

The Monotony of the New: Evelyn Waugh and Modernist Aesthetics

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Evelyn Waugh's formative years as a writer coincided with the period that cultural historians tend to regard as the high season of modernism. By 1928, the year in which Waugh's first trade book was published, a biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the modernist reassessment of the role and technique of the artist had reached its apogee.¹ In 1933, by which time Waugh had also published *Decline and Fall, Vile Bodies* and a number of travelogues, the anarcho-surrealist critic, (Sir) Herbert Read, applauded a revolution in the history of art discernible qualitatively from the previous shifts in sensibility that were recognised as periods. The contemporary revolution was "not so much a revolution, which implied a turning over, even a turning back, but rather a break-up, a devolution, some would say a dissolution". For Read, "its character [was] catastrophic".²

Writing as he was in the context of an overwhelmingly self-conscious disassociation of artistic sensibilities, Waugh has largely come to be regarded as "a lone voice crying in the modernist wilderness"³ or, in the words of a *New York Times* art critic, an "implacable opponent of modernism" whose admiration was "reserved for Victorian narrative painting, Augustan architecture and Pre-Raphaelite decoration".⁴ In Jeffrey Heath's view, Waugh "found his spiritual home in the eighteenth century and always remained profoundly at odds with his own time".⁵

¹ See Malcolm Bradbury & James McFarlane, 'The Name and Nature of Modernism' in Malcolm Bradbury & J McFarlane (eds), *Modernism: 1890-1930* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981) pp. 30ff.

² Cited in 'ibid.', p. 20.

³ Christopher Wood, Postscript to Evelyn Waugh, *P.R.B.: An Essay on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (Westersham: Dalrymple Press, 1982) p. 44.

⁴ Hugh Kramer, *The New York Times*, 22 January 1981, p. C17.

⁵ Jeffrey Heath, *The Picturesque Prison: Evelyn Waugh and his Writing* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1982) p. 37.

The provenance of assessments such as these is clear. Waugh's biography of Rossetti was a calculated repudiation of certain modern critical stand points on art - namely, Roger Fry's doctrine of "significant form" and Clive Bell's theory of "aesthetic emotion" - and the views expressed in *Rossetti* are entirely consistent with opinions expressed by Waugh on other aspects of modernist aesthetics. The "fallacy of modern art" is a conspicuous theme throughout *Brideshead Revisited* and he spoke of modern architecture in terms of the "Nazi-factory manner (concrete and steel)"⁶ and the "post-war Corbusier plague". He described Paul Klee's work as the "acme of futility".⁷ Indeed, Waugh is renowned for his splenetic enmity towards the very age into which he was born. Later in life, he created Gilbert Pinfold, an alter-ego whose strongest tastes were negative: Pinfold "abhorred plastics, Picasso, sunbathing, and jazz - everything which had in fact happened in his own lifetime".⁸

Despite his Pinfoldism, Waugh's writing from the inter-war period is supremely typical of that period in its contribution to the development of an inter-war aesthetic, a matter of technique, and its role in the conscious demarcation of the modern from the Victorian, more a matter of sensibility. He was, as Christopher Hitchens has commented, "very much 'of' the Jazz Age".⁹ Above all, Waugh accepted modernist criticisms of empirical approaches to the representation of human behaviour and agreed that the subjugation of individuals to their material environment in Victorian and Edwardian art and literature was inadequate to give full expression to the complete range of human emotion and experience. Like the English Protestant attitude which had a trenchant allegorical significance for Waugh, the Victorian imagination was two-dimensional and suffered from its preference for the picturesque over the substantial. The obvious modernist techniques such as modern settings, modern idioms and futurist montages that are characteristic of Waugh's prose were an essential feature of his response to the twentieth century and were integral to his literature as an alternative to a redundant artistic culture.

Waugh's objection to modernism was that the introversion and subjectivism of its modes of perception failed to provide the divine context necessary to give meaning to individual existence. Consequently, modernism created an aesthetic without any logical structure, excommunicated from the creative achievements and, more importantly,

⁶ Evelyn Waugh, *Robbery Under Law: the Mexican Object Lesson* (Pleasantville: The Akadine Press, 1999) p.27.

⁷ See George McCartney, *Confused Roaring: Evelyn Waugh and the Modernist Tradition*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) p. 52.

⁸ Evelyn Waugh, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962) p. 14.

⁹ Christopher Hitchens, 'The Permanent Adolescent', *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 2003.

from the standards of Christian civilisation. The modern artistic position gave primacy to intuition: this was the theory of "artistic emotion". Yet, for Waugh, this excessive relativism meant that modern creativity defied critical evaluation which rendered it susceptible to the mundane orthodoxies of the market.

For Waugh, the most important reason for the atrophy of creativity in the twentieth century was the dislocation of human experience from its divine essence, the source of individuality, although there were other interrelated reasons as well: altered patterns of patronage, the specious designation of the twentieth century as the "age of the common man", the abstraction of art, an acceptance of the ersatz. In this sense, Waugh's aesthetic sensibility was in fact conditioned by modernity. He recognised the modern condition and the need to engage with it. He rejected the romantic attitude that modern life could be escaped in what Sir Stephen Spender referred to as the dream of a "beautiful, unworldly 'ancient'".¹⁰

II

When Waugh's biography of Rossetti appeared in 1928, the luminaries of Bloomsbury had consigned Victorian art in general, and the Pre-Raphaelites in particular, to historical oblivion and Rossetti had "faded out of notice."¹¹ Virginia Woolf had identified the marked methodological differences between Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and H.G. Wells - the three writers Woolf referred to as the "the most prominent and successful writers in the year 1910" - and the "young writers" of the 1920s, in particular, James Joyce.¹² Ortega y Gasset had contended for the primacy of the medium of an artwork over its content, even if at the expense of accessibility. Arnold Schoenberg and his students had emancipated dissonance, abandoning two centuries of rules and practices of harmony. It was notable in itself that Waugh had selected the Pre-Raphaelites as the subject for his first trade book. At the time, Roy Campbell assumed that Waugh's objective in writing *Rossetti* was to raise a "fallen Victorian idol" from his degradation. Sir John Squire was pleased that Waugh, as the

¹⁰ Sir Stephen Spender, *The Struggle of the Modern* (London: Methuen, 1963) pp. 159ff.

¹¹ Sir John Squire, review in the *Observer*, 28 April 1928, in Martin Stannard (ed.), *Evelyn Waugh: the Critical Heritage* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) p.66-9 and John Bryson, Introduction to Evelyn Waugh, *Rossetti: His Life and Works* (London: Redwood Burns Limited, 1975) p. vii.

¹² Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction' and 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' in *Collected Essays* (2 vols), (The Hogarth Press: London, 1966) p. 103 (v.2) and p. 326 (v.1).

author of *Rossetti*, was not one of the “idiots who [drew] attention to themselves by sneering at anything which their fathers admired.”¹³

In *Rossetti*, Waugh approached the subject of Victorian art from within a well-conceived theoretical framework. His guiding principle was the exposure of what he saw as the “modern critical attitude” that the “real artist fundamentally is someone interested in the form underlying the appearance of things”.¹⁴ In Clive Bell’s words, the modern method of thought agreed “that any form in which an artist can express himself is legitimate”: it had “ceased to ask, ‘What does this picture represent?’ and ask[ed] instead, ‘What does it make us feel?’”.¹⁵ For Waugh, this theory of “significant form” or “aesthetic emotion” devalued the conventions of art criticism and art itself: “[i]t seems to me that modern criticism has failed in this: that it has taken an already existing word, ‘art,’ and has fastened it upon a newly discovered ‘necessary relation of forms in space’”. The modern position discerned artistic qualities in “stark purity” in primitive art and art produced intuitively without regard to academic training. In Waugh’s view, however, this spoke of its shortcoming: “[t]hat the primitive negro sculpture satisfies the æsthetic emotion ought to make the healthy Western critic doubt the formula rather than acclaim the barbarian”.¹⁶

Waugh contended for the importance of civilisation and its standards to the artistic process. Generally, this was a position that presupposed a fundamentally European, specifically Christian, construction of civilisation. According to T.S. Eliot, creativity flourished only in the “mind of Europe” which did not “superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsman”.¹⁷ Similarly, Waugh claimed to be moved by “something like the Crusader’s zeal for cross against crescent” on reflecting that the “skilful, spiritless bits of merchandise” from the period of Arab supremacy in Egypt “were contemporary with the Christian masterpieces in the Musée Cluny”.¹⁸ This was a perspective that gave primacy to cultural traditions and that was impatient with the dogma of novelty. Following an exhibition of Picasso and Matisse at the Victoria and Albert Museum in December 1945, Waugh

¹³ Roy Campbell, review in *Nation and Athenaeum*, 19 May 1928, in Martin Stannard (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.72; Sir John Squire, ‘op. cit.’, p. 66.

¹⁴ *Rossetti*, pp. 222-3.

¹⁵ Cited in Richard Cork, ‘The Visual Arts’ in Boris Ford (ed.), *The Cambridge Cultural History: Early 20th Century Britain*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p. 160.

¹⁶ *Rossetti*, p. 223; see Douglas Patey, *The Life of Evelyn Waugh* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) pp. 22-3.

¹⁷ See T.S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ and ‘Religion and Literature’ in *Selected Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953) pp. 25 and 43.

¹⁸ Evelyn Waugh, *Labels* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985) p. 90. Although this was not always the case – Waugh thought the Tutankhamen discoveries on display in Cairo “real works of art – of exquisite grace” and “just as fine as anything which ha[d] survived of Athenian Art”: letter to Harold Acton, 1 April 1929 in Mark Amory (ed.), *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) p. 33.

wrote to *The Times* suggesting that the creations of those artists reflected mankind's disillusion when it realised that it was incapable of the great feats of "the civilized masters" such as Titian and Velasquez; yet rather than "patiently relearning the forgotten lessons" in order to alleviate its disappointment, "it turn[ed] meanly towards 'something new'."¹⁹ He was dismissive of the notion of the *avant-garde* as an end itself and wrote of Cocteau as "an unhappy man in Paris whose life [was] occupied in trying to be modern." There were also people in Bloomsbury with the same idea although "these poor Britons" had never caught up.²⁰

In Martin Stannard's view, Waugh regarded artistic endeavour as a matter of craftsmanship: "[w]riter, painter, printer, carpenter – the objects of all their labours was to produce useful, pleasurable, well-wrought objects."²¹ This was a point appreciated by Hillaire Belloc who wrote to Waugh after the publication of *A Handful of Dust* praising the construction of that novel - "[c]very word is right and in its right place: so that the effect is a maximum for the material employed".²² It was also the outlook that confirmed Waugh's enduring esteem for P.G. Wodehouse, a writer who, according to Waugh, stood "high in the historic succession of the master-craftsmen of his trade". For Waugh, the exactness and simplicity of his prose rendered Wodehouse inimitable.²³ The experimental and idiosyncratic methodology employed by James Joyce and Gertrude Stein on the other hand, produced art that offended Waugh's guiding aesthetic principles that there was such a thing as good art and that, before anything else, it demonstrated the deliberate application of skilful and sensible design. In 1964, in a B.B.C. television interview with Jane Howard, he argued that there had been a "sinister influence" at work in the inter-war period to reduce prose style to "gibberish", that Gertrude Stein and James Joyce wrote "gibberish" and that reading *Ulysses*, one could watch Joyce "going mad sentence by sentence".²⁴ Waugh considered Stein's writing, in particular, incomprehensible according to any meaningful standard: she was "outside the world-order in which words have a precise and

¹⁹ Letter to the editor of *The Times*, 18 December 1945 in Mark Amory (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 214.

²⁰ Evelyn Waugh, 'Let Us Return to the Nineties but not to Oscar Wilde' in Donat Gallagher (ed.), *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh* (London: Methuen, 1983) p. 123.

²¹ Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: the Early Years, 1903-1939* (London: J.M. Dent, 1986) p. 223.

²² Cited in Simon Leys, 'Terror of Babel' in *The Angel and the Octopus*, (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1999) p. 179. More recently, Simon Winchester has described Waugh as the master of the exact use of words: Simon Winchester, 'The World Beneath our Feet', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 29 August 2001.

²³ Evelyn Waugh, 'The Angelic Doctor: the Work of Mr P.G. Wodehouse' in Donat Gallagher (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.252. Waugh admired David Jones's *In Parenthesis* for the same reason: "[Jones] must be read with the attention of a surgeon, but there is not a sentence which on precise analysis lacks a precise meaning". Evelyn Waugh, 'A Mystic in the Trenches' in Donat Gallagher (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 196.

²⁴ Interview with Jane Howard on *Monitor*, 1964.

ascertainable meaning”.²⁵ Picasso, however, exemplified what Waugh considered the “fallacy of modern art” and the depreciation of aesthetic standards to the point to which it was impossible to discuss aesthetics within any sensible frame of reference: “[i]f one had learned the jargon there was quite a lot one could say about the painting of ten years ago – ‘recession’, ‘planes’, ‘significance’, etc.; but before a painting by M. Picasso in his latest manner, the most glib tongue is compelled to silence.”²⁶

A more fundamental objection for Waugh to the “exorbitant” subjectivism of modernism was the consequence of its introspection. In valorising subjective consciousness, the moderns sought internal, psychological, rather than external, environmental, explanations for human behaviour and relationships. Virginia Woolf considered that the point of departure for the moderns from the Victorians lay “in the very dark places of psychology”.²⁷ The influential T.E. Hulme argued that modern poetry dealt with “the expression and communication of momentary phases in the poet’s mind”.²⁸ For Waugh, however, the modernists’ search for material and inspiration in the individual’s psychological state produced art that was obscure, esoteric and uncommunicative. Waugh saw a tendency amongst too many modern poets - and here he was referring specifically to T.S. Eliot’s followers - to employ language intelligible only to themselves and to “relate experiences one to another inside themselves”.²⁹ This irritation with the self-indulgence of a particular artistic idiom is seen in Waugh’s generally dismissive attitude towards Bloomsbury and his contempt for the group of left-wing artists, the Auden-Isherwood circle, satirised in *Put Out More Flags* as a coterie of self-referential partisans unaware of their irrelevance.

Waugh’s dissatisfaction with the modernist preoccupation with emotional and intuitive bases for experience also reflected the importance of the religious outlook he brought to bear on his aesthetic ideals. The attempts by novelists since and including Joyce to represent the whole human mind and soul, although not necessarily misguided to the extent that they were concerned with exposing the duo-dimensionality of the Victorian imagination, were certainly misconceived in their failure to place the individual in a context that gave the individual some meaning. This was a common response to modernist introversion. For a critic such as Georg

²⁵ Letter to Robin Campbell, 27 December 1945 in Mark Amory (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 214.

²⁶ ‘Let Us Return to the Nineties but not to Oscar Wilde’, p. 123.

²⁷ ‘Modern Fiction’, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

²⁸ T.E. Hulme, ‘A Lecture on Modern Poetry’ in Patrick McGuinness (ed.), *Selected Writings*, (Manchester: Fyfield, 1998) p. 63.

²⁹ ‘A Mystic in the Trenches’, p. 196.

Lukács, the individual “in the work of leading modernist writers is by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings ... Man, thus conceived, is an ahistorical being”.³⁰ Inevitably, having regard to his religiosity, the context said by Waugh to have been omitted by modern writers was not social or historical but divine: “that of being God’s creature with a defined purpose”. For Waugh the attempt to represent the individual more fully in art meant “only one thing, man in his relation to God”.³¹

David Lodge in fact numbers Waugh amongst the “first postmodern generation of English novelists” in the sense that his novels reflected a retreat from attempts to “represent the modern consciousness as faithfully as possible”.³² However, the moderns’ purpose in portraying experience by articulating individual consciousness was not inconsistent with aspects of Waugh’s own artistic objectives, in particular, to disengage art and literature from the mindset according to which human nature was shaped by social and economic factors. Woolf considered Bennett’s prose characteristic of the empirical technique in its painstaking reproduction of material conditions - “Mr Bennett ... is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has built a house, there must be a person living there” – and which, despite Bennett’s sympathy and humanity, actually overlooked essential human qualities: “Mr Bennett has never once looked at Mrs Brown in her corner ... Mrs Brown is human nature.” Woolf went to lengths to distinguish her cultural milieu from the Victorians and Edwardians: “... those tools are not our tools and that business is not our business”.³³

Similarly, for Waugh, art that subjugated human character to its material environment was cognate to the humanist disciplines that thought of individuals in terms of “types” or else held a starkly positivist conception of the conduct of human relations. These analyses offended Waugh’s religiously guided belief in the individuality of the human soul and the agency of individual free will. According to Waugh, novelists had no business with types which were “the property of economists and politicians and the other professional bores” of the period.³⁴ In 1929, he in fact argued that Ronald Firbank was the first quite modern writer to solve the aesthetic

³⁰ George Lukács, *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 19-20.

³¹ Evelyn Waugh, ‘Fan Fare’ in Donat Gallagher (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 302. See also Douglas Patey, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

³² David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002) p. 64.

³³ ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

³⁴ ‘Fan-Fare’, p. 302.

problem of representation in fiction and suggested that the modern method had emancipated art from its positivist constraints:

Nineteenth-century novelists achieved a balance [between subject and form] only by complete submission to the idea of a succession of events in an arbitrarily limited period of time. Just as in painting until the last generation, the aesthetically significant material of the artist had always to be occasioned by anecdote and representation, so the novelist was fettered by the chain of cause and effect. Almost all of the important novels of this century have been experiments in making an art form out of this raw material of narration.³⁵

According to Waugh, the Victorian imagination was beset with an ultimately counter-productive preference for the scientific over the religious: the fettering “chain of cause and effect” identified by Waugh in nineteenth century art and literature and which Firbank broke. To the extent that Waugh regarded Roman Catholicism as a complete frame of reference, it is natural that he drew an intellectual association between the empiricism of the Victorian mind and the English Protestant attitude. As Richard Wasson has pointed out, this had important consequences for Waugh’s aesthetic critique. Having seceded from the vital traditions of Catholicism, “the great open alters of Catholic Europe”, English Protestantism was at once a cause and a function of the Victorian outlook: a cause in its faithless inability to resist scientific agnosticism; a function in its having become a vapid ritual in a misfired recreation of English tradition. Waugh saw the inevitable outcome of Protestant attempts to recreate English traditions divorced from essential and substantial Catholic traditions as the travesty of the picturesque which shaped the Victorian imagination and from which even Rossetti was not immune: “[m]oss, ivy and Gothic imitations can make the English tradition seem venerable but they are only decorative paint on the picturesque mask.”³⁶ The Anglican service in *A Handful of Dust*, for example, caters to a deeply romantic, “madly feudal” sensibility although it has no relevance to the congregation. Its function is largely ornamental and one imagines that the Protestantism preached is incapable of delivering any real spiritual solace to its adherents. This is the case with Tony Last, the protagonist in that novel, who has never really thought about whether he believes in God and attends Church

³⁵ Evelyn Waugh, ‘Ronald Firbank’ in D. Gallagher (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 57.

³⁶ Richard Wasson, ‘*A Handful of Dust*: Critique of Victorianism’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 7 Winter, 1961.

on Sunday out of a paternalistic sense of social obligation to the parishioners, a notably Victorian attitude. In this sense, the worldview that sustained English Protestantism was also the worldview that sustained the proliferation of “picturesque bits” and “quaintness” that Waugh detested such as:

the preservation of ancient monuments, and the transplantation of Tudor cottages, and the collection of pewter and old oak, and the reformed public house, and the Ye Olde Inne and the Kynde Dragone and Ye Cheshire Cheese, Broadway, Stratford-on-Avon, folk-dancing, Nativity plays, reformed dress, free love in a cottage, glee singing, the Lyric, the Hammersmith, Belloc, Wesscx-worship, village signs, local customs, heraldry, madrigals, wassail, regional cookery, Devonshire teas, letters to *The Times* about saving timbered alms-houses from destruction, the preservation of the Welsh language etc.³⁷

In Waugh’s view, these phenomena were picturesque in that they were a sentimental substitution for the authentically traditional. This is the ideology, for example, behind Waugh’s distaste for Sir John Squire and Squire’s campaign for the preservation of historic buildings. Squire, a reviewer and critic for *The Observer* and *The London Mercury* throughout the 1920s, cultivated the image of a beer-drinking, cricket-playing *littérateur*. He is satirised in *Decline and Fall* as Mr Jack Spire whose tastes for timbered Tudor architecture are obtusely bourgeois and awful when compared with those of the fashionable and aristocratic Margot Beste-Chetwynde.³⁸ The critique of Victorian middle-class sentimentality is the dynamic for Waugh’s development of an aesthetic that was fundamentally modern in its censure of what Wyndham Lewis regarded as the “great, unimaginative, cold, unphilosophic, unmusical” English culture.³⁹ Clearly, Waugh approved of cultural innovation as a will to discredit a redundant, artless predecessor; indeed, this was an important artistic tradition in itself.

During a visit to Spain in 1928, for example, Waugh became fascinated with the Neo-Catalan architecture of Antonio Gaudi. In *Labels* he explained that he was attracted initially by the roofs of Gaudi’s buildings

³⁷ *Labels*, p. 46.

³⁸ Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951) pp. 118-9. See also Martin Stannard (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.66n and Mark Amory (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 165n.

³⁹ Cited in Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) p. 141.

which were “like a rough sea petrified” and their chimneys “twisted and bent in all directions like very gnarled fruit-trees”.⁴⁰ Yet the organicism of Gaudi’s designs is intensely capricious and, on its face, embodies the concept of “aesthetic emotion” that Waugh had sought to dismantle in *Rossetti*. Waugh himself saw Gaudi’s designs as examples of the potential excellence of art-for-art’s-sake “untempered by considerations of tradition or good taste”; on one view, his appreciation of them rests uneasily with his antagonism towards art that was intuitive and transient. George McCartney has attempted to resolve perceived inconsistencies by reasoning that Waugh’s enthusiasm for Gaudi was ambiguous:

Standards may have been neglected, but, intentionally or not, Gaudi’s amazing rule-breaking inventiveness did injustice to a thoroughly indecorous age. With whatever mixture of irony, Waugh admired Gaudi’s genius even as he deplored the vision it served.⁴¹

It is clear, however, that it was the stridently unsentimental individualism of Gaudi’s modernistic vision that led Waugh to describe Gaudi’s architecture quite unequivocally as the “glory and delight of Barcelona”. For Waugh, the vitality of Gaudi’s Art Nouveau style was a consequence of it not having been subverted by decadence and archaism as was the case with Art Nouveau in England and France. Reflecting on the likely evolution of Art Nouveau from the decorative motif of the root of the water-lily, Waugh lamented that for English taste “the peacock’s feather and the green carnation outshone the tulip and the water-lily root”, a development which ultimately led to other pastiches: the brief flirtation with Holland when painters “put tiles around their hearths and pot-bellied jugs of burnished copper in their windows” and the decorative fancy for “timber and thatch and black old oak.” In Waugh’s mind, the outstanding quality of Gaudi’s art was its integrity. Even though it was unconstrained by considerations of tradition and taste, it maintained the purity of an artistic ideal: it “apotheosised all the writhing, bubbling, convoluting, convulsing soul of the Art Nouveau”. The guiding vision assumed a structural centrality that ensured that Gaudi’s architecture was not frivolous, superficial or *chic*. Voguish attempts to incorporate elements of the Neo-Catalan style into the architecture of English beach-houses, for

⁴⁰ *Labels*, p. 145.

⁴¹ George McCartney, *op. cit.*, p.55. Similarly, David Lodge regards Waugh’s appreciation of Gaudi as “deliciously ambivalent”: David Lodge, *Evelyn Waugh* (New York: Columbia University Press) 1971, p.9.

example, bore the same relationship to Gaudi's creations as the "rococo decorators of the Pompadour's boudoir" to the masters of Italian baroque.⁴²

There is a tendency to see Waugh as "a reluctant modernist"⁴³ and his relationship with modernism as generally an exploitative one in which he drew on his knowledge of the avant-garde and deployed its techniques in the service of his own classical aesthetic agenda. According to Brooke Allen, Waugh "usurp[ed] individual motifs and techniques and then superimpose[d] them onto his structure – often, of course, with the purpose of mocking or criticizing some aspect of modern life, or indeed the modern school itself."⁴⁴ However, the predominant concern disclosed in Waugh's writing is the debased state of English culture and society after the Great War and rather than adopt a romantic critical perspective and construct a prosaically nostalgic literary idyll – as did, for example, the Georgian poets between 1910 and 1922 – Waugh explored the issues relevant to his concern by placing modern culture and society in their setting and describing them in their terms. He was preoccupied with the modern condition and this preoccupation – particularly when the modern is juxtaposed with the Victorian and Edwardian as in *Vile Bodies*, the primitive as in *Black Mischief*, or the pastoral as in *Scoop* – is an important dynamic of Waugh's style. In this fundamental sense, in employing modernist techniques as he did, Waugh intended that they would be structural elements of his literature. Indeed, for Peter Conrad, modernism is so structurally relevant to *Vile Bodies* that the bright young things with whom that novel is concerned actually "live and die futuristically".⁴⁵ Having accidentally taken control of a racing car, the enduring symbol of Futurist dynamism, Agatha Runcible submits to what Marinetti glorified as "the love of danger, the custom of energy, the strength of daring",⁴⁶ experiencing what the Futurists called a 'dynamic sensation'. She collides and then descends into a surrealist montage of modern, mechanised kinesis:

Indeed, Miss Runcible was already showing signs of strain. She was sitting bolt upright in bed, smiling deliriously, and bowing her bandaged head to imaginary visitors.

⁴² *Labels*, p. 143-4.

⁴³ Christopher Ames, *The Life of the Party: Festive Vision in Modern Literature*, (Athens: the University of Georgia Press) 1991, p. 179.

⁴⁴ Brooke Allen, 'Vile Bodies: A Futurist Fantasy', *Journal of Twentieth Century Literature*, Fall, 1994, v. 40, no. 3, p. 327.

⁴⁵ Peter Conrad, *Modern Times, Modern Places: Life and Art in the 20th Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999) p. 96.

⁴⁶ F.T. Marinetti, 'The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism' in Herschel Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) p.286.

'Darling,' she said. 'How *too* divine ... *how* are you? ... and how are *you*? ... how angelic of you all to come ... only you must be sure not to fall out at the corners ... ooh, just missed it. There goes that nasty Italian car ... I wish I knew which thing was which in this car ... darling do try and drive more straight, my sweet, you were nearly into me then ... Faster'

...

There was rarely more than a quarter of a mile of black road to be seen at one time. It unrolled like a length of cinema film. At the edges was confusion; a fog spinning past: '*Faster, faster,*' they shouted above the roar of the engine. The road rose suddenly and the white car soared up the sharp ascent without slackening speed. At the summit of the hill there was a corner. Two cars had crept up, one on each side, and were closing in. 'Faster', cried Miss Runcible, 'Faster.'⁴⁷

The physical products of modernity are an essential aspect of Waugh's prose, not merely in the sense that they play a part in the development of his plots (which they do, for example, when the lives of characters in *Put Out More Flags* are lived under the threat of air raids⁴⁸), but also in that they are an artful feature of his response to what Hugh Kenner has characterised as the episodic nature of modern life in a twentieth century city: "[a] city shaped by rapid transit, and later by a telephone network, delivers its experience in discrete packets."⁴⁹ In *Scoop*, one of William Boot's first encounters with the "atrocious city" and, in the context of his hitherto eccentrically pastoral existence, modernity, is the six lifts in the lobby of the Megalopolitan building which seemed to be in perpetual motion:

... with dazzling frequency their doors flew open to reveal now left, now right, now two or three at a time, like driven game, a series of girls in Caucasian uniform. 'Going up,' they cried in Punch-and Judy accents and, before anyone

⁴⁷ Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (London: Compact, 1993) pp. 189 and 197-8.

⁴⁸ According to Bernard Bergonzi, the fear of aerial bombing was, along with cinema, one of the most important products of modern technology to which English literature characteristically responded throughout the 1930s: Bernard Bergonzi, *The Myth of Modernism and Twentieth Century Literature*, (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986) pp. 125ff.

⁴⁹ See Brooke Allen, 'op. cit.', p. 321.

could enter, snapped their doors and disappeared from view.⁵⁰

Waugh claimed that *Vile Bodies* was the first English novel in which dialogue on the telephone played a large part.⁵¹ Consequently, discussions between the characters are fragmented and faceless suggesting a real qualitative diminution in human intercourse in the modern age and something disconnected about human relations. The courtship between Nina and Adam is conducted by telephone in clipped and banal phrases with the effect that the two are incapable of communicating to one another the complete depth of their pain and betrayal.⁵² When Adam casually remembers that he is engaged to Nina, he goes into a telephone box in a tube station “which smelt rather nasty” and telephones her:

“Oh, I say. Nina, there’s one other thing – I don’t think I shall be able to marry you after all.”

“Oh, *Adam*, you are a bore. Why not?”

“They burnt my book.”

“Beasts. Who did?”

“I’ll tell you about it to-night.”

“Yes, *do*. Good-bye darling.”

“Good-bye, my sweet.”⁵³

In this way, the interlocutors are deprived of essential human qualities, or at least an opportunity of expressing them, and human intercourse becomes a very superficial procedure.

Air travel had a slightly different dehumanising effect to the telephone. As Waugh realised, the aviator saw the earth abstractly, imperceivable of the deviations, eccentricities and subtleties of the landscape. Waugh described the orderliness of the countryside as it appeared from the air during a flight to Paris - the “houses and motor cars looking so small and neat ... it was all so clean and bright” – although this was an impression that yielded quickly to monotony: “[a]ll one gains from this effortless ascent is a large scale map”.⁵⁴ As cartography cannot possibly convey the peculiarities of the individuals that inhabit the land described, so air travel rendered men and women “indiscernible except as tiny spots”. Moreover, in their anonymity, the lives of the people on the ground when seen from

⁵⁰ Evelyn Waugh, *Scoop* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1943) pp. 24-5.

⁵¹ Preface to *Vile Bodies*, p. 7.

⁵² David Lodge, ‘Waugh’s Comic Waste Land’, in *The New York Review of Books*, 15 July 1999, p. 31.

⁵³ *Vile Bodies*, p.54.

⁵⁴ *Labels*, p. 11. See also P. Conrad, *op. cit.*, p. 93ff.

above, are devoid of any higher purpose than “marrying and shopping and making money and having children”.⁵⁵ They do not have any singularity and their aspirations are reduced to the degraded functions of modern subsistence: acquiring consumer goods and reproducing. Indeed, the aviator could almost be regarded as the ideal modernist personality in the sense that his impressions of the people below him are entirely subjective, formed without reference to any objective knowledge of them. From its subjective but disassociated perspective, the modern mind objectified the rest of humanity. From this view point, individuals were like T.S. Eliot’s living dead in *The Waste Land*:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.⁵⁶

The abstraction of reality by affecting the medium of perception is a particularly modern technique and, like Ortega y Gasset, Waugh realised that modern modes of perception were dehumanising. Ortega, of course, thought that “seeing require[d] distance”. He celebrated the modern tendency towards remoteness of perception and the stylisation of nature and, therefore, of humanity. These were processes that liberated artistic expression from the pedestrian, undistinguished realism of the nineteenth century. The socio-historical implications of Ortega’s explication were always clear: modern perception created an art of the “finer senses” distinguished from, say, Romanticism, the “first-born of democracy ... coddled by the masses”. In Ortega’s view, the representation in art of human realities diminished the strictly aesthetic elements of a work by imposing on an audience’s willingness to sympathise with human predicaments and it was this quality that made art accessible: “[n]o wonder that nineteenth century art has been so popular; it is made for the masses inasmuch as it is not art but an extract from life”. In these terms, modern art was the cultural reaction against the proletarianisation of society and against the masses’ century and a half long claim “to be the whole of society”.⁵⁷

Waugh was at one with Ortega when it came to the proposition that there was a strong sociological aspect to modern art. He also drew an association between modern art and the sociological phenomenon of the masses. However, in abstracting humanity by depicting individuals at a distance or by denying them expression of their full range of emotions, his

⁵⁵ *Vile Bodies*, p. 197.

⁵⁶ T.S. Eliot, ‘The Waste Land’ in *Selected Poems* (Faber & Faber: London, no date) p. 53.

⁵⁷ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1952) pp. 5-26.

point was that modern modes of perception were largely responsible for the unhelpful constructs of the “man in the street” and the “age of the common man”. Indeed, as a Catholic believing in the immortality of individual souls made in the image of God, his position could not have been otherwise. According to this attitude, the manifest consequence of disengaging humanity from its civilised sensibilities was to render humans demographic types, predisposed in their taste and behaviour towards uniformity and predictability. Waugh took issue, for example, with Huxley’s suggestion that the human intellect derives satisfaction from reducing “irrational multiplicity to rational and comprehensible unity”. In Waugh’s view, human thought and taste “consist[ed] in distinguishing between similars” and it was erroneous to treat individuals and their preferences generically: “[m]en and women are only types – economic, psychological, what you will – until one knows them”.⁵⁸

For one, it produced an aesthetic as creatively devalued and as prone to sentimental orthodoxies as the Victorian aesthetic that modernism had intended to displace. The industrial ideology typified for Waugh modern modes of perception, necessarily disregarding variations in individual taste and reducing the multitudinous to the standard. Altered sources of patronage after the Great War meant that artists and designers were no longer customising their product for a wealthy individual. Instead, they collaborated with industry to produce goods for an anonymous market. In 1936, Nicholas Pevsner considering the case of the modern architect wrote:

[t]he warmth and directness with which the ages of craft and a more personal relation between architect and client endowed the buildings of the past may have gone for good. The architect, to represent this century of ours, must be colder, cold to keep in command of mechanised production, cold to design for the satisfaction of anonymous clients”.⁵⁹

In the nineteenth century, the “transition from aristocracy to industrialism” had very nearly destroyed English art.⁶⁰ In Waugh’s own time, the industrial ideology had created a landscape which the civilised man found “intolerably monotonous in detail” and a world in which he travelled to find “the same firms in almost identical buildings displaying uniform mass-products to uniform mass-clothed, mass-educated customers”.⁶¹ Whereas

⁵⁸ Evelyn Waugh, ‘More Barren Leaves’ in Donat Gallagher (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 214.

⁵⁹ Cited in George Naylor, ‘Industry and Design’ in Boris Ford (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 258.

⁶⁰ Rossetti, p. 22.

⁶¹ *Robbery Under Law*, p. 89.

the Pre-Raphaelites had expressed the ungainly reality of human anatomy in their art and the input of the individual in their design, the standardised products of industrialism intentionally eliminated from their design, any eccentricities and imperfections that suggested human personality. In *Brideshead Revisited*, Waugh described the tedious artificiality of a modern interior:

... and between the walls were yards and yards of biscuit-coloured wood which no carpenter's tool had ever touched, wood that had been bent around corners, invisibly joined strip to strip, steamed and squeezed and polished; all over the blotting-paper carpet were strewn tables designed perhaps by a sanitary engineer, square blocks of stuffing, with square holes for sitting in, and upholstered, it seemed, in blotting paper also; the light of the hall was suffused from scores of hollows, giving an even glow, casting no shadows ...⁶²

By deliberately disallowing the fine distinctions of the individual personality from its scope, rather than creating Ortega's aesthetic aristocracy, modern art rendered itself susceptible to the sentimental, faddish vagaries of what has come to be described as the mass market. Waugh described Chiraco's paintings as "*Vogue covers writ large*."⁶³ In *Vile Bodies*, party invitations were adapted from *Blast* and Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto*. Picasso's *modus operandi* was the same as that of the dance band leader or the Nazi orator: to mesmerise an audience with techniques that had little to do with art, music or politics. Picasso could only be treated as crooners were treated by their devotees: "[i]n the United States the adolescents, speaking of music, do not ask: 'What do you think of So-and-so?' They say: 'Does So-and-so *send* you?'"⁶⁴ By reason of its dehumanising modes of perception, modern art became a fashionable commodity like the jazz music that so distressed Guy Crouchback but that allowed the impressionable and modish Trimmer confidently to feel up to date by "truck[ing] about with raised hands in little shuffling dance steps."⁶⁵ Waugh was concerned with a process replayed subsequently and constantly throughout the twentieth century: the appropriation of the radical and vital elements of an artistic tradition, rendering them modish to

⁶² Rossetti, p. 44; *Brideshead Revisited*, p. 225.

⁶³ Diary entry for 17 October, 1928, in Michael Davie (ed.), *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1928) p. 299.

⁶⁴ Letter to the editor of *The Times*, 18 December 1945, *op. cit.*

⁶⁵ Evelyn Waugh, *The Sword of Honour Trilogy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) p. 37.

ensure accessibility to the widest possible audience. In this sense, modern art thrived on its own immediately recognisable features and qualities, subjecting itself to sentimentalising observances. Artistically speaking, Poppet Green, the aspiring surrealist in *Put Out More Flags*, was little better than Plant Senior, the reproductionist in *Work Suspended*. In 1859, Green's subjects:

would have been knights in armour, ladies in wimples and distress; [in 1889] 'nocturnes'; [in 1919] pierrots and willow trees; now in 1939, they were bodiless heads, green horses and violet grass, seaweed, shells and fungi, neatly executed, conventionally arranged in the manner of Dali.⁶⁶

III

Most of the major themes in Evelyn Waugh's work from the inter-war period were the product of the interaction between a heightened consciousness of a peculiarly modern condition and a rejection of that condition and its assumptions. His point was that modern artists, by looking at the world from a subjective viewpoint, either turned their project in on itself and in fact failed in their attempts to portray the shades of individuality or else deliberately eradicated the eccentricities of humanity from their art.

Aesthetically speaking, however, he was not an 'archaicist', what Spender referred to as a "neo-traditionalist",⁶⁷ concerned with resuscitating a sentimental and redundant creative project. He was clearly familiar with the principles of modernist aesthetics and, despite his disdain for the exorbitant subjectivism of modernism, modernist techniques were integral to his engagement with his age. In this way, although he did not accept the values of the contemporary scene, he allowed his sensibility to be acted on by the modern experience and reflected in his art.⁶⁸ As George McCartney has commented, despite Waugh's aversion to the twentieth century and its artistic expression, "it is hard to imagine him at home in other" century.⁶⁹

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⁶⁷ Sir Stephen Spender, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ See Sir Stephen Spender, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-8.

⁶⁹ George McCartney, *op. cit.*, p. 257.