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## *Introduction*

Evelyn Waugh's reputation as the chronicler of the 1920s Bright Young People has shone with more radiance since his death than as the Catholic moralist. Yet the latter he also undoubtedly was, or, rather, became. Waugh's later masterpieces *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) and the *Sword of Honour* Trilogy (1952–61) have little of the whirl and glare of his first two novels *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *Vile Bodies* (1930). These books, which predate Waugh's conversion to Catholicism – which occurred eight months after *Vile Bodies*' publication – see strangely passive heroes trying to negotiate a world particularly ill-suited to gratify or reward them, who feel the absence of a code of behaviour or values which would help them to navigate that world. Despite the title's allusion to *The Book of Common Prayer*, this novel will offer nothing in the way of religious or spiritual consolation.

What most readers of *Vile Bodies* will think of and remember it for instead is its parties – parties which transport guests from their homes and their identities, towards being somewhere or someone different:

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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.

*Vile Bodies* has a large cast for a short novel, and the experience of going to a lot of parties attended by a crowd of people you don't know can be rather alienating or, as the Bright Young People might have it, 'sick-making'. But none of these parties is attended for very long – what makes this novel so enjoyable to read is the rapidity of its shifts in both scene and tone. These shifts feel especially modern when they are accelerated by new technology. The abrupt switches in the novel's point of view are clearly an attempt to reproduce in prose the kinds of sharp edits possible in the narrative cinema enjoyed by both characters and author alike. The plot is punctuated by set pieces such as the montage of the Channel crossing, the crowd scene of Lady Metroland's party, the motor car race, and the screening of Colonel Blount's film during which 'whenever the story

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reached a point of dramatic and significant action, the film seemed to get faster and faster'. (As Agatha dies, she and the voices in her head are too calling out 'Faster, faster'). The novelist Rebecca West praised the novel's 'rendering [of] the incoherence which has afflicted society in consequence of the invention of the combustion engine'. The dustjacket of the first edition of *Vile Bodies* featured an illustration drawn by Waugh himself of a racing car, a technology whose power to travel at speed seemingly independent of human agency briefly rouses the narrator of *Vile Bodies* to a modernist hymn to:

those vital creations of metal who exist solely for their own propulsion through space, for whom their drivers, clinging precariously at the steering wheel, are as important as his stenographer to a stockbroker. These are in perpetual flux, a vortex of combining and disintegrating units, like the confluence of traffic at some spot where many roads meet, streams of mechanism come together, mingle and separate again.

A racing car carries the epitome of the Bright Young People, Angela Runcible, not to happiness and fame (the combination of politics, a newspaper and yet another party have already seen her carried to infamy), but off the track and into insanity and death. *Vile Bodies* opens with many of its ensemble travelling but suffering from sea sickness. The

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novel's party goers are incessantly in movement but without a clear sense of where they might be going, heading for boredom, illness or even death. Swinging drunkenly on a chandelier might, as one discovers, lead either to a funny story or to an untimely demise.

The shady Jesuit Fr. Xavier diagnoses the Younger Generation's frantic thrill-seeking as a symptom of an 'almost fatal hunger for permanence', as if to suggest that the wiser course would be resignation to the febrile mobility, even the transience, of life. Ginger makes his fortune from imperial exploitation in Sri Lanka but is soon bored trying to spend his pile in London (also bringing back with him, as his speech shows, the coloniser's racist lexicon). 'I'd give anything in the world for something different' mopes Adam to Nina at Lottie Crump's; the novel's brief glimpses of the servant's hall, the railway carriage and the pub gesture towards the possibilities of what life might be like in other classes, but overall the novel's jaded view of technological and social progress does not seem to offer much in the way of prospects for human happiness. After marrying Ginger, Nina reaches new speeds when she boards a plane and sees a vision of humanity from which she feels more alienated than connected:

Nina looked down and saw inclined at an odd angle a horizon of straggling red suburb; arterial roads dotted with little cars; factories, some of them working, others

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empty and decaying; a disused canal; some distant hills sown with bungalows; wireless masts and overhead power cables; men and women were indiscernible except as tiny spots; they were marrying and shopping and making money and having children. The scene lurched and tilted again as the aeroplane struck a current of air.

‘I think I’m going to be sick,’ said Nina.

Rather than a brighter future, the novel’s arc seems to point instead towards a decadence, a falling-off. The accumulation at Shephard’s Hotel and Major Blount’s house of furniture, photographs and bric-a-brac from earlier epochs suggest, as does the lonely exile of the King of Ruritania, the inevitability of being left behind by history.

Waugh’s fictional universe, at least at this stage of his career, is one seemingly abandoned by providence: human beings must find such order in experience as they can for themselves. Waugh’s (largely dismissive) 1965 Preface to *Vile Bodies* acknowledges the influence on the novel of the early twentieth-century decadent novelist Ronald Firbank; in his essay about the author Waugh praises the cinematic quality of Firbank’s novels and notes they ‘are almost wholly devoid of any attribution of cause to effect’. *Vile Bodies* has none of the urge for connection of the plot of the classic Victorian novel, and more of the dream-logic of Lewis Carroll’s Alice books. *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) provides the book with its two epigraphs.



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‘Well, in our country,’ said Alice, still panting a little, ‘you’d generally get to somewhere else – if you ran very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.’

‘A slow sort of country!’ said the Queen ‘Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!’

The plot turns on not on teleology but seemingly on chance: Adam’s trick with the coins when he meets the fortuitously rich stranger at Lottie Crump’s; his dreamlike meetings with the drunken major who has made Adam’s fortune by betting on a horse – a fortune he withholds from Adam by periodically disappearing from view. In a world seemingly governed, like Alice’s, more by randomness than by determinable laws, little can be lasting or dependable, and the self is subject to the arbitrary whims of those who have power and money – here not Lewis Carroll’s Red or White Queen but lawmakers, publishers and newspaper proprietors. Adam is unsuccessful even in asserting his identity in the face of the major’s inebriation and Colonel Blount’s (perhaps calculated?) dottiness; he successfully masquerades, in the novel’s final Christmas, as Nina’s husband and is even possibly the father of her child. Lottie Crump can never remember the names of her guests; Angela Runcible becomes the spare driver at the race because she happens to

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be wearing a randomly selected armband; three different characters bear the name of Mr Chatterbox. One of Mrs Ape's Angels has changed her name to 'Chastity' following her conversion (each of the Angels are named, superficially, after a virtue), only for her chastity to have slipped from her again by the time we see her, several names later, in the Major's car in the book's epilogue, 'Happy Ending' – a conclusion which presciently foresees the next World War.

It is an astonishingly bitter ending for an ostensibly comic novel. It may be a book full of parties but there is more hang-over here than euphoria, or rather 'that secondary stage, vividly described in temperance hand-books, when the momentary illusion of well-being and exhilaration gives place to melancholy, indigestion and moral decay'. Adam imagines at one stage another kind of party, a banquet comprising the smells of food only, which can neither nourish or glut. Waugh declared the novel to be 'a welter of sex and snobbery' in a letter to his friend, the aesthete and author Harold Acton, but its sex is rather disappointing: "All this fuss about sleeping together," complains Nina just after she and Adam have watched a film. "For physical pleasure I'd sooner go to my dentist any day"; Miles Malpractice is forced to exit the novel, leaving the country, it is strongly hinted, because of his homosexuality.

Waugh's early novels gesture more towards nihilism than a moral lesson; he wrote to his friend Henry Yorke (who

published, in 1929, his own second novel *Living*, under the name Henry Green), that he was ‘relying on a sort of cumulative futility for any effect [the novel] may have’. In the middle of writing *Vile Bodies* Waugh had suffered perhaps the most traumatic event of his life. The book was begun in June 1929 at the Abingdon Arms in Beckley in Oxfordshire – it remained Waugh’s habit, even after his second marriage and fatherhood, to remove himself from his loved ones when he was writing a novel. On 9 July, he received a letter from his first wife, also Evelyn (dubbed by their friends ‘Shevelyn’, as he was ‘Hevelyn’), announcing that she had fallen in love with another man, the BBC assistant news editor John Heygate, and she wished to end their marriage. In the Preface Waugh confesses that the novel’s composition saw ‘a sharp disturbance in my private life and was finished in a very different mood from that in which it was begun’. Following this disruption, the novel was completed by 29 September that year. Martin Stannard’s meticulous editing of the different states of *Vile Bodies* suggests that the novel’s first six chapters were completed before the ‘severe disturbance’, and that, following Shevelyn’s desertion, chapter six was revised; and then chapter seven – which sees the introduction of Ginger, Adam’s rival for Nina’s affection – and the remaining chapters of the book were produced subsequently.

While the significance of this dramatic change in Waugh’s life should not be underestimated, it’s important to note that

the novels that Waugh went on to write, uninterrupted by such personal upset, also exhibit such drastic changes in tone or similarly sudden reversals. Even while Waugh, in Beckley, was wholly unaware of what was happening to his marriage in London, he was still inventing Adam's heartbreaking discovery of the 'Charlie Chaplin' signature on the cheque Colonel Blount gives him, and creating the pathos of Nina's closing words to Chapter Five, thinking that she and Adam must break up for lack of money: 'It's awful to think that I shall probably never, as long as I live, see you dancing like that again all by yourself.'

The alternation between cruelty, pathos and farce is characteristic of Waugh's comic method: the swiftness of the transition between these moods is a part of what makes the novel so funny, through the pratfall or the sudden reverse, the mock heroic, the parody. Think too of the marvellous combination of high and low culture, the sacred and the profane, in the hymn sung by Mrs Ape's Angels, 'There ain't no flies on the Lamb of God'. *Vile Bodies* is magnificently funny, and not in the comic spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness; it is funny because of its cruelty, not in spite of it. It is also funny because of Waugh's magnificent gift for writing dialogue. Much of the novel's speech is presented un glossed by narratorial commentary, so one has to infer characterisation through attentive listening to a character's idiolect:

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‘Well! how too, too shaming, Agatha, darling,’ they said. ‘How devastating, how un-policeman-like, how goat-like, how sick-making, how too, too awful’.

‘Awful rough luck on you I mean and all that but still when you come to think of it after all well look here damn it I mean d’you see what I mean?’

‘Not quite,’ said Adam gently.

In the Preface Waugh makes the ‘claim that this was the first English novel in which dialogue on the telephone plays a large part’; the novel’s shortest chapter consists entirely of a gloriously terse exchange between Adam and Nina as they split up over the telephone. The phone also connects the partygoers of *Vile Bodies* across London, and the narrator moves among them, eavesdropping on Bright Young People and the older generation, priest, prime minister, policeman, procureuse, superannuated pre-Raphaelite model, Maharajah, Mrs Ape’s Angels and railway traveller alike – as if to report their misdeeds, by means of the telephone, to the novel’s other technology of rapid communication, the newspaper. Gossip in the aftermath of a party is breathlessly dictated down the telephone and reported in the newspapers the next day as fact: Adam will lose his job as Mr Chatterbox for inventing imaginary artists, peers and party goers, and green bowler hats. Lord Balcairn phones in to his news desk an

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elaborate, lurid fantasy of an orgy involving the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Prime Minister before committing suicide in a gas oven. (Here the narrator comments on the contrast between the noble deaths of previous Balcairns and the squalidly decadent modernity of the act which sees the end of the Balcairn line.) Waugh drew a connection in his 1929 essay 'The War and the Younger Generation' between the scandals being reported in the press and young people's loss of purpose:

Freedom produces sterility. There was nothing left for the younger generation to rebel against, except the widest conceptions of mere decency. Accordingly it was against these that it turned. The result in many cases is the perverse and aimless dissipation chronicled daily by the gossip-writer of the press.

Since the publication of *Decline and Fall*, Waugh himself had taken on far more journalistic work than before, publishing on such topics as 'Old-Fashioned Drinks', 'Let the Marriage Ceremony Mean Something', 'I Prefer London's Night Life' and 'Youth Has its Say: What I Think of My Elders'. Waugh characteristically played down the biographical or truth-telling nature of his work, at one stage writing and then deleting from the novel the possible epigraph: 'BRIGHT

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YOUNG PEOPLE AND OTHERS KINDLY NOTE THAT ALL CHARACTERS ARE WHOLLY IMAGINARY (AND YOU GET FAR TOO MUCH PUBLICITY ALREADY WHOEVER YOU ARE).’ The destruction of the manuscript of Adam’s memoirs in the opening chapter of *Vile Bodies* by the Customs officer might also resemble Waugh’s own attempt to disavow the autobiographical impulse. Nonetheless, some of Waugh’s recent experiences, alongside romantic desertion, find their way into the novel: for example, he attended a car race in Belfast in August 1929, and after university, he had written and acted in an amateur film titled *The Scarlet Woman*, featuring the later staple of British cinema Elsa Lanchester. The experience of filming this script forms the basis of Colonel Blount’s disastrous production of a film on the life of John Wesley, a subject considered, and then rejected, by Waugh as a follow-up to his 1927 biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Mrs Melrose Ape closely resembles the American revivalist Aimée Semple McPherson; Shephard’s hotel is so transparently a portrait of the Cavendish Hotel that Rosa Lewis, the real-life Lottie, barred Waugh for life; friends from Waugh’s set appear under pseudonyms, and some of the parties listed in the passage above are based on parties from Waugh’s set.

*Vile Bodies* was an instant success: it was published on 14 January 1930 and reprinted five times by the end of February. In the seven months following its publication, *Vile Bodies* sold 11,000

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copies. Whatever the personal trauma that accompanied its composition, it established Waugh as a novelist of significance. The party might have ended for Waugh's *Bright Young People*, but for his career as a writer it was just beginning.

Simon J. James





## *Preface*

This was a totally unplanned novel. I had the facility at the age of twenty-five to sit down at my table, set a few characters on the move, write 3,000 words a day, and note with surprise what happened. The composition of *Vile Bodies* was interrupted by a sharp disturbance in my private life and was finished in a very different mood from that in which it was begun. The reader may, perhaps, notice the transition from gaiety to bitterness.

It was the first of my books to be a popular success. *Decline and Fall* had been well reviewed but its sales in its first year were small, fewer than 3,000 copies if I remember rightly. *Vile Bodies* caught the public fancy for extraneous reasons. 'The Bright Young People' with whom it deals, and of whom I was a member rather on the fringe than in the centre, were one of the newspaper topics of the time. They were totally unlike the various, publicized groups of modern youth, being mostly of good family and education and sharp intelligence, but they were equally anarchic and short-lived. The jargon most of us spoke came new to the novel reader and so captivated one prominent dramatic critic that for weeks

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he introduced into articles week after week: “‘Too sick-making”, as Mr Waugh would say.’ There was also a pretty accurate description of Mrs Rosa Lewis and her Cavendish Hotel, just on the brink of their decline but still famous. I think I can claim that this was the first English novel in which dialogue on the telephone plays a large part. For reasons of novelty the many gross faults were overlooked. There were not many comic writers at that time and I filled a gap. I began under the brief influence of Ronald Firbank but struck out for myself. It is not a book I enjoy re-reading but there are one or two funny scenes which redeem it from banality. I like Colonel Blount, though he is a figure from conventional farce. He was brilliantly played by Athol Stewart in a very poor dramatic version. I may add that at the time I invented ‘Father Rothschild’ I had never met a Jesuit.

E. W.

Combe Florey 1964

‘Well in our country,’ said Alice, still panting a little, ‘you’d generally get to somewhere else — if you ran very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.’

‘A slow sort of country!’ said the Queen. ‘Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!’

‘If I wasn’t real,’ Alice said — half-laughing through her tears, it all seemed so ridiculous — ‘I shouldn’t be able to cry.’

‘I hope you don’t suppose those are real tears?’ Tweedledum interrupted in a tone of great contempt.

Through the Looking Glass, Lewis Carroll



*VILE BODIES*



## *One*

It was clearly going to be a bad crossing.

With Asiatic resignation Father Rothschild S. J. put down his suitcase in the corner of the bar and went on deck. (It was a small suitcase of imitation crocodile hide. The initials stamped on it in Gothic characters were not Father Rothschild's, for he had borrowed it that morning from the *valet-de-chambre* of his hotel. It contained some rudimentary underclothes, six important new books in six languages, a false beard and a school atlas and gazetteer heavily annotated.) Standing on the deck Father Rothschild leant his elbows on the rail, rested his chin in his hands and surveyed the procession of passengers coming up the gangway, each face eloquent of polite misgiving.

Very few of them were unknown to the Jesuit, for it was his happy knack to remember everything that could possibly be learned about everyone who could possibly be of any importance. His tongue protruded very slightly and, had they not all been so concerned with luggage and the weather, someone might have observed in him a peculiar resemblance to those plaster reproductions of the gargoyles of