"Was Anyone Hurt?": The Ends of Satire in A Handful of Dust

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One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.

Oscar Wilde

Wallace Stevens wrote that death is the mother of beauty, but for Evelyn Waugh death more often gives birth to comedy. In *Decline and Fall*, a schoolboy is killed by a stray bullet from a track official's misfired pistol. In *Vile Bodies*, a gossip columnist puts his head in an oven when he can no longer get into the right parties. In *Black Mischief*, the hero unwittingly consumes the stewed body of his lover during an African emperor's funeral rites. Such a casual acceptance of violent and untimely death has become an emblem of Waugh's sensibility, the signal characteristic of his dark humor. In Waugh's fiction, life is nasty, British, and short.

With an ambivalence characteristic of Waugh's critics, Conor Cruise O'Brien has called this apparent indifference to death a "schoolboy delight in cruelty" (50), distancing himself morally and emotionally from Waugh's delight while still praising the author's peculiar talents. O'Brien discerns, even as he reproduces, a discrepancy in the fiction between ethics and pleasure, a gap that some theorists have argued is endemic to satire itself, which assumes a moral stance in defense of traditional, communal values, but exults in the representation of the vice and folly it excoriates. As Michael Seidel has put it, despite his "curative, meliorative, or restorative role," the satirist is inevitably "implicated in the debasing form of his action" (3, 4).[1] In order to clean up, you have to get dirty.

If Waugh's fiction offers a useful case study in the paradoxes of satire, it is equally valuable for the questions it opens in understanding modernism. For Waugh's attitudes toward both modernism and modernity more generally are similarly vexed. As George McCartney has written: "Waugh's response to the modern was marked by certain fruitful ambivalence. In his official pose he was the curmudgeon who despised innovation, but the anarchic artist in him frequently delighted in its formal and thematic possibilities" (*Roaring* 3).[2] Although Waugh later in life repeatedly denounced modernist formal experimentation, his early fiction nonetheless came to embody a modern sensibility in its apparent rejection of the novel's traditional ethical obligations. Even in matters of form, he

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[1] See also Waugh's contemporaries Burke and Lewis. Kernan and Levin provide good introductions to theory of satire. Griffin offers a useful overview and complication of the theoretical consensus about satire that emerged from Yale in the 1960s.

[2] McCartney's reading of *Handful*, while intelligent and nuanced, adheres to the much-discussed themes of barbarism and civilization, only discussing this "fruitful ambivalence" obliquely.

didn't consider himself a traditionalist, but rather grouped himself with writers such as Firbank and Hemingway who deployed what Waugh sometimes called, following Wyndham Lewis, an "external method."[3] Indeed, in Waugh, the satiric and the modern often look very much alike; while the author may claim to satirize a decadent modernity, the disruptive mechanism of his satire fosters the very modern decadence he decries.

A Handful of Dust brings to the fore this tension between Waugh's implicitly reformative, conservative impulse and his subversive and thoroughly modern—if not precisely modernist—enjoyment of the aesthetic possibilities of cruelty. The novel is the story of Tony Last, an English aristocrat thoroughly devoted to his family estate, Hetton, and to the unchanging routines that the decaying neo-Gothic country house embodies. It tells of the dissolution of Tony's family, his beliefs, in a sense his entire world. But the novel also tells the story of the dissolution of *satire*; in it Waugh both thematizes and enacts the breakdown of the comic-ironic sensibility that characterizes his early work. Understanding this breakdown, in fact, can explain a longstanding and unresolved critical conundrum—the abrupt tonal shift of the novel's concluding chapters, which modulate away from the comic into the mode Freud called the uncanny. What I argue in the following pages, in short, is that in *A Handful of Dust* Waugh pushes his satire to such limits that it must take another form.

I

Early in the novel, Waugh gives his readers a kind of object lesson in the ethics of comedy. While Tony and his young son, John Andrew, walk to church, John tells his father a story he has heard from the stable manager Ben about a mule named Peppermint "who had drunk his company's rum ration" (37) in the First World War and subsequently died. Tony finds the story "very sad" (37), but John Andrew responds: "Well *I* thought it was sad too, but it isn't. Ben said it made him laugh fit to bust his pants" (38). What seems important here is not merely the difference in the men's reactions—Ben finds comedy where Tony finds pathos—but the hierarchy among them. If Waugh is joking about the simplicity of John's logic, he is also using the boy to comment critically on Tony's easy sympathy for a long-dead mule. John's acceptance of Ben as the authority in such aesthetic judgments, in other words, indicates not only Tony's parental neglect (Drewry 6)—a failure to instill in his son the values of his social class—but also the outmoded nature of those very values. Waugh expects his readers to understand that, in this case at least, a cruel reaction trumps a sympathetic one.

Like the death of Little Nell for Oscar Wilde, the death of Peppermint for Waugh forces a choice between laughter and tears. Wilde presumably laughs at

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[3]   Lewis rejects the experimental attempts by Joyce, Woolf, and Lawrence to render the experience of consciousness and endow their characters with psychological depth. He favors instead an approach he calls "classical," which seeks distance on human behavior in order to describe it in its absurdity. Waugh reviewed a pamphlet of Lewis's, "Satire and Fiction," that would become part of *Men Without Art*. Waugh said he found Lewis's theory "immensely interesting, particularly the observations about the 'Outside and Inside' method of fiction" (*Essays* 102). For a detailed discussion of Lewis and Waugh, see McCartney, "Being."

Dickens's literary *treatment* of the death of Nell, his manipulation of his readers' emotions, not the child's death *per se.* (Little Nell, being fictional, has no death *per se.*) By laughing, and boasting about his laughter, Wilde rejects the entire system of values embedded in Dickens's novel and the culture from which it springs. Thus Lionel Trilling claims that Wilde's target is not merely "insincerity" (claiming virtuous feelings one does not experience), but the Victorian value of sincerity itself—the obedience to the social code that demands these virtuous feelings. Quoting another of Wilde's famous maxims—"all bad poetry springs from genuine feeling" (qtd. in Trilling 119)—Trilling takes Wilde's oppositional attitude to imply "that the direct conscious confrontation of experience and the direct public expression of it do not necessarily yield the truth and indeed that they are likely to pervert it" (119). Feeling not only fails to guarantee aesthetic quality, but becomes itself the very object of Wilde's suspicion.

This suspicion of the authority of feeling situates Wilde as an important precursor to Waugh and a key figure in an influential strain of modernism. Wilde has become, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, "the very embodiment of ... a modernist antisentimentality" (132),[4] and it is this specific flaw of sentimentality that modernist aesthetics after Wilde—as articulated by writers ranging from D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot to Flannery O'Connor and James Baldwin—often sought vigorously to repudiate. (Indeed, with the recent re-estimation of popular sentimental modes of literature, modernism, or a convenient idea of it, has suffered among critics for this repudiation.)[5] I will return to the troublesome, even paradoxical, problem of delimiting the sentimental as an aesthetic category; my point for now is that the shift Trilling describes away from sincerity—and toward a more elusive standard he calls "authenticity"—corresponds to, and even compels, a shift in the meaning of the word sentimental from positive overtones of sensitivity and compassion toward negative connotations of excess, falseness, and laxity (see Sedgwick 150). The loss of faith in emotion as a guarantee of moral or aesthetic value thus generates a very powerful idea of what it is to be modern. If we understand "modernism" less as a school or movement (as the "ism" invariably suggests) than as a sensibility—the more colloquial sense of "the modern"—then the term becomes a synonym, or near-synonym, for words such as sophistication, urbanity, refinement, even aloofness. The value that antisentimental writers like Wilde and Waugh placed on qualities such as wit and

[4] Sedgwick takes Wilde as an emblem not only of "modernist antisentimentality" but also of "late-Victorian sentimentality" (132)—as well as of the emerging cultural-psychological category of "the homosexual." That Wilde can embody both sentimental and antisentimental ideas is a paradox Sedgwick means to underscore, and I will return to her argument.

[5] Clark, for example, sees this scorn as the sign of "its adversarial relationship to domestic culture" on the part of "beleaguered avant-garde intellectuals" (1). Even though the work of Clark and others has valuably enlarged the scope of literary-cultural study and helped to disturb a confining canon of modernist authors, I depart from her approach in that I do not believe that rehabilitating the sentimental under the banner of populism leads to a more progressive politics than an "elitist" rejection of it. Others in fact have argued that the sentimental can be tyrannical; Kundera, for example, writes, "When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object. In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme" (250).

even ethical indifference becomes a sign not merely of cultural distinction but of a deep skepticism toward inherited ideas of what it means to know and feel.

Placed in this theoretical context, *A Handful of Dust* becomes a much more significant novel for understanding modernism than its somewhat orthodox formal surface might suggest. Ben's laughter at the death of Peppermint can now be understood as a refusal to let the kind of "genuine feelings" that Wilde scorns deprive the mule's rum binge of its inherent comedy, a rejection of Tony's reflexive sentimentality. Indeed, Ben's laughter is only one of many instances in the novel that bring to the fore a case of suffering only to undercut or move past the ostensible sympathy the situation appears to elicit. Take the very first words of the book:

"Was anyone hurt?"

"No one I am thankful to say," said Mrs. Beaver, "except two housemaids who lost their heads and jumped through a glass roof into the paved court. They were in no danger. The fire never properly reached the bedrooms I am afraid. Still they are bound to need doing up, everything black with smoke and drenched in water and luckily they had that old-fashioned sort of extinguisher that ruins everything." (3; Waugh's emphasis)

Before we even know the topic of conversation, we hear an apparent expression of compassion that provokes a deceptively complex response. Mrs. Beaver voices sympathy for the victims of the fire but her concern is immediately revealed as insubstantial, since she cares only for those of her own class. The injured (or dead?) housemaids are an afterthought; Mrs. Beaver implicitly dismisses their fates as deserved, since their injuries resulted from foolish panic. The reader, moreover, makes a second correction in understanding Mrs. Beaver's initial sentence. When she says the maids "lost their heads," the reader, still unaware of the fire, can easily take this phrase literally. How indifferent is Mrs. Beaver to the maids' suffering? Cold-hearted enough to dismiss their decapitation? And even when we learn that they "lost their heads" in only a figurative sense, we never discover the women's ultimate fates. Did they survive? How badly were they injured? Was anyone hurt? Mrs. Beaver moves onto her true concern, the property damage that her business can financially exploit.

Mrs. Beaver's initial concern with human suffering is revealed as mere conversational reflex, or idle curiosity, soon forgotten. The novel, to be sure, does not cultivate our sadism toward the housemaids; if anything, Mrs. Beaver's cavalier treatment of them arouses a little sympathy. Yet the narrative seems content to let the Beavers' conversation unfold and to leave the residual question of the housemaids unaddressed. Instead, we laugh at the virtual nakedness of Mrs. Beaver's greed, or the shabbiness of her effort to cloak this greed in false compassion. The novel's concern is less with who is hurt, or how badly, as with how some people respond when others are hurt. This book is not about the housemaids or about Peppermint the mule, but about our responses to their fates.

A Handful of Dust is full of such small avoidances. Jenny Abdul-Akbar, the former wife of a Moroccan prince, bears "the most terrible scars" (121) from her husband's abuse but comes off as a comic figure, absurdly eager to confess the details of her "frightful nightmare" (115) to near-strangers. The prostitute Milly is absolutely blasé when telling Tony about the circumstances that led to the birth of her daughter: "I was only sixteen when I had her. I was the youngest of the family and our stepfather wouldn't leave any of us girls alone. That's why I have to work for a living" (181). When Brenda reads to Tony from the morning papers, her disengaged chatter runs together nightmarish grotesqueries and social gossip:

> *Reggie's been making another speech... There's such an extraordinary picture of Babe and Jock ... a woman in America has had twins by two different husbands. Would you have thought that possible? ... Two more chaps in gas ovens ... a little girl has been strangled in a cemetery with a bootlace ... that play we went to about a farm is coming off.* (18)

In all three of these cases abuse or murder remains a mild disruption on the surface of the text, troubling a reader briefly but remaining infused with the comic-ironic tone that pervades the novel. If the novel does hold any sympathy for the suffering of Jenny, Milly, or the girl in the cemetery, it refuses to make a direct plea for compassion. Such a plea, presumably, would only give way to something resembling Tony's naïve and sentimental affection for a mule poisoned by rum. Instead, the material of "frightful nightmare" (to use Jenny's phrase) is converted, through a kind of emotional alchemy, into social comedy.

Such moments, frequent as they are, may lead the reader to expect a kind of moral failure in Waugh's characters, yet they hardly prepare her for the novel's most shocking instance of a troublesome response to pain—Brenda's reaction to her son's death. (John dies in a hunting accident.) Tony's friend Jock Grant-Menzies travels to London to tell her the news, and when Brenda hears that "John" has died she mistakenly assumes Jock to be speaking of her lover, John Beaver. When she learns it is her son who has died, she is stunned: "John ... John Andrew... I ... Oh thank God..." (162). That Brenda feels relief and thanks God that her son has died instead of her obnoxious lover clearly reveals her depravity.[6] Her response to the news—unlike her reaction to the report of the strangled girl—is so shocking that whatever laughter it might provoke is overwhelmed by the revulsion a reader likely experiences. Even more significantly, however, Brenda's reaction validates Mrs. Rattery's earlier comment to Tony that the death might not upset Brenda as much as he fears: "You can't ever tell what's going to hurt people" (149). Echoing the novel's opening question—or obliquely answering it—Mrs. Rattery's remark intimates not only that Tony's faith in

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6   To be fair, Brenda later behaves less outrageously, exhibiting at least the outward signs of grief: "All Brenda's movements were slower than usual and her voice was flat and expressionless" (167). But since Waugh's external approach never renders her experience, these outward signs are all we have to judge her on. And since she and Tony barely speak to one another, we never hear either one attempt to express grief.

Brenda's decency will lead him astray, but also that in Waugh's universe *all* human passions are too thickly disguised for others to assess accurately. Waugh's external method does not so much deny the interiority of the self, but rather suggests that it is oddly unknowable, buried beneath layers of social custom and ritualized expression.

Unlike the death of Little Nell, or Lord Tangent in *Decline and Fall*, or the schoolgirl in the cemetery, John Andrew's is one fictional child's death at which no one can laugh. Yet the comedy manages to proceed. Brenda's friends see the death as gossip for their circle, and Jenny narcissistically blames herself: "O God.... What have I done to deserve it?" (157). The most ridiculous response is that of Brenda's mother, who writes what Brenda calls "a sweet letter":

> ...*I shall not come down to Hetton for the funeral, but I shall be thinking of you both all the time and my dear grandson. I shall think of you as I saw you all three, together, at Christmas. Dear children, at a time like this only yourselves can be any help to each other. Love is the only thing that is stronger than sorrow....* (170)

The grandmother's clichéd expressions of grief, contradicted by her refusal to be inconvenienced by travel, bear no more weight than Mrs. Beaver's professed concern for the victims of the fire. The platitudes of Brenda's mother return us to a world where narrator and reader are both more comfortable: we again laugh at the moral inadequacy of the novel's characters.

Tony, of course, cannot assume the indifference, to the death and to Brenda's affair, that comes so easily to Brenda and her friends; the middle of the novel focuses on the clash between his pain and the nonchalance of those around him. Thus, when Brenda's mother urges Tony to take Brenda back, the reader begins to feel what must be Tony's outrage:

> *I will tell you exactly how it happened, Tony. Brenda must have felt a tiny bit neglected—people often do at that stage of marriage. I have known countless cases—and it was naturally flattering to her to find a young man to beg and carry for her. That's all it was, nothing* wrong. *And then the terrible shock of little John's accident unsettled her and she didn't know what she was saying or writing. You'll both laugh over this little fracas in years to come.* (174-75; Waugh's emphasis)

The suggestion that the death (safely euphemized as "little John's accident") and the break-up of the marriage ("this little fracas") might be the subject of laughter is outrageous—an outrageousness remarkable in the work of a novelist who so often displays his own modernity by laughing at death and suffering.

We have arrived at a paradox: Waugh, whose "schoolboy delight in cruelty" seems to owe so much to Wilde's stance of laughing at the death of Little Nell, directs his greatest indignation at the character who trivializes the death of John Andrew and laughs at the subsequent dissolution of his parents' marriage. Waugh's own attitude toward Wilde embodies this paradox. He repeatedly derided Wilde as a figure of fashion, and described him as "at heart radically

sentimental" ("Firbank" 56; see also "Nineties"), even though the anti-Dickensian Wilde seems most influential on Waugh in his rejection of sentimental poses. Likewise, the modernity of Brenda and her friends, which, in its delightfully extreme nonchalance, shares much with the indifferent postures of Waugh the satirist,[7] itself becomes subject to the author's ironic inflections. Brenda and her clique transform life into a kind of art to be judged only on aesthetic, not moral, grounds:

> [Brenda's] very choice of partner gave the affair an appropriate touch of fantasy; Beaver, the joke figure they had all known and despised, suddenly caught up to her among the luminous clouds of deity. If, after seven years looking neither to right nor left, she had at last broken away with Jock Grant-Menzies or Robin Beasley ... it would have been thrilling no doubt, but straightforward, drawing-room comedy. The choice of Beaver raised the whole escapade into a realm of poetry for Polly and Daisy and Angela and all the gang of gossips. (75)

Drawing-room comedy is the genre through which Brenda and her friends usually view their world, a genre populated by "joke figure[s]" such as Beaver. But the invocation of the "realm of poetry" and the "touch of fantasy," echoing Tony's private vocabulary of English Romance, suggests that Brenda's own worldview is also built on fantasy. Brenda's Wildean equanimity may stand in contrast to Tony's more overtly outmoded devotion to a Victorian way of life, but both characters understand the world through a set of aesthetic forms at once grandiose and clichéd. Ironic postures of indifference, so often characteristic of Waugh's own narrative tone, become Waugh's target every bit as much as sentimental affectations of feeling.

That such aggressively antisentimental postures, whether Wilde's or Brenda's, reveal themselves as susceptible to the charge of sentimentality suggests a larger contradiction within the idea of sentimentality that Sedgwick has discussed at length: the collapse of the distinction "between sentimentality and its denunciation" (153). Sedgwick notes that accusations of sentimentality tend to expose the accuser to similar charges, according to the logic of "it takes one to know one" (156): "[O]nly those who are themselves prone to these vicariating impulses ... are equipped to detect them in the writing or being of others" (153).[8] As a result, merely "to enter into the discourse of sentimentality ... is almost inevitably to be caught up in a momentum of ... scapegoating attribution" (154)—trying to

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[7] Eagleton observes in both the characters and narrators of Waugh's fiction "an inability to be surprised or disoriented by experience" (106) that fails as a critique of upper-class manners because it puts forward no valid alternative; Waugh's narrators, for him, lack adequate distance from the characters. Littlewood discusses the "sophistication" shared by characters and narrator, which he describes as "[t]he refusal to be shocked, disoriented, embarrassed or involved" (14). *Dust*, he remarks, "deliberately puts far more strain than any previous [novel] on the writer's habitual mechanisms of defence. Detachment is harder to maintain, humour more difficult to find, romanticism a more dangerous commitment" (146).

[8] Sedgwick, of course, is drawing on an equation between the attribution of sentimentality and the attribution of homosexuality, and much of her discussion of the sentimental involves reading the suffering male body, often the body of Christ, as a site of sentimental attachment.

expose the "real" sentimentalist. Yet that act of exposure is specifically what the paradoxes of the term "sentimental" imply *cannot* be done, since naming or denouncing a "real" or "closet" sentimentalist only adds one more link to a potentially endless chain.[9] Waugh, I suggest, runs up against precisely this paradox. His own satiric sensibility, so acute in detecting the sentimental in others—including literary precursors such as Wilde—cultivates readerly sympathy for Tony in a decidedly unsatiric, even sentimental manner; moreover, he indicts those characters whose accents of indifference most closely echo the authorial-narratorial voice itself.

A brief look at Waugh's personal biography might help to make the point. Waugh's biographers have noted that Tony's situation resembles Waugh's own after his first wife (also named Evelyn) left him for a lover. In a letter to Harold Acton, Waugh expressed frustration that friends and relatives urged him not to make too much of the affair:

> *Everyone is talking so much nonsense on all sides of me about my affairs, that my wits reel. Evelyn's family & mine join in asking me to "forgive" her whatever that may mean ... I did not know it was possible to be so miserable & live but I am told that this is a common experience. (Letters 39)*

In a letter to Henry Yorke, furthermore, Waugh voiced a desire to find solace in the humorous reactions of others to his plight: "If you hear any amusing opinions about my divorce do tell me. Particularly from the older generation. The Gardner line is that I am very 'unforgiving'" (*Letters* 40). Finally, a few months later, Waugh again wrote to Yorke:

> *I have decided that I have gone on for too long in that fog of sentimentality & I am going to stop hiding away from everyone. I was getting into a sort of Charlie Chaplinish Pagliacci attitude to myself as the man with a tragedy in his life and a tender smile for children. (Letters 41)*

The parallels are significant: like Tony, Waugh felt pressure to affect a blasé sophistication others seemed to possess quite naturally, and, like the narrator of his novel, he shifts attention from the experience of pain to the amusement derived from the responses of others.

Yet the differences between the letters and the novel are equally instructive. Most obviously, the glaring asymmetry that there was no dead son in Waugh's life implies that the author felt he needed a dramatic incident to precipitate the collapse of the Lasts' marriage. Indeed it suggests that Waugh was loading the dice in favor of Tony, manipulating his reader's emotions in a manner worthy of Wilde's Dickens. More subtly, however, Tony never expresses the dissatisfaction with, and persecution by, the responses of others that Waugh articulates in his letters; these feelings are only implied, left for the reader to experience. Nor does

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[9]   Thus, Sedgwick concludes, the term "sentimental" can in itself be "neither rehabilitat[ed] nor rubbish[ed]" (157); instead, the particular writing and reading contexts of the work in question must be closely examined.

Tony seek solace by mocking those who respond to his fate in "amusing" ways; this too is left to the reader. Finally, Tony never assumes enough self-consciousness to regard his own feeling of victimization as sentimental; in the novel, it is Brenda's piggish brother Reggie who suggests that Tony is merely "taking the line of the injured husband" (204). In short, the whole range of feelings that Waugh articulated in his letters—anger, self-pity, self-reproach—are in the novel either left implicit or put into the mouths of unreliable characters. This is wholly in keeping with Waugh's adherence to a Lewisian external method that refrains from rendering the interior lives of characters, but it also suggests that certain reactions are suppressed for the sake of the aesthetic demands of the genre.

There is, moreover, an important exception to Waugh's external method in the novel, and it is the ultimate indication of the author's sympathy for Tony that he violates his aesthetic principles in order to render his hero's interior mental state. When Tony is compelled to stage an affair to justify his divorce legally, the madness of his circumstances begins to terrify him:

> *For a month now he had lived in a world suddenly bereft of order; it was as though the whole reasonable and decent constitution of things, the sum of all he had experienced or learned to expect, were an inconspicuous, inconsiderable object mislaid somewhere on the dressing table; no outrageous circumstance in which he found himself, no new mad thing brought to his notice could add a jot to the all-encompassing chaos that shrieked about his ears.* (189)

While the episode at Brighton, in which Tony is forced into increasingly ridiculous behavior, appears farcical to the reader, to Tony it seems "phantasmagoric, and even gruesome" (189). This rift between the comic and the "phantasmagoric" and "gruesome," visible in the narrator's departure from principle in order to enter Tony's mind, points up the limitations of the "drawing-room comedy" genre epitomized by the mock-affair. Waugh explicitly *tells* us that the events are phantasmagoric and gruesome because the protocols of his method demand that he represent these same events as comic.

However effective Waugh's satire may be as a critique of sentimentality, then, it also appears incapable of rendering certain emotional states. In drawing-room comedy, phantasmagoria will always appear as silly, never gruesome. The problem Waugh's satire faces thus may be the paradigmatic challenge of all literature. Roland Barthes has written:

> *A friend has just lost someone he loves, and I want to express my sympathy. I proceed to write him a letter. Yet the words I find do not satisfy me: they are "phrases": I make up "phrases" out of the most affectionate part of myself; I then realize that the message I want to send this friend, the message which is my sympathy itself, could after all be reduced to a simple word:* condolences. *Yet the very purpose of communication is opposed to this, for it would be a cold and consequently inverted message, since what I want to communicate is the very warmth of my sympathy. I conclude that in order to correct my message (that is, in*

order for it to be exact), I must not only vary it, but also that this variation must be original and apparently invented. This fatal succession of constraints will be recognized as literature itself. (xiv)

For Barthes, the aim of literature is not to express the inexpressible, but rather, working with a received, public language, to "unexpress the expressible" (xvii), to render an essentially banal emotion in an original language. As Trilling put it, genuine feeling juxtaposed with direct expression fails to yield truth. Hence the indirectness of literature, hence the ironic representation of grief. One could of course dismiss the problem altogether, and dispense with the effort to render grief; to do this might be to realize the theoretical possibilities suggested by Lewis, who insists that *"perfect laughter*, if there could be such a thing, would be inhuman" (92; Lewis's italics), or by other champions of modernist abstraction, such as José Ortega y Gasset, who urged the "progressive elimination of the human, all too human, elements predominant in romantic and naturalistic production" (11). But Waugh rejects this option and presses upon his reader the ethical dimension of his characters' struggles.[10] What results is a satiric attack on ironic attitudes—a satire that ceases to look like a satire, a drawing-room comedy that flees the drawing room for the jungle.

II

Tony's flight to South America in the novel's final chapters, and the fate he meets there, provide a drastic change from the rest of *A Handful of Dust*, not only in setting but also in tone, even genre. Henry Yorke wrote to Waugh in 1934:

I feel the end is so fantastic that it throws the rest out of proportion. Aren't you mixing two things together? The first part of the book is convincing, a real picture of people one has met.... But then to let Tony be detained by some madman introduces an entirely fresh note and we are with phantasy with a ph at once. (qtd. in Stannard 377)

Yorke's complaint,[11] that the story undergoes a tonal shift which destroys the integrity of the novel, has a clear explanation in the genesis of the book. Waugh initially composed and published the episode of Tony at "Chez Todd"—in which Tony is rescued but then held captive by an old man, Mr. Todd, who forces him

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[10]   The portrait of Professor Otto Silenus in *Decline and Fall*, with his desire to eliminate considerations of human form from architecture and cinema, suggests that to Waugh this extreme formalism was inane. Waugh writes of Silenus: "His only other completed work was the *décor* for a cinema film of great length and complexity of plot—a complexity rendered the more inextricable by the producer's austere elimination of all human characters, a fact which proved fatal to its commercial success" (159).

[11]   Eagleton's Marxist critique is curiously a version of the same complaint. Eagleton objects that "the American exploration reveals the hollowness of English culture as 'metaphysically' rather than socially determined" (112), thereby undermining the effectiveness of the novel's social critique. In other words, the generic and geographical shifts undermine the social realism of the novel.

to read aloud, over and over, the complete works of Dickens—as a free-standing story entitled "The Man Who Liked Dickens"; only later, curious about his character's history, did he write the rest of the novel ("Fan-Fare" 303; Jebb 109). The "fantastic" short story, by this argument, possessed unity on its own, but clashed with the comic-satiric tone of the novel that was appended to it. Waugh, however, insisted to Yorke that the episode was necessary: "[T]he Amazon stuff had to be there. The scheme was a Gothic man in the hands of savages—first Mrs. Beaver etc. then the real ones, finally the silver foxes at Hetton" (*Letters* 88). Yet Yorke objected to tonal, not thematic discord; Waugh never answered his complaint. Is it possible, then, to go beyond a merely genetic explanation of this tonal shift? Rather than seeing "mixing two things together" as a flaw resulting from the creative process, might we see the disjunction as essential to the novel?

In calling the final episode "phantasy with a ph," Yorke situates the story within an aesthetic tradition that dwells on the "phantasmagoric" and the "gruesome"—to use the terms from Tony's interior monologue in Brighton. Freud famously called this tradition "the uncanny," and Wolfgang Kayser after him called it "the grotesque."[12] The term "grotesque" has a long history of shifting meanings, but contemporary critics tend to agree in seeing the grotesque as characterized by a duality or ambivalence that goes back to Ruskin's analysis of Venetian gargoyles. For Ruskin, the grotesque combines "two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful" (115). In the ludicrous aspect of the grotesque lies its affinities to satire and caricature; in the fearful side, its relation to Freud's uncanny.[13] The conclusion of Waugh's novel, then, moves from one face of the grotesque to another, from laughter to fear. "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," wrote T. S. Eliot in the line that gave Waugh his title (Eliot 4), and in this ending the "phantasmagoric" and the "gruesome," the materials of "frightful nightmare," are no longer converted into comedy. Of course, the idea that reading Dickens interminably—a lifetime of reading the death of Little Nell—might be a Dantean punishment indicates that Waugh has not entirely abandoned the comic, and I will return to the comic undertones of these concluding chapters. But the reader's laughter, as Yorke's response attests, becomes increasingly uneasy.

Curiously, criticism of *A Handful of Dust* has neglected to link the novel's ending with Freud's uncanny, whether because Waugh's readers have obediently followed the author in their distaste for psychoanalysis, or because such concerns have not seemed germane to their efforts to locate in the novel a stable system of moral and religious beliefs. In the most widely accepted reading, Richard Wasson and others after him have argued that it is a kind of poetic justice that Tony should live out his days endlessly reading the author so deeply associated

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[12]   On Freud's influence on, and parallels with, Kayser, see Weisstein 4, Russo 7, and Steig 257. Kayser's grotesque, derived primarily from Romantic sources, differs markedly from Bakhtin's notion of a "Rabelaisian" grotesque that is celebratory and life-affirming.

[13]   On the relationship between the grotesque and satire, see Steig, Frye 308-12, and Thomson 41-47.

with the Victorian values that have led him astray.[14] Without wholly rejecting Wasson's argument, I want to suggest that a psychoanalytic reading can help not only to establish thematic parallels between the two parts of the novel, but also to explain why Waugh's novel breaks out of the confines of the drawing room, literally and figuratively. If, as I have argued, the satiric mode of the opening chapters of the novel stages a *failure* of feeling, as it relentlessly works to avoid excessive sentiment by allowing reader and narrator to laugh at the moral inadequacy of its characters, these final fantastic chapters reintroduce sentiment, only in an estranged, uncanny guise.

Like both satire and the sentimental, the uncanny as a literary category has been the subject of significant theoretical work. For some years it functioned as a minor buzzword of deconstructive criticism, whose dead authors so often left ghostly traces. Some critics went so far as to identify literature and narrative themselves as uncanny (see Felman, Lyndenberg). But Freud used the term in a much less metaphorical sense; in defending his foray into aesthetics, he defined that field as "the theory of the qualities of feeling" ("Uncanny" 219), and wrote of the uncanny: "It is undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror.... Yet we may expect that a special core of feeling is present which justifies the use of a special conceptual term" ("Uncanny" 219). Freud himself has some trouble describing the feeling further, as his descriptions tend to slide into psychoanalytic explanation of the origins of the feeling. But in his literary discussion he reserves the term for those works—most extensively, E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman"—that elicit in readers this feeling of anxiety or dread. Ghost stories, tales of the supernatural, Gothic novels, horror movies, and the like are thus natural, although not necessary, loci of the uncanny.[15] Used in this sense, the uncanny as a generic term complements both the sentimental and the satiric, which I have also discussed in terms of their effects (pity, laughter) on an implied reader.[16]

A brief review of Freud's theory may be useful. For Freud, the experience of the uncanny derives from either the revival of repressed infantile complexes, or the confirmation of surmounted primitive beliefs ("Uncanny" 249). The category of "infantile complexes" includes such Freudian favorites as the castration complex and "womb-phantasies," while "primitive beliefs"—for example, in

[14] Wasson's reading has corrected the assumption that Waugh endorses Tony's attachment to big houses and Victorian ideals. My only objection to Wasson's reading is that it too comfortably reads the novel as a kind of morality tale, stabilizing Waugh as a normative, Christian satirist, and inadequately acknowledging the contradictions inherent in his method. Meckier, Allen, and McCartney all expand on his conclusions.

[15] Of course the familiarity of readers (and viewers) with the well-established conventions of these genres can greatly *diminish* the intensity of the uncanny feelings they elicit because their formulaic construction signals their artificiality; the process Freud calls "reality-testing" mitigates the level of anxiety most adults would experience during, say, a viewing of *The Twilight Zone*.

[16] It should go without saying that an implied reader is an abstraction. Real readers respond to the same text in all kinds of ways; some laugh where others choke back tears and still others recoil in horror. It is precisely this instability, and the effects that it generates in Waugh's fiction, that makes his work so generative for a reading in this vein.

animism, magic, or evil spirits—entail a failure to demarcate psychical from material reality. This failure in turn stems from an overvaluation of the power of one's own thoughts, or a projection of those thoughts onto the external world (250).[17] In short, it is the regression to magical thinking, linked to the childhood of the individual or the species, which induces the feeling of the uncanny. But there is a second condition necessary for the production of the uncanny in fiction, a condition less psychological than narratological. The phenomenon that produces the uncanny must survive the process of "reality-testing," that is, scrutiny to determine whether it is real or illusory. An author can deliberately create supernatural fictional events that do not stand up to reality-testing (e.g., fairy tales), and therefore do not seem uncanny. By the same token, however, an author can manipulate the reader to believe *more fully* in the reality of supernatural phenomena than she would in real life by first establishing a reader's faith in the reality of the characters; as a result, fiction can, more easily than life, induce the feeling of the uncanny ("Uncanny" 250). The uncanniness of Waugh's conclusion is thus enhanced by the author's having first created, in Yorke's words, "a real picture of people one has met."

What is it, then, in "Du Côté de Chez Todd" that induces the feeling of the uncanny? Where is the fear in *A Handful of Dust*? To begin, we might recognize in Tony's exile a variation on the modernist paradigm of the voyage as a return to beginnings. Like Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, Waugh uses the barbarism of the wilderness to comment ironically on the savagery of "civilization."[18] A latter-day Marlow exploring the blank spaces on the map, Tony finds himself at the remotest reaches of European exploration: "The stream which watered [Mr. Todd's land] was not marked on any map" (284). For both authors, too, the journey to the ends of empire is a temporal regression; Marlow explicitly calls his voyage a trip back in time, and Tony returns to a world of animistic belief in which, Todd suggests, there exist magic potions for every purpose, including raising the dead. Even in Waugh's composition of the novel, the tale "began at the end" with the short story about reading Dickens ("Fan-Fare" 303).

In typically modernist fashion, moreover, Tony's regression is psychological as well as anthropological. He travels back to a land of childhood as well as precivilization; geographical dislocation becomes the occasion for, or literalization of, a metaphorical exploration of the self. Deep in the Amazon jungles, Tony finds himself seeking an idealized version of his childhood home. Spurred by Dr. Messinger's tales, he imagines the City of their quest as "Gothic in character, all vanes and pinnacles, gargoyles, battlements, groining and tracery, pavilions and terraces, a transfigured Hetton" (222). He traverses the ocean in search of the Hetton that eluded him in England. But when Tony finally finds the city of his quest, it is no medieval fantasy, but Mr. Todd's Yeatsian house "of mud and wattle" (284). In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim writes that in fairy tales, "the house in the woods and the parental home are the same place,

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[17] Freud discusses these phenomena in much greater detail in *Totem and Taboo* 114 ff.

[18] Meckier discusses the intertextual presence of both Conrad and Dickens. On Waugh and Dickens, see also Allen. On Waugh and Conrad, see McCartney 140.

experienced quite differently because of a change in the psychological situation" (170). Positive and negative associations are split between the safe parental home and the dangerous house in the woods in order to organize the ambivalent feelings attached to domesticity and family. And lest we apply Bettelheim's symbolic code too freely, the text has already pointed us in this direction with its references to Hetton; the hut is indeed "a transfigured Hetton," although not transfigured as Tony imagined. It is a space at once home and not home, familiar and unfamiliar—precisely the terrain that Freud called the *unheimlich*. For, in Freud's theory, the uncanny is familiar but appears as unfamiliar because our knowledge of it has been repressed: "the prefix '*un*' is the token of repression" ("Uncanny" 245). Tony has traveled from the drawing-room comedy of England, through a jungle of confusion, and emerged into a clearing. This enclosed space is both the unconscious psychic space of childhood and the literary space of "phantasy with a ph."

Discerning the parallels between the stately country home of Hetton and the little house in the jungle makes clear that the two parts of the novel share thematic concerns beyond the rather obvious analogies Waugh himself described between savagery at home and abroad. And while the fear provoked by Tony's powerlessness at the hands of Todd can be understood on a merely *psychological* plane, a *psychoanalytic* reading accounts for a number of otherwise peculiar details. For example, Tony relies on Todd for his daily food; when Tony refuses to read to him, the old man deprives Tony of his supper. Todd provides medicine too, which Tony drinks down like a little boy: "'Nasty medicine,' [Tony] said, and began to cry" (288). Most strikingly, Todd first begins to appear as menacing when he describes his neighbors to Tony: "The Pie-wie women are ugly but very devoted. I have had many. Most of the men and women living in this savannah are my children. That is why they obey—for that reason and because I have the gun" (289). The little old man's surprising and unsettling sexual potency makes him the father of the whole community around him, and the gun, while offering a joke about the obedience of children, serves as a garish emblem of phallic power. Supplying food and medicine, fathering children, enforcing his will as the law, Todd's behavior makes perfect sense if his hut is understood as a dream-like, transfigured Hetton and Todd himself as a transfigured father. In the original short story, "The Man Who Liked Dickens," Mr. Todd was called "Mr. McMaster," and Tony turns out to be a prisoner at this master's house just as he for so many years was unable to leave his father's estate.

But in spite of the paternal role that Todd often assumes, much of his behavior fails to fit such a model. Todd is illiterate, infantile, and needy; he demands to be read to like a stubborn child. In fact, it is Todd who explicitly compares Tony to *his* father: "You read beautifully.... It is almost as though my father were here again" (293). Like a child, Todd habitually strikes a pose of mock-innocence when he knows he is doing wrong. This childlike old man, moreover, constitutes "a unique audience" for Tony to read to, in a passage that is oddly disturbing despite lacking any suggestion of supernaturalism:

> *The old man sat astride his hammock opposite Tony ... following the words, soundlessly, with his lips. Often when a new character was introduced he would say, "Repeat the name, I have forgotten him," or "Yes, yes, I remember her well. She dies, poor woman." He would frequently interrupt with questions.... He laughed loudly at all the jokes and at some passages which did not seem humorous to Tony, asking him to repeat them two or three times; and later at the description of the sufferings of the outcasts in "Tom-all-alones" tears ran down his cheeks into his beard. His comments on the story were usually simple. "I think that Dedlock is a very proud man," or, "Mrs. Jellyby does not take enough care of her children." (292-93)*

The simplicity of Todd's concerns, his unsophisticated diction, his attempt to follow along silently, and, above all, the utter excess of his emotional—indeed sentimental—reactions seem much more appropriate to a young child than to an old man. Thus, if Todd's earlier name, McMaster, suggests his paternal authority, it also might suggest his role as son; like the "un" in *unheimlich*, the "Mc" in McMaster is "the token of repression," indicating a deeper and more contradictory significance.

Todd, then, with the emotional reactions of a child, but the sexual and punitive power of a father, can be said to represent the son's usurpation of paternal authority; he is Tony's triumphant rival in an oedipal struggle. For Tony's captivity evokes a complex of desires and fears bound up with succession and inheritance, impotence and generativity, usurpation and punishment, which have been latent throughout the novel. Tony's surname, Last, signals the extinction of his line, and John's death leaves him without an heir. After the death, in fact, Tony tries to convince his adulterous wife that their generativity has not reached its end: "Brenda, sweet, I don't understand. We're both young. Of course we can never forget John. He'll always be our eldest son but..." (169). Brenda doesn't let him finish his sentence. The death and the divorce bring about the end of Tony's procreative life.

The emergence of Mr. Todd in the novel's final episode is then a defamiliarizing, a rendering un-homely, of the family romance already operating among Tony, Brenda, and John Andrew. For young as he may be, John Andrew is a sexual rival of his father, and Waugh's insights into childhood sexuality are wonderfully Freudian. When Brenda, to assuage her own guilt, tries to engineer an affair between Tony and Jenny, it is the son, not the father, who falls for the "Princess": "She's more beautiful than Miss Tendril, even. I think she's the most beautiful lady I've ever seen.... D'you think she'd like to watch me have my bath?" (118). Later, when Jenny says good-night, he is even more forward:

> *They sat on John's small bed in the night-nursery. He threw the clothes back and crawled out, nestling against Jenny. "Back to bed," she said, "or I shall spank you."*

> *"Would you do it hard? I shouldn't mind."*

"Oh dear," said Brenda. (119)

To recognize the sexual rivalry between Tony and John is to see that it is more than mere coincidence—indeed more than the author's rigging up a joke at Brenda's expense—that John Beaver and John Andrew Last share a first name. For while John Andrew might be Tony's rival in an intrapsychic struggle, John Beaver is both a secondary and more literal sexual rival. We have another case of a psychoanalytic "splitting," where the potentially patricidal agent is symbolically divided into a good figure and an evil one, between an innocent victim, John A., and a loathsome perpetrator, John B. Brenda's mistaking one for the other, while manifestly displaying her own misplaced affections, also voices a latent *textual* desire to kill off the evil rival and spare the good one. In other words, her mistaken conclusion that John Beaver has died summons an alternative situation with which the reader and author would probably be much happier, given their implied sympathy for Tony.[19]

But the psychoanalytic *content* of Tony's situation is only one source of the uncanny anxiety that Waugh's phantasmagoria produces. For Freud's essay on the uncanny, as Neil Hertz observes, contains an important ambiguity. Hertz notes that Freud wrote "The Uncanny" while he was working out the theory of the repetition compulsion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and viewed the repetition compulsion as a source of the uncanny ("Uncanny" 238; Hertz 98). But, Hertz argues, Freud is not always clear whether it is the *content* of the repetition or the mere *fact* of repetition that arouses anxiety; often the former seems trivial in comparison to the latter: "Whatever it is that is repeated—an obsessive ritual, perhaps, or a bit of acting-out in relation to one's analyst—will ... feel most compellingly uncanny when it is seen as *merely* coloring, that is, when it comes to seem most gratuitously rhetorical" (102; Hertz's italics). Hertz's point is that when involuntary repetition appears uncanny, the particular act that one finds oneself repeating might seem utterly benign—as benign, say, as reading a novel by Dickens.

For in a peculiar way, the triviality, even the silliness of Tony's fate—the fact that it feels like a sick joke—is exactly what makes the scene so disturbing, giving it a power over readers that even Marlow's confrontation with Kurtz no longer quite possesses. Indeed, Todd's demand for reading echoes, a little uncannily, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where Freud cites the child's desire to hear a familiar story repeated as an example of the repetition compulsion *par excellence*:

> *If a child has been told a nice story, he will insist on hearing it over and over again rather than a new one; and he will remorselessly stipulate that the repetition shall be an identical one.* (42)

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[19]   Freud describes a similar splitting of the "father-imago" in "The Sandman": "In the story of Nathaniel's childhood, the figures of his father and Coppelius represent the two opposites into which the father-imago is split by his ambivalence; whereas the one threatens to blind him—that is, to castrate him—, the other, the 'good' father, intercedes for his sight. The part of the complex which is most strongly repressed, the death-wish against the 'bad' father, finds expression in the death of the 'good' father" ("Uncanny" 232n1).

When Mr. Todd articulates a desire for repetition he is every bit as "remorseless":

You see, they are the only books I have ever heard. My father used to read them and then later the black man ... and now you. I have heard them all several times by now but I never get tired. (292)

Mr. Todd quite literally *is* the compulsion to repeat; he forces Tony to read and reread to him, in what has seemed to many readers an endless repetition.[20] As his name would indicate then, Todd is an externalization of Tony's own unconscious death-drive, the drive that gives rise to the repetition compulsion, which Freud describes as "the inertia inherent in organic life" in relation to the instincts that "tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things" (*Beyond* 43-44). The novel's title, in fact, while directly invoking *The Waste Land*, may also, through Eliot, allude to Genesis 3:19. There God announces the mortality of Adam in language that perfectly illustrates the phenomenon of which Freud spoke, the tendency of life to regress to an inorganic state: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." (Lacan makes the same point: "Thanatos ... is the reduction to dust" [138].) As an externalized agent of Tony's own unconscious instinct, Todd/McMaster is Tony's master, the law that "overrides the pleasure principle" (*Beyond* 24), the law that Tony must obey even as he recognizes the absurdity of such obedience. With the loss of his watch, Tony is stranded in the province of the unconscious, which, as psychoanalytic theory has it, knows no sense of time. Tony's enslavement to the repetition compulsion is thus eternal; any hope of return to England is destroyed.

In this estranged form, Todd's arbitrary exercise of authority very literally assumes the "'daemonic' force" (*Beyond* 41) that Freud attributes to the repetition-compulsion.[21] Of course, before and after Freud, literary works have embodied elements of the unconscious as devils, vampires, evil spirits, or little old men in the jungle. As Hertz notes, the relation between "demonic" and "psychological" explanations of uncanny experience is, in psychoanalytic theory, one of manifest to latent. Within a given fictional world, there may indeed exist "real" demons or spirits, but their affective power still derives from their psychodynamic origin (Hertz 108, 105). Moreover, the idea of the unconscious as demonic reminds us of what Slavoj Zizek, following Lacan, takes to be a central Freudian idea—"the status of the unconscious as radically external" (43). To see ourselves as the puppets of unconscious forces is to realize the automatism of our own selves, the stubborn *unconsciousness* of the unconscious.

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[20] See, for example, Allen: "It is evident ... that Tony will never be released even by death; he clearly reads on today, solitary sufferer in the particular circle of hell to which his author so mercilessly consigned him" (155). Wilson offers an eccentric dissent, holding out hope for Tony's return to Hetton (2).

[21] Kayser similarly reads the grotesque as an invocation of "the demonic aspects of the world" (188), seeing the demons and spirits of supernatural fiction as symbols of a kind of existential alienation.

Interestingly, recognizing the automatism of our behavior is also the source of laughter in Bergson's famous theory of the comic as "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (330); similarly, it is essential to Lewis's externalist prescriptions for satire. The uncanny thus shares this fundamental perception with the comic, and the proximity of the two modes in Waugh's work is no accident. But of course there is a difference. Freud himself, discussing none other than Oscar Wilde, notes that the comic tends to work against the production of uncanny anxiety: "Even a 'real' ghost, as in Oscar Wilde's *Canterville Ghost*, loses all power of at least arousing *gruesome* feelings in us as soon as the author begins to amuse himself by being ironical about it and allows liberties to be taken with it" ("Uncanny" 252; Freud's italics).[22] Laughter serves as a corrective force, rescuing us from pure mechanism, whereas the uncanny fails to restore us to ourselves.[23]

In the novel's uncanny conclusion, then, the reader not only confronts the violent psychodynamics underlying the novel's social comedy, but also glimpses the phantasmagoric underside of the novel's disavowal of sentimentality. Sentiment, combated so aggressively in the novel's earlier episodes, returns—and literally with a vengeance. Waugh's use of Dickens thus offers a variation on Wilde's laughter at the death of Nell. This time around, the sentimentality of the Victorian author induces not laughter but horror; Dickens is not aesthetically laughable, as he was for Wilde, but aesthetically dreadful. For Waugh, the heart of darkness, the savage core of man's being, is revealed to be not brutal barbarism but the sentimental pieties of culture.

Shifting a discussion of modernism away from both the formal/technical and the social/historical questions that have driven so much work in the field, and raising alongside them questions of sensibility and genre, not only situates Waugh much closer to the center of important trends in Anglo-American modernism, but also suggests the importance of understanding how modernist literature serves to structure and model the ways in which we respond emotionally to the pain of others. The collapse of Waugh's satire into the uncanny suggests that the efforts of so many modernists to escape the sentimental might necessarily give rise to an undertow in which the claims of feeling reassert themselves, although in negative form. Rather than write off modernist antisen-

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[22] Similarly, in his discussion of "The Sandman," Freud argues *against* the doll as a source of the uncanny in the story precisely because of its satiric coloring: "Nor is this atmosphere [of the uncanny] heightened by the fact that the author himself treats the episode of Olympia with a faint touch of satire and uses it to poke fun at the young man's idealization of his mistress" ("Uncanny" 227). Steig takes this point further in his excellent article, in which he defines the grotesque as "the managing of the uncanny by the comic." But Steig is also careful to note that comic techniques "may also enhance anxiety through their aggressive implications and through the strangeness they lend to the threatening figure" (259-60).

[23] Cf. Cavell: "Picking up Bergson's idea of the comic as the encrusting or the obtruding of the mechanical or material onto or out of the living, we might conceive of laughter as the natural response to automatonity when we *know* the other to be human. This takes laughter as some reverse of amazement. In that case it would follow from the absence of our laughter in the face of the impression or imagination of automatonity in others that we do not know others to be human.... [T]he perception of the comedy is essential to, is the same as, the detection of the madness" (415).

timentality as a politically reactionary effort of highbrows to distinguish themselves from an increasingly literate populace, we might critically examine it as a new problem in the representation of suffering based in a fundamental re-orientation toward the way that feeling itself is understood.[24] Set beside the work of other modernists, such as Djuna Barnes, Samuel Beckett, and Nathanael West, whose satiric impulses also tend to produce moments of uncanny dread or anxiety,[25] Waugh's fiction offers a vantage point from which to re-examine relations of ethics and aesthetics, sympathy and detachment, reality and representation, and to ask why this sort of dark and unstable comedy has proved such an enduring mode throughout the twentieth century.

In an interesting footnote to Todd's encounter with Dickens, Waugh, in 1953, reviewed a study of Dickens in which he, not surprisingly, referred to Dickens as a "tear jerker." Yet he also recognized the novelist's "unique genius," and in Dickens's habit of mesmerism saw an apt metaphor for the author's peculiarly compelling power over his readers ("Apotheosis" 447). Strikingly, Waugh compared Dickens to Chaplin, the same figure of sentimentality to whom he had likened himself, disparagingly, two decades before:

The happiest comparison perhaps is to Mr Charles Chaplin, in particular to the film City Lights. *There we have scenes of appalling sentimentality and unreality, ... but we have a unique genius in full exuberance.... We all have our moods when Dickens sickens us. In a lighter, looser and perhaps higher mood we fall victim to his "magnetism." Like Mme de la Rue we unroll from our sensible ball and do what the Master orders. ("Apotheosis" 447)*

Without entirely dropping his ironic tone, Waugh concedes that however "unreal" the emotion that Dickens and Chaplin elicit, it retains its pull on even the most sophisticated of readers. Here the sentimental itself appears as uncanny: the tearjerker captivates us just as the hypnotist does; the "Master" Dickens forces us to obey his will just as Mr. McMaster forces Tony. If satire points out to us the ludicrousness of our sentimental impulses by reducing human character to the laughably rigid operation of mechanized emotions, then the uncanny holds up this reduced character as something more disquieting: a dumb puppet in thrall to forces outside itself.

A decade later, Waugh testified a third time to this uncanny power. In his autobiography, *A Little Learning*, he recounts how his father, another man who loved Dickens,[26] would read to his sons:

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24   Bell is among the only critics I have found who engages this issue in detail; his study covers a large historical span but does examine how modernists such as Lawrence and Henry James retained "an unstated criterion of true or authentic feeling" (169) despite their "recognition that emotional life may run underground, and may even present overt manifestations directly counter to true meaning" (148).

25   Miller does not discuss Waugh, but does examine satire in the work of several writers he calls "late modernist": Barnes, Beckett, Wyndham Lewis, and Mina Loy.

26   Dickens was Arthur Waugh's favorite author, according to Stannard (25). There is another father-son relationship lurking here: a Bloomian *agon* between Dickens and Waugh. Waugh's

For some eight years of my life for some three or four evenings a week ... he read to me, my brother and to whatever friends might be in the house, for an hour or more from his own old favourites—most of Shakespeare, most of Dickens, most of Tennyson.... Had it not been so well done, there might have been something ludicrous about the small, elderly, stout figure impersonating the heroines of forgotten comedies with such vivacity. In fact he held us enthralled. (71-72)

Although the experience is recounted as pleasurable—even bordering on the "ludicrous" so amenable to Waugh's satire—this Dickensian scene of domestic novel-reading curiously anticipates (or echoes) Tony's encounter with Mr. Todd. Indeed, in *Ninety-Two Days*, the account of his South American travels that furnished material for *A Handful of Dust*, Waugh conceded that while reading Dickens in the jungle he recovered a pleasure in reading he had not experienced since childhood (120-21). Like the novel, the autobiographical accounts suggest that the engagement with Dickens is a situation of supernatural enthrallment to a master with uncanny powers—uncanny because, as in childhood, the sentimental pull of the novel can still possess us.

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