Sobering Adam in the Nightmarish "Becoming": beyond Waugh's *Vile Bodies*

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In Evelyn Waugh's second novel, the purposeless and unruly lives of "Bright Young Things" in the thirties and their previous generation are depicted, according to some critics, with too much satire. It is true that Waugh's sarcastic glance seems to be cast in all directions, grotesquely caricaturizing the amoral age rather than trying to find a way to moral recovery. For, example, we notice the motif of "Waste Land" futility in the repetition of one party after another held by Bright Young Things with no particular purpose. As we can see in out-of-mind Agatha's monologue,"We are going round and round," repetition with no creative force may spin out of control at any accidental time and end up in nightmarish ruin.

Referring to the mode of writing in the text, Carens points out Waugh considered the cause-and-effect mode to be inappropriate and borrowed the "counterpoint" mode from Firbank, which resulted in the most outstanding characteristic of the novel—the silly and inconsequential chain of events.

> Firbank's use of counterpoint, then, was of central importance, providing a technical precedent for Huxley, who found in counterpoint a way to express his irony and to escape from the chronology he despised, and for Waugh, who perceived that a sequence of events in a cause-to-effect relationship could not express...the absurdity he saw in English society of the thirties. (Carens 8-9)

More concretely, forgetfulness, misrecognition, and switching constitute the basic grammar, mediating the accidental development of the plot, and echoing the basic undertone of "cumulative futility." In other words, failure to share the stable signifiant/signifié relations— label and content relation in other words—among characters is at the bottom of the discommunication and absurdity.

On the other hand, it might be possible to say, as Carens points out, the religious motif, which is found in his later works, exists in this text as a shadow. It is Father Rothchild who diagnoses the Bright Young Things and prophesies the future. In this essay, however, I will try to find the trace of permanence, rather in the very place where accidents stand out. First I will scrutinize the contingency in the text foucusing on Agatha, and then discuss the relation between Adam and the Major as another example of contingency and, if possible, try to find the theme of permanence there.

1. Contingency—thingness

Among so many nonsense events in the text, Carens points out, the theme of contingency is most conspicuoslly foregrounded in the racing ground which leads Agatha up to death.

> As Waugh develops this technique[a comic technique of setting off a silly and inconsequential chain of events] in his early satire…it reveals a world grotesque and cruel, without purpose or meaning…as is the chain of events leading to the death of Miss Runcible in *Vile Bodies*… (Carens 9-10)

In this "chain of events" Agatha wearing the tag of replacement *by chance*, is forced to fill in for the injured driver before she (and readers) knows it, then begins to go round and round, completely out of control, until finally she spins out of the circuit to her death. The process is so speedy and unrealistic that we cannot so much as know whether we should fear or laugh at this absurdity. All that happens here happens as if in a dream.

The truth is that this scene of stark absurdity is strongly foreshadowed by another remarkable scene cited below.

> She threw her cigarette over her shoulder, and by a beneficent attention of Providence which was quite rare in her career it fell into the water. Had it fallen into the petrol it would probably have been all up with Miss Runcible… Miss Runcible lit another cigarette. 'No smoking in the pits, please,' said the official.' 'My dear, how awful of me. I quite forget.' (This time it fell in the mechanic's luncheon basket and lay smouldering quietly on a leg of chicken until it had burnt itself out.) (*Vile Bodies* 140)

Why does this scene have so comical, and probably as much black, an effect? The main reason is that Agatha's act of throwing a cigarette evokes the fatal nonchalance and haphazardness of Bright Young Things. They never have the past nor the future as the point of reference, but they live for the immediate now. In short, this scene summarizes and caricaturizes their life as "things" which are merely subject to contingency—appropriately for readers in post quantum theory age. Readers feel, by Waugh's very reference to "Providence," that the narrow brushing with death is nothing more than a completely meaningless accident. As if to prove this, Agatha is led, by the same string of accidents, to a death which has no more meaning than her previous escape, after her participation in the race.

Contingency is the rule which governs the modern world, and again we have to remember that the accidental developments in this text are mediated by the accidental exchange of one signifiant/signifié (label/content)relation to another—for example, from Agatha-girl to Agatha-driver, from Colonel Blount-Adam's prospective father-in-law to Colonel Blount-a film addict(accordingly from a check for a grand to a mere piece of paper underwritten by the name of Charlie Chaplin).

The narrator's lecture on two types of cars is pregnant with meaning in this context.

The truth is that motor cars offer a very happy illustration of the metaphysical distinction between 'being' and 'becoming'. Some cars, mere vehicles with no purpose above bare locomotion, mechanical drudges such as Lady Metroland's Hispano Suiza, or Mrs Nouse's Rolls-Royce, or Lady Circumference's 1912 Daimler, or the 'general reader's' Austin Seven, these have definite 'being' just as much as their occupants.

... Not so the *real* cars, that become masters of men; 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 stock broker, 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. (*Vile Bodies* 135–136)

It is easy to find in this lecture the lesson on the reversal of master-servant relation between man and things—that the cirsumstances which surround man have become something more speedy and changeable, and that man is now at the mercy of this uncontrollable outside. However, the more nightmarish implication is that man himself has become an object to be disassembled, reconstructed, and redistributed.

Subject to the speedily changing circumstances, characters in the text cannot stand on the stable signifiant/signifié relation, the presumed condition for man to communicate in a day to day life whether in a social or cultural context. As Agatha-Girl changes into Agatha-driver in a minute and goes around in the circuit, so Nina, who makes with Adam the only constant plot line of pending marriage, is given a price and circulates in the market as an exchangeable merchandise, changing hands from Adam to Balcairn. A sanctified sphere of "self"—as in the sense of maintaining something of unchangeable and unexchangeable—is destroyed in this text in multiple levels.

In this world where there is no time for anything—any signifiant/signifié relation—to sink into man's consciousness and gain currency, everything can become anything at ever renewed present—with no durée—as we confirmed in the scene of Agatha throwing a cigarette. The binary division between being and becoming Waugh lectures on is, in a sense, quite misleading. For, characters in this text, who never maintained any definite being, are not becoming anything, either. Rather, they are hampered, by the ever renewed delay, (of carrying anything of the past in durée—temporal equivalence for the depth of recognition), from becoming anything or forming any experience. Paradoxically speaking they "repeat the difference," as in parties.

As McCartney correctly points out, this lecture echoes Marinetti's futurism, though I am doubtful about McCartney's identification of Bergson's philosophy of becoming with Marinetti's way of viewing the world—which is in line with Wyndom Lewis's denunciation of Bergson as the most responsible for the modern chaos.

Waugh's mock tribute to the "the real cars" suggests Waugh no doubt agreed with this assessment of the modern sensibility, although he hardly shared Marinetti's enthusiasm for it. (McCartney 49)

Evidently Waugh never shares Marintti's enthusiasm. On the contrary, it is not difficult to find, behind this lecture, and behind this deprivation of anything positive from so-called "becoming," an cynical face of Waugh the satirist.

Italicized real in the lecture is double edged, one edge cutting classic cars as out of date and disqualified from "real," and the other cutting the phoniness of the self-claimed real world advocated by futurists—which speed cars symbolize. In short "Becoming" in this lecture is nothing but a parody of a more creative becoming—the becoming with *durée*, Bergsonian term with strong connotation of permenance or continuity—psychological time scheme where all the past is preserved and ready to flow into the present in accordance with the context.

Then, is it impossible to find a place for the motif of permanence in this text where the prevailing undertone of Waugh's "Waste Land" seems to prevent any consistant meaning from arising? One possible answer to this is that, as is presented by Heath, the existence of Father Rothchild, who diagnoses the murky thirties and especially Bright Young Things in it, and foresees the future in spite of his apparently grotesque portrayal. In fact, this duality of Father Rothchild shows the subtleness of the position that religion is afforded in this novel.

On the other hand, Carens points out that in the amoral world of the text only Adam can be a point which readers can identify with.

> Her[Agatha's] nightmare...symbolizes the life from which Adam and Nina, in rare moments of tranquility, withdraw in loathing and disgust. Adam reflects upon the feverish round of parties which are analogous to Miss Runcible's motor race:
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> ...Masked parties, Savage parties, Victorian parties, Greek parties, Wild West parties, Russian parties, Circus parties, parites where one had to dress as someone else, almost naked parties in St. John's Wood...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...
>
> So leans his forehead to cool it on Nina's arm, and she murmurs "I know, darling." (Carens 75-76)

It is true that Adam himself is a member of Bright Young Things in his mentality: his circumstantial repetition "I can marry you," and "I cannot marry you." corresponds to the repetition of parties; he even sells Nina to Ginger for a small pittance. Nevertheless, I admit that, if there is any hint of permanence in this text at all, readers will feel it *through* Adam, or more correctly through Adam's relation to the Major, who I think is the counterpart of Father Rothchild in the realm of dream.

2. Contingency and Permanence

I have so far discussed the contingency which prevails in this text on plot and verbal levels. It is, in fact, omnipresent. However, this omnipresence is shared by one mysterious character—

the Major who holds the key to Adam's marriage: He is the man who gives stone-broke Adam the hope for marriage, and lets him down by getting drunk and having going off with the money he promised to give Adam. Is he contingency personified, or Providence of whose absence Waugh emphasized by the very reference to it in the scene of Agatha throwing a cigarette? The first encounter between Adam and Major after their parting in the first chapter is depicted as follows.

> Adam turned and saw not three yards away…the long-thought figure of the drunk Major… 'Hi!' cried the drunk Major. 'Hi! I've been looking for you everywhere.' 'I've been looking for you,' shouted Adam. (*Vile Bodies* 138)

However, this precious moment of communication while passing each other in the car is erased by the horn of the race car and the applause of the crowd(another chance) immediately after this, and Adam again loses sight of the Major. Later in the racing field, they meet again, and The Major says he has been looking for Adam and that he wants to give back the money to him.

> When they had finished their champagne, the Major—now indisputably drunk—rose to go… "But couldn't I come and see you soon. About the money, you know." "Sooner the better, old boy. Though I don't know what you mean about money." "My thirty-five thousand." "Why, yes, to be sure. Fancy my forgetting that…" (*Vile Bodies* 145)

Even after this, the failure in handing the money is repeated, each time leaving a tantalizing hint of what the Major really thinks—or whether he has a mind at all.

It is true, as Heath points out "Coincidence brings Adam and the Major together from time to time…," that the Major is an allegorical figure to embody the world of successive chance events. However, Waugh's finesse is in that he shows the Major's elusiveness not only as the string of chance events of meeting and parting, but also as readers' abortive experience, if they attempt to read the Major' mind in psychological realism. In this process the major eludes every indicator that readers get from texts and through which they try to read his mind—whether he got away with a grand or not.

For example, after the Major's disappearance with one thoudand pounds the former king of Ruritania mentions another Major whom he knew that pocketed something.

> While Miss Runcible finished her story…the ex-King of Ruritania told Adam about a Major he had known, who had come from Prussia to reorganize the Ruritanian Army. He had disappeared south, taking with him all the mess plate of the Royal Guard, and the Lord Chamberlain's wife, and a valuable pair of candlesticks from the Chapel Royal. (*Vile Bodies* 38-39)

Given an indicator—another major—as a hint, however, readers have to give up getting at any motive of the Major's, for he is drunk when he is gone. Time and time again Waugh writes that

"the major is gone," and every time the major is gone, that means one thousand pounds—and marriage—have slipped Adam's hand and that readers have to give up psychological reading by any hint he leaves—whether it is a line or an action—prevented by such dream-like spheres as drunkness or sleep.

The more readers fail in their attempt to interpret the indicators pointing at the Major, the more thirst they feel for the rising of some definite meaning or answer—a halt of the endless nightmare. That is, we identify with any character in the text, probably for the first time, through Adam, who "cools his head on Nina's arm." (*Vile Bodies* 104) Adam represents, in his relation to the Major, the subconsciousness of the young amoral generation who seem to have come to terms with being "things," which, in fact, is not the entire truth. This is what Father Rothchild has in mind when he mentions the young generation's hidden "thirst for eternity."

Even so, we should not overlook the fact that the major is the *ever elusive* Providence, not the Providence *found*. The major never ceases to appear even after the outbreak of the war. In other words, although it may sound rather paradoxical, as long as the major continues to appear, Adam never meets the real Providence (or fate or whatever you call it). We could almost imagine the snicker on the Major's face in the following scene where Adam hears of the Major from a hotel clerk.

> He had three or four pound notes in his hand. Kept waving them about and saying, "D'you know what? I met a mutt today. I owe him thirty-five thousand pounds and he lent me a fiver." (*Vile Bodies* 150)

He would continue to bear the same snicker, not the snicker of a con man, but that of the tantalizingly changing world of "becoming," as long as Adam tries to find the answer in the outside world, and until he sobers from the all too passive submission to it. When he recovers the creative becoming in his inner time, he can regrasp the outside— a string of accidents—within his inner necessity, and leap to some vantage point of recognition. Although this type of narrative and psychology exists only as a shadow in this text where Waugh carries the world symbolized by "the real car" to the extreme, an intertextual look at the final scene of the *Bridesheds Revisited* may give us some hint on the alternative mode to experience the ever-changing world.

> The builders did not know the uses to which their work would descend; they made a new house with the stones of the old castles; year by year, generation after generation, they enriched and extended it; year by year the great harvest of timber in the park grew to ripeness; until, in sudden frost, came the age of Hooper; the place was desolate and the work all brought to nothing; *Quomodo sedet sola civitas.* Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.
> "And yet," I thought…"and yet that is not the last word… "Something quite remote from anything the builders intended, has come out of their work, and out of the fierce little human tragedy in which I played; something none of us thought about at the time: a small red flame…relit before the beaten-copper doors of a tabernacle…burning anew among the old stones." (*Brideshead Revisited* 331-332)

The flame in the chapel is the symbol of Continuity and Permanence—namely Catholic faith—*within* the all too changeable world of "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." The binary division of being and becoming is dissolved there in faith—an inner necessity. The vantage point suggested by the chapel flame is not discovered as a premeditated harmony at the end of the linear development of the story, but after the main characters' loss of the definite "being" and over the nightmarish experience of drifting ("becoming") —decline and fall in short. If *Vile Bodies'* satire seems too much sometimes—, for it is double-edged, mocking the binary division of being and becoming as a way to weigh value—or too little—, for satire presumes what Waugh calls the homogeneous moral standard, which is not visible in the novel—that is because the counter-narrative with Chatholic value only acts as an amorphous shadow in *Vile Bodies*.

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