The first character is Apthorpe, Guy's fellow Halberdier, and the other is his ferocious, one-eyed Brigadier Ritchie-Hook. In succession, both appeal to Guy's romantic nature and boyish desire for adventure, and the result of their locking horns is some of the most hilarious and extended comedy of Waugh's entire canon.

Guy, who had felt drawn towards Apthorpe by virtue of their similar age and leg ailment, finds himself helping Apthorpe in protecting his "thunder-box", a chemically-operated latrine, from the appropriations of Ritchie-Hook.

Apthorpe was up at first light next day exploring the outbuildings and before breakfast had discovered an empty shed where the school perhaps had kept bats and pads. There with the help of Halberdier Crock he installed his chemical closet and thither for several tranquil days he resorted for his comfort. It was two days after the fall of Finland that his troubles began.¹⁴

Events of World War II pale beside this epic battle as Ritchie-Hook restricts all but himself to use of the thunder-box, sets a potted geranium on top of the door to knock Apthorpe on the head, institutes a full-company search when the thunder-box is hidden, and finally destroys it with a bomb when Apthorpe sits on it:

In less than five minutes an explosion rattled the windows of the schoolhouse. Various jolly end-of-term

¹³Frederic Stopp, Evelyn Waugh: Portrait of an Artist (London: Chapman & Hall, 1958), p. 160.

¹⁴Men., p. 180.

voices rose from the dormitories: "Air-raid"; "take cover"; "Gas".

Guy buckled his belt and hurried out to what he knew must be the scene of the disaster. Wisps of smoke were visible. He crossed the playing field. At first there was no sign of Apthorpe. Then he came upon him, standing, leaning against the elm, wearing his steel helmet, fumbling with his trouser buttons and gazing with dazed horror on the wreckage which lay all round the roller.

"I say, are you hurt?"

"Who is that? Crouchback? I don't know. I simply don't know, old man."

Of the thunder-box there remained only a heap of smoking wood, brass valves, pinkish chemical powder scattered many yards, and great jags of patterned china.¹⁵

In Henry Fielding's manner of piling more comic details on top of an-already completely farcical situation, Waugh exploits to the fullest the comedy of this epic battle. Because it assumes such importance to the main protagonists and to the onlooker Guy, a local restaurant owner and part-time spy named Guiseppe Pelecci decides that it is important enough to warrant informing his superiors in Italy.

But even the passive Guy himself is a source of comedy in this episode. His assistance to Apthorpe gives him a sense of well-being and comradeship as he had never really known before. Sympathetic though he is to Guy, Waugh places Guy, too, in the comic spectacle. Guy is not merely observer but is himself observed by Waugh's comic eye.

After a few more steps Apthorpe said: "Look here, old man, if you'd care to use the thunder-box, too, it's all right with me."

It was a moment of heightened emotion; an historic moment, had Guy recognized it, when in their complicated

¹⁵Men., p. 195.

relationship Apthorpe came nearest to love and trust. It passed, as such moments do between Englishmen.¹⁵

The comic melodrama of this scene is ostensibly more indulgent than satiric, more sympathetic than critical because it serves to ease Guy's sense of alienation.

Juxtaposed with the more important, but also more distant, events of the Second World War, the episode of the thunder-box is one of Waugh's most extended pieces of situation comedy. But in Waugh's intensifying criticism throughout the book, Apthorpe becomes more a means of satirical comment than of comic delight. Even after he has been "biffed" by Ritchie-Hook, he continues to regard war as something not very relevant to himself. He represents that attitude which does not recognize war as a real threat and is more concerned with a show of rank than with meaningful action. His concern with rank--he challenges another aspiring officer to a duel in Morse Code--and his inclination to panic decisions provide Waugh with ready-made comic situations:

Suddenly from below came the sound of bugles and whistles. The platoon doubled back and found the whole camp astir. Apthorpe had distinctly seen a parachute land a few fields distant. Patrols, pickets and duty-companies rushed to the scene. Two or three rounds were waywardly fired.

"They always bury their parachutes," said Apthorpe. "Look for newly dug ground."

All night they trampled down the young wheat until at reveille they handed over the duty to their reliefs. Several bus-loads of kilted soldiers had meanwhile arrived from a neighbouring camp. They were seasoned

¹⁶Men., pp. 187-8.

men who were sceptical of Apthorpe's vision. An indignant farmer spent most of the morning at the Castle computing the damage done him.¹⁷

But in the final analysis, such comic lunacy stands little chance before the necessities of war, and Guy begins to suspect that there is "something rum"¹⁸ about Apthorpe, something basically false and misdirected in his soldiership. As the tidings of war get more gloomy--France falls, things are going badly in Norway, invasion appears imminent--Guy's admiration for Apthorpe wanes and he transfers his romantic notions to the more pragmatic Ritchie-Hook.

The comic approach of Men at Arms is that of deflation, but in a manner very different from the tones of sarcasm which were pointedly present in the romantic, often cloying style of Brideshead Revisited (1945). The tight, crisp phraseology of the war-trilogy ("Chaos in Liverpool. Quays and ships in absolute darkness. Bombs falling somewhere not far distant.")¹⁹ is quite opposite to the excessive sentimentality of Brideshead Revisited and suggests the controlled detachment of works previous to it. A passage from both Brideshead Revisited and Men at Arms dealing with a similar situation indicates the difference in tone between them and suggests how the comic tone is asserted in the latter work.

In Brideshead Revisited Charles Ryder indulges in a

¹⁷Men., pp. 242-3.

¹⁸Men., p. 207.

¹⁹Men., p. 276.

lengthy rhapsodical monologue which may appear more cloying than profound:

Here my last love the army died. ...as I lay in that dark hour, I was aghast to realize that something within me, long sickening, had quietly died, and felt as a husband might feel, who, in the fourth year of his marriage, suddenly knew that he had no longer any desire, or tenderness, or esteem, for a once-beloved wife; no pleasure in her company, no wish to please, no curiosity about anything she might ever do or say or think; no hope of setting things right, no self-reproach for the disaster. I knew it all, the whole drab compass of marital disillusion; we had been through it together, the Army and I, from the first importunate courtship until now, when nothing remained to us except the chill bonds of law and duty and custom. I had played every scene in the domestic tragedy, had found the early tiffs become more frequent, the tears less affecting, the reconciliations less sweet, till they engendered a mood of aloofness and cool criticism, and the growing conviction that it was not myself but the loved one who was at fault.²⁰

At one point Guy shares a similar feeling towards the army, but the style and tone are now greatly altered:

Those days of lameness, he realized much later, were his honeymoon, the full consummation of his love of the Royal Corps of Halberdiers. After them came domestic routine, much loyalty and affection, many good things shared, but intervening and overlaying them all the multitudinous, sad little discoveries of marriage, familiarity, annoyance, imperfections noted, discord.²¹

Besides the obvious change in sheer length and the taut phrasing, there is in this second passage a quality of ironic detachment, subtle but nonetheless present, which Waugh did not display towards Charles Ryder.

²⁰ Evelyn Waugh, Brideshead Revisited (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1951), pp. 11-12.

²¹ Men., p. 91.

There are, in fact, two levels of irony at work in the novel: the first, in Guy's own ironic view of life; and the second, in Waugh's total view of events. Guy's involvement in events is colored by an anticipation of something different happening from what was expected, like a film he had once seen of Prince Charles and the Rising of '45:

...across the crimson panorama the little bands swept together into one mighty army. Unconquerable they seemed to anyone ignorant of history, as they marched into the setting sun; straight, as anyone knowledgeable in Highland geography could have told them into the chilly waters of Loch Moidart.²²

This personal ironic view colors Guy's outlook on life and is responsible both for his feelings of despair and also for his detachment from immediate events. When Guy makes a particularly bad showing on the rifle range and takes out his frustration on Trimmer, the Halberdier who rags him about his ineptitude, his awareness of the discrepancy between expectation and result creates a feeling of remorse and sadness:

Was it for this that the bugles sounded across the barrack square and the strings sang over the hushed dinner table of the Copper Heels? Was this the triumph for which Roger de Waybroke took the cross; that he should exult in putting down Trimmer?

In shame and sorrow Guy stood last in the²³ queue for boiling water, leaning on his fouled weapon.

Guy is struck low in his awareness that this little drama

²²Men., p. 201.

²³Men., p. 127.

is in ludicrous and ignominious contrast to his idealistic dreams of going to fight the enemy. But Waugh's juxtaposition of "the bugles" and "Roger de Waybroke" with "the queue for boiling water," and his selection of "fouled" as an adjective for the crutch with which Guy struck Trimmer render the passage slightly less than entirely serious; they place Waugh somewhere obliquely, rather than directly, behind Crouchback.

This other level of irony, of Waugh's total view of events, is a view which qualifies or "places" even Guy's role. Like Tony Last's longing for "embroidered feet on the green sward; the cream and dappled unicorns,"²⁴ Guy's love for the Royal Corps of Halberdiers indicates Waugh's detachment from Crouchback:

Guy loved Major Tickeridge and Captain Bosanquet. He loved Apthorpe. He loved the oil-painting over the fireplace of the unbroken square of Halberdiers in the desert. He loved the whole Corps deeply and tenderly.²⁵

Guy does not become any the less likable for his romantic sentiments towards the army; indeed, he becomes more easily sympathized with. There is, however, a tinge of comic mockery present in this description, a gentle raillery which qualifies partially the reader's attachment to Guy. This ironic distancing by Waugh enables us to see Guy like Apthorpe, as a school-boy at play.

²⁴Hand., p. 151.

²⁵Men., p. 58.

As Men at Arms alternates between high farce and ironic commentary on the War, Guy's motives for joining the war also become open to criticism. Guy, who had joined the war with a high moral intention, could be quite critical of the casual attitude of others towards the war but also, he does not recognize the fatuity of his own unrealistic view of it:

He was a good loser, but he did not believe his country would lose this war; each apparent defeat seemed strangely to sustain it. There was in Romance great virtue in unequal odds...And just before sleep, came a personal comforting thought. However inconvenient it was for the Scandanavians to have Germans there, it was very nice for the Halberdiers.²⁶

With this attitude, the mock battle over the thunder-box and the fake exercises can be viewed as good fun, but they are a prelude to real fighting which occurs, briefly, in a light skirmish on the beach at Dakar where Guy leads a reconnaissance patrol. The landing is done in storybook-hero style, "true Truslove-style,"²⁷ as Guy is filled with the "most exhilarating sensation of his life; his first foothold on enemy soil."²⁸ But the notion of war as romantic or glorious is quickly dispelled, like the three bursts from a Bren gun which fall alarmingly near Guy. When Ritchie-Hook is wounded, Guy is held responsible and is discredited for the landing. Close

²⁶Men., p. 220.

²⁷Men., p. 282.

²⁸Men., p. 285.

on the heels of this setback, Apthorpe dies, and Guy is blamed for his death because he had given a bottle of whiskey to him as he lay sick in the hospital. Things have turned out very differently from what Guy had expected, but the difference is no longer a comic one, for Guy is "filled with a trembling, hopeless sense of disaster...something quite of another order."²⁹ Ironically, Guy's plunge into the stream of active life has left him more alienated than he had been at the opening of the book:

Already the Second Battalion of the Halberdiers spoke of Guy in the past tense. He had momentarily been of them; now he was an alien; someone in their long and varied past, but forgotten.³⁰

At the close of Men at Arms the comedy of Waugh's satirical attack on the farce of preparations for war is subsumed by the sombre outcome of circumstances, and the comic irony attending events in Guy's life turns to a pessimistic tone presaging further disaster.

Like Men at Arms, Officers and Gentlemen opens with Guy's sense of well-being and optimism. As "an act of pietas was required of him, a spirit...to be placated,"³¹ he attempts to locate "Chatty" Corner to give him Apthorpe's vast amount of bush equipment. Amazingly, Chatty pops up on the isle of Mugg where Guy has been stationed for training with X Commandoes, and here amid some hilarious training incidents, Guy

²⁹Men., p. 310.

³⁰Men., p. 314.

³¹Off., p. 21.

moves out again in an attempt to be 'simpatico' with men. He again strikes up a friendship, this time with the aesthetic, audacious Ivor Claire, whom he regards as the quintessence of England's fighting force.

Except for a number of scenes of farce that are reminiscent of the earlier-Waugh style, the tone of Officers and Gentlemen becomes increasingly sombre and grimly ironic. The satire becomes more heavy-handed as Waugh attacks self-aggrandizement, opportunism, and personal and national betrayal of established moral codes. The ideals on which Guy had based his military career in Men at Arms are revealed to be illusory, and the clear-cut view of an enemy across the Channel proves to be an enemy at large, among his own ranks of officers and aristocratic gentlemen.

Waugh satirizes the scramble for prominent positions in the military, already seen in Men at Arms and similar to the literal scramble that results for the room which is vacated when one of the captains suffers a broken leg and has to be removed from Mugg. The unified war effort almost disintegrates in the face of petty squabbling over personal comforts:

"You've got to realize," said Bertie with unusual severity, "that my men are big men. They need space."

"My servant must have quarters next door to me," said Eddie. "I can't go shouting down to the troop deck every time I want anything."

"But, Guy, we can't sleep with the Coldstream."

"I won't be responsible for the heavy machine-guns, Crouchback, unless I have a lock-up," said Major Graves. "And what's this about doubling up with the MP? I mean to say, that's a bit thick."

"I can't possibly share the sick-bay with the ship's surgeon," said the doctor. "I'm entitled to a cabin of my own."

"It doesn't seem to me you've done anything for us."³²

Even at the top levels, the bickering and jockeying is carried on. Major-General Sprat, Director of Land Forces for Hazardous Offensive Operation (HOO), sees the problem clearly when his superiors at the War Office demand to be shown positive results of the Special Service Forces:

"They're out to do us down," he reported succinctly. He need not name the enemy. No one thought he meant the Germans. *[Italics mine]*³³

Thus, in order to escape a 'military guillotine', a plan is devised for a small mock battle that will appease the wrath of the War Office. But even beyond the general lack of concerted or unified effort, there is a more serious flaw in the individual personnel of military officialdom, as officers reveal themselves to be less than gentlemen, and much less than good soldiers. The spirit of Apthorpe, exposed by Chatty Corner as ostentatious but shot full of discrepancies, also inhabits Guy's commanding officers: Major "Fido" Hound breaks easily under the conditions of real war when the magic official forms, "bumf", no longer guide him; Ivor Claire, considered by Guy as the "fine

³²Off., p. 103.

³³Off., p. 117.

flower of them all...quintessential England, the man Hitler had not taken into account,"³⁴ deserts under direct orders; Tommy Blackhouse, "a professional soldier,"³⁵ "a perfect soldier,"³⁶ decides that it is less fuss for everyone if the whole matter of Claire's desertion is dropped--"Never cause trouble except for positive preponderant advantage" was his working precept³⁷--and is relieved when the matter is beyond his jurisdiction.

Finally, as if to cap the succession of betrayals--betrayals of Guy's principles--Russia becomes one of England's allies, and Guy realizes that the principle of Justice for which he had so eagerly enlisted is an ambiguous and treacherous excuse for oppurtunism and expediency:

It was just such a sunny, breezy Mediterranean day two years before when he read of the Russo-German alliance, when a decade of shame seemed to be ending in light and reason, when the Enemy was plain in view, huge and hateful, all disguise cast off; the modern age in arms.

Now that hallucination was dissolved, like the whales and turtles on the voyage from Crete, and he was back after less than two years' pilgrimage in a Holy Land of illusion in the old ambiguous world, where priests were spies and gallant friends proved traitors and his country was led blundering into dishonour.³⁸

With this spirit of disillusionment amid these circumstances of betrayal, it is almost a contradiction to

³⁴off., p. 114.

³⁵off., p. 13.

³⁶off., p. 61.

³⁷off., p. 238.

³⁸off., p. 240.

speak of the element of comedy in this work. And yet, it is undeniably there. Guy's stay on the isle of Mugg is rich with comic portraits and farcical incidents. The crisp adjective and taut phrase of ironic commentary also gives way to copious, meandering phrases and epic-proportion similes. Guy's meeting with Chatty Corner in his dark lair and the handing over of Apthorpe's bush gear illustrate this comic method:

...it had been an unnerving day and its climax found Guy so confounded between truth and fantasy that he was prepared, as he entered the room, to find a tableau from some ethnographic museum, some shaggy, prognathous hypothetical ancestor, sharpening a flint spear-head among a heap of gnawed bones between walls scrawled with imitation Picassos. Instead he found a man, bulky and hirsute indeed, but a man made in the same image as himself, and plainly far from well, wrapped in army blankets, seated before a peat fire on a commonplace upright chair, with his feet in a steaming bucket of mustard and water. At his hand stood a whisky bottle and on the hob a kettle of water.³⁹

Waugh's comic style has always involved the seizing of a salient detail and linking it with a grand or majestic reference for comic effect, and here one may luxuriate in the many examples. When the lair of Mugg shows Guy his illegal, hidden store of ammunition, he does so "with the air of an oenophile [a connoisseur of wines] revealing his most recondite treasure;"⁴⁰ the diatetic authority who comes to Mugg for an experiment appears before Guy like an apparition from the sea, "his grey beard spread in the wind

³⁹Off., p. 56.

⁴⁰Off., p. 92.

like a baroque prophet's;"⁴¹ and the men of X Commando return from an abortive mock exercise "shuffling, soaked and spiritless as stragglers on the road from Moscow."⁴² When coupled with anti-climax, Waugh's ornate description is highly comical:

There were shadowy, violent actions and sounds of whacking, kicking, snarling and whining. Then the piper had it all to himself again. It was intensely cold in the hall and Guy's eyes wept anew in the peat fumes. Presently the piper, too, was hushed and in the stunning silence an aged lady and gentleman emerged through the smoke. Colonel Campbell was much bedizened with horn and cairngorms. He wore a velvet doublet above his kilt, high stiff collar and a black bow tie. Mrs. Campbell wore nothing memorable.⁴³

Beyond these portraits of caricature and comical comparisons are various episodes of high farce. In one practise assault on the island, Ivor Claire obtains his objective by the unorthodox method of hiring a bus and driving to his destined location instead of tramping over rock and moor as the others do. The experimental expedition by the dietician, Dr. Glendinning-Rees, to prove that the men can live equally well off seaweed as bully beef results in his own emaciated form being carried back on a stretcher. And one of the funniest incidents involves the mock raid on a tiny, uninhabited island near Jersey, staged to mollify the War Office who want to see results in their war:

Trimmer drew his pistol and continued the advance. They reached the top of a grassy ridge, and saw half a mile to their flank a dark feature that stood out black

⁴¹off., p. 92.

⁴²off., p. 86.

⁴³off., pp. 60-1.

against the silver landscape.

"There's your tower," said Ian.

"It doesn't look like a tower."

" 'Moonlight can be cruelly deceptive, Amanda, ' " said Ian in his Noel Coward voice. "Push on."

They moved forward cautiously. Suddenly the dog barked again and Trimmer as suddenly fired his pistol. The bullet struck the turf a few yards ahead but the sound was appalling. Both officers fell on their faces.

"What on earth did you do that for?" asked Ian.

"D'you suppose I meant to?"

A light appeared in the building ahead. Ian and Trimmer lay flat. A light appear downstairs. A door opened and a broad woman stood there, clearly visible, holding a lamp in one hand, a shotgun under her arm. The dog barked with frenzy. A chain rattled.

"God. She's going to let it loose," said Trimmer. "I'm off."

He rose and bolted, Ian close behind.⁴⁴

This little expedition, entitled Operation Popgun, is led by "Trimmer" McTavish and mistakenly lands in France where the men blow up a railway track. Trimmer and his publicity man, Ian Kilbannock, had both been quite tipsy during the operation but when they return to England, Trimmer's feat is exploited by the press and he is proclaimed a hero.

But these farcical incidents, like the deeper significance of most of Waugh's comedy, do more than merely provide comic relief from the dreariness of war. This comedy is balanced on the fine edge of irony. Events at Crete are the central focus of the book and all the preliminary exercises on Mugg and the other military excursions in the book are off-set and qualified by them. Ivor Claire's unorthodox

⁴⁴off., p. 146.

method of gaining his objective in the exercise on Mugg foretells his lack of scruples in deserting at Crete. The failure of that preliminary run on Mugg is repeated in actual war with the total defeat and withdrawal at Crete. And most important, the success of the unimportant mock-expedition, Operation Popgun, which results in making Trimmer a national hero, is the ironic counterpart to the catastrophe of the Cretan episode.

The irony of this second book has shifted from the comic irony of Men at Arms to a more sombre and bitter tone. But again, Waugh's position and his view of the action are oblique. When Ian Kilbannock, successful public relations man of the war, tells Guy that his kind, namely the Upper Class, the "Fine Flower of the Nation"⁴⁵ won't do for this war because

"This is a People's War...and the People won't have poetry and they won't have flowers. Flowers stink... We want heroes of the people, to or for the people, by, with and from the people,"⁴⁶

one should not suppose that Waugh is only satirizing Ian's statement. Ironically, Ian verifies his own statement when his description of Trimmer's nervous, clumsy, and less than heroic action in Operation Popgun as "exemplary coolness"⁴⁷ results in Trimmer's becoming a national hero. Ian is

⁴⁵Off., p. 101.

⁴⁶Off., p. 101.

⁴⁷Off., p. 150.

right and Guy wrong, for Guy's estimation of Ivor Claire, "the fine flower of them all...quintessential England" is shattered at the end when Claire deserts. Guy's ideal of gentlemanly conduct and his belief that war and ethics can operate successfully side by side are severely blinkered idealism. Because Guy does not share the sceptical view of military convention to which Claire, Tommy Blackhouse, and Corporal-Major Ludovic all subscribe, he suffers emotionally and professionally while the others manipulate themselves into the most advantageous circumstances.

The emerging importance of Ludovic also verifies, but with a qualification, Ian's statement of a People's War. Ludovic is an unusual kind of aesthete with a particularly tough outlook on life that sustains him when others like Major Hound go under. It is this toughness that enables him to carry out a heroic escape from Crete and recover after only two days in the hospital. Ironically, this godless sceptical aesthete observes the fallacy of Guy's belief that the war is being fought by gentlemen like General Miltiades, of the Greek army, who in old age is still faithfully following his king. "All gentlemen," Ludovic notes as a kind of choral comment, "are now very old."⁴⁸ In a further irony it is he, sceptical of ideals, who carries Guy ashore at Sidi Barani after their escape

⁴⁸Off., p. 186.

from Crete, aristocracy literally being kept alive by the common man. A deeper irony occurs when Guy learns that the aristocratic ideal is not really worth saving at all, for Julia Stitch, member and representative of that ideal, connives in Ivor Claire's flight to India after his desertion from Crete. Unknown to Guy is her duplicity as she destroys the evidence of his attempt to inform the authorities of a British soldier lying dead in an unknown spot on Crete. Thinking that the package which Guy gives her to post contains evidence against Claire--it contains the dogtags of the dead soldier--she drops it into the waste basket, in effect nullifying Guy's act of military duty and personal charity. The corollary of Ludovic's message now becomes clear: only old men can believe in holy crusades or a just war. Idealism is no match for active opportunism.

In the final ironic note of the book, Guy re-capitulates to the insistence on correct form which he had met in his early training with the Halberdiers: after having seen that war at every level is but a game of opportunism and jockeying for the most advantageous situation, this insistence on correct drill, proper show and the discipline of orders becomes both farcically and painfully ironic.

Just as the title "Men at Arms" was an ironically comic inversion of the boys' games of the soldiers in that book, the title "Officers and Gentlemen" also constitutes an ironic inversion. Officers reveal themselves as less than gentlemen, while true gentlemen are rare and quite decrepit with age. The comic and satirical tone--a bit more than "gentle remonstrance" as De Vitis⁴⁹ calls it--of the earlier book has given way to the darker tones of grim and melancholy irony. The whole of this second book is less a juxtaposing of comic absurdity with grim irony than a qualification or alteration of the first. In this book, as in the next, a dominant quality of Waugh's style is his juxtaposition of comic description with tragic awareness. One small episode which illustrates this "verbal daring with terse peripheral judgment"⁵⁰ concerns Major 'Fido' Hound, an officer and ostensibly a gentleman who has entered into a small case of bartering with the enlisted men after the defeat on Crete. Having thus done so, "he returned to the centre of his group and sat silent with his map and his lost soul."⁵¹ In the last book of the trilogy, such critical evaluations

⁴⁹A.A. DeVitis, Roman Holiday: The Catholic Novels of Evelyn Waugh (New York: Bookman Associates, 1956), p. 80.

⁵⁰George Greene, "Scapegoat with Style: The Status of Evelyn Waugh," Queens Quarterly, LXXI (Winter, 1965), p. 489.

⁵¹Off., p. 177.

become more pointed and dominant, and comic satire becomes almost entirely irony of the tragic mode.

The tone of melancholy that pervades the last half of Officers and Gentlemen intensifies in Unconditional Surrender (1961) to one of overwhelming gloom. Waugh's tone is even further restrained in describing Guy's return to the Halberdiers after the rout at Crete. Descriptive passages that were used in early works to give a sense of comic melodrama no longer create a comic effect. Now, they serve to heighten the painful awareness that Guy has of his increased loneliness. For two years he has done nothing memorable nor personally satisfying, and the death of his father, "the best man, the only entirely good man he had ever known,"⁵² deepens his gloom and the melancholy tone of the book:

It was a still day; the trees were dropping their leaves in ones and twos; they twisted and faltered in the descent as their crumpled brown shapes directed, but landed under the boughs on which they had once budded. Guy thought for a moment of Ludovic's notebook, of the 'feather in the vacuum' to which he had been compared and, by contrast, remembered boisterous November days when he and his mother had tried to catch leaves in the avenue; each one caught insured a happy day? week? which? in his wholly happy childhood. Only his father had remained to watch the transformation of that merry little boy into the lonely captain of Halberdiers who followed the coffin.⁵³

⁵²Evelyn Waugh, Unconditional Surrender (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 65. All future references to this book will be in the form: Uncon.

⁵³Uncon., p. 67.

Due to his age, approaching forty, Guy is left behind when a Second Brigade is assembled and landed in Italy and he takes an obscure position at HOO HQ. From there he is assigned to parachute lessons in Essex prior to being stationed in northern Italy. A jumping accident results in an injured knee and he returns to London invalided at his Uncle Peregrine's flat. When Virginia Troy, his former wife, re-establishes a friendship and suggests that they be remarried, informing him that she is pregnant with Trimmer's child, he marries her in spite of opposition from his friends.

Shortly thereafter he is moved to Bari, Italy, where he feels himself sinking deeper into spiritual limbo, in despair over his futile and tiny participation in five years of war. He learns, with no great emotion, that his wife Virginia and Uncle Peregrine have been killed by a "doodle bug" bomb and that Virginia's son Gervase is safe with Guy's sister Angela. In Begoy, a small town in Croatia where he is next transferred, Guy acts in a non-political capacity as liaison officer between the 'general staff' of the Yugoslavian partisan forces and the combined British and American liberation forces. He receives an appeal for aid from a group of Jewish refugees, persecuted first by the Nazis and now the prey of partisan hostility. After all his attempts to evacuate them to Italy are thwarted by the partisans, Guy learns that they have escaped to Italy where they are interned again in a dismal

camp by unconcerned liberation officials. Two of them, the Kanyis, have been tried by a People's Court and put to death for anti-Communist activities. Following this, Guy drops out of the picture except for a brief glimpse of him at a reunion at Bellamy's in 1951, of the Commandos from isle of Mugg training. Guy, we learn, has married Domenica Plessington, the earthy, kind Catholic girl who cared for Virginia's son, and with two sons of their own are living in the old Crouchback home at Broome.

Unconditional Surrender draws to a conclusion all the elements of the first two books of the trilogy and integrates completely all the varied features of his writing. In this book even a partially-sustained comic situation is never allowed to flourish fully. The episode in Essex, where Ludovic, now Guy's commanding officer, attempts to isolate himself from his company, is cut short by Guy's parachute accident and his hospitalization. Occasional short incidents of pure comic malice again occur, as when Guy is hospitalized for his leg injury and has as a fellow inmate, an

inflamed and apparently delirious man who broke into complaint that his bed was overrun with poisoned insects.

"DT's, I suppose," said de Souza, "perhaps if we ring his bell someone will think he has taken a turn for the worse and come with sedatives."

He rang and at length an orderly appeared. "...This one's on the danger list. You'd better come out," and when they were once more in the corridor he added: "Never saw anything like it before. Some joker in Alexandria gave him a parcel 'by hand of officer only' to take to London. It was full of scorpions and they escaped."⁵⁴

⁵⁴Uncon., p. 110.

But such incidents are infrequent in this last book.

Similarly, with the full development of Guy Crouchback's character, less attention is paid in this work to minor figures who crop up. The fussiness of Peregrine Crouchback appears to be a throwback to the humorous one-dimensional caricatures of Waugh's early style, like Colonel Blount in Vile Bodies, and the nameless major who helps Guy throughout the whole war calls to mind the nameless major who kept crossing Adam Fenwick-Symes' path in Vile Bodies. But the difference in Waugh's characterization can be seen quite early in this last book: the mortality of Virginia Troy, last of the "exquisite, the doomed, and the damning"⁵⁵ of the Bright Young People is portrayed with a pathos and genuineness that was not given to either Brenda Last or any previous central female character of Waugh:

Virginia was a Scarlet Woman; the fatal woman who had brought about the fall of the house of Crouchback; and, what was more, to Uncle Peregrine she fully looked the part. Not for him to read the faint, indelible, signature of failure, degradation and despair that was written for sharper eyes than his.⁵⁶

Guy is truly sorry when he unintentionally humiliates her and his compassion towards her and acceptance of her child gain for her the reader's sympathy. In this last work, the satire of her mistakes--and indeed, the satire on the frivolity and errors of all the Bright Young People from

⁵⁵Uncon., p. 200.

⁵⁶Uncon., p. 131.

Decline and Fall to A Handful of Dust--is changed to an admission and acceptance of human foibles and human weakness.

The comedy of caricature is no longer sustained when it involves mortality. Thus, the seeming supra-mortals meet a different fate than they did in Waugh's earlier novels. Like Grimes crossing the path of Pennyfeather in Decline and Fall, Brigadier Ritchie-Hook bounds indefatigably across Guy's path throughout the trilogy. He had captured Guy's imaginative fancy early in the Halberdier training in Men at Arms; he had popped up briefly with Guy's Commandos for the Hookforce landing on Crete in Officers and Gentlemen; in Unconditional Surrender he shows up again, this time for a demonstration battle on a little block-house twenty miles from Begoy in Yugoslavia:

The battle prepared for the visiting general was to be an assault on a little block-house some twenty miles to the west...There were no Germans near. The garrison was a company of Croat nationalists, whose duty it was to send out patrols along the ill-defined frontiers of the 'liberated' territory and to find sentries for bridges in that area. They were not the ferocious ustachi but pacific domobrans, the local home-guard. It was in every way a convenient objective for the exercise; also well placed for spectators, in an open little valley with wooded slopes on either side.⁵⁷

Ritchie-Hook is like Captain Grimes in that he is always involved in some new escapade. Unlike the indestructible Grimes, however, Ritchie-Hook is mortal. At the attack exercise, he initiates his own surprise action:

⁵⁷Uncon., p. 209.

He [Guy] raised his binoculars and recognized the incongruous pair, the first was Ritchie-Hook. He was signalling fiercely, summoning to the advance the men behind him, who were already slinking away; he went forward at a slow and clumsy trot towards the place where the rocket-bombs had disturbed the stones. He did not look back to see if he was being followed. He did not know that he was followed, by one man, Sneiffel, who like a terrier, like the pet dwarf privileged to tumble about the heels of a prince of the Renaissance, was gambolling round him with his camera, crouching and skipping, so small and agile as to elude the snipers on the walls. A first bullet hit Ritchie-Hook when he was some 20 yards from the walls. He spun completely round, then fell forwards on his knees, rose again and limped slowly on. He was touching the walls, feeling for a hand-hold, when a volley from above caught him and flung him down dead. Sneiffel paused long enough to record his last posture, then bolted....⁵⁸

In Waugh's writing, mortality cannot be evaded any longer, and the change in tone is one of obvious sobriety:

The death of Ritchie-Hook had changed the events of the day from fiasco to tragic drama. There was ample material for recriminations but in the face of this death even the Commissar was constrained to silence.⁵⁹

But the tone of this last work is not simply one of unadulterated melancholy. Though it appears that Guy is moving ever deeper into personal despondency, there is a counter-movement at work in this book that brings it into the range of sympathetic comedy. This counter-movement is determined, first, by Waugh's controlling irony, and secondly, by the awareness he gives to Guy of personally sharing a common fate. Guy's involvement is seen, explicitly, when he

⁵⁸Uncon., pp. 221-2.

⁵⁹Uncon., p. 223.

takes Virginia's illegitimate child as his own, and implicitly, when we discover at the book's end, that he has remarried and has children of his own. In this acceptance by Guy of the responsibility of being human, we have arrived at the comedy, or attitude to life, which Bernard Schilling defined earlier in this paper, namely, "a willing participation--an acceptance of the full responsibility of being human...."⁶⁰

Although it may seem that Waugh has neatly tidied up loose ends, that he has accounted for all characters in some way or another, and that "things have turned out very conveniently for Guy"⁶¹ at the end, this work is not that simple nor Waugh's point all that neat. The pattern of Guy's life is more intricate than that of a romantic hero who suffers, then finds redemption and new meaning in life which he approaches with determination and zeal. The irony that attends the events of this book evokes a multiple response.

Guy's initial reaction to the outbreak of war was, for the most part, romantic, simple, and full of hope. The issue then so clear, the enemy in plain view, provided a chance, a splendid opportunity to strike a personal blow for Justice, and thereby gain some kind of personal justification for existence. Individuals, Guy believed, were united here for the common cause of Justice, but he soon learned that not many shared his fervent idealism:

⁶⁰Bernard Schilling, The Comic Spirit, p. 17.

⁶¹Uncon., p. 240.

"Why go to war at all? If all we want is prosperity, the hardest bargain Hitler made would be preferable to victory. If we are concerned with justice the Russians are as guilty as the Germans."

"Justice?" said the old soldiers. "Justice?"⁶²

The scramble for personal advantage seen in the first two books is now matched by a political scramble as Russia, former enemy, becomes an esteemed ally. In Unconditional Surrender a highly-embellished sword which has been commissioned by the King for presentation as tribute to the "steel-hearted people of Stalingrad"⁶³ reveals the sentimental regard of the British for their new political ally. The clear-cut issue of Justice that Guy had sought to defend in the war has become completely blurred in the abandonment of principles and the shifting alliances. For Guy, war is no longer a glorious time, but rather,

the massing and moving of millions of men, some of whom were sometimes endangered, most of whom were idle and lonely, the devastation, hunger, and waste, crumbling buildings, foundering ships, the torture and murder of prisoners.⁶⁴

His seasons of hope--training with the Halberdiers and the Commandoes--have been lost entirely. And, when no honourable cause remains to be found in the Allied war, when those who observe the new axis of power to lie in the emerging Communist militancy change their allegiances, then Guy

⁶²Men., p. 21.

⁶³Uncon., p. 22.

⁶⁴Uncon., p. 147.

loses all desire to live. His wish to die had first been suspected by Ludovic, is observed by an English composer in Bari, and finally admitted by Guy himself in his religious confessions:

"Father, I wish to die!"

"Yes. How many times?"

"Almost all the time."

The obscure figure behind the grill leant nearer.

"What was it you wished to do?"

"To die."

"Yes. You have attempted suicide?"

"No."

"Of what, then, are you accusing yourself? To wish to die is quite usual today. It may even be a very good disposition. You do not accuse yourself of despair?"

"No, father; presumption. I am not fit to die."

"There is no sin there. This is a mere scruple. Make an act of contrition for all the unrepented sins of your past life."⁶⁵

However, Guy's development is greater than any previous hero of Waugh and he must come to terms with personal responsibility in events that have taken place. He has not yet admitted to himself his own part in the futility of war, and this central insight is enunciated by Madame Kanyi, one of the displaced Jews in Yugoslavia:

"Is there any place that is free from evil? It is too simple to say that only the Nazis wanted war. These communists wanted it too. It was the only way in which they could come to power. Many of my people wanted it, to be revenged on the Germans, to hasten the creation of the national state. It seems to me there was a will to war, a death wish, everywhere. Even good men thought their private honour would be satisfied by war. They would accept hardships in recompense for having been selfish and lazy. Danger justified privilege."⁶⁶

⁶⁵Uncon., p. 171.

⁶⁶Uncon., p. 232.

By courting death, she says, life is somehow justified; and Guy must recognize his own culpability in this regard. By his final admission, "God forgive me. I was one of them,"⁶⁷ the final shattering blow is dealt to his romantic view of war and his religious and patriotic idealism. But even more shattering and important, this knowledge is the recognition of the ambiguity of all action, even his own, for he learns that his most charitable intentions have resulted directly in calamity. Guy's friendship with Madame Kanyi--talking to her, carrying a load of wood for her, sending her a pile of old American magazines--is responsible for her trial and death by a People's Court. The total feeling of futility prevents him even from lashing out in anger against this miscarriage and travesty of justice.

The new allies, the Communists and partisans, prove themselves as severe and intolerant as the Nazis, and the People's Peace reveals itself to be as intransigent and harsh as the War itself. In the desolation of this view it is the supreme irony of Guy's life that he has gained what he lacked at the beginning of the war. At that time he had had no wish to persuade or convince or share his opinion with anyone; all feeling of brotherhood was absent.

⁶⁷Uncon., p. 232.

He had considered war a glorious time, a thing that would revitalize his paralytic emotions and give meaning to his life. His hope had given way to despair as he viewed the chaos of war, the compromise of personal and national honour, the futility of personal volition. And yet, from this waste land a spirit of compassion has emerged, so that his concern for the individual in a time when the individual has ceased to matter--"What do two more or less matter?"⁶⁸ is a common rejoinder--emerges as a fixed value in a relative world.

The distance that Guy has traveled to get to this knowledge was traversed first by his father. Early in the book, when Guy had scorned the Lateran Treat which had been concluded between the Vatican and the Fascists, Mr. Crouchback had emphasized the integrity of the individual: "Quantitative judgments don't apply. If only one soul was saved that is full compensation for any loss of 'face'."⁶⁹ It was the memory of his father's words, together with the deepening awareness of the lack of his own unselfish action, that enables him to see Virginia Troy as other than the "tart" that her friend Kerstie⁷⁰ and the critic DeVitis⁷¹ call her. Guy discerns "the faint, indelible signature

⁶⁸Uncon., p. 234.

⁶⁹Uncon., p. 17.

⁷⁰Uncon., p. 151.

⁷¹A.A. DeVitis, Roman Holiday, p. 77.

of failure, degradation, and despair"⁷² that lies close behind her gay exterior and makes her appeal for help. Knowing that Virginia is tough and would somehow survive, and that by marrying her he will not be changing her, Guy is aware, too, that his opportunity to provide for one individual in the chaos of a war-torn world must not be lost. His acceptance of the responsibility of raising this unwanted child of Trimmer and Virginia is met with scorn. Kerstie Kilbannock protests by posing to him the question he has had to ask himself: "My dear Guy, the world is full of unwanted children...what is one child more or less in all that misery?"⁷³ Mr. Crouchback's words and perhaps, Guy believes, his special goodness have prepared the way for Guy's reconciliation to the importance of the individual as he accepts Trimmer's child as his own. The acceptance of that responsibility anticipates his attempts to help the Jewish people at Begoy, and ultimately is the reinforcement of his belief that only through personal charitable actions can the individual ever hope to redeem the times.

The force of the book derives from its irony. There is an inversion of roles as Guy's desire to maintain aristocratic ideals leads to his participation in a very common life, while Ludovic, the Common Man, accepts for himself the illusions,

⁷²Uncon., p. 131.

⁷³Uncon., p. 151.

the castle and the role of Guy's former life. Through his acceptance of Trimmer's child as his own, Guy has insured the continuation of the Crouchback line. Ironically, the ideals of aristocracy, ideals in the best sense of justice and honour which Guy saw abandoned so readily in the war, are maintained by Guy himself in his acceptance of the son of Trimmer, shabby representative of the Common Man. As in Howards End, aristocracy has been joined with the most common elements thus establishing a new and hardier stock. Trimmer's son embodies, simultaneously, the defeat of Guy's aspirations and the assurance that the Crouchback line has not been ended. Guy's personal unconditional surrender to the forces and spirit of the times have secured, ironically, a victory for him, so that the comment of his brother-in-law at the end of the book, "things have turned out very conveniently for Guy," is indeed accurate. But that victory has cost Guy more than Arthur Box-Bender could ever reckon or understand.

The main irony of the book is that the myths which Guy believed in--aristocratic, military, patriotic--have all cleared away, and the ambiguity of life itself is exposed.

The awareness of the futility of action and the necessity of continuing that action is at once tragic and supremely comic. It is only after Guy has assimilated and taken cognizance of the tragicomic human condition and has himself gone through the malaise of being that he is capable

of bearing the tragedy of existence.⁷⁴ If tragedy, as we have said, shows the individual man as doomed by the nature of things to sadness and defeat, sympathetic comedy alleviates that sorrow by emphasizing that each man must willingly participate in and embrace the full experience of life. The intermingling of tragic and comic elements in the war-trilogy takes this work into the range of that which earlier in this paper was termed 'human comedy'. In these terms, the comic experience is one that is based on a humane, albeit critical, approach to life, demanding a necessary participation in events and a full acceptance of the responsibility of being human.

By comparing the war-trilogy with Waugh's earlier novels, one sees clearly the development in Waugh's writing, that is, the development from satiric comedy to sympathetic comedy. The anaesthesia of the heart which Waugh displayed towards his hero in Decline and Fall, Vile Bodies, Black Mischief, and even to a certain extent in A Handful of Dust, has become, in Sword of Honour, a sympathetic sharing of the hero's values. However, the most important development in his writing--and which has been the main point of this paper--is that the cold and rather heartless objective view of human folly in those early satiric novels now has been altered to include a measure of understanding and

⁷⁴See Ionesco's comment on the tragicomic human condition in the Introduction of this paper, p. 7.

sympathy for the weaknesses and errors that necessarily go with human life. In the war-trilogy, the author and the reader remain critical of human actions at an intellectual level; that intellectual awareness has been tempered, however, by emotional involvement.

In Waugh's final work, the comic "no" or rejection through satire which the reader experienced in the earlier works is transmuted into a critical but sympathetic acceptance of that which is human. It is this progression from critical to sympathetic comedy which is the most significant development in Waugh's writing and which this thesis suggests will rank him as a major comic writer of the first half of the twentieth century.

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