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**WAUGH'S *THE LOVED ONE*:
A CLASSIC/ROMANTIC PARADIGM**

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Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* can, like its precursor *A Handful of Dust*, be read as a critique of nineteenth-century values and *mores*. *A Handful of Dust* dealt with those values as they pertained to private life, and explored the failure of humanism to provide sufficient social and moral structure. *The Loved One*, on the other hand, specifically questions the dilemma of the artist; here Romanticism, as opposed to the more general concept of nineteenth-century humanism, is the object of Waugh's ire. Like Eliot, Waugh considered himself philosophically and artistically a classicist, and he blamed Romanticism—especially the extremes to which the Romantic ethos was carried during the course of the later nineteenth and the twentieth centuries—for setting up a false religion in opposition to the true.

In *The Loved One* Waugh successfully associated the Romantic impulse not with the life force, but with *thanatos*. His spotlighting of James, Poe and Tennyson as the Victorian heirs to Shelley and Keats emphasizes the overripe, the decadent, the morbid. The cult of death at Whispering Glades (the great American necropolis, closely modeled on Los Angeles' Forest Lawn Cemetery) is a natural outcome, Waugh posits, of the Romantic aesthetic. The social historian Philippe Aries affirms that it was the early part of the Romantic age that initiated the fear of and the fascination with death; Waugh blames that era for the cult of death without God that has continued into the modern age. With this novel Waugh contributes his own part to the modernist critical symposium on Classical *versus* Romantic art, though his Eliotic credenda are cleverly concealed within the Hollywood satire.

The novel's hero, Dennis Barlow, is a jaunty young man who made a name for himself as a war poet. With the end of World War II, at loose ends, he accepts an offer to come to Hollywood to write a life of Shelley for the cinema. After this project falls through, Dennis gets a job in a pet cemetery and stays on in Los Angeles, sharing a house with another expatriate, Sir Francis Hinsley, an elderly belle-lettrist turned scriptwriter. When Hinsley commits suicide, Dennis goes to Whispering Glades to arrange for the funeral. There he falls in love with Aimee Thanatogenos, the beautiful but mysterious mortuary cosmetologist; he has a competitor for her favors, however, in the person of the glamorous Chief Embalmer, Mr. Joyboy.

Superficially, *The Loved One* is a baroque and farcical reweaving of the central Jamesian themes of love and death, innocence and experience, America and Europe, around the inner kernel of theological commentary, connected by Waugh's vision of America as a land of exiles. As Waugh's reading of Dickens in the jungle of Guiana enabled him to add the depth and framework necessary to *A Handful of Dust*, so his first readings of James, begun just before his journey to the United States, pervade that book. In late 1946, shortly before his departure for New York, he writes in his diary: "What an enormous, uncovenanted blessing to have kept Henry James for middle age and to turn, as the door shuts behind the departing guest, to a first reading of *Portrait of a Lady*."¹

The Loved One is as permeated with echoes of James as *A Handful of Dust* is with those of Dickens. Though no student of American literature, Waugh instinctively grasped its appositeness to the theme that Forest Lawn invoked. His novel is virtually a disquisition on Leslie Fiedler's definition of American fiction as, "bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction, nonrealistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic—a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation."²

Throughout the novel, Waugh plays with the contiguity of love and death—the special preoccupation of Romanticism in decline—and emphasizes the peculiar mannerisms imposed upon the literature of the later nineteenth century. If James's novels act as the *ur*-text for *The Loved One*, manifold other nineteenth-century authors are invoked to provide its texture.

Dennis's arrival in California as Hollywood's answer to Shelley quickly sets the tone for the literary aura that will follow, as does the film studio's ludicrous transformation of film star Juanita del Pablo ("surly, luscious and sadistic"³) into an Irish colleen—both *personae* of course being highly-colored clichés of archetypal romance. The *topos* of Romantic parody is picked up by Dennis in his private pursuit of Romance; since he does not write the Shelley film (which would surely have been parodic) he transfers his field of travesty to the personal level. The parodic poems Dennis sends Aimee are almost all nineteenth century masterpieces, all dealing, in some manner, with death. He parodies Cory's "Heraclitus": "They told me, Francis Hinsley, they told me you were/ hung/ With red protruding eye-balls and black protruding/ tongue" (85); he parodies Poe's "To Helen": "Aimee, thy beauty is to me/ Like those Nycaean barks of yore (130);" he claims authorship of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale": "...For many a time/ I

have been half in love with easeful death;" he parodies Richard Middleton's "Any Lover, Any Lass": "Her little hands are soft and when I see her fingers move/I know in very truth that men/Have died for less than love"(120). (Waugh grotesquely juxtaposes this parody with the activity Aimee is performing at the time she reads the verse: "She put the manuscript in the pocket of her linen smock and her little soft hands began to move over the dead face"(120). This also recalls, perhaps purposely, Browning's strangled Porphyria with her "little neck" and "little head"). Most notably, though, Dennis parodies Tennyson. Waugh shared with Eliot a virtual obsession with Tennyson; along with Dickens, he was for Waugh the most redoubtable of the great Victorians—impossible to emulate, impossible to ignore. " 'Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white,' had struck bang in the centre of the bull, but [Dennis] knew few poems so high and rich and voluptuous"(106). When Dennis attempts to write an elegy for Francis Hinsley, the first thing he is able to come up with is a burlesque of Tennyson's "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington":

Bury the great Knight
With the studio's valediction
Let us bury the great Knight
Who was once the arbiter of popular fiction.(85)

Most importantly, he quotes "Tithonus": "I wither slowly in thine arms,/ Here at the quiet limit of the world." With its pagan, Classical and Romantic elements all focusing on the theme of *thanatos*, this is the central quotation for this novel about, and composed of, quotations.

In indulging in parodic art, Dennis is doing nothing more nor less than getting into the spirit of *Whispering Glades*, for that necropolis itself specializes in nineteenth-century parody. The *Wee Kirk o' Auld Lang Syne* is dedicated to Robert Burns, a poet whose "warmest admirers," Waugh felt, "can hardly claim that he has anything to offer except a purely superficial charm. He writes in a dialect which renders his work either repugnant or additionally endearing, according as one's sympathies tend"⁴—there being no doubt, of course, of the tendency of Waugh's own. Aimee sits and thinks about Death and Art on the "Lake Isle of Innisfree;" Mr. Kaiser, the fruit magnate who has buried his family there, sponsors a weekly radio program of Wagner. In the *Slumber Room*, where the corpses are laid out for viewing, a canned version of "Oh, for the Wings of a Dove" is played in direct reference to James.

It is possible to see the development of Waugh's concept of the theme of nineteenth-century art in the manuscript changes; his original idea was to have Dennis crib his verses from the collected poems of Christina Rossetti, then he changed it to those of Tennyson, and finally broadened it to the entire *Oxford Book of English Verse*. Thus he makes his point less obvious while still keeping the Rossetti/Tennyson flavor in the poems cited— as well as being able to make the apt addition of Poe.

Another change Waugh made in manuscript was in the initial description of Aimee Thanatogenos. After the word "decadent," the second draft continues the description with references to nineteenth century painting:

Not perhaps with the rich overtones of Toulouse-Lautrec; rather Pre-Raphaelite. She was like a Rossetti watercolour in the mahogany panelled dining room of a Gateshead magnate, not one of those voluptuous denizens of the King's Road tricked out in renaissance costume but rather a product of his submission to Ruskin...⁵

As with the changing of the anthologies from the specifically Victorian Tennyson and Christina Rossetti to the more general *Oxford Book of English Verse*, Waugh perhaps felt that here he was making his point too obvious. Also, though all the art he cites in the book is of the most lush and overripe, his purpose is to keep his own prose crisp and classical, giving away nothing, eschewing not only moral but also aesthetic judgment. Thus, though his heroine's fate is finally the same as Milly Theale's, her last hours are stripped of gauze and romance and are presented in repugnant detail, as she is cremated in the furnace of the pet cemetery, with Dennis raking out the ashes and pounding up the pelvis. Waugh takes the raw materials of Romantic art and, removing the stage props, exposes it in its barren nakedness. Dead, Aimee is an object not of idealization but simply of deadness; even her Romantic admirer, Mr. Joyboy, feels that Daisy Miller ultimately elicits respect and sentiment from the men who have taken advantage of her innocence; Aimee, more appropriately, is remembered only through an annual card from the Happier Hunting Ground.

Sir Harold Acton makes an interesting passing remark about *The Loved One* in his autobiography: "There is so much of Evelyn's brand of humour in this tale that it stands in relation to his *oeuvre* as *Un Coeur simple* to Flaubert's. Evelyn was little versed in French

literature, so it must be a coincidence that a parrot held the same place in Mrs. Joyboy's affections as in the good Felicite's."⁶ But in youth, Waugh had shown an interest in French literature, especially that of the nineteenth century, as his diaries demonstrate. It seems more than likely that Waugh was acquainted with *Un Coeur simple*, and, with that in mind, Mrs. Joyboy's parrot takes on a central thematic importance. It is to be remembered that Felicite in her simplicity allows her parrot to become the focus not only of her affections but of her religious impulses. When she dies and has her final beatific vision, Christ himself has taken on the glimmering green plumage of the parrot.

This suits Waugh's purpose very well. Thematically, *The Loved One* is closely related to *A Handful of Dust*; in his review, Desmond MacCarthy recognized that it is an "exposure of the silly optimistic trend in modern civilization which takes for granted that the consolations of religion can be enjoyed without belief in them, its symbols and associations remain beautiful when they have ceased to mean anything."⁷ With his invocation of the Romantic artists and their Victorian heirs, Waugh is viciously attacking those artists who, he implies, are the great secularizers of art.

Waugh would agree with Hulme that Romanticism is spilt religion:

Put shortly, these are the two views, then. One, that man is intrinsically good, spoilt by circumstance; and the other that he is intrinsically limited, but disciplined by order and tradition to something fairly decent. To the one party man's nature is like a well, to the other like a bucket. The view which regards man as a well, a reservoir full of possibilities, I call romantic; the one which regards him as a very finite and fixed creature, I call the classical.⁸

Waugh would have it that the Romantic artists, in raising man's creations to the status of God's, have trivialized and ultimately desanctified the work of art; by divorcing it from its religious source it has become an artifact rather than a masterpiece. In the conflict between Dennis and Mr. Joyboy, as they compete for the vacant modern mind and heart of Aimee, Waugh has given a brilliant paradigm of the Romantic and Classical attitudes to art. Mr. Joyboy is, in fact, the Romantic artist taken to his full parodic extreme:

'Had they been mother and child I should have taken both, busy though I am. There is something in individual technique—not everyone would notice it perhaps; but if I saw a pair that had been embalmed by different hands I should know at once and I should feel that the child did not properly belong to its mother; as though they had been estranged in death. Perhaps I see whimsical?'⁹

Mr. Joyboy is known at Whispering Glades as a "true artist." His work is an expression of his feelings, his personality—when he is crossed in love, his corpses look morose, when he is elated, they mirror his soul (" 'Miss Thanatogenos, for you the Loved Ones just naturally smile...It seems I am just powerless to prevent it. When I am working for you there's something inside me says "He's on his way to Miss Thanatogenos" and my fingers just seem to take control' " (69)).

Dennis, on the other end of the spectrum, is a parodic version of Eliot's traditional, Classical poet. "What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."¹⁰ Dennis would seem to have taken this dictum of Eliot's to heart as Mr. Joyboy has not; his "poetry" is *fully* an "extinction of personality," a complete "self-sacrifice." "We shall often find," writes Eliot,

that not only the best, but the most individual parts of [the poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously...No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. (4)

Dennis has absorbed this philosophy to the point where his "poems" are nothing more than the literal transcriptions of the masterpieces of his dead ancestors, with only a word changed here or there.

It is no accident that both Eliot and Waugh use death-imagery. The Romantic artist tries to deny death by asserting the immortality of the personality via the work of art (a process symbolized by Mr. Joyboy's fruitless attempts to breathe life into the dead body); the Classical artist

accepts his own eventual relegation to oblivion by becoming one with a tradition greater than himself.

Hence the necessity for the crudity and abrasiveness that so many readers have found offensive in the character of Dennis Barlow. The Classical poet must dissociate himself from the distorting power of emotion, according to Eliot: "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates. It is not the 'greatness,' the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process that counts" (7-8).

Waugh has brilliantly contrived to insert the *lupos* of Romantic and Classical art unobtrusively into the fabric of his satire; and properly read, *The Loved One* is a more succinct and valuable contribution to the literature of the subject than are his more straightforward disquisitions, too often marred by dogmatism and irritability.

NOTES

¹Evelyn Waugh, *Diaries*. ed Michael Davie. (Penguin Books, 1984), p. 663.

²Leslie Fieldler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Penguin Books, 1984), p. 29.

³Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1948), p. 3.

⁴Evelyn Waugh, "The Books You Read." *Graphic* 8 Nov. 1930, p. 277.

⁵Quoted by Robert M Davis in *Evelyn Waugh, Writer* (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1981), p. 201.

⁶Harold Acton, *More Memoirs of an Aesthete* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 224.

⁷Quoted in Martin Stannard, ed *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 309.

⁸T. E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism." In *Speculations*. ed Herbert Read. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1961), p. 117.

⁹*The Loved One*, p. 71.

¹⁰T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In *T. S. Eliot: Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1950), pp. 67.