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TERRIBLY BRIGHT: CHARACTERIZING THE BODY IN WAUGH'S *VILE BODIES*

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ABSTRACT

A far cry from the “war to end all wars,” the shocks and tremors of the Great War shook the foundations of the English heritage. Generational divides—exacerbated by the divisional powers of total war—widened into gulfs, as Waugh acknowledged the emergence of three separate classes: “There is (*a*) the wistful generation who grew up and formed their opinions before the War and were too old for military service; (*b*) the stunted and mutilated generation who fought; and (*c*) the younger generation” (Waugh, “The War and the Young Generation” 61-62). This younger generation—the rabble-rousers and party-goers and gate-crashers—paraded noisily into the 1920s in a veritable triumph of modernity. From his unique “insider” position as an early Bright Young Thing, Evelyn Waugh condemned his fellow party-goers for their wanton lusts and misdirection. This lost generation became the target of his satire, lampooned as outlandish characters in the heat of moral decay.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
Chapter 1 BODIES AT WAR: An Introduction	1
Chapter 2 A CONCURRENCE OF CHURCH AND STATE: The Religious and Governmental Body	11
Religion of the Great War	11
God's Ape	18
The Wily Jesuit	26
Chapter 3 ONE'S FIRST PARTY: The Narcissistic-Blindness of the Body and the Younger Generation	38
Very Drunk-Making	39
Too Shaming: Agatha and the Bright Young Woman	45
Chapter 4 Too Awful: Adam and the Bright Young Man, A Conclusion	63
BIBLIOGRAPHY	74

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Onlookers at the "Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red" Installation at the Tower of London, November 2014.3

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Chapter 1

BODIES AT WAR: An Introduction

Euston Square. King's Cross. Farringdon.

The Circle line creeps closer and closer, yet with each stop, only a few passengers solemnly clamber aboard, and the majority remain empty-handed. A snake in London's transportation underbelly, the train winds its way closer and closer to City.

Barbican. Moorgate. Liverpool Street.

Standing on the platforms—across from the walls of crumbling dark bricks—clusters of black overcoats begin to form, briefcases resting at their side, handbags on their shoulders, four bright red petals arranged and fastened to their lapels: they stand together, but no one speaks. Apart, but together—that seems to be the theme. I look down at the time on my phone, wondering if they should be leaving work this early.

Aldgate.

A few passengers exit, yet the rows of poppy pins, quiet and reflective, remain.

Tower Hill.

Exiting the blackened tunnel of the Tube, climbing higher and higher to the surface, no one seems in a rush to leave. They wait patiently, standing single file on the escalators, pressing their Oyster cards down at the barrier and walking through the open gates with unparalleled calm. I hadn't looked up directions to where was I going, nor was it really necessary: my feet follow the march. Stepping out from their tall glass buildings, walking underneath the overcast skies and cement archways, the Londoners descend on Tower Hill: businessman, pensioner,

student and tourist alike step over the pristinely green grass of Trinity Square Gardens and cut across the street, joining the impromptu procession.

Until there they are, spilling out of the window of Legge's Mount, fanning across the Kentish rag-stones and spreading out before in a vastly crimson plane—the deepest, brightest color in the sepulchral city: 888,245 ceramic poppies. The last is to be planted tomorrow, Armistice Day, by a 13-year-old cadet—888,246 deaths and one hundred years after the war.

Whether it is from behind the miniscule lens of an iPhone camera or a Nikon DSLR, the depth and range of emotion in passers-by cannot quite be captured. Children giggle, their hands held loosely by their parents, their minds untethered and wandering; students and parents smile, posing for pictures against the railing, planning to upload them later to their social media sites with hashtags for their great-grandfather or grandfather who fought; yet the older generation looks on, silent and funereal and proud, their heads bowed in prayer and their feet rooted to the spot.

There is a strange unity to the procession: an atmospheric calm hangs overhead, and even the happiest faces falter momentarily. In this image of a unified nation, is hard to believe that just days before I had passed “Be Brave Scotland: Vote YES” chalked into a wall below Edinburgh Castle—remnants of the referendum. There is, instead, the overwhelming question rising above the crowd: after all these years, have we forgotten the bloodshed of the Great War?

Perhaps the question we should be asking—and indeed, what Evelyn Waugh asked by writing *Vile Bodies*—how *could* we forget?

When the image of global carnage still burned freshly in their minds, how could London of the 1920s forget the hellish decade just before? Were their drunken revelries, their parties and

their costumes all in spite of the war generation? Or were these attempts of tortured minds to heal and forget?



Figure 1. Onlookers at the "Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red" Installation at the Tower of London, November 2014.

At first glance, it would seem Evelyn Waugh is of the former camp, especially as *Vile Bodies*—his second novel, written hastily and published in 1930—latches onto the popular subject of newspapers and gossip columns at the time in lurid detail: the *terribly* bright, Bright Young People. One of its more central characters, Adam Fenwick-Symes, displays the same sort of deferential nonchalance towards the war, and Waugh spends only two lines observing November 11th as though it were any other day—without preamble and without internal reflection:

Then he went to Marylebone. It was Armistice Day, and they were selling artificial poppies in the streets. As he reached the station it struck eleven and for

two minutes all over the country everyone was quiet and serious. (Waugh, *Vile Bodies* 65-66)

This moment of stillness passes almost unnoticed, ready to be forgotten by the time of the next booze-filled debauchery—yet it is evident that the narrator has *not* forgotten. The moment Adam reaches London, he is surrounded in the train station by “office workers hurrying with attaché-cases and evening papers”: even in the midst of rush hour, the Londoners hadn’t forgotten, as “they still wore their poppies” (*VB* 77).

Indeed, just as Adam is visually reminded of the war, the reader is prodded again and again with casual references to the horrors of constant bombing in the middle of dinner conversation,¹ and older men—with slightly addled memories—clinging to their war titles. In the latter instance, we find Colonel Blount—Nina, Adam fiancée’s father, with a peculiarly dull memory and blunt address—answering the door in an inversion of the societal rankings of an English country home:

‘You must forgive me for opening the door to you myself. My butler is in bed to-day. He suffers terribly in his feet when it is wet. Both my footmen were killed in the war.’² (*VB* 69)

¹ Though ex-regent of a fictional land, the King of Ruritania channels a strangely desensitized image of war: “All my family they have bombs thrown at them, but the Queen, never. My poor Uncle Joseph he blow all to bits one night at the opera, and my sister she find three bombs in her bed. But my wife, never” (*VB* 39). His Queen serves as the paragon of the Bright Young People: despite never having a bomb thrown at her (just like the younger generation in their country homes and colleges were too far removed to feel the duress of war), at the mere mention of the French cook’s “bomb”—most likely a *bombe glacée*, a traditional French dessert—her “poor brains has was all nohow”, shell-shocked and driven mad without even glimpsing the battlefield (*VB* 39).

² This quote is a direct copy of a line from an earlier short story, entitled “A House of Gentlefolks,” in which the Duke of Vanburgh answers the door with the same apology: “I hope you will forgive my opening the door myself. The butler is in bed to-day – he suffers terribly in his back during the winter, and both my footmen have been killed in the war” (40). The short

The Great War is thus paired with the systematic decline of Britain's land-owning gentry, as the upstairs family switches roles with the downstairs caretakers, and the centuries-old walls begin to crack and crumble around them.

It is consequently apparent that World War I lies in the underbelly of London as the shadow under the feet of this new generation of Bright Young People. In this context—and in his other works similar to *Vile Bodies*—Waugh “ridicules those of his characters who try to go on living as though the Great War had never happened, as though the achievement of true happiness were only a matter of perpetuating the attitudes and values of the previous age” (McCartney 4). Martin Green's ‘dandies’³ have no place in Waugh's London.

Yet it would be a mistake to treat *Vile Bodies* as a simple satire on the Younger Set.

We must realize that as much as Waugh can be placed as an entertainer of the Bright Young People—a friend and fellow party-goer—this generation is one in conflict with itself. They are not avant-garde: rather like Miss Runcible, they have been placed in a car alongside the revving engines of the Dadaists and the Futurists, all prepared to race around a track outlined by the older generation.⁴ They are not general disparagers of England as a nation, but rather what it

story, told in the first person, conveys Waugh's own disturbance in just a few simple phrases, echoing his distaste for those who found it in themselves to forget the war's atrocities: “*Have been killed* – the words haunted me incessantly throughout the next few hours and for days to come. That desolating perfect tense, after ten years at least, probably more...” (“A House of Gentlefolks” 40).

³ We reference here the generational divide which Martin Green fabricated to explicate the competing mindsets of artistic groups. Apart from the ‘rogues’ and ‘naifs’, the ‘dandies’ of course are the nineteenth century writers and artists. Yet, while the Bright Young People and Waugh sympathized with the easy frivolity of London's artists, Waugh clearly does not support *all* associated with England's decadence—that is, if his article entitled “Let Us Return to the Nineties but Not to Oscar Wilde” is to be taken literally.

⁴ Here we reference in particular the motor race in Chapter 10, in which Waugh places several caricatures of international avant-garde movements: Marino, the “Italian devil” who throws spanners across the track, stands in for Filippo Tommaso Marinetti; the large German with a bust tire runs off the road and up a tree in a likely reincarnation of Dadaist nonsense; and the

had become: they promote “images that would be frankly hostile to ‘England’; they looked for decadence and for the flag of rebellion against the fathers” (Green 46). Even their supposed “brightness” is not their own—the “whole Glorious Youth legend was invented by the elderly and middle-aged” (Waugh, “Why Glorify Youth?” 126). Consequently, as much as *Vile Bodies* knowingly misrepresents the Bright Young People, it also concerns itself *with* their misrepresentation.

If modernism is, as David Reynolds surmises, “‘a crisis of representation’ . . . about both what could be represented and how it should be represented” (158) then I would like to propose a series of frameworks through which we must begin to view *Vile Bodies*. The first is the arc of the satire.

There is, indeed, a history of referring to Waugh’s literature as ‘satire’: for the sake of simplicity and coherency, I will continue to characterize *Vile Bodies* as such throughout. However, we must keep in mind that one of the defining guidelines of satire is its moral code: as Griffin paraphrases, conventional satiric theory mandates clear divisions to be placed in separation of right from wrong. Yet, in *Vile Bodies*, there is no clear-cut moral division that we can assign to characters without formulating a back-story to rationalize their behaviour: as we shall see in Chapter 2, even figures of religion and government are drawn crookedly. According to Lisa Colletta, there is reason to label *Vile Bodies* as a ‘Modernist social satire’, as the classification “disallow[s] easy identification with protagonists and [does] not ridicule cultural values or societal vice” (Colletta 5)—the latter of aspect of which, if absent, would castigate

Americans whose cars “had failed to start” are veritable representations of their country’s two infamous instances of tardiness—the war and the art world (*VB* 169).

Waugh as a hypocrite and incidentally remove any credibility of his satirical lancing. In the absence of singular target, the work would seem to serve a more light-hearted purpose:

As scholars of traditional high Modernism have observed, the grotesque and the absurd become the ‘moral’ standards. One of the implications of this shift of standards is a need to distinguish traditional ideas about satire from ideas about dark humor and a need to expand our repertoire of terms and gain critical tools for more subtle analyses of Modernism, whether serious or comic. Without faith in meaningful moral development, comedy no longer serves a corrective satirical function but instead offers the pleasurable—if only momentary—protection of laughter in the face of injustice and brutality. (Colletta 5)

There is reason as well to classify Waugh’s work as ‘dark humour’ in that it “tends towards the dystopian and presents a grim and even hopeless picture of the historical moment between the wars” (Colletta 6). Although the umbrella term of ‘dark humour’ offers within it the employment of “a deeply ambivalent humor” as “just what is being satirized is never entirely clear,” the classification is still a relatively broad label for *Vile Bodies*—and indeed, for many of Waugh’s early ‘satires’ as well (Colletta 2). Despite the element of inherent pessimism, ‘dark humor’ is an ill-fit label that fails to encompass the sheer sense of hopelessness present in Waugh’s writing.

Consequently, I would like to treat *Vile Bodies* as a ‘depression-comic’⁵ in that it falls within this

⁵ In the experimental spirit of Waugh’s work, I have created this term specifically to suit my analysis, in order to identify a sub-level of satire that relies heavily on elements of dark humor and irony to convey its narrative, but is ultimately overwhelmed by a despondent and despairing tone informed by pressures at once both dystopian and comic. Simultaneously as well, the term ‘depression’ refers to the mentality depicted in his letters, while ‘comic’ can also encompass Waugh’s early at sparsely detailed, thin-lined illustration. Thus, the ‘depression-comic’ should life so comically dismally that the only thing left is to do is laugh.

range of social satire, modernism, and dark humour, but contains an overwhelmingly disturbed tone that prevents any finalization of a moral interpretation.

Secondly, in light of the ‘experimental nature’⁶ of its composition—and particularly with Waugh’s fondness for Max Beerbohm’s exhibitions as well as his own art in mind—we can treat *Vile Bodies* as the literal transcription of a series of cartoons. Within Waugh’s early writing, there is a cast of characters who appear frequently, yet no hero to lead them. There is divorce, tragedy, and death—yet these characters and their stories are merely fictive and never *intend* to cross the border into reality. In a certain respect, it is true that these characters are, as critics have suggested, ‘contemptuously’ flat:

As a result, the characters, even Adam, are as Bergonzi has described them, ‘puppets, caricatures, pasteboard figures, rather than fully rounded characters.’⁴⁸

Vile Bodies is more essayistic than novelistic; Adam, more exemplificative than real. (Cook 92)

However, there is distinct purpose to their cardboard weight: while Cook complains that no moralistic reading can be ascertained without characters’ dynamism, we might emphasize that

⁶ There is a tendency by a vast majority of critics to label *Vile Bodies* as the highly experimental work it was, *without* proper consideration of its experimental nature, highlighting that while the work “offers as does no other early novel insights into his artistic development” (Cook 82), the aim of the satirist is inconclusive. Though the “technique of the narrative-persona and character-persona relationship... is recognized as ‘experimental’” (Cook 82), the critics claim that the moralistic edge of the satirist’s lance is decidedly blunt. However, where the majority of critics find Waugh’s narrator as in “lack of implicit interest in Adam [that] robs the satire of *Vile Bodies* of any human sting and denies it the status of serious art,” (Cook 99) I would remind the reader that this is no such take. Through the avant-gardes, “serious art” has already been contested and vilified. Through the Bright Young People as well, the *treatment* of “serious art” has been impugned: one only needs to consider their various art hoaxes to understand their deferential treatment. Thus we will regard *Vile Bodies* as both ‘experimental’ *and* ‘serious art’—unlike our critics who tend towards one lens—but not condemn the work to aimless trajectories: rather we will treat *Vile Bodies* as a work which attempts to do much more than it is ever given credit for, and give due analysis of Waugh’s concoction.

rather than characters, these Waugh's figures are *caricatures*—exaggerated and lampooned for humorous spectacle rather than didacticism. This emphasis on fiction perhaps provides the reason as to the selection from *Through the Looking-Glass* as preface to Chapter One: just as Alice wouldn't be able to cry if she were not 'real,' the characters of *Vile Bodies* "are not crying 'real tears'" (Davis 142). We might, perhaps, consider Waugh's review of Edward Van Every's 1930 *Sins of New York*—purposefully titled "Vile Bodies"—as applicable to his own work, in its espousing of:

Lurid pictures of low life, representing the dangers of opium, alcohol and harlots; pictures of women fighting or getting drunk (both these subjects occur with a frequency that must imply a pathological appeal); portraits of American criminals and beauties. Perhaps my favourite is an illustration of one of the 'whimsical freaks and fancies indulged in by the giddy girls of Gotham'; it represents a 'society belle' in oriental costume, reclining on a divan and surrounded by oriental *objets d'art* of frightful ugliness; kneeling and kissing her bare foot is an elderly American gentleman in frock coat and pince-nez; his top hat and cane lie on the tiger-skin run. (101)

It is in his note concerning the "recent re-emergence of the drawing-room album" in which we can consider the structure of his own work, *Vile Bodies* ("Vile Bodies: Review" 100).

In this clarification of *Vile Bodies* as simultaneously 'depression-comic' and a written re-configuration of cartoons into a 'drawing-room album', we might come full circle in determining the best springboard from which to leap into literary analysis. Before we can explicate the text, I would like to propose the following image as the final, organizational reminder. Of Waugh's activities, one of his most regularly attended was silent films—in particular, those of Charlie

Chaplin and Harold Lloyd. It is the latter artist—whose work is notably more daring and dangerous in the stunts he performed—that Waugh watches most frequently around the time of *Vile Bodies*' composition. In a rather notable still, Lloyd stands center frame, several guns forming a ring around his shocked face, all cocked and ready to shoot. It is in the inversion of this image that we can understand Waugh as a satirist, as a writer, and as a cartoonist: rather than the target, Waugh stands at the center and spins, and firing point blank at anything surrounding him. His criticizing lance, though sharpened, strikes several in absence of a singular target, and—rather to the hilarity of his audience—sometimes fires blanks. No one is safe: leading figures of religion, government, and the Bright Young People all stand at equal risk. Yet, in his criticisms of the popularization of sensationalist religion and its militarization, of the supposed moralist's affinity for politics, and of the young Narcissist's tendency towards suicide, Waugh delivers through a distracted—even unreliable—narration the strong feelings of misdirection of a generation caught in the interwar period. The absence of a guiding moralistic voice speaks to the period of modernity gripping the abyss, and rationalizes the placement of the apocalyptic final war in *Vile Bodies* as neither the Reckoning nor *deus ex machina*. Given the hopelessness of his caricatures, war is, quite simply, inevitable.

Chapter 2

A CONCURRENCE OF CHURCH AND STATE: The Religious and Governmental Body

It is quite a comical scene to imagine: the three statesmen—influential in high society circles—suddenly crowding behind the curtains in Lord Metroland’s study, watching and waiting for the bearded stranger-spy wandering down the passageway to reveal himself. Finally Prime Minister again, Mr Outrage⁷ appears rather new to the idea of secrecy in the first place—on his own, he admits, he “should never have thought of” keeping a door unlocked to trap a spy (*VB* 98)—despite already having entangled himself in his own web of scandal. Lord Metroland, “still smoking” (*VB* 102), puffs his cigar insouciantly, as though he could care less if they apprehend the spy or not. Father Rothschild seems the most experienced in preventing scandals from leaking, as he ushers his fellow conspirators to hide. Yet as they leap from the curtains to catch the spy, this “concurrence of Church and State” (*VB* 102) represents much more than a simple meeting of the minds: it unearths a new comedic body birthed from traditional satire.

Religion of the Great War

Shadowing the obvious darker ironies of leaders of church and state in cahoots, the violence and brutalism of the Great War challenged the average Englishman’s faith in his God and in his government. As ‘total war’ wreaked havoc across Europe, body counts piled higher in its wake. The “most infamous date of the war” for the British became July 1, 1916—the start of the Allied offensive at Somme, a campaign which resulted in 420,000 total casualties for

⁷ For coherency with the English edition of *Vile Bodies* from which I quote, the reader shall note that all honorifics will *not* be affixed with the punctuation of American-styled titles.

England alone (Reynolds, xxv). However, for all countries involved, the most fundamentally shattering aspect of war was not the number of bodies, but the devastation of close-combat carnage. The lethal combination of firearms at close range permitted “the unremitting grime, discomfort, fear and high fatality of trench warfare,” as “the artillery shell and the heavy machine gun created a fearful type of war, in which a single day could bring tremendous carnage” (Brown 92).

Under constant fire in close quarters, the rigid social and religious structures instilled in a soldier since birth were tested by his environment. In the trenches, the commanding officers became his government, and this “general and the officer class...tended to bring to the war the attitude that religion was part of social order and the hierarchy that they had learned in the Victorian and Edwardian middle and upper classes” (Brown 92). However, machine guns leveling each man were ignorant of class or social distinction, and the very dynamics of “trench warfare” forced soldiers to brave No Man’s Land in order to gain ground:

The trench conditions created what was felt to be an environment of peculiar religious consequences. The first of these was the constant fear, smell and experience of death and mutilation...The second was the absence of women – the emblem of Christian piety – whose softness and loving nature, combined in a silent and quiet female sensibility, had long been understood to be essential to men’s Christian condition. Cut adrift from femininity and normal society, the churches were fearful that British manhood was being permanently brutalized beyond the reach of religion. (Brown 99)

From all over England, men went off to war, God-fearing and rule-abiding. They returned from the bloodshed, as broken, fractured shadows of their former selves. They were mentally

crippled and physically mutilated by warfare, bloodied and beaten even in victory. The war generation returned to their cities and their cottages and their farms with their own wide range of ailments:

The first of these in importance was the crisis of the masculine body created by the death and maiming of the First World War. This led to men adopting a comradeship based around war experience, one that simultaneously undermined myths of ‘glorious war’ and excluded non-combatants (which could take in both women and most of the British clergy). A remembrance culture developed in the 1920s around rituals, and architecture and organisations of war-remembering – in the distinctive remembrance service on 11 November each year...in the British Legion for ex-servicemen, which combined leisure and remembrance functions together. (Brown 126)

The war may have ended by the 1920s; the dead may have been laid to rest; statues and memorials may have been erected; however, as it is made clear by Martin Green’s *Children of the Sun*, the war widened the gulf between generations. Green understood its impact as a direct result of an “Edwardian relaxation” of Victorian values, transforming chastity into “unseriousness, self-indulgent hedonism” (Green 40). Accompanying this ‘relaxation’ is the loosening of moral values, encouraged by the devastation of war. The soldier had fought for his religion, killed in the name of God and country, and had been irrevocably betrayed. He felt abandoned in the trenches, quivering under the unbearable weight of the bodies that fell in before him. The promise of salvation had been murdered in No Man’s land.

As Green points out as well, the perfidy of the leaders of government and religion did not fly beneath the radar of the younger minds of the 1910s, nor the literary thinkers of the 1920s.

During the war, the Battle of Somme drew vitriol from the younger ranks:

David Lloyd George took over from Lord Kitchener at the War Office, and by the end of the year was prime minister... But on the men of keen sensibility among the young, the effect of the Somme was something much too profound to be satisfied by a substitution of one man for another as prime minister. They felt they had been betrayed, and by their fathers—by England's fathers. (Green 42)

Similarly, works published argued bitterly against those with a hand in the governing of war, as England sent more men off to battle without an apparent purpose. These were the lambs sent to slaughter:

These golden lads had been sacrificed, it was felt, by 'the old men,' 'the generals,' and 'the hard-faced men who did well out of the war.' Siegfried Sassoon's book of poems, *Counter-Attack*, published while the war was still being fought, demanded a crushing of England's rulers, to follow on the crushing of Germany's. (Green 43)

Wilfred Owen's doomed youth died as cattle, with the dull roar of machine gun fire as passing-bells.⁸ Charles Sorley's words are haunted by pale battalions of millions of the mouthless dead.⁹ Edward Thomas heard in the callous bugle cry his own apathy towards death,¹⁰ and hatred not of Germany, nor England, but of the Kaiser's¹¹ assumption of divinity. Arthur

⁸ Refers to Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth".

⁹ Refers to Charles Sorley's "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead".

¹⁰ Refers to Edward Thomas's "No one cares less than I' [Bugle Call]".

¹¹ Refers to Edward Thomas's "This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong".

Graeme West wrote scathingly of cheerful men lauding the war as the ‘epic days,’ and condemned the soldiers who dared smile despite witnessing fields that

Proved all that muddy brown monotony,
 Where blood’s the only coloured thing. Perhaps
 Had seen a man killed, a sentry shot at night,
 Hunched as he fell, his feet on the firing-step,
 His neck against the back slope of the trench,
 And the rest doubled up between, his head
 Smashed like an egg-shell, and the warm grey brain
 Spattered all bloody on the parapet... (West “God! How I hate you, you young
 cheerful men”)

Morbid images pervaded the texts of the soldier-poets, betraying their wounded minds. However, the guts and the gore of war poetry do not feature strongly in Waugh’s literature for the simple fact that while England’s young men were dying in droves across the Channel, he was younger still. He was, for lack of a better phrase, part of a different generation, born into the shadows of combat—which explains in part the darker mood of his novels.

In his 1929 essay “The War and the Younger Generation,” published in *The Spectator*, Waugh saw the societal divides in the same light as Martin Green. The war had fractured the population of England into three separate classes: “There is (a) the wistful generation who grew up and formed their opinions before the War and were too old for military service; (b) the stunted and mutilated generation who fought; and (c) the younger generation” (Waugh, “The War and the Younger Generation” 61-62). However, Waugh distinguishes his experience clearly from the veteran generation and the older generation in a manner which clarifies the darker

ironic tones underlining the majority of his early novels. The world into which he and the younger generation were birthed, raised and nurtured in, was one of “darkened streets, food rations, the impending dread of the War Office telegram, hysterical outbursts of hate and sentiment, untrustworthy sources of information and the consequent rumours and scares” (“The War” 62). On the home front, war shaded his adolescence with a bleaker delusion of normality. Modern life obviously weighed heavily on the young Waugh, who retained many Victorian and traditional conceptions of religion despite his schooling. He scorned public schools for encouraging independent thinking: “When they should have been whipped and taught Greek paradigms, they were set arguing about birth control and nationalization” (“The War” 62). The relaxation in schooling and freedom of thinking likely contributed to Waugh’s spell as an atheist, for his encounter with an Oxford theologian (referenced in his letters and acknowledged by McCartney) opened his eyes to questions of authorship in the Bible and speculation on the nature of Christ.

In the years leading up to the publication of *Vile Bodies*, however, Waugh’s approach to religion becomes decidedly more Catholic. In March of 1929, he had written to W.N. Roughhead about convincing the *Daily Express* to take his piece on “the Youngest Generation’s view of Religion...very serious & Churchy” (Amory 30). Under the tutelage of the Jesuit Martin D’Arcy, Waugh converted to the Catholic faith in 1930, following closely on the heels of *Vile Bodies*’s publication. As McCartney argues in *Confused Roaring*, the Jesuit’s teachings and epistemologies developed in *The Nature of Belief* had the profound effect on the young Waugh of impressing a religious interpretation of the correspondence between thought and desire:

The essential simplicity of the divine nature does not admit any distinction between intellect and will. As a created being, then, man fulfills his nature to the

degree that he approximates, at his own level, the divine unity of knowledge and deed. The solution to the perplexing conflict between thought and desire is faith in a divinity that bridges the distance between them. Only commitment to an absolute can strike a balance between the reflective intellect and the impulsive will. (McCartney 35)

Whether or not intentionally placed within the text,¹² the conflicts between ‘reflective intellect’ and ‘impulsive will’ manifest in a variety of characters—not the least of which are the paragons of religion and government: Mrs Ape, Father Rothschild, Prime Minister Outrage, and Lord Metroland.

Despite its genesis, Waugh’s approach to figures of religion and authority is hardly cavalier. Rather, *Vile Bodies* emphasizes Waugh’s disillusionment with the superstructures of faith and government regulating and monitoring modern society. His characters become caricatures, and his plot progresses to subversion. Through a cartoonish lampooning of religious figures, Waugh criticizes the moral decay of English society as the repercussions of the avant-garde reaction to World War I. Mrs Ape becomes, as Marcus Beaty suggests, “the object of satiric irony as the personification of debased religion” (Beaty 55): her manner and figure portray the militarization of modern religion as leading invariably to supercilious fanaticism. Father Rothschild, despite his contrary nature, reflects the same scheming and profiteering of religious figures (e.g. Aimee Semple McPherson) seeking governmental, rather than heavenly, power.

¹² As mentioned in the preface of and in various letters from the time period, *Vile Bodies* was notoriously unplanned. Consequently, we can take the majority of characters as fluid and allow for either the conscious or unconscious inclusion of epistemologies he may have encountered at their very moment of impact.

Evolving from a generational mistrust in government and religion, the irony in Waugh's *Vile Bodies* thus reflects the shallowness of modern religion.

God's Ape

Perhaps the most outlandish and cartoonish character, Mrs Melrose Ape registers distastefully amongst the English elite as the unwelcome representation of American religiosity. In a rather typical English, bordering Dickensian fashion, Waugh's determinedly loud "woman evangelist" (*VB* 9) befits her name. Her posture—emphasized when "squaring her shoulders and looking (except that she had really no beard to speak of) every inch a sailor" (*VB* 11)—defines her as a resolute woman of business, while simultaneously contributing to her unbearable weight in the text. Presented as pseudo-masculine—she is missing the critical whiskery, hairy trimmings that distinguish gentlemen from boys—her resemblance to the coarser sex is at once uncanny and decidedly unattractive.¹³ Apish and exaggerated in appearance, Rothschild's early warning to Adam Fenwick-Symes—"There is an extremely dangerous and disagreeable woman on board—

¹³ The claim to Mrs Ape's physical attractiveness is rather bold, especially as someone described so frequently as 'magnetic' could hardly be repulsive. It is similarly true that Arthur Henderson (a fellow voyager across the Channel) comments that the "old girl" is "not a bad-looker herself, if it comes to that" (*VB* 26). However, the text cannot be taken quite so literally here. Mr Henderson had graced previous pages as the cards-dealer in the smoking-room, and the first to blame the ventilation and foreign foods for his "feel[ing] all swimmy of a sudden" (*VB* 19) instead of admitting he is prone to sea-sickness. As a member of Mrs Ape's boozy audience, he already 'drank the Kool-aid' during her rousing sea shanty. Additionally, Henderson's observation is not directly that Mrs Ape is attractive, but that she isn't bad "if it comes to that" (*VB* 26) thereby implying that with the aid of a drink and complete absence of a more attractive alternative (i.e. the angels) he could be persuaded to find the woman a bit more agreeable.

a Mrs Ape.” (VB 13)—confirms Waugh’s portrayal of Melrose Ape as unlikeable and primeval, as traditionally bestial qualities harken to a baser, uncivilized ancestor.¹⁴

The primitive aspects of Mrs Ape’s name appear most vociferously with her raucous hymnal. Leading the bar patrons on the ship “in a rich, very audible voice” (VB 20), her monetary challenge to the barkeep—“Five bob for you, steward, if you can shout me down” (VB 20)—is as good as a gorilla beating her chest. Inherent in her name as well is Waugh’s latent criticism. Ostensibly, Mrs Ape exhibits the more animalistic tendencies of her namesake, but in that she is a woman of faith, she is simultaneously ‘God’s ape’—therefore, Waugh utilizes the American’s name not only to exaggerate her appearance, but indicate that she is also “a fool,” or “a person who mimics God” (OED). Her fanaticism therefore paints her as the village idiot, woefully ignorant in that the louder her primal scream, the thinner her faith.

However, Waugh does allow Mrs Ape to hold a certain charm: “she was nothing if not ‘magnetic’” (VB 10). In a way, it is ironic that one of Waugh’s more physically repulsive characters with a “coarse face¹⁵” (VB 99) is said to hold a certain, invisible allure in her eyes—“renowned throughout three continents for their magnetism” (VB 100). Yet, it would certainly be

¹⁴ We shall treat Rothschild’s assessment of Mrs Ape seriously, for the Jesuit is said to have “the happy knack to remember everything that could possibly be learned about everyone who could possibly be of any importance” (VB 9). As he remembers Adam quite quickly, it is likely that his observation is an objective assessment of the perils of fanaticism embodied in Mrs Ape.

¹⁵ It is Lady Throbbing, in conversation with other members of the elite at Lady Metroland’s party, who observes Mrs Ape’s physiognomy as such, and not Evelyn Waugh directly as narrator. However, as the remark is made through Lady Throbbing, and is not contested, it stands as emblematic of society’s judgment of Mrs Ape’s physical appearance—exacerbated by her likening to a pimp and panderer with the further observation that “she looks like a *procureuse*” (VB 99). This comparison to a “madam” has been observed previously in Frederick L. Beaty’s *The Ironic World of Evelyn Waugh*, when commenting upon the behavior of the angels: “Their stage names, such as Chastity, Prudence, and Temperance, are ill suited to their offstage conduct; and Mrs Ape, in trying to control them, must sometimes assume the role of a madam struggling to keep her wayward ‘girls’ in line” (Beaty 55).

hard to critique a fanatic without allowing some expression of disarming delusions. Just as the Modern Churchman with “ox-like eyes” (177) in *Decline and Fall* speaks of visions and of “killing a great deal” (178) as his divinely-ordained “mission” (178), so too does Mrs Ape wrestle disparagers into hymnal and whore out her host of angels to gain celebrity. Consequently, her inclusion in the text, as well the emphasis on her ‘magnetism,’ exemplifies Waugh’s disapproval of sensationalist tendencies in modern religion:

Without convictions of any kind, these characters wander through the novels vaguely unnerved by the chaos that surrounds them. Their failure to sustain the tradition of which they are the immediate beneficiaries has emptied their world of purpose... This was Waugh’s assessment of a culture that has lost confidence in itself and its ability to make sense of the world. It explains the frequent appearance of fanaticism in his fiction. In *Vile Bodies* Lady Melrose Ape, the stalwart, lightly bearded evangelist modelled on Aimee Semple McPherson¹⁶, wows London with her feel-good religiosity and her troupe of nubile singing angels...(McCartney 25).

Like her miracle-working namesake, she appears “when things were at their lowest” (*VB* 19) in the ship’s smoking-room. With the ship tossed upon the seas, and the men at the bar

¹⁶ After reading into this identification for myself, Daniel Mark Epstein’s *Sister Aimee: The Life of Aimee Semple McPherson* highlights several important coincidences, which I believe further ground this previously established identification: the Canadian-American bought a 1912 Packard, which became a “rolling church” (Epstein 117), not unlike Mrs Ape’s “travel-worn Packard car, bearing the dust of three continents” (*VB* 9); when she raised up a hymnal at a revival, after her face blistered from an exploded lamp, her audience “as they watched the evangelist’s face transformed from a mass of red welts to its smooth bloom of health” were apparently thunderstruck (Epstein 119); and finally, she exploited the sensationalist press through manipulating a story of her kidnapping in 1926—believed by many of her critics to have been faked—into a Gospel lesson, which is not unlike Mrs Ape’s own relationship with the press.

tossing back drinks, the atmosphere is not unlike the desperation towards the end of the Great War—nor indeed, is it alien to the hangover days of the end of the 1920s, as after a decade of boozing, economies worldwide spiraled towards economic depression. Mrs Ape’s entrance to the smoking-room and religious parley with the men harkens to the “trench religion” described by George Gardner, an Anglican archdeacon paraphrased by Callum G. Brown as emerging on the religious scene by emphasizing spiritualism: “His view was that spiritualism was attracting those who sought the novel and the sensational, whilst many actually now reveled in belonging to religious minorities as an act of defiance” (Brown 104).

Spiritualism of society in 1918 correlates to the “religion of the trenches,” a kind of “‘emergency religion’, one ill-founded on true Christian knowledge, and as something closer to superstition than well-founded understanding of Christian teaching and the way to redemption through God’s grace” (Brown 94). Mrs Ape’s admonishments remind the reader of the same overtures of American evangelists at the time, pronouncing praise and the singing of hymns as the ultimate remedy for sickness:

‘But let me ask you this If you’re put out this way over just an hour’s seasickness’ (‘Not seasick, ventilation,’ said Mr Henderson mechanically), ‘what are you going to be like when you make the mighty big journey that’s waiting for us all? Are you right with God?’ said Mrs Ape. ‘Are you prepared for death?’ (*VB* 20)

The chastisement conveys her more self-glorified position, emphasized again in the linguistic connotations of ‘ape’: the famous evangelist can shame the men before her, utilizing the war rhetoric of chaplains and army captains—instilling a fatal sense of urgency with her existential

questioning, “Are you prepared for death?” (*VB* 20)— for she shallowly glorifies and praises God without subjecting herself to the customary guilt of the Catholic conscience.

Waugh further colors this first encounter with the obnoxiousness of fanaticism with Mrs Ape’s irksomely unstoppable optimism. She hassles the men in the smoking-room with her hosannas of Hope,¹⁷ carousing them into song with patronizing overture: “‘Now, boys, I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. We’re going to sing a song together, you and me... You’ll feel better for it body *and* soul’” (*VB* 20). Ironically, the English pastime of drunken pub-singing is led by an overtly religious American, who orders a double rum (despite the Prohibition taking place in her home country) and leads her inebriated congregation in “song of Hope” (*VB* 20), rather than the typical licentious lyric of a sailor song. She goes further to presume knowledge of Britain’s ailments:

‘There’s only one great evil in the world to-day. Despair. I know all about England, and I tell you straight, boys, I’ve got the goods for you. Hope’s what you want and Hope’s what I got.’ (*VB* 20)

Acting as a peddler of faith—with her salesman approach “I’ve got the goods for you” (*VB* 20)—the ‘hope’ that Mrs Ape portends to package and sell as panacea ironically cements her position as a pimp. Her attempts to sell religion to her smoking-room companions constitute “the perversion of her calling into profiteering, for she exploits the human desire to buy one’s own deliverance” (Beatty 56). Mrs Ape’s instruction comes at a cost. In the manner of a modern

¹⁷ As Hope does seem to be the one name missing from Mrs Ape’s line-up of angels—numbering Faith, Charity, Fortitude, Humility, Prudence, Divine Discontent, Mercy, Justice, Creative Endeavour, and Chastity—it is my conclusion that Waugh intends ‘Hope’ to tacitly denominate Mrs Ape. This quiet nickname serves to emphasize the deluded optimism of American evangelists and fanatics while Waugh simultaneously excoriates the tone of modern religion as decidedly un-Christian.

day busker, or Catholic Tetzels' jingling coffers¹⁸ in the early sixteenth century, she takes "round the hat and collected nearly two pounds, not counting her own five shillings which she got back from the bar steward" (*VB* 22). Her axiom epitomizes the rationalization of selling indulgences: "Salvation doesn't do them the same good as they think it's free" (*VB* 22). However, ostensibly Mrs Ape does not sell merely ecclesiastical wares, as a careful memory of Waugh's readers of *Decline and Fall* would reveal: she is involved, quite hypocritically, in the sale of bodies.

In a position of authority and ownership from inception, Mrs Ape walks onto the ship "at the head of her angels" (*VB* 9). The personal pronoun immediately assigns Mrs Ape's complete ownership of the singing troupe, while simultaneously indicating her possession of their bodies, in an arrangement which is not otherwise foreign to Waugh's work. What could be a simplistic and honest mother-daughter relationship is perverted by previous references to white slavery and prostitution. The Angels attract male attention: not only do Mr Henderson and Lord Metroland voice separate desires to "have another look," but Waugh suggests the angels themselves invite flirtation, for they "clearly" could "be winked at" (*VB* 93). Similarly, in *Decline and Fall*, Paul unwittingly refers to the women the notorious Margot Beste-Chetwynde hires for prostitution in South America as "chorus-girls"¹⁹ (*DF* 146). Readers recalling Beste-Chetwynde's marriage to Lord Metroland should be hardly surprised, then, that she appears again as Lady Metroland, attracted perhaps to the prospect of hiring another 'chorus-girl': noting Chastity's physical merits as "far too pretty a girl to waste...time singing hymns" (*VB* 95), Lady Metroland extends the

¹⁸ The irony in the observation that Tetzels was responsible for the sale of indulgences should not be lost in Waugh's comment on American evangelism.

¹⁹ The second-time reader, in realizing that "chorus-girls" euphemizes prostitution, will note the darker implications of wanting the less experienced girls more, as Margot offered "much higher wages to the ones who said they'd never had a job before" (*DF* 146). The context of this discussion would seem to suggest that 'less experience' refers to virginity.

insidious offer of a job in South America. As Mrs Ape is in charge of the singing troupe, the preservation of euphemistic phrasings for prostitution drawn in *Decline and Fall* likens Mrs Ape to a ‘madam’.

However, her command as—what Lady Throbbing terms—a ‘*procureuse*’²⁰ is regulated by a militaristic code. The language circumscribing his depictions of Mrs Ape and her angels harkens back once more to the diction of war. They are referred to as a “troupe” (*VB* 26), which exchanges with its militant homonym “troop” to depict the composition of the body of angels and illustrates their gait: after being dismissed following role call, they “bobbed prettily and trooped aft” (*VB* 10) in the manner of common foot soldiers. As wings are instrumental to any angel (and instruments are conducive to entertaining hymnal groups) the angels as well each “carried her wings in a little black box like a violin case,” which could substitute for the darker image of a soldier’s gun, auxiliary to his uniform. When gunfire rumbled like thunder, soldiers sought the safest depths of the trenches, or struck up a song in silences to lift spirits: similarly, the angels sing “wildly, desperately” while the ship was buffeted by the waves, and resort to “Mrs Ape’s famous hymn, *There ain’t no flies on the lamb of God*” (*VB* 16). The desperation in their voices is enough for Kitty Blackwater to speculate whether a “service” (*VB* 21) was being held, a word which indicates a religious sense of endangerment, in that a service or prayers are held usually on a ship in distress: as “it sounds so like a hymn,” Blackwater’s concerns that the ship will be “wrecked” swell into fearful questions (*VB* 21). However, ‘service’ harmlessly as well connotes military duty. For all her sailorly qualities, then, Mrs Ape appears as the master and commander of the angels, and the darker ironies of language expose Waugh’s reader to the militancy of religion in Great Britain during and after World War I.

²⁰ Please see Note 15.

In its militant expression, Mrs Ape's 'revivalism' seeks little more than to ransack the graves of a dying religion. Her preaching admonishes and praises, and though she proselytizes, she rarely preaches gospel from the Bible: faith seems to be a mere tool as Mrs Ape thrives on her fame. Just as the soldier was utilized by the military—and by extension, the government—modern narcissism reveals the shallowness of nouveau religiosity, and the money-grubbing laced into every word. While Mrs Ape's second "oration about Hope" was intended to inspire "self-doubt" and reflection on sin, the pointedly italicized words of "*Just you look at yourselves*" strike listeners dumb and "stiff," wondering if their noses are awful²¹ (*VB* 100). If the goal of the fanatic is to inspire conversion, then the monstrously fallacious gossip writer Simon Balcairn wrote Mrs Ape's "swan-song," which testifies to the strength of her faith (*VB* 105). Ever the opportunist, Mrs Ape's extends the lie: the "tears coursing down" the face of Agatha Runcible, the "sobs of contrition" from the Marquess of Vanburgh,²² and the "emerald and diamond tiara" thrown down by the Duchess of Stayle as a "'Guilt Offering'" would corroborate belief in the effectiveness of modern religion (*VB* 105). However, the lies froth forth from the petty journalistic profession of exploiting gossip, and Mrs Ape seeks actively to milk the monetary benefit of fame by confirming Balcairn's story as a miracle:

She also caused her Press agent to wire a further account to all parts of the world...then left the country with her angels, having received a sudden call to ginger up the religious life of Oberammergau. (*VB* 109)

²¹ The reference to her nose alludes to a comment made by Miss Agatha Runcible: "Darling...is my nose awful" (*VB* 100). The comment is problematized by the implications of a "red-nose," which will be addressed in Part III, "One's First Party".

²² See Note 48.

While Waugh never mentions remuneration as the direct reason for Mrs Ape's sudden flight, the timing of the "sudden call" (*VB* 109) hints at her desire to capitalize on her press mentions. Similarly, for the readers fooled by her magnetism, Waugh identifies her materialistically by her dress: "a magnificent gown of heavy gold brocade embroidered with texts" (*VB* 95). A far cry from a monk's unassuming habit, the gold brocade on her gown, as well as its weight, distinguish the gown as expensive (which would have been well marked by the party's attendees) while the embroidery of "texts" could refer to the Bible. The pecuniary value of the fabric—indicated by the specification of a "brocade"—has more weight than the scriptures incorporated in its design. Given that references to religion are used as mere decoration, Waugh deliberately outfits Mrs Ape as a profiteering, self-serving woman, masked as a woman of God.

The Wily Jesuit

In distinctly different garb—distinguished by a small, borrowed suitcase of "imitation crocodile hide" bearing initials in Gothic characters, and containing "some rudimentary underclothes, six important new books in six languages, a false beard and a school atlas and gazetteer heavily annotated" (*VB* 9)—the secretive, comic yet political, Father Rothschild S.J. stands as the antithesis to Mrs Ape's violent fanaticism. Although Waugh confessed to having "never met a Jesuit" (Davis 140) at the time of writing, the archetype of the "'wily Jesuit' of popular tradition" (Phillips 17) has some stickiness. The inventiveness of the character borders adaptation, as even Father D'Arcy (Waugh's guide through conversion, whom he met only after *Vile Bodies* was completed) noted that Rothschild is "a composite of several Jesuits—a satirical portrait" (Phillips 17). We must note immediately that even though the Jesuit is modelled on a

general impression rather than a historical figure, the dichotomization of the two predominant religious figures is achieved, but is hardly divisive enough to allow Rothschild to escape judgment.

Initially, Mrs Ape seems to stand for the primal and youthful, and Rothschild for the civilized, traditional and archaic. The field of Waugh's critics all recognize the Jesuit as a hallmark of a more Western conceptualization of religion, hand in hand with connotations of primordial authority and institutionalized power. McCartney claims that Rothschild epitomizes "Western tradition" as his "name and vocation suggest antecedents in Judaism, Christianity, and European liberal capitalism" (McCartney 37). Greenberg sees the "fusion of two great institutions":

with his Jewish surname he embodies the wealth of European banks, while with his title Father he carries the religious authority of the Catholic Church. Like the satirist, he speaks from a position of superiority with the backing of communal and institutional power. (Greenberg 68)

Still others adopt more serious treatments, and color Rothschild as an initially humorous character that grows into an oracle, perhaps adopting and channeling the voice of damnation previously missing in Waugh's satire. Garnett leads the front of crusaders for a developing character, concluding that the Jesuit "grows from a comic caricature into a prophet" (Garnett 72) who predicts the inception of the next world war by the book's end.

However, it would be a mistake to laud Rothschild as the sole director of Waugh's moral code nor the perpetrator of the satire in the depression-comic. Not only would this contradict our earlier conclusion that *Vile Bodies* is satire without singular object, but it would also be ignorant of the deliberate narrative absence and visual omnipresence concerning Rothschild's political

scheming. All things considered, Rothschild may be in a position of relative power: however, he has not risen above the circus. Indeed, Greenberg joins the voice of Seidel in the observation that Rothschild is as “grotesque” as a satirist ought to be:

Seidel observes that satirists, like the targets they deride, are often represented as ugly or deformed: ‘it is one of the more plaguing paradoxes about the satiric mode that the satirist, having taken on a kind of monstrosity at his subject, makes something of a monster of himself.’ ... Thus *Vile Bodies*’ most powerful enforcer of stability himself resembles a repulsive gargoyle – and a cheap imitation at that. (Greenberg 69)

Furthermore, there is something stony and stalwart in Rothschild’s initial characterization that would give rise to such connotations of authority: Greenberg’s observations are therefore not entirely ill-founded. In one of the clearest and most direct character descriptions, Waugh emphasizes that the Jesuit’s “tongue protruded very slightly,” bearing “a peculiar resemblance to those plaster reproductions of the gargoyles of Notre Dame” (*VB* 9). Juxtaposed with his position on the ship—as he is “standing on the deck,” with “his elbows on the rail...[surveying] the procession of passengers coming up the gangway” (*VB* 9)—it would seem that Rothschild stands at a vantage point which physically empowers him to observe and criticize those below him. In both his physiognomy and location, he appears to ‘look down’ on those surrounding him. At the very least, his gargoyle nature would seem to confirm Greenberg’s assessment: however, Rothschild does not bear the omniscience nor the purification powers that would place him on a pedestal as sole satirist. Firstly, as it is Rothschild’s “happy knack to remember everything that could possibly learned about everyone who could possibly be of any importance” (*VB* 9), it is evident that he does not possess worldly knowledge that would distinguish a satirist. In

“conventional satiric theory” from the theorists of the 1960s, satire requires clarity: it is the “business of the satirist...to insist on the sharp differences between vice and virtue, between good and bad, between what man *is* and what he *ought to be*” (Griffin 36). The moral code is thus innately *known* to the satirist—as second-nature as breathing. However, rather than know the moral divisions inherently, Rothschild can only “remember everything” (*VB* 9) about a select group of people—and, while they are qualified as important, the narrow-mindedness of selective knowledge betrays a subtle willful blindness absent from the genetic composition of the satirist.

Still, moments of his feigned omniscience²³ seem valid superficially, given his first interaction with another character. The Jesuit greets Adam with an apparent and informed manner: he knows exactly where they initially met—“five years ago at luncheon with the Dean of Balliol” (*VB*)—as well as intimate details of Adam’s personal life, including the completion of his autobiography and recent engagement. Rothschild even goes as far to intimate knowledge which Adam himself does not apparently know: he bestows on his younger counterpart the observation that he will “find [his] father-in-law a little eccentric – and forgetful” having suffered “a nasty attack of bronchitis this winter” (*VB* 13). Imparting this information would seem to be a benevolent act, delivered with the same conscientiousness as his warning that about “an extremely dangerous and disagreeable woman on board – a Mrs Ape” (*VB* 13); however, Rothschild’s interaction with Adam appears just a paragraph below the narrator’s disclosure of Adam’s most recent adventures, following closely on the heels of the knowledge that: “He had

²³ As mentioned previously, Waugh’s depiction of Rothschild’s knowledge—his “happy knack to remember everything that could possibly learned about everyone who could possibly be of any importance” (*VB* 9)—carries the qualifying phrase limiting the blanket noun ‘everyone’ those who ‘could possibly be of any importance’. The linguistic segregation implies that his knowledge is self-selected, which is contrary to the very notion of ‘omniscience’ and contests the verity of his knowledge.

been two months in Paris writing a book and was coming home because, in the course of his correspondence, he had got engaged to be married” (*VB* 13). On one hand, the juxtaposition of the narrator’s disclosure with Rothschild’s claim to intimate knowledge confirms the strength of Rothschild’s memory, as well as emphasizes the centrality of Adam’s character. However, the timing of the interaction follows the pattern of gossip, with the proximity of the narrator’s knowledge and the Jesuit’s suggesting that the latter’s knowledge derived ‘through the grapevine’ rather than his own stock of memory. Consequently, the information given by Rothschild confirms that not everything he says is to be taken at face value, as the knowledge could be imported rather than imparted, and the original weight of firsthand observation is lost. Take, for example, Rothschild’s later encounter with the gossip journalist, Simon Balcairn, connected to Adam through the transference of the Mr Chatterbox role. When Balcairn is originally dressed in a beard as a “stranger” (*VB* 102) the masking of his identity heightens the gravity of the situation, and his de-bearding is tantamount to Rothschild’s de-escalation of the scene: however, (almost ironically) the unveiling indicates that Rothschild had “over-estimated the gravity of the situation” just exactly as gossip is intended to do (*VB* 103). The Jesuit’s admission of guilt in ‘over-estimating’ the role of the stranger-spy resolves any questions as to the integrity of his own feigned omniscience, for he confirms that the information which he imparted on Lord Metroland and Mr Outrage (by leading the charge in Balcairn’s unmasking) can be asymmetrical, and thus untrustworthy.

Additionally, likening to Rothschild to a gargoyle would paint the Jesuit as a purification figure, as these monstrous statues (installed as gutters) carry water away from the cathedral. As gargoyles are designed to prevent water breaking down the mortar of the structure, we can say that the statue acts as an orifice of the church—spouting rainwater from their stony mouths in a

sculpted imitation of holy water blessings sprayed onto passersby below. At first glance, Rothschild's portraiture as such a figure would seem to confirm his position as moralist. However, titling Rothschild as "satirist" is further compromised when in consideration of the second type of gargoyle—one which is purely decorative, and which Waugh depicts specifically in reference to the Jesuit's physical composition. Simultaneously grotesque and beautiful to look at, not all gargoyles are built for any purpose other than ornamentation. The direct reference in *Vile Bodies* (in Rothschild's character depiction) is to the latter form of gargoyle, which "does not carry water away from the building at all" and "is merely intended to add to the picturesqueness of the outline" (Gibson 3). Therefore, with a "protruding tongue" and "elbows [leaning] on the rail," Rothschild becomes none other than the gargoyle known as the Monster overlooking Paris, implying the latent monstrous grotesqueness of his character as well as the sexuality of the passengers²⁴ below. The reference is fitting as Paris of the 1920s was the fading capital of the literary-artistic world, and the "crossing" (*VB* 9) of the vessel is most likely across the Channel, from France to England—especially as both Mr Outrage and Adam Fenwick-Symes are said to have been "in Paris" (*VB* 11, 13).

The grotesqueness of his depiction underscores the dichotomies he embodies, personifying and internalizing rather than condemning the hypocrisy of modernity and modern

²⁴ As Chris Baldick emphasizes in his guide to *Literature of the 1920s*, Paris heralded writers and artists from all over the world during the Jazz Age, including: Proust, Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Hemingway, and Samuel Beckett. However, the end of the Twenties drew a transition from a Franco-centric to a German-centric world, when the "Weimar Republic began to exert a magnetism both cultural and erotic" (Baldick 172). Therefore, as Paris (though already established) is the the fading star of the arts world, it would only make sense to commence the action by disembarking from France and structuring a metaphor which relates the proposed satirist to the infamous gargoyle, and the ship's passengers to Paris itself. The embers burning in France's erotic city are thus cooling, as the misfit group of socialites, responsible for stoking those flames, carry their vices back across the Channel, leaving France in moral decay.

religion by emphasizing the duplicity of his nature. We have already noted the clothing²⁵ he carries with him and his physical resemblance to the infamous gargoyle, which assimilates cleanly into the first, linguistically implied element of satire as “*satyr* (the half man-half beast suggesting that satire is lawless, wild, and threatening)” (Griffin 6). Preserving this satyr-gargoyle mold is a resurfacing and reworking of the militancy in the evangelicals, as Father Rothschild welds together themes of faith and war. The narrator does not once relax his Catholic title, thereby placing an emphasis on his religious ties by constantly referring to him as either ‘the Jesuit’ or ‘Father Rothschild’. However, the only direct display of his faith (in contrast to his more mystic counterpart) is his trembling during the ship’s crossing: in an internalization mimicking the Catholic lauding of the “sufferings of the saints” Rothschild muses on “the mutability of human nature, the Four Last Things, and between whiles repeated snatches of the penitential psalms” (*VB* 15). This is the one moment of weakness for Rothschild, and the chink in his armor shows what should be the strongest facet of his character (if *Vile Bodies* were to be a morally-chartered satire): his faith. Rather than face every complication presented with his faith as his sword and the Lord his shield, “only seasickness can remind him of religion,” while “Mrs Ape is immune even to seasickness” (Davis 140). To put it more succinctly, seeking penance only when in danger delineates Rothschild as a Christian of last resort. Simultaneously, while the name ‘Rothschild’ does indeed carry a heritage of Western capitalism, the surname more

²⁵ Where Mrs Ape’s brocade dress depicts her desires for profit and fame quite succinctly, the clothes Rothschild bears with him allow Waugh to alert his reader to his more insidious nature. If his surname wasn’t enough, the suitcase he carries is made of “imitation crocodile hide” and is notably not his own, as he had borrowed it from the *valet-de-chambre*, and the “initials stamped on it in Gothic characters were not Father Rothschild’s” (*VB* 9). In conjunction with the false beard (syntactically shuffled nonchalantly between “six important new books” and “a school atlas and gazetteer heavily annotated”), Rothschild’s possessions paint a questionable identity (*VB* 9).

importantly implies a heritage of financing wars: The London bank branch of the Rothschild family notably funded the Duke of Wellington in Spain and Portugal during the Napoleonic Wars, essentially subsidizing the British government. Not only do the opposing forces of religion and capitalism manifest in Rothschild, but “his worldly interests and behind-the-scenes plotting jar with his priestly vocation, and his objectives are never revealed” (Beaty 63). It is thus Rothschild’s secretiveness and entanglement in political affairs which entices the reader and levels the text with an air of paranoia, while simultaneously confirming our suspicions from the first page: while he is presented as a rather familiar—even likeable—alternative to Mrs Ape, his numerous disappearances betray the Jesuit as an untrustworthy figure.

Rothschild’s simultaneous presence and absence heightens the reader’s paranoia by physically suspending narrative expectations of his character: Rothschild’s inconstancy betrays his character as suspect, rather than confidant. His first entrance is quick enough: he disappears “before Adam had time to reply,” his head popping back up suddenly and briefly before he was “gone again” below the ship (*VB* 13). Upon landing, he disembarks by separating himself from the crowd, “[fluttering] a diplomatic *laissez-passer* and [disappearing] in the large car that had been sent to meet him” (*VB* 23). These initial comings-and-goings paint Rothschild as of a certain mercurial nature: though an active character throughout, he is coincidentally absent from the main events—he disappears below the ship just as the vessel is carried into a storm, and misses the confiscation of Adam’s copy of Dante and autobiography. As he professes to know everything about anyone of importance, his absences at critical moments strikes a discordant note within the reader, reminiscent perhaps of loneliness of the trenches and the betrayal of England’s fathers. Certainly, his possession of a *laissez-passer* (separate from a League of Nations Nansen pass, and most likely issued by the British government) and the car “sent to meet

him” implies that Rothschild has certain connections in positions of authority (*VB* 23). If he truly is as connected as Waugh intimates, then had Rothschild waited, he would have been able to save Adam’s autobiography—a book he claims to “be interested to read” (*VB* 13)— from being burned straight away as “downright dirt” (*VB* 25). His rapid comings and goings draw attention to his movement, yet Waugh suspends confirmation of the direction in which he moves: far from a moral spokesperson, the Jesuit’s actions and pretension of omniscience hint towards a more obscure character which stands for generational disconnect, rather than serving as a mouthpiece for the youth.

The groundwork for his characterization as a gargoyle, as well as his inconsistent appearances, is laid so well that the foundation of a suspect figure causes his appearance at events of imminent scandal to be almost expected. If previous insinuations of Rothschild’s governmental connections were not clear enough, they are cemented when Waugh allows the Jesuit to knowingly interrupt an intimate moment²⁶ between Mr Outrage and Baroness Yoshiwara, that even the narrator cannot bring himself to fully disclose. With just a few words,

²⁶ Emblematic of an overtly frivolous government, Waugh’s attention to the Baroness Yoshiwara reigns governmental figures in with the lash of satire. In a clear example of Waugh’s favoring of an imperialist mindset, Yoshiwara is depicted with the most prejudice: given “golden hands clasped in the lap of her golden Paquin frock,” with childlike naiveté —“Why did he not pick her out of her red plush chair and sit her on his knee? Was she, perhaps, looking ugly tonight?” (*VB* 48)—that paints her as diminutive figure. As Outrage has had previous romantic affairs—he dreams of “a world of little cooing voices, so caressing, so humble; and dark eyes, night-colored, the shape of almonds over painted paper screens; little golden bodies” (*VB* 15)— his interaction with Yoshiwara involves a governmental figure in his criticism on the over-sexuality of the modern age. Yet Waugh’s concern appears to lay just as much with Outrage’s ineffectuality as his scandal, as what his detective sergeants cum escorts “did not know about his goings on was not worth knowing...from a novelist’s point of view” (*VB* 11). However, despite excusing Outrage’s epithet—“the Right Honorable Rape”—as more of a “pun about his name than a criticism of the conduct of his love affairs,” the emphasis on his “liability to panic” damns Prime Minister of last week as ineffective and weak, hardly the man Waugh desires to run his country (*VB* 11).

the Jesuit hints at his knowledge of the scandal and attempts to curb further trouble—“The baroness had better return immediately” as the “waiter...has a brother at the Japanese Embassy” (*VB* 49). Simultaneously the call reveals his allegiances, in that the same courtesy had not been extended to his younger counterparts. However, his warning to Outrage is not entirely altruistic: Outrage will “be in office tomorrow,” and as they have much to discuss (and Rothschild’s character is already *not* the portrait of morality), it could very well be that Rothschild gains more from preventing the relationship reaching scandalously international heights than Outrage does (*VB* 49). Certainly, the secrecy of the telephone conversation corroborates his behavior during Lady Metroland’s party, as both Rothschild and Outrage were seen to be “plotting with enthusiasm” in Lord Metroland’s study (*VB* 101). While their discussion is only ever mentioned as “statesmanship and foreign policy,” there are perhaps more serious matters afoot, as even Lord Metroland finds the plotting “not at all in his line,” preferring “a good scrap” in the Commons, “those orgies of competitive dissimulation,” and the occasional “sonorous speech to the Upper House” (*VB* 101). However, as exaggerations tend to do, the overwhelming element of secrecy transitions the scene into comedy. The image is ridiculous: three, relatively large statesmen, crammed behind the curtains and hiding in illustration of Waugh’s darker insinuations of the church and state conspiring together—or else, in league with each other. Despite the lunacy of the scene—of Metroland “cigar erect” (*VB* 102) and “still smoking” (*VB* 102) behind the curtain, of Balcairn protesting at having to tug his beard off without soaking it first in hot water—with all the “plotting” (*VB* 101) and “conspiring” (*VB* 97) taking place, it is little wonder that the most obscure man out of the three statesmen would be paranoid enough about the presence of “spies everywhere” to lead the charge against the bearded stranger. Despite the

dismissal of Balcairn as an overestimation (*VB* 103), the reality is that a threat is still present, as Greenberg observes, in the press itself:

The specter of espionage, arising in the customs house when Adam is seen as a potential anarchist, reappears when Simon penetrates Margot's party disguised as a clergyman in a false beard. The leaders of the older generation – Rothschild, Outrage, and Metroland – expose him in a scene that parodies the genre of the spy novel... (Greenberg 64)

The irony of course of the gossip writer in such a situation is that first, he has drawn more attention than he has observed—in that, because of his disguise, “several people were asking about him” (*VB* 97)—and despite getting as close to a “scoop” as one could by stumbling into Lord Metroland's study, Balcairn telephones back useless drivel on Mrs Ape's performance in exemplification of the single-track mind of this younger generation of party-goers. Somewhat ironically as well, the three “Great Men” (*VB* 98) participate in the gossip of authority figures that does have relative control over the plot of the novel and the fate of the characters: as Rothschild forecasts the “war that's coming” (*VB* 113) in a moment that provides insight into the psychology of the modern era. Despite distancing himself from the younger generation, he must be somewhat familiar with their behavior: the Jesuit pays enough attention to Adam to call to mind idle details about their first meeting and his new family (gossip or otherwise), and even disappears finally by “mounting his motor cycle,” the machine that roared as loudly as the 20's (*VB* 113). The suspicious reader would suggest that Rothschild takes pleasure and hedges his bets by forecasting war: after all, the Rothschilds have historically loaned to governments (and most likely profited) from war, and his donning of “overall trousers” to conduct “much business...before he went to bed” would seem to suggest that he is outfitting himself to

muckrake before the war. A kinder eye would see that mechanics wear overalls during the races, making Rothschild the mechanic for English foreign affairs and policy. Despite all the secrecy and apparent self-centeredness, the Jesuit could actually be trying to keep the machine of England well oiled and sturdy for another lap around the track: whether this machine is the economy headed toward global financial meltdown, or a tank into World War II, is another matter entirely. Father Rothschild's presence in the text is consequently as cryptic as Mrs Ape's motivations for remaining in England: however—as Waugh makes it entirely known through their exaggerations—neither the Jesuit nor the evangelist is “an ideal spiritual guide” (Davis 140). With or without Rothschild's oil changes, with the young people steering, the motor car of England is set to run straight off the race course.

Chapter 3

ONE'S FIRST PARTY: The Narcissistic-Blindness of the Body and the Younger Generation

Sitting in the driver's seat of that "Made in Britain" machine, the Bright Young People race as through the decaying English countryside and past the Doubting Halls as though they've stolen it. And indeed, in a certain fashion, they have. They have swilled back their problems with champagne, and drunkenly clambered behind the wheel of an English Plunkett-Bowse, and promptly driven into the Italian Futurist vehicle before taking a wrong left turn at Church Corner and speeding out of control. They have borrowed and broken without paying the damages. As such, if the Bright Young People are representative of an entire generation—that generation "lost" in between the panic of World War I and the binge drinking that followed—then Agatha Runcible's complaint in the carriage with the Younger Set calls to mind the narcissistic blindness²⁷ of a generation trapped in a modern age they can't afford, and stuck in the denial that they have been abandoned in a burgeoning penniless wasteland:

'One awful thing is we haven't got a car. Miles broke it, Edwards, I mean, and we simply can't afford to get it mended, so I think we shall have to move soon.

Everything's getting rather broken up, too, and dirty, if you know what I mean.

Because, you see, there aren't any servants, only the butler and his wife, and they are always tight now. So demoralizing. Mary Mouse has been a perfect angel, and

²⁷ This is a term fabricated for my own use to explicate and expound the mentality of the Bright Young People (and like-minded persons) as circumstantiated in their era.

sent us great hampers of caviar and things ... She's paying for Archie's party tonight, of course.' (VB 29)

Very Drunk-Making

Well into the early hours of the morning, the drunken ruckus could still be heard echoing in the St. George's Baths, clambering for another cocktail, another round. Spilling out in a flood of bathing costumes as the average Londoner headed to work, the carousing younger set were guided by police into taxis and buses home. The infamous Bath and Bottle Party ended in numerous exaggerated accounts splashed across the gossip columns, and a coincidental 'forgetfulness' on the part of the Bright Young People. Eyewitness accounts²⁸ embellish the reality of Noël Coward's 'marvelous party,' of Evelyn Waugh's "*what a lot of parties*" (VB 123):

'Great rubber horses and flowers floated about in the water, which was illuminated by colored spotlights. Many of those present brought two or three bathing costumes, which they changed in the course of the night's festivities. Cocktails were served in the gallery, where the cocktail-mixers evidently found the heat intolerable, for they also donned bathing costumes at the earliest opportunity. A special cocktail christened the Bathwater Cocktail, was invented for the occasion.' (Taylor 5)

The splendor of such an event was characteristic of the age, traditionally haunted by midnight capers and scavenger hunts and extravagant masquerades. There is hardly a moment in literary

²⁸ The quotation here from Taylor comes from a man named Tom Driberg, who is recorded as having attended Midnight Mass with Waugh on Christmas Eve, 1930. (Page 31)

discussion of Waugh's early work in which his drinking or attendance at such affairs is *not* mentioned: however, we might postulate the infamous 'Impersonation Party'²⁹ and hoaxes as analogous to the modernist's effort to repaint³⁰ the individual. Whatever the set had portended to be, whatever Waugh had spurned them as, even as the band had packed up the stage, the "indefatigable maiden ladies of Chelsea and Mayfair, dyspeptic noble-men and bald old wits still caper...as 'the Bright Young People'" (Taylor 29). In this throng of undulating limbs of cocaine-powdered noses and Gin-soaked costumes were those vile bodies—the lithe and sprightly, newly decrepit and corrupted, Modern Era incarnate.

The Mayfair set remained in the public eye throughout the 1920s, dazzling much of the press and stoking general criticism with each escapade. Their popularity was such that there is a

²⁹ The Impersonation Party is a notable image from the Bright Young People's history: each "of the guests was asked to represent some well-known personality," with "The *Tatler*...on hand to photograph the revelers" (Taylor 78). Yet, the party serves a dual purpose in our reading. The first is to confirm the narcissism of the group, in that "a vigilant self-absorption...led several of the guests to come not as starts of stage or screen but as each other" (Taylor 78).

³⁰ While previous generations attempted to address the subject as the individual—to delineate its space on canvas with careful detail and attention paid to the face and body—we see in Waugh both the hand of a cubist and impressionist at work. If we define "modernism" as an attempt to repaint the individual, caught in in the interwar period and between emblems of the past and future (i.e. his father and his motor-car) we can extract from Waugh's "In Defence of Cubism" reasoning to as their blurred depiction. If Waugh believes that art should present "surely the impression that objects give," and thus in a period of generational perversion, it would only make sense that depictions embody some of that distortion: "we are not to suppose that the Cubist receives the impression of a maze of innumerable geometrical figures, but he must use some means of putting down his sensations" ("Cubism" 7). The individual is therefore seen simultaneously clearly and crookedly. Rather than distinctly defined by stringent moral codes, the body of the modern individual is pressured from all sides. He no longer could be blurred haphazardly into his world: rather his image pops in the thick, abrasive lines of Futurist and Cubist painting, a frighteningly fragmented self-portrait, an honest reflection of a blitzkrieged generation.

distinction—generally forgotten by today’s standards—between a ‘bright young thing’³¹ and the Bright Young People themselves:

Much less exact is the description ‘Bright Young Thing.’ Again, this was in general use very soon after the end of the First World War, but the meaning is all-purpose, as imprecise in its way as ‘flapper.’ A Bright Young Person may have been a Bright Young Thing, but not all Bright Young Things were Bright Young People... Used in this way, ‘Bright Young Thing’ had a wide currency throughout the 1920s and beyond, variously employed as a means of identification, an archetype (as in newspaper articles about ‘What the bright young thing is thinking’) and as an advertising tool designed to reach anyone between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. (Taylor 22)

Thus the characters of *Vile Bodies*—distinctly labeled as the “Bright Young People” (*VB* 14)—are intended directly as caricatures of Waugh’s associations, even if he and known members of the group sought to distance themselves from affiliation as much as possible. As Taylor noted as well, Beverly Nichols categorically denied Evelyn Waugh’s Noël Coward’s, and his own involvement with the rambunctious group. Yet letters and diaries reveal Waugh’s flirtation with the group: he writes frequently to Henry Yorke and Harold Acton, referencing parties thrown by the Guinnesses (known intimately to Waugh as ‘Bryan & Diana’). Coupled with days of drinking and a penchant for gossip³² Waugh’s behavior (as chronicled in his diaries

³¹ This distinction remains especially pertinent today, as Stephen Fry’s 2003 film—a re-envisioning of Waugh’s *Vile Bodies*—takes the former name, implicating that the satirical eye in general is focused on an entire generation rather than the select group Waugh originally addressed.

³² In a letter from July 20th, 1929, he writes to Henry Yorke that during his recent encounter with Nancy Mitford, he “formed a clear impression that she & Robert are secretly married or is that my novelists imagination?” (Amory 36).

and revisited in letters) only confirms his participation in the group, even if he participated rather unwittingly. In a letter to Henry Yorke he conveys his desire to avoid the group of socialites that normally splash across the headlines (ironically so, as the Guinnesses are well known in society pages as a poster-couple for the Bright Young People):

‘Are you going to Bryan & Diana’s party. I might go up for it if I thought there would be anyone who wouldn’t be too much like the characters in my new book.’
(Amory 36)

Furthermore, in a letter in the same month to Harold Acton, he references reports of Acton’s presence at such excursions, while indicating his initial belief that the Bright Young People would find his new novel (*Vile Bodies*) relatively distasteful:

‘I see your name often in the papers, reported as appearing at parties. I nearly came up again today for Bryan’s party but I feel so chained to this novel. I am sure you will disapprove of it. It is a welter of sex and snobbery written simply in the hope of selling some copies.’ (Amory 37)

Indeed, the belief that *Vile Bodies* would not sit well with the Bright Young People—for having thrown a particularly smarting punch at the group by caricaturing several members—is reflected more shallowly in a preliminary warning:

Waugh had no particular wish to write about the Bright Young People *per se*, and in the typescript of *Vile Bodies* there is this angry prefatory note:

BRIGHT YOUNG PEOPLE AND OTHERS KINDLY NOTE THAT ALL CHARACTERS
ARE WHOLLY IMAGINARY (AND YOU GET FAR TOO MUCH PUBLICITY
ALREADY WHOEVER YOU ARE).

They interested him only as yet another helpless group of people tossed in the modern storm... (Carpenter 185)

We must note that Carpenter interprets the note as bitter and finds Waugh's interest in the *Bright Young People* merely circumstantial. However, it would be the moralist's and traditional satirist's tendency to interpret the parenthetical as 'angry'—perhaps colored in part by the use of capital letters—when, given the comedic context, the note is likely added in jest. Given the book's dedicatory 'with love' to Bryan & Diana Guinness, Waugh may be exercising the same facetious technique from his role in the Bruno Hat Exhibition in 1929, an elaborate hoax "which introduced to the public a fake modernist painter" (Green 208-209). The hoax performed as well as any scripted play: with Brian Howard's paintings as props, and Tom Mitford in costume as the fictive Bruno Hat, Waugh's contribution to the 'party trick' (composing catalogue notes for the paintings) was clearly an opportunity to practice writing nonsense in serious overtures for a bit of a laugh.

Consequently, even if Waugh did not vociferously identify with the members of his generation, he is familiar enough with their habits and parties to warn them, somewhat sardonically, of the fiction following. Indeed, as acknowledged earlier by Taylor³³, denial of participation was common amongst the *Bright Young People*, while mostly bright young things reveled in their title. If the avant-garde are said to lead the charge of societal trend as the vanguard from the upper-class, and if 'bright young thing' can be bandied about to any rambunctious youth, the *Bright Young People* sought distinction in sophistication. And sophistication means keeping one's distance. Incidentally, a self-denial of his participation

³³ Here, we note specifically that Taylor has surmised from his reading that "Waugh was anxious to distance himself from his material," which was a "common affectation among 1920s partygoers" (Taylor 8).

replicates the plague of the the younger set: the ‘narcissistic-blindness’³⁴ of the individual in the modern age.

Although his characters have been criticized as contemptuously flat, there is a certain undeniable sense of individuality in *Vile Bodies* that stems from an apotheosis of the self and glorification of self-love. It is little wonder that Adam Fenwick-Symes is writing his autobiography at such a young age: with the hyper-centralization of the ‘I’ enforced by the sensationalist press obsessed with the new celebrity, one would expect a plethora of autobiographies to flood the text. Yet these members of the avant-garde were advanced to a fault. Having spent their developing years in war and darkness, perhaps a certain part of the younger generation anticipated its return. According to Taylor, the silent film actress, Brenda Dean Paul, wrote “looking back from the wasteland of the mid-1930s, she had:

‘the recollection of turgid water and thousands of bobbing champagne corks, discarded bathing caps and petal-strewn tiles as the sun came out and filtered through the giant skylights of St. George’s Baths, and we wended our way home.’ This is a characteristic image of the Bright Young People’s world: the thought of sorrowing in sunlight, good times gone, the myriad champagne corks bobbing away on a stream turned unexpectedly chill. (Taylor 6-7)

The ‘end of the party’ was certainly a sobering thought, and Waugh’s fiction takes us for a darker turn. The rise of Narcissism in the imminent wasteland of the modern world necessitates action: rather than let the world consume him, the Narcissist must consume himself.

Consequently, as the roar of the Twenties died, the parties dulled, the drinking (which provides

³⁴ This is a term fabricated for my own use to explicate and expound the mentality of the Bright Young People (and like-minded persons) as circumstantiated in their era.

disorientation from the plot) becomes the daily affair, decay becomes the only certainty and suicide—the ultimate act of narcissism³⁵—becomes the norm. Therefore, as the salient Bright Young Persons of their fiction, behind the façade of Agatha Runcible and the masquerade of Adam Fenwick-Symes' marriage to Nina Blount, Waugh places the younger generation.

Too Shaming: Agatha and the Bright Young Woman

Agatha Runcible's flirtation with the limelight rounds off a host of 'unangelic angels' donning pink noses, Hawaiian costume and Chéruit frocks. From her elaborate dress to her fondness for drink, it is clear that Waugh has Bacchanalized the party-going, fashionable modern woman. Even the meekest characters, Miss Mouse, cannot help but feel the rousing "pit-a-pat" of her heart:

How she longed to tear down her dazzling frock to her hips and dance like a Bacchante before them all. (*VB* 53)

The almost exhibitionist behavior of the Bright Young Woman and her female acquaintances present the pretense of permanence in drunken revelry and self-indulgent orgy: this self absorption with self-pleasure prohibits the morally-cognizant realization that their brightness will one day end. Thus, as the Narcissistic self is unsustainable and blind to its own faults, Waugh's exaggeration of women's behavior in the 1920s drags their bodies towards inevitable suicide.

³⁵ This idea is adapted from a book originally penned by Eric F. Langley which focuses on the writings of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Superficially, the weight of time would force the reader to differentiate between epistemologies of the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries, but the Renaissance conceptualization of the individual is not entirely incompatible with the development of the celebrity in the Modern Age. Although the definition of suicide as the ultimate act of narcissism is my own, both Langley's work and my own extrapolations will be addressed in "Too Shaming: Agatha and the Bright Young Woman".

To a certain degree, Waugh's exaggeration of the lasciviousness of the modern woman represents an abstraction from the Victorian ideal. However, we might also consider the female characters as an exaggeration of an archetype already present in Modernist literature: specifically, Greenberg draws comparisons of *Vile Bodies* to both Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson*, and, more appropriately, Aldous Huxley's *Antic Hay*. Indeed, it is in the latter satire that we find a more critical lens through which the younger generation is subjugated. If we consider first how Huxley vulgarizes the feminine form—distinguishing the transition from Victorian conceptions of virtuous to the modern woman—we might define a baseline from which we can determine the degree of exaggeration in Waugh's fiction.

In Aldous Huxley's 1930 essay "Vulgarity in Literature," the female virtues—"to be pale, to have no appetite, to swoon at the slightest provocation"—were once considered:

the signs of maidenly good breeding. In other words, when a girl was marked with the stigmata of anaemia and chronic constipation, you knew she was a lady.

Virtues are generally fashioned (more or less elegantly, according to the skill of the moral *courtier*) out of necessities. Rich girls had no need to work...European fashion had decreed that the elegant should have all her viscera constricted and displaced by tight lacing. In a word, the rich girl lived a life scientifically calculated to make her unhealthy. A virtue was made of humiliating necessity, and the pale ethereal swooner of romantic literature remained for years the type and mirror of refined young womanhood. (Huxley, "Vulgarity in Literature" 8)

In the "humiliating necessity" of the virtuous woman and with his treatment of the feminine form—with the feminine becoming decidedly unfeminine in its vulgarity—Huxley could not

help but be tempted to the role of Emblazoner,³⁶ parsing his more sexualized female characters into mere assemblages of limbs. Huxley's treatment of the feminine form can thus be our starting point, as he extenuates traditional values into a moral arc, while Waugh's attention is placed more conscientiously in his effort to exaggerate. However, in *Antic Hay*, there is a distinction made—which might be better classified as between 'adulteress' and 'socialite'—which isolates the Bright Young Woman from her eroticized generation. The 'adulteress' appears as a tangle of limbs clothed by a fleshy pink reminiscent of the dichotomy between a female's blush and her more carnal areas: as Gumbriel, Huxley's 'Complete Man', withdraws from Rosie's quarters, he cannot help but be tempted by her body clad in a pink kimono, "soft and secret, still more secret beneath the pink folds" (Huxley, *Antic Hay* 128). Crucially here—although Gumbriel is the seduced, while Rosie, carried in his arms and "deposited...on the rosy catafalque of the bed" as preamble to intercourse, stiffens and does "her best to pretend she [is] dead" (*AH* 123)—it is Rosie who is the "devilish female," the "conscientious hedonist" (*AH* 119). By contrast, Myra Viveash—in the trappings and "alien elegance" of a Bright Young Woman, with her "tall tubed hat and silk faced overcoat, [and] cloak of flame-coloured satin" (*AH* 61)—has been crushed by the passing times, her breath constantly on the verge of "expiring" under the weight of the modern world. After all, it is Myra who is constrained by the imagination of the Modernist Male Artist, just as her very portrait has been "distorted" and "made longer and thinner than she really was...leaning backwards a little from the surface of the canvas, leaning sideways too" as though

³⁶ I reference here theory in Jonathan Sawday's *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* as preface to the patriarchal (circumscribed in the societal) necessitation of treating the female body as a sum of parts rather than an individual.

seen “through a tornado” (*AH* 83). Where the ‘adulteress’ is the conscientious hedonist, Myra is the “poor thing” who must be:

Talking to herself. Must be cracked, must be off her head. Or perhaps she took drugs. That was more likely: that was much more likely. Most of them did nowadays. (*AH* 179)

Under such consideration, Myra Viveash is much more the literary prototype to the exaggerated Bright Young Woman parading as Agatha Runcible in *Vile Bodies*. She has been painted thus—her body physically contorted by the avant-garde painters in her association—yet Huxley avoids implying direct physical exaggeration of her features. Where Myra commands from the passenger seat—“Drive, drive, drive,” (*AH* 288)—Agatha takes the reins, driving the motor car “Faster...Faster...” (*VB* 191) off the of the race track. If we hold Myra Viveash as the literary prototype to Agatha Runcible, the hypothesis of the latter’s madness and suicide are all the more plausible as an exaggeration of its source.

Before we can come to terms with Agatha’s role in *Vile Bodies*, we must first address her counterparts: in other words, in order to define Agatha as an abstraction from the ideal woman, we must a consider a more minor characterization of the ideal woman that Waugh also bastardizes—when, in accordance with traditional moral satires, the archetype should not have been treated as such. In continuation of our framework from Huxley’s satires, both types—‘adulteress’ and ‘socialite’—exist within Waugh’s work: however, the distinction between Huxley’s dichotomized woman is distinctly absent, as Waugh presents a depiction of the modern woman which blurs and bends her, as though the entire sex were meant to be seen through the ‘tornado’. In order to explicate the dynamism of the female form, we might first consider the treatment of Mrs Ape’s angels—named after virtues, yet far from virtuous. In particular, their

promiscuity and “red noses³⁷” (*VB* 95) embody a vulgar twist on both traditional and Victorian conceptions femininity. Fittingly, rather than preserve one guiding sense of femininity, Waugh perverts the lot of them, beginning with the angels—celestial beings who *should* present the moral ideal. Mrs Ape’s reminder—“You’re angels, not a panto, see?”—falls on deaf ears, as their childish antics, red noses, pinching, and flirtations befit a harem of Columbines much more (*VB* 10). No longer Patmore’s Angel in the House³⁸, the angels are free give in to “*smut again*” (*VB* 95) and again. Thus polluted, these virtues turn into “beasts, swine, cads” (*VB* 94) as they chastise Chastity (ironically) for “[taking] up with Mrs Panrast³⁹” (*VB* 93)—a connection which would color their ‘orgies’ as a more self-indulgent affair: consequently, in a basic linguistic conception of the word, the homoerotic love is an extension of self-love. Although Waugh distinguishes the scene as an interrogation, given “precisely and judiciously... for this was no orgy,” the parenthetical comment informing the reader of the setting speaks volumes: even if there is nothing explicitly sexual in the trial, the very fact that their courtroom is Lady Metroland’s schoolroom (which doubles as a bedroom) anticipates Metroland’s attempt to recruit

³⁷ The recurring image of a ‘red nose’ is likely to do with a definition from the 16th and 17th centuries: “A person who has a red nose as a result of drinking; a drunkard” (OED). Consequently, Mrs Ape’s comment— “They’ll think it’s a temperance meeting to see you like that” (*VB* 95) with a red nose— refers fittingly to the excessive drinking characteristic of the time period, which Waugh satirizes from a position of equal guilt.

³⁸ This remark is made especially in respect to all traditional values of fidelity, as during the war, many soldiers were expected to return home to find their wives’ infidelity—a matter which we shall return to in “Too Awful: Adam and the Bright Young Man.”

³⁹ Given that Mrs Panrast—an “awful-looking woman” (*VB* 51) — has already been mistaken for the masculine Mrs Ape, and that Chastity “thought she *was* a man” (*VB* 94), it is likely that Waugh portrays Panrast as ‘butch’ to corroborate the gossip as to the status of her marriage, as well as insinuate her reason for divorce. If indeed we are to treat Mrs Panrast as a lesbian—for she “looks like a man and—and she *goes on* like a man” (*VB* 94) —then pinching between the angels becomes all the more perverse.

Chastity (*VB* 94).⁴⁰ Conjoined with the implication that the angels gave into orgies “sometimes in their bedroom,” if the angels can be said to play ‘homoerotically’ (in a more misogynistic and equally contemporaneous sense of the word) and work ‘sexually’, then, when confronted with certain destruction, their only chance of absolution is the abdication of self-possession (*VB* 94).

With her self-absorption and constant pleasure-seeking, it is somehow almost fitting that Chastity should be found as one of Lady Metroland’s prostitutes, cozying up to the General in room with blinds drawn, “shutting out that sad scene” (*VB* 224) of war and wasteland. She is found nameless and struggling to remember her identity: she was “called Chastity once,” then ‘Bunny’ by some soldiers at Salisbury Plain, ‘Emily’ by a white-haired American doctor, “*numéro mille soixante dix-huit*” in Paris (*VB* 223). The devolution of her name follows the trajectory of her abuse, detailing the external stripping of her individuality along with her identity: she is first given a nickname; then another female’s name by a doctor using her body as a replacement for his wife; and finally, sent to the East by a group of men, she is no longer a

⁴⁰ Lady Metroland’s less glamorous intentions have been insinuated on a number of occasions. Here, we refer to the interchange discussed in the section entitled “God’s Ape,” yet we would be remiss if we did not note that there is another young woman previously entrapped in Lady Metroland’s schemes. In a discussion between Kitty Blackwater and Fanny Throbbing—whom, we might first note, both bear modern euphemisms for vagina as a first name—Fanny’s derisive remark on Agatha Runcible’s behavior—“I wonder Viola allows her to go about like that. If she were my daughter...” (*VB* 26)—is quickly rebuked by Kitty. As she reminds Fanny that “[her] daughter” (*VB* 26) is most likely in a similar, if not worse situation, it is evident that Lady Metroland’s prostitution ring is well-known amongst certain members of the societal circle (as it should be, for she had previously been under threat of trial in *Decline and Fall*): “I am afraid she has severed her connection with Lady Metroland...they think that she is in some kind of touring company” (*VB* 27). The depravity of Fanny’s daughter’s situation slips by almost unnoticed, but excavating her fate within the larger context of the ‘bright young woman’ leads to darker implications. Given the numerous implications of sexual contact between even just Adam and Nina—Adam drunkenly slumbers “with his head in her lap” (*VB* 55)—it is overwhelmingly apparent that “girls seem to know so much nowadays” that previous generation had only learned firsthand from sexual experience during marriage: the danger of course comes with their systemic blindness, in that as many of the young women will ultimately end up being taken advantage of in one or another.

person, just a mere tangle of limbs and a serial code. We must remind ourselves here that Waugh insists on referring to her still as Chastity—almost in spite of her own confusion as to her name, and implying the narrator’s insistence on struggling for the preservation of the self. At the very least, the narrator would seem reluctant to let the last vestige of Virtue be crushed under the weight of a grotesquely modern world.

Chastity’s fate, then, is the fate of the narcissistic self when confronted with external pressures. In that sense of mutually assured self-destruction (of the internal and external worlds) we can apply Langley’s theory from *Suicide and Narcissism*. In his terms, both narcissists and self-murders “have mutual affinity both in the nature of their impulses towards self-assertion and absorption, and in the very specific vocabularies of their expression:

Together, the suist and the suicide...stand as negative exemplars of excessive self-subjection and self-involvement, as advocates of gratuitously isolationist self-sufficiency. Proffered in indictment of what is perceived of as a classically informed inclination towards systematized introspection, reflection, and self-scrutiny, the suicide and the narcissist are cautionary figures of immoderate individualism.” (Langley 2)

Although Langley’s lens narrows on the Early Modernists and the Shakespearean stage, the hyper-centralization of the individual is specific to both the Renaissance and Modern epistemologies; therefore, in application to the Modern Era, I would like to extend Langley’s theory. In *Suicide and Narcissism*, he draws from the Ovid’s Narcissus, seeing the “immaculate self-absorption of the narcissist and...the fragility of a purely self-constituted subjectivity” in the attractive youth, whose “self-immersion...is revealed as suicidal” (Langley 1). His reader is reminded that narcissism is “where the self-lover’s self-involvement is concomitant with his self-

destruction” while suicide is “where the self-loather both takes his time, asserts his agency, and takes his life, asserting nothing” (Langley 9); however, the application of such theory is dangerous in that to allow the suicide in the twentieth century is to cater towards a moralist reading. While prominent characters in *Vile Bodies* may commit self-obliterating acts that serve—for all intents and purposes—as self-murder in its loosest materialization, the absent violence prohibits a moralist reading. To put it simply, we cannot read Waugh as a moralistic satire because there is not enough punitively gruesome death. Consequently, as much as suicide becomes a consequence of narcissistic-blindness, the unfulfillment of the self-murderer—that is to say, its incompleteness or dissatisfaction—prohibits absolution and condemns characters to wasteland.

Despite a similar weight of emphasis, the individual is composed differently in the Modern Era. Without sacrificing too much detail, where the Renaissance man burgeons on the eve of creation, of scientific discovery and innovation, the emphasis is on the ‘new’ rather than the traditional. Abiding by an Elizabethan Protestantism, the temperament of religion (particularly in reference to the conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism, replete with Spenserian Bowers of Bliss and Archimago typecasts) may be seen as destructive, but dually and overwhelmingly progenitive, in that the sacraments of one were demonized and vilified in the creation of the other. By contrast, this hypertension of creation-destruction⁴¹ is inverted in the Modern Era. Automobiles, trains, telephones, gramophones—in such a period of innovation that

⁴¹ This idea of interlacing creation and destruction is simple, yet hardly unnatural: in a simple review historical economics, the Industrial Revolution hinges on the phrase “creative-destruction,” an idea which espouses that with economic progress and technological invention, the cost of “destruction” of one job sector (i.e. farming) is counterbalanced—if not, outweighed—by the “creation” of other job sectors (i.e. manufacturing). Culturally and socially (chronologically contingent with the Industrial Revolution and Empire) we see “creative-destruction” in its inversion in the 1920s.

allowed for leisure and a marketplace for the consumer, the neon world of the Jazz Age radiates creative forces; however, such modern technological innovations occur under the umbrella of destruction⁴² and systematically beget a new sense of destruction in a capitalist-market's societal devouring of the individual. Coupled with themes of gross consumption—in particular, the rise in drug and alcohol usage, both of which equally prohibit the natural will and thus prevents the full realization of the self—Agatha's plight, covered in national papers as “news” (*VB* 50), headlines her social demise. As much as Lewis Carroll's Alice⁴³ is “keen on images” as the “modern female consumer” lost in the “commodity culture” of Wonderland, Agatha Runcible is also the nonsense⁴⁴ figure, absorbed by the same consumptive desires of the 1920s (Talairach-Vielmas 49).

In the age of the popular press and the emerging celebrity, each gossip column and photograph becomes a mirror for the ‘bright young thing’: one could go out the night before, and wake up the next morning to her face plastered across the ‘society pages’ and her name on the edge of everyone's lips. The papers' spotlight on celebrity thus molds the ‘bright young’ world

⁴² Here, we recall the fragmentation imposed upon nation-states following the Great War, otherwise known as devolutions leading inevitably toward the Second World War. Simultaneously, we can tacitly imply that the technological innovation during the war period was specifically geared towards winning the war, and much less towards evangelical desires of “job creation”.

⁴³ As Waugh's *Vile Bodies* is prefaced with a quote from Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, it is only appropriate that we consider the inspirational element of Alice, typified as the “female consumer” and her bodily mutations as representative of “the dangers that women run when roaming the streets in search of pleasure” (Talairach-Vielmas 53).

⁴⁴ It is certainly easy to find the trails of Waugh's inspiration for characterization within the origins of nonsense poetry. For hyperbole specifically, “one of the most essential techniques... is to out-hyperbolize hyperbole, doing to hyperbole what hyperbole itself does to ordinary speech” (Malcolm 42): from the visual exaggerations of bodies and nonsensical dialect, which classifies everything as either ‘divine’ or ‘too, too sick-making.’ Even the narrator holds a certain “Marlovian style of declamatory verse” (Malcolm 44) as certain scenes drenched in hyperbolized dialogue are ended with authorial exclamations overlaid with a mocking tone— “Oh Bright Young People!” (*VB* 29).

into Narcissus's reflecting pool: Agatha Runcible has seen her image captured on the front pages of newspapers, and has fallen in love. While a cursory glance would paint her as a tragic figure, such a viewpoint would lend itself readily to a moralistically inclined analysis. On the contrary, Miss Runcible appears to relish in the embroilment of the individual in scandal.

Where her dialogue screams the injustice of her treatment, the melodramatic idiolect recanting such stories derives power from the shock induced in response: thus Miss Agatha Runcible perpetuates scandal to confirm her individuality superficially in the refraction of her figure across newspapers. Having been “mistaken for a well-known jewel smuggler”⁴⁵ her “shrieks and yells” can be heard “from the next room” most likely in order to broadcast the violence and arbitrariness of her strip-search, as well as curry sympathy, as even the narrator is induced to pity her as “poor Miss Runcible” (*VB* 24). Though an image of her fixing her makeup—“working hard with lipstick and compact” (*VB* 25)—signifies a vulnerability in her mask that she must conceal, her recitation of events reads as monologue of revenge:

‘My dear, I can’t *tell* you the *things* that have been happening to me in there. The way they looked ... too, too shaming. Positively surgical, my dear, and *such* wicked old women, just like *Dowagers*, my dear. As soon as I get to London I shall ring up every Cabinet Minister and *all* the newspapers and give them all the most shy-making details.’ (*VB* 25)

Emphasis is placed immediately on the perception of events—specifically, on the “terrific wardresses” for “the way they looked”—as Miss Runcible escalates the narrator’s single-line comment into a “too, too shaming” performance of three sentences, replete with exaggerated

⁴⁵ The irony here, of course, is that Runcible most likely derives a higher degree of flattery from being mistaken for a world-renowned jewel smuggler than she is disturbed by her treatment.

syllables and seemingly false ‘my dear’s (which only seem to inflate the hyper-centralization of the first person personal pronoun in dialogue): conversation is thus no longer an equal exchange between two parties, but a diatribe of one. The conflagration of the invasive—“positively surgical” (*VB* 25)—strip-search, both in its textual occasion and Miss Runcible’s retelling, ignites the Younger Set’s excitement: rather than nauseating the moralistic audience, gossiping about her “outrageous treatment” cured their sea-sickness, and “they cheered up wonderfully” (*VB* 28). Thus the effect of scandal is so unexpected that we might, in examining their dialogue closer, take into consideration that the repetition of ‘too’—as in “too, too awful”—negates the more serious and overbearing weight originally attached to the noun that follows, crippling the “awful” into denotation as ‘commanding awe’ rather than ‘directly appalling’ (*VB* 28). Despite being “usually worth a couple paragraphs” (*VB* 50) to the money-minded gentleman columnist, the prevalence and perversity of the strip-search gossip contributes to a profitable consumption of Agatha by the news outlets, particularly as “they’re featuring her as a front-page news story tomorrow over this Customs House business” (*VB* 50). Her story is further promulgated and peddled by her own words, to the point where she embraces strangers with “*My dear*...if you’d seen me this afternoon” (*VB* 44): it is clear that Agatha derives some sense of identity as the figure solely entrenched in scandal.

The dedication of the press to her cause can be interpreted as the self-funded and narcissistic-blindness inherent in social suicide.⁴⁶ As the darling of High Society,⁴⁷ her

⁴⁶ We shall define ‘social suicide’ more generally as the act of killing one’s reputation, and therefore one’s social identity, as the two are heavily co-dependent.

⁴⁷ As the only figure thus far with apparent political connections, given the distinction of Lord Chasm (her father) as a high-ranking member of the peerage, and newspapers’ affectation for her epithet—“the Honorable Agatha” (*VB* 59)—Miss Runcible’s behavior is decidedly dishonorable. It is clear that part of the attention given to her figure is due to her heritage, but as much as she is “poor Viola Chasm’s daughter” (*VB* 26) and the “Peer’s daughter” (*VB* 35), she is also the “poor

popularization in the press invites strangers to feel sympathy, and fabricates (in its repetitive publication) the intimacy of maternity: Adam overhears “an old indignant woman at his elbow” vociferously criticizing the national attention—ironically so, for she is as guilty of a “Nasty prying [mind]” as the next—justified only by her “feelings about that girl just as though it were me own daughter” (*VB* 35). However, the overwhelming pressure of national attention—the parceling of her identity into reflections of her escapades capped at eight hundred words—drains her character of life the more she seeks to live through its publication:

Suddenly light came flooding in on Miss Runcible’s mind as once when, in her debutant days, she had gone behind the scenes at a charity matinee, and returning had stepped through the wrong door and found herself in a blaze of floodlights on the stage in the middle of the last act of *Othello*. “Oh, my God!” she said, looking round the Brown breakfast table. ‘Isn’t that just too bad of Vanburgh.’⁴⁸ He’s always doing that kind of thing. It would serve him right if we complained and he lost his job, don’t you think so, Sir James ... or ... don’t you?’ (*VB* 59-60)

At first reveling in the extraordinariness of “*Midnight Orgies at No. 10*”—Agatha “should have loved to have seen it”—the shock value of her name syntactically appears to trigger the vivid memory of her debutante days: however, the realization of her involvement precludes her innocence with an ejaculatory “Oh, my God!” (*VB* 60). On one hand, the exclamation may be

pretty” (*VB* 35) young thing slandered by papers and adored by the English public. Her actions therefore—though almost contesting the title of ‘Honorable’, which could even be bestowed mockingly—are not horrible (by national standards) to condemn her to her fate.

⁴⁸ The name ‘Vanburgh’ is already curiously present in Waugh’s short stories, yet the character associated with the name is always somewhat at a distance. As Vanburgh is hardly abused (comparatively) it could be that his inclusion marks Waugh’s deference for ancestral English names: in this case specifically, the architect and Restoration playwright, Sir John Vanburgh. In short story published just a few years before *Vile Bodies*,

a heartfelt confession of guilt, indicative that Agatha feels smothered by Othello's hands already, and flees No. 10 to escape judgment. On the other hand, it is more likely that the repetition of her initial exclamation encompasses the awkwardness of finding herself amongst the Prime Minister and his family, as well as her indignation at her reception. When she continues in her scheming to comment on the possibility of Vanburgh losing his job, her attempt to insert herself into the circle of power—highlighted in the replacement of ego-centric first personal pronouns with the suggestion, “if *we* complained” (*VB* 60, my emphasis)—ends in blank stares of quiet dismissal, as “the eyes of the Brown family” remain tacitly trained on her, and prompt her fleeing: she has been usurped in papers, as the emphasis and credit of throwing the “*most extraordinary party of the little season*” and “*the brightest party the Bright Young People have yet given*” has been awarded to “*Miss Jane Brown,*⁴⁹ *the youngest of the Prime Minister's four lovely daughters*” (*VB* 59). Even in her departure, her costume betrays her reluctance to leave the glow of flashbulbs from “the crowd of reporters and Press photographers who were already massed” and surrender her spotlight, as she “trail[s] garlands of equatorial flowers” which linger vividly in her escape (*VB* 60). In her narcissistic-blindness, Agatha Runcible fails to comprehend how any other name could take precedence in the gossip column; yet her blindness obscures the Icarian trajectory of

⁴⁹ Miss Brown's attendance at Archie Schwert's Savage party, and the events leading up to Agatha's misplacement of her latchkey, is apparently based on the story of Mary and Sibell Lygon, the daughters of Earl Beauchamp who returned home in the early hours of the morning without a door key: thus “Stranded on their Belgravia doorstep in white ball gowns, they decided that their sole solution was to walk round to...Downing Street, and demand a bed for the night” (Taylor 34-35). As a reimagining of such a scandalous story, the Lygon sisters would be representative ‘bright young things,’ and their familiarity with the Baldwins of Downing Street would implicate the increasing popularity of the Bright Young People. As a complement to Waugh's fiction, the story would expose the extent of the Bright Young People's influence on society: far from a marginalized movement, the very characters Waugh satirizes are the select part of a generation, with names popularized by the press, noble heritages passed down from the English countryside, and funds as low as the gambling artist.

her fall, augmenting to the insipid and corrosive drunkenness that results in her fatal hospitalization.

If her fleeing from No. 10 Downing Street is her fall from grace, then entering the motor-race is her suicide mission. In order to elucidate the evolution of her downwards trajectory, we must return to our previous discussion in order to address the metamorphosis of narcissism in a twentieth-century text. As we have already determined (albeit somewhat implicitly), for Waugh, the Ovidian pool and Langley's Renaissance scientist—basin and all—assume the shapes of gossip columnists: however, these reflections are not the perfect, immutable mirror image of the Renaissance, but the oscillating and imperfect refraction of light. We thus see the body in the Modern Era at the moment the reflecting water is disturbed, and as the Narcissist has divulged an image from the rippling water, the momentary perception of the self is tenuous. Self-conception is thus tied irrevocably to its source—the gossip columns and word of mouth—yet, as humans are inconstant, their words, postlapsarian by nature, collapse into devolutions and destroy the image as readily as it is built. If Rumor, in mutating, molds the reflection of the self against society, so too does the destabilization of the reflection pool invite its destruction. Consequently, Agatha's fall from grace necessitates the same self-absorbed need to obliterate the imperfect image: either by consuming in hopes of preserving the perfect image from an external (but internally-pressing and invasive) world, or in desperation to return to the image that was lost.

Marooned in hospital, Agatha answers her Grecian fate with the gusto of youthful blood: her immediate reaction to any contrary stranger or “damned rude man” is to “go up to that divine tent and get a drink” in a quest for self-affirmation⁵⁰ (*VB* 167). As drunkenness can be perceived

⁵⁰ There is something to be said here, that Agatha's calls for alcohol often hinge on situations in which she is not the central concern. She forces the group to miss the start of the motor race—arguably the most exciting time, apart from unexpected crashes and the finish—by insisting that

as a willful blindness⁵¹ on the part of the drinker, Agatha's decision to accept the responsibilities of the "Spare Driver"⁵² role assigned to her is entirely irrational: her better judgment is impaired in the same fashion as the reflecting pools of newspapers which enticed her to prostitute herself in scandal in exchange for notoriety. Simultaneously, their brassards—"strips of white linen" (*VB* 161) which stand as "badges of rank" (*VB* 162) within the racing car's pit team—create an opportunity for a different kind of Impersonation Party, and Agatha plays the game to win. Having suffered initial incompetency by waving the blue flag that "'means [the racer's] to stop next lap'" (*VB* 169)—when she knows fully well that she shouldn't have waved it (*VB* 169)—Agatha reverts her speech to repetition to get what she wants: constantly claiming "I'm spare driver...I'm the spare driver" indicates a desperate attempt, aided by liquid courage, to regain the spotlight (*VB* 173-174). Therefore, her demanding the wheel is a social suicide. We cannot rule out that Agatha did not wave the blue flag unwittingly to gain attention—she has already broken other male conventions⁵³ with narrative nonchalance—and she seems to know rather ominously

in spite of her timing, the point still stands that "a drink *would* be nice" (*VB* 167). While Archie Schwert orders their four whiskies, Agatha takes advantage of their distance from the more stimulating spectacle of the motor and attempts to retrain the spotlight on herself by highlighting her treatment: "What a pig that man was" (*VB* 167). However, her complaints are rounded off quite succinctly—she falls into uncomfortable silence after being reminded that "'My dear, it was only you'" smoking—and it becomes quite clear that her trials are no longer as titillating to the Bright Young People as they once were (*VB* 168). At the very least, to Adam, Archie Schwert, and Miles Malpractice, she is hardly the most exciting spectacle of the race: by brushing her aside rather than entertaining her nonsensical complaints, the Bright Young Men may have triggered her more desperate attempts to arrest attention.

⁵¹ The constant drinking here may be a visual abbreviation for "blind-drunk," as in "so intoxicated as to see no better than a blind man" (OED). We can call this a willful blindness, as alcohol is imbibed out of the desire of the drinker (i.e. no one forces a man to drink) and thus intoxication is willfully impairing one's better judgment.

⁵² Ironically so, as the brassard is just another costume, and assumption of identity that actually lands the Bright Young Woman in trouble (*VB* 163).

⁵³ We reference here the previous mention of her trousers, a startling dress choice for the Bright Young Women, which is condemned by older generations: a "lady" in "trousers" is just as contemptible as a gentleman "[taking] off 'is boots in the saloon bar" (*VB* 154). The style of

that her entry in the race will only lead to ““Good-bye”” (*VB* 174). Indeed, if we are to treat Agatha as the Narcissist eternally seeking pools in which to view her reflection, her desire for recognition blinds her to the dangers of the race. Consequently, as her acquiescence to the position is followed closely enough by the announcer’s updates on the race, we might view the emphasis on drinking as entirely intentional as a means of arriving at her central position. As her collision with and besting of the Italian Omega car is announced to the “Patriotic cheers...on all sides” it appears as though Agatha has succeeded in winning the attention of “the news” (*VB* 174). However, in order to retain the spotlight and fulfill her Narcissistic desires, she must let her madness take the wheel, or else be crushed by the other racers: abandoning the racetrack in an attempt to soar to new heights thus only results in the same Icarian descent. Surrounded by self-murderers⁵⁴, the only logical answer to Agatha’s final hospitalization *should* be suicide: the

dress is thus another costumed show in a “defiance of restraints” which “appeals to the latent anarchy in all of us” (Beaty 59).

⁵⁴ The absence of violent suicide is particular only to the Bright Young People themselves, as Waugh constantly references high-profile deaths. The first snags headlines as the “*Tragedy in West End Hotel*” in which Florence Ducane—“described as being of independent means” —falls “from a chandelier which she was attempting to mend” (*VB* 76). Though an “accident” on paper, the trajectory of her story—that she was “formerly connected with the stage” and “well known in business circles” —paints her Icarian fall (*VB* 76): she is most likely an actress, fallen from the grace of the silver screen, who cannot stand her new low of prostitution (she had been up in Judge Skimp’s room, and was identified there narratively as “one of his young ladies”) and swings on the chandelier to crash to her death (*VB* 76). More closely affiliated with the Bright Young People (and the cleanest suicide) Simon Balcairn’s final descent is his two column report on the Metroland’s party, which is his “last story” and “his swansong,” lyricized in the “lie after monstrous lie [which] bubbled up in his brain” (*VB* 105). The orchestrating of the gossip column...as his words conduct the organs of the *Excess* office: “The night staff of reporters, slightly tipsy...stood over the stenographer as he typed...composers snatched the sheets of copy...the subeditors began ruthlessly cutting and scrapping” (*VB* 105). As his life had already been eclipsed by an overwhelming sense of doom—every social rejection “means ruin for [him]” (*VB* 85)—it is clear that Simons death results from his profession: he, along with Lord Vanburgh, are the only relatively high-profile figures (replete with titles and pedigree) whose “profession” is “depressing” in which “literally all conversation is ‘shop’” (*VB* 85). As he has been replaced at the Metroland’s party by Lord Vanburgh—“Ruin ... She’s asked Vanburgh” (*VB* 86)—it is only in the cruel irony of the fates that Balcairn lay his head down in the oven “by

moralist here would either give her a fit good-bye, as a means of optimistically or poetically ending the most salient victim of the satirical eye, or else physically maim her. But there is little divine justice rendered in her eventual passing, which is steeped in enough ambiguity—as the last the narrator witnesses is the “stab of a hypodermic needle,” her death is implied by the hollowing ellipses and distant italics as Agatha’s consciousness fades into “... *nothing at all ... nothing*” (*VB* 200)—for literary autopsy to be suspended. However disappointingly quiet her end may be for the moralist, Agatha’s passing into madness and beyond is somehow more fitting for Waugh’s satire than suicide. Previous attempts of critics have placed Agatha as the organizational figure in the midst of chaos: for Beaty, Agatha’s “hallucinations after the crash...represent the group’s headlong rush toward destruction” (Beaty 58); Myers imagines Agatha to be a “human racing car,” who embodies the consequences of “disorder...finally [made] a moral matter” (Myers 18); and according to Davis, “Agatha knows, with the peculiar clarity of dreamers...that she and her cohorts cannot stop, that they are doomed to play their roles” in the moralist’s skit (Davis 144). Yet their attempts to pigeonhole Agatha ignore the very nature instilled in her name: just as a runcible spoon is neither fork nor spoon, chaining Miss Runcible to a singular representation is woefully ignorant of the mutability of characterization in *Vile Bodies*. We cannot drag her body to the moralist’s pyre, and claim that we must burn her for the absolution of a generation of sin: she drifts into madness well before the retributive storm of

some mischance” with his head resting on “Vanburgh’s gossip page in the *Morning Despatch*” (*VB* 106). Given his fall from societal grace, and despite referring to him within the same paragraph with the intimacy of a first name basis—as the narrator refers to Balcairn as ‘Simon’ in the moments before his death, and then in all the splendor of his title the moment he has “died” (*VB* 106)—the gossip-writer’s departure from his fictional world is treated with all the blasé tones of a man taxed by a lifetime of gossip. As he dies—as “coughing made him breathe, and breathing made him feel very ill...soon he fell into a coma and presently died” (*VB* 106)—it is as if the narrator can no longer muster excitement for the ordinary suicide.

war. On the other hand, it is through her materialist consumption and overwhelming egoism that we see self-absorption necessitates suicide, in effort to preserve the self from external forces: that, inevitably, war has been declared.

Chapter 4

Too Awful: Adam and the Bright Young Man, A Conclusion

In truth, our examination of ‘the bodies’ of *Vile Bodies* intentionally leads the reader astray. Just as a gossip columnist might strain his ear to listen to one conversation at a party, and— through the grapevine effect of storytelling—exaggerate the truth into a picture of his fancy, Waugh’s plot becomes similarly distracted, dazed and confused between the lines of Jesuit and evangelist, sobriety and drunkenness, decades-old establishment and revolting youth. For all his hatred of Matisse, he certainly reincarnates the struggle between Pre-Raphaelite and Modernist paintings, the tension between landscape and individual brushstroke. Waugh’s landscape, as Greenblatt reminds us, is no longer the picturesque:

All over Evelyn Waugh’s England country houses are being torn down. Hordes of men, well-trained in the art of demolition, arrive at magnificent estates, bringing with them the machines of destruction—monstrous steam shovels that undermine the most stubborn roots of culture, sledge hammers that shatter ancient rocks of tradition, grotesque iron laws that tear down the spires of religion. Nothing resists the onslaught... Weeds spring up between cracks in the floors of ancestral halls, vines force themselves into weak points of chapel walls, mosquitoes and bats invade the life of quiet drawing rooms. The disintegrating world seems at the point of a great cataclysm, of the Second Coming even, but in this dying civilization there are neither resolutions nor revelations. (Greenblatt 3)

It would be a misnomer to label Waugh as a traditional satirist given our previous determination that there must be a moral distinction drawn between good and evil, right and wrong in order to do so. The barriers between these oppositions have crumbled: the stone in which they were laid

and set as commandments has fractured and split beneath the insurmountable weight of the Great War. The insanity of total warfare—its challenging brutality, gratuitously dehumanizing violence, and religious abandonment—ushers in a period devoid of moral code and cemented identity. Waugh fabricates this decentralization—a “radical instability” not uncommon to any of Britain’s generations, despite Father Rothschild’s suggestion⁵⁵ (*VB* 134)—in the implementation of caustically distant dialogue: for this, there is no better example than the dialogue of Adam Fenwick-Symes.

Whether or not we take Waugh’s critics’⁵⁶ assessment seriously—that the biographical similarities of Adam to Waugh provide reason enough to label him as the mouthpiece for Waugh’s own grievances—Adam’s placement as protagonist is by default rather than by design.

⁵⁵ The critics have a tendency to remember Rothschild solely for his elocution on the “radical instability” of the age: “I know very few young people, but it seems to me that they are all possessed with an almost fatal hunger for permanence... these divorces show that. People aren’t content just to muddle along nowadays” (*VB* 132). Initial analysis would confirm the separation between older and younger generations, as the three Great Men hold “these young people” (*VB* 132) at an arm’s length, classifying each by their parentage and familial ties rather than individual name: “That stepson of yours, Metroland, and that girl of poor old Chasm’s and young Throbbing’s brother” (*VB* 132). However, the attempt to distance themselves from the young people—to keep their feet high and dry from the oncoming waves of ‘radical instability’ amongst the youth—ultimately fail. Despite the representative older generation’s linguistic attempts to remove themselves from the equation, they are—as Lord Metroland finds—surrounded on all sides: as she surveys his study from a “very comfortable chair,” he takes note of his “shelves of books – the *Dictionary of National Biography*... a tray with decanters and a plate of sandwiches, his evening mail” (*VB* 134). Yet Metroland’s observations begin and end with the same reflection: “A radical instability, Rothschild had said, radical instability” (*VB* 134). As Metroland’s survey of his study is locked in on both ends by the phrase, Waugh entrenches Metroland—and subsequently, the older generation as well—in the same radical instability, thus prohibiting another attempt by critics to place Younger Set as the target of the satire.

⁵⁶ I refer to here the possible accusations of author masquerading as protagonist: Garnett obsesses over the influence of Waugh’s “self-portrait in his diaries [as] the model for, or at least a strong influence on” Adam Fenwick-Symes (Garnett 62); Myers applies chronological justifications to the second half of *Vile Bodies*, interpreting Waugh’s own “‘essential identity’ [as] most at risk in *Vile Bodies*” as seen through the actions of Adam (Myers 18); and Carpenter identifies “perhaps a glimpse of the Waugh’s married life in Adam and Nina’s conversation after their first night together” (Carpenter 190).

The aspiring writer finds himself central to the majority of scenes, but shuns the spotlight: he becomes a close acquaintance of the Bright Young People and regular attendee of their parties, yet defines himself as an outsider: he gets “into the carriage *with* the Younger Set” (*VB* 28, my emphasis) yet he is not a part *of* them. Essentially, Adam is labeled by critics as the ‘central character’ on accident:

The action is generally related to Adam Fenwick-Symes; but from the beginning paragraphs, it is obvious that Waugh has chosen to minimize the narrative role of the hero and to put the burden of narration and the responsibility of thematic development and tonal control on the narrator, who functions freely and independently of the central character. The narrator is free to shift his view from scene to scene and his interest in one minor character to another and to observe and comment as omniscient. The central character in this novel does not have the important function of organizational device; although he is important to theme, the major thematic development occurs because of the narrator’s interpretation of events; yet, the central character is essential to the tone. (Cook 83)

Given Adam’s central attachment to the plot, it is only suitable that we should conclude by addressing his contribution to the text.

If we are to examine the distancing effect of Adam’s dialogue, we might first consider that Waugh has previously revealed in private letters that all of his characters are gossip writers,⁵⁷ and indeed, their dialogue follows as such. In what we might conceive as a traditional elements of a gossip column, a tension is maintained between the entertaining and the

⁵⁷ Here, I refer to a letter in September of 1929, addressed to Henry Yorke, which states formally: “All the characters are gossip writers” (Amory 39).

informative: Waugh recognizes both elements, and exploits them by dragging his dialogue towards exaggeration. It is in this hyperbolization of dialogue that Waugh allows for the tone to remain relatively distant. This enforced alienation fits directly into the structure of dark humor, which demands the simultaneous “distance of the narrator and the one dimensionality of characters”:

In order for shocking events to remain comic, they cannot arouse too much sympathy in the reader, and this is achieved by presenting characters who cannot be known in any depth, whose fears, longings, and desires of the heart remain unexplored and unrevealed. In *Vile Bodies* Waugh gives us a hero, if the word can be attributed to a character so insubstantial, who reacts to any circumstance that comes his way, from his loss of 1000 pounds (and therefore his fiancé) to finding himself on the ‘biggest battlefield in the history of the world,’ with the same distracted response. The reader is able to laugh at the various circumstances the characters find themselves in because the characters themselves seem to see little that is dire in their circumstances. (Colletta 89)

However, Colletta’s interpretation is still complicated: we cannot paint Adam as the ‘hero’ simply because war and tragedy is inevitable.

A gossip-writer out of necessity,⁵⁸ Adam’s relationship with Nina Blount reveals the tendency of his generation towards independence and relative indifference, as “*Vile Bodies* is not a love story”: “Adam and Nina are significant only as representatives of the sickness of an entire

⁵⁸ Having lost his thousand pounds, Adam “then became Mr Chatterbox” (*VB* 108): as he rather ‘falls into’ the role (he is approached during lunch at Espinosa’s by the *Daily Excess*’s social editress on a completely different subject, and ends with accepting a ten-pound per week salary) Adam plays in dictating the major trends in gossip is systematically amplified as his relationship with Nina falls apart.

generation, and their thwarted attempt to marry is meaningful and interesting only as a symbol of the frustrated search for values of all the Bright Young People” (Greenblatt 13-14). This coldness seeps through their interactions, and second readings cast doubt as to whether they had been in love at all. Their most intimate scenes occur at great physical distances: “during the course of his correspondence, [Adam] had got engaged to be married” (*VB* 13). Rather than the passionate and heated thing flickering through the pages of D. H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley, romance in *Vile Bodies* is a thing “one could grow to be fond of after a time, like smoking a pipe” (*VB* 91): yet the whole affair makes “one feel very ill at first” to the point where even the thought of physical intimacy must be immediately taken with a healthy dose of liquor—in Nina’s case, by “cutting up a lemon and making a cocktail” (*VB* 91). If alcohol is the only antidote to “all this fuss about sleeping together” (*VB* 90), then the clinical approach to sexual acquaintance symptomatizes the desensitization and alienation of a generation: it is little wonder that they should drink excessively to feel anything at all.

Simultaneously, the language of the gossip writer—and of the Bright Young People—forbids intimacy. If we define ‘intimacy’ as not withholding the truth (or else as full and honest disclosure) then the dialogue of the Bright Young People—spoken in a “form of speech...[that] carried over the noise of the gramophone, which rendered ordinary conversation quite impossible” (Carpenter 166)—becomes all the more representative of general detachment and hopelessness that characterizes the depression-comic. Any attempt of Nina to inject emotion into her relationship with Adam is immediately noted and rebuked—“I say, Nina, you are getting sentimental” (*VB* 55): it would appear that instead of ‘sweet nothings’ and terms of endearment, the bright young person would prefer to view the world as “divine” (*VB* 55) *ad nauseam*. In their sarcastic overlays, the conversational bandying about of ‘divine’, ‘too’, and ‘bogus’ conveys the

insincerity of their dialogue: the original weight of a word no longer holds when it is stretched into longer syllables. We might even consider that the young person's exaggerated tones and random interjections of Cockney⁵⁹ serve as costumes—disguising the monotony of daily life as “too, too” much, when in reality, the constant partying and photographers are all “so *exhausting*, if nothing else” (*VB* 54). Consequently, there is no personal connection that can be made when everything becomes exaggeration—which fits the detachment of the age.

With the sheer number of divorces⁶⁰ in *Vile Bodies* all mentioned haphazardly, the absence of narrative voice alarms the reader: there is perhaps, a darker chill to the brevity of the telephoned discussion of Nina and Adam's separation created through the narrator's absence, than there is warmth in previous depictions of their relationship. In continuation of Chapter 3's discussion of the correlation of narcissism and suicide, divorce would seem a way for the self to regain its self-ishness. As marriage can be thought of a literal union, there is no longer a male and female counterpart⁶¹ but an unified self (no longer an Evelyn Gardner and Evelyn Waugh

⁵⁹ For any number of times, shallow observations are tossed out—such as Archie Schwert's comment “‘Pretty as a picture’ . . . in Cockney” (*VB* 55)—in order to convey the distinct lack of intimacy, as though this should be a rather romantic picture of Adam sleeping with “his head in [Nina's] lap” the quiet moment is jarred by Archie's crude accent.

⁶⁰ Waugh himself finds the idea of ‘unhappy marriage’ to be commonplace, as “there is nothing essentially ‘modern’ in making a mess of one's marriage” (Waugh, “Tell Us the Truth About Marriage” 94). Rather, the ‘modern’ aspect of marriage is that “people seem to grow more and more interested in the one amusement that civilization and mechanization have been quite unable to change: the simple old amusement of sex” (“Tell Us” 94). Waugh's treatment of sex as an “instinct” and as a “perfectly mild and controllable appetite,” he insinuates simultaneously that when the appetite is not controlled—as it had *not* been in amongst members of the younger generation, both in *Vile Bodies* and his own reality—then the suddenly insatiable appetite for pleasure dissolves relationships and marriages (“Tell Us” 95). This is simple enough to see that in a general division of characters, the ones in *Vile Bodies* who let themselves be consumed by earthly carnal pleasures (i.e. Chastity) are found stripped of name and and tossed aside like an unwanted toy, only to be picked up again by the next abuser.

⁶¹ For the contemporary reader, please understand that as this analysis references marriage in the 1920s (in which gender binaries were the only reality and, despite flirtations with cross-dressing,

but a Mr and Mrs Waugh). Consequently, the separation of the unified self is technically a self-abortion: we can thus label 'divorce' as the suicide of the married couple, which is fittingly abundant in the fictional work steeped in 'narcissistic-blindness'. While Adam and Nina did not marry in *Vile Bodies*, their separation is still the denial of fulfillment for the individual self. Their telephone conversation then becomes the final sterilization of the another aspect of *Vile Bodies* which could have led to moralistic reading:

'You're going to marry Ginger?'

'Yes.'

'I see.'

'Well?'

'I said, I see.'

'Is that all?'

'Yes, that's all Nina.'

'When shall I see you?'

'I don't want ever to see you again.'

'I see.'

'Well?'

'I said, I see.'

'Well, good-bye.'

'Good-bye ... I'm sorry, Adam.' (*VB* 184)

homophobia was still unacceptable) which necessitates the use of male and female as counterpart.

The recycled dialogue—‘Is that all?’ and ‘Yes, that’s all’—refuses to let the characters change the script. They are chained to repetition, at a loss for words as they are forced to regurgitate the garbled phrases from the other’s speech. This same dialogue characterized by exaggeration problematizes the conversation for the simple reason that Nina and Adam’s emotions are *false*: the party is over, and the pair must disrobe from the costume of their relationship.

The drinking and the sheer number of parties—the inebriation and false intimacies—then contribute to the overall sickness not just of a generation, but of a nation:

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 Scotland and disgusting dances in Paris—all that succession and repetition of massed humanity ... Those vile bodies ... (*VB* 123)

It is in this overload of sensation—these caricatures and exaggerations—in which the ‘depression-comic’ can be found. Just as the Bright Young People feel as though they are being tossed about, “‘just exactly like being inside a cocktail shaker,’” there is an equal sense of hopelessness on the part of the younger generation: in the midst of their partying and costuming, they are faced with a reality that is “‘too, too sick-making’” to the point where mixing another cocktail won’t fix their nausea (*VB* 14).

This is not to say that the Bright Young People are at the center of Waugh's storm. Nor is it to say that the initial storm was some reincarnation of biblical trials at the hand of the satirist. The inebriated Bright Young People are at once both guilty and innocent of the distortionary effects of the Modern Era. They are as much the cause of the distortion of the 1920s as they are the victim of their age.

Their dialogue *must* be distant. Their characters *must* be exaggerated. To portray the Younger Set in any other light would be unfaithful to the object sitting still, ready to be captured in sweeping brushstrokes. Without one element, the other would not exist—without the militaristic Evangelist, the untrustworthy Jesuit, the unvirtuous Angels or the drunken Bright Young Woman—the dialogue would float from the text as unattached. The exaggerated caricatures are thus what grounds the hyperbolized text, and the hyper-inflated diction fill the characters like balloons. Thus the insanity and nonsense of the characters' depictions is paradoxically what paints them of *Vile Bodies* on the canvas of the Modern Era in thick, bold and daring portraiture.

It is only by understanding these demands of distance and exaggeration that can we understand Adam's fate, or why he should be "oblivious to all the happy emotion pulsing near him" in the final pages. We find him "on a splintered tree stump in the biggest battlefield in the history of the world" (*VB* 220); penniless⁶² even though the drunk Major has reappeared and recognized him; loveless despite having received a letter from Nina. The only way to survive in the jaws of genuine destruction is to remain unaffected: consequently, it is not Adam's "Happy Ending" (*VB* 220) that we stumble upon, but his final surrender to "the accumulated fatigue of

⁶² The pound is, as expected, "not worth much nowadays" (*VB* 222).

two days' fighting" (*VB* 222) and to sleep, even as the "sounds of battle began to return" (*VB* 222).

Despite our analysis and preliminary conclusions, and before we can let Adam finally rest, there are critics we must address. There are those who treat *Vile Bodies* as the lesser of Waugh's bookshelf: instead of standing upright in the perfect irony of the "happy ending," the text falls flat on their lists, shoved into a few pages of cursory analysis and generally ignored. For some (including, but not limited to, Phillips and Cook) the experimental nature of *Vile Bodies* hinders analysis or direct readings, and some (i.e. Myers) go as far as to write the whole effort off as an attempt botched by the personal tragedy of Waugh's divorce:

After Chapter Six parts of *Vile Bodies* are, quite simply, badly written. Waugh seems to have lost his sense of an audience while he was writing it, and consequently of a stable position from which to engage with the chaos he depicts. The breakup of his marriage apparently deprived him of the sense that he understood those who understood him... The fact remains that Waugh persisted in writing this book, enduring as he did so the formal disintegration of his comic mode and the withering of his collusive understanding with an inscribed readership. In the process, however, he became a moralist. (Myers 17)

As previous critics place emphasis on his personal life as reasoning for the trajectory of the satire—with their lens, it would seem as though if the supposed real-life Nina Blount (i.e. Evelyn Gardner) had *not* divorced Waugh, the fiction would have ended simply. There is no merit given to the experimental nature of *Vile Bodies*, no treatment of the work as its own endeavor: the vast majority of critics almost seem to write *Vile Bodies* off as a failed attempt at avant-garde work,

hardly worth the recognition of similarly aged writers.⁶³ I would like to note that such interpretations are drawn hastily from a mindset that relies too heavily on biography rather than the work itself. Therefore, in order to clarify how the ‘Happy Ending’ falls under the depression-comic lens, I propose we return to the image of Doubting Hall.

When Adam first attempts to visit his fiancée’s father and secure his future, fissures in the certainty of that reality appear. Like the stately homes of England—and indeed, like the moral codes once upheld by their masters and vassals—Doubting Hall is “bordered by dripping trees and dilapidated stone wall” and flanked by “nondescript outbuildings that had once been” (*VB* 68). Perhaps, in this configuration, we can see why it is that Waugh’s text appears to dissemble so quickly. If we rewind to even before Adam can reach his destination, his taxi driver warns when Adam hops inside in Aylesury: ““Long way from here Doubting ’All is”” (*VB* 67).

Perhaps, the taxi driver isn’t necessarily right. Perhaps the irony is that Doubting Hall is a lot closer than it seems—just as close to the tone of the reading as “Doubting All” would be. Perhaps Waugh is already in the doorway, opening it wide and welcoming in his reader and apologizing for the indecency of answering the door himself: because in the decline of modern civilization, in the midst of financial meltdown and in the advent of world war, what else is there to do but doubt.

⁶³ I would contest this sentiment solely on the basis of having read from various members of Waugh’s friend group, as well as the writers he has admired. In preparation for this thesis (and in addition to the bibliographic readings) I have torn through Nancy Mitford’s *Wigs on the Green*; Aldous Huxley’s *Mortal Coils*, *Crome Yellow*, and *Antic Hay*; D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*; Graham Greene’s *Brighton Rock*; and Evelyn Waugh’s *Scoop*, *A Handful of Dust*, *Brideshead Revisited*, and *Put Out More Flags*. Even though I would have liked to visit all of the works listed within my analysis, I simply found far too much within *Vile Bodies* itself to warrant the incorporation of too many other texts. That being said, I find it quite frankly naïve on the part of contemporary critics to forget *Vile Bodies* amongst their careful considerations of Waugh’s more notable works.

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