



## *Et in Azania Ego: Quester Knights, Arthurian Apocalypses and the Call of the South, in the Early Novels of Evelyn Waugh*

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# EPI-REVEL

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Et in Azania Ego: Quester Knights, Arthurian  
Apocalypses and the Call of the South, in the Early  
Novels of Evelyn Waugh

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Evelyn Waugh depends upon comic exaggeration and farcical coincidence to create an illusive mood of social and political anarchy to define the moral decay that prevails in his fictive London during the final days of glory of the British Empire and the beginning of the Great Depression. These phenomena become the primary thematic focus of his early novels, particularly in *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*, where he contrasts the frenzied chaos of the social life of the British ruling class with what he perceives to have been the rich Victorian heritage of empire, order and stability, an order he associates with the high moral purpose of the great landed aristocracy of an even earlier era. It is a tribute to Waugh's honesty as well as to his sense of justice that he is able to recognize that the idyllic Tennysonian past he uses as counterpoint to the atonal dissonance of the modern age is itself a Victorian idealization of the earlier unsullied past of Arthurian legend and thus equally illusory in its imagined perfections. Waugh uses the archetype of the Arthurian quester knight as a dominant motif in his examination of these themes, throughout his career, most effectively, perhaps, in his war trilogy, where he contrasts the sordid materialism of the leaden technological present with what Guy Crouchback, his protagonist, mistakenly presumes to have been the golden lustre of the medieval past<sup>1</sup>. It is a construct that he uses less romantically and with decidedly more humor in the 1930s in his novels: *Black Mischief*, *A Handful of Dust*, and *Scoop* as it illuminates and defines the call of the south from his singular politically and socially conservative perspective.

In each of these novels, the protagonists unconsciously seek a variety of 'grails' as they pursue an elusive chivalric ideal, each in a different southern imperial post, out of motives which range from and in some instances include a desire for fame and fortune, to the search for the City of God, to the attempt to regain a paradise lost. Basil Seal, for example, the *enfant terrible* of the British ruling class, seeks fame, glory and the restitution of his badly-soiled reputation in the Azania of *Black Mischief*; Anthony Last, the best and brightest of his generation, on the other hand, seeks solace, psychic healing and anonymity, but most of all, El Dorado in *A Handful of Dust*, while William Boot, the last of an ancient line of impoverished landed gentry, is thrust willy-nilly from the rural Eden of his ancestral manor, Boot Magna, into the midst of the Ishmaelian jungle in *Scoop*. For each of these young men, the call of the south provides the clarion call which summons them to their individual destinies. Each fanfare represents the final trumpet blast that ushers in an Arthurian apocalypse and the birth of a leaden new age.

One could say, of course, that *all* solar myths, not to mention all heroic quests, represent psychogenic efforts to regain the archetypal paradise — that lost, protected, sinless, environment of the collective unconscious — the primal womb. One could also say, similarly, that all solar quests *must* end in annihilation or at least in fragmentation before the cycle begins again<sup>2</sup>. In Waugh's first two novels, which are semiautobiographical mirrors of the

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed analysis of Waugh's use of this myth in the war trilogy appears in my forthcoming book: *Tradition and Change in the Novels of Evelyn Waugh*, Edwin Mellen Press, New York, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the more interesting and useful examinations of the function of solar mythology in the evolution of human consciousness include but are in no way limited to the following studies: Robert Briffault, *The Mothers*, London and New York, 1927; Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, translated by Ralph Mannheim, vol.III, *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, New Haven and London, 1957; Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, abridged edition, New York, 1951; Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, New York and London,

author's Oxford and early London experiences, however, no real sense of mythic quest or purpose reveals itself. What prevails, instead, is a sense of comic, cosmic fall. Indeed, what Waugh records in *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies* is the comic collapse of the world of traditional morality for two equally ingenuous protagonists: Paul Pennyfeather, the serious, middle-class, sober and industrious theology student of *Decline and Fall* and Adam Fenwick-Symes of *Vile Bodies*, who is, in almost every way except native intelligence, very much his twin. Both young men are orphans; both are naive and both are, as the novels open, preparing themselves for entrance into traditional middle class careers. Both are resolute in their faith in a universe governed by reason and order — the safe, predictable and eminently just world of the nursery — presided over by what ought to be traditionally trustworthy figures of authority — disinterested and compassionate guardians, bachelor aunts and uncles and archetypal British nannies. For such unmitigated faith in the principles of reason and justice, the modern gods of anarchy and chaos conspire to chastise them.

The comic structure of both novels is also very much the same. In both, the south figures, but only very marginally, in a wholly symbolic way. In *Decline and Fall*, it serves as a metaphor for the corruptive source of Margot Best-Chetwynde Pastmaster's modern and, *almost*, utterly charming, amorality. Her personal fortune and the ultimate source of her power, which has heretofore gone to keep the Pastmaster titles and estates solvent, derives entirely from her late father's Latin-American Entertainment Company — the front for a string of international brothels headquartered in Buenos Aires. In *Vile Bodies*, on the other hand, the South of France functions as the modern equivalent of the Island of Lost Boys for the generation of Bright Young People, who flit aimlessly through the novel, in rebellion against the moral hypocrisy of their parents, all the while they depend very heavily upon them for economic survival.

It is not until *Black Mischief*, Waugh's fictionalized treatment of his journalistic venture to Abyssinia for the coronation of Haile Selassie that the south will figure in itself as an instrumental force in the molding of character for one of Waugh's protagonists. Thenceforth, it emerges as a primary element representing the corruptive imperial core poisoning the traditional chivalric values of Victorian Britain. From the 1930s onward, empire and empire building or preservation become the dominant evils in Waugh's universe. Imperialistic delusions of superiority and the inability to see the ultimate futility of bringing "civilization" to the far outposts of the realm assure the collapse of traditional western values, Waugh suggests, and these become the leitmotifs of his comic apocalyptic vision. In his concerns, in this respect, he is not very far removed from the literary and philosophical positions of Conrad, Forster and Orwell.

*Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies* provide us with the domestic dimensions of this apocalypse. *Black Mischief*, *A Handful of Dust* and *Scoop* extend Waugh's Johannian vision to the farflung peripheries of empire. Neither Paul Pennyfeather nor Adam Fenwick-Symes are permitted to embark upon a search for their mature identities, but are depicted, instead, as innocent pawns in a cosmic game — the rules of which are lost upon their adolescent belief in their own ability to survive fortune's vagaries. Thus ill-equipped, they are doomed to fail even before they begin their life's journey.

In *Black Mischief*, Waugh breaks briefly from his use of the archetype of the naive hero thrust precipitously from rural or academic paradise into the hell of the military-industrial age gone

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1948; Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, 3rd edition, Cambridge, England, 1922; Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Human Consciousness*, translated by R.F.C. Hull, New York (Bollingen Series XXX) and London, 1954; Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother*, translated by Ralph Mannheim, Princeton, N.J. (Bollingen Series XLVII), 1972. A fascinating feminist study of solar mythology and its impact upon the development and transmigration of Christianity is contained in Monica Sjoo's and Barbara Mor's study, *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*, Harper & Row, New York, 1987.

mad, and presents us, instead, with a fully-developed portrait of a child of the twentieth century, Basil Seal, the unregenerate rogue scion of the ruling class whose close resemblance both in temperament and exploit to Toad of Toad Hall in Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows* is his only ameliorative trait. Basil Seal is Matthew Arnold's Philistine grown to epically monstrous proportions. With such as he lurking even on the periphery of global action, the day of judgment needs must be close at hand. Only in Azania or some other equally primitive outpost could a Basil Seal hope to become one of the principal players. In the novel, Basil appears in mid-career as the contemporary embodiment of Rudyard Kipling's soldier of fortune. As such, he is the antithesis of the naive heroes who have preceded him. No chance victim of the alien forces of the universe, he! Instead, we are faced with an *enfant terrible*, the lineal descendant of the *miles gloriosus* of New Comedy or some misbegotten offspring of one of the miscreant knights of Arthur's realm, who robs, plunders and indiscriminately violates chapter and verse of the chivalric code at will with a perverse sense of pleasure in, or worse, complete oblivion to his own depravity.

Previously, such characters had only played ancillary roles in Waugh's cosmos. In the novels of the 1930's, they assume center stage. Basil Seal, however, makes such literary predecessors as Alistair Digby Vain-Trumpington and Peter Pastmaster seem pale models of Victorian decorum by comparison. His arrogance and moral aberrations are of such enormity that even Margot Best-Chetwynde Pastmaster Metroland finds his behavior outrageous. In taste and temperament, in fact, Basil bears much resemblance, as well, to T.S. Eliot's Sweeney, and his adventures in Azania turn out to be an unrelieved comic saga of adventures in birth control, copulation and death. Thus, Basil Seal does not represent a solar hero whose quest for the grail will restore the kingdom and replenish the wasteland. Rather, he bears much closer parallels to Mordred, Arthur's son by his sister, Morgawse, whose monstrous disposition springs from his incestuous birth, and whose very existence becomes the instrument which brings about the collapse of Camelot. He is, in fact, a comic prince of darkness, whose Arthurian persona is derived from the Brthyonic god of darkness, Medrawt<sup>3</sup>. As such, he is as necessary to the collapse of Camelot as the anti-Christ is to the Apocalypse of St. John the Divine.

Basil's abrupt departure for Azania from London where he lives in a state of perpetual social disgrace is motivated primarily by his need to absent himself from the city owing to his latest round of excesses. He is driven, as well, however, by a Napoleonic sense of his own manifest destiny. Thus he considers his departure to be merely the necessary next step on his way to a long overdue political rise. He counts upon his slight acquaintance with the victorious usurper, Seth, to assure himself a central role in the administration of this last outpost of independent African tribal kingdoms, a role which, he feels confident, will then catapult him into the international prominence which he is similarly convinced he so richly deserves. His entrance into Azania on the day of Seth's coronation is treated with complete indifference by the British legation, and we learn, through the eyes of one of the oldest members of the oldest family of the tribal aristocracy, that even in Azania, the golden past is dead.

The only real effect that Basil's arrival has on the political life of the kingdom is to thicken the never-absent intrigue in Debra Dowra and to heighten the political maneuverings going on between the British and French legations as they attempt to gain political ascendancy over each other in this backward and non-strategic country. In this, their efforts mirror the characteristic madness of the domestic and foreign political intrigue of their mother countries, at least as Waugh perceived it.

The Perroquet Victory Ball, like all of Waugh's mad parties, has thematic significance. There, all of the threads of political intrigue, which have, until now, been spinning separately become

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<sup>3</sup> See Charles Squire, *The Mythology of the British Islands*, London, 1905, p.366 *et seq.* for Medrawt's attributes and functions. See also discussions in Graves and Briffault.

intertwined. At the ball, Seth finally recognizes Basil as his former Oxford classmate. Following their reunion, he appoints him Minister of Modernisation, High Commissioner and Comptroller-General, thereby justifying all of Basil's great expectations and, at the same time, unwittingly assuring his own reign of a short and ignominious end. For it is a corollary of Basil Seal's anti-Midas nature unknown to Seth that everything he touches turns to lead. But the emperor has offended fortune in his own sudden rise. And, as those whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad, Basil Seal thence becomes the instrument whereby they foment the insanity that has engulfed Azania, as a result of Seth's usurpation of power, nursing it to new heights of irrationality.

Basil's trek through Azania echoes the plundering zeal devoid of the religious fervour of the medieval crusader. He allies himself in his quest for profit and glory with the archetypal Levantine merchant, Mr. Youkomanian, who, as a result of Basil's patronage, is appointed Financial Secretary by Seth. Mr. Youkomanian and Basil Seal are brothers under the skin. The effect of this extraordinary alliance of kindred hearts and minds upon the affairs of the Azanian state presents a comic exposure of all of the absurdities which the major political "isms" of the 1930s perpetrated against an indifferent public who in its apathy became willing accomplices to the combined exploitative talents of such representative, degenerate members of the military-industrial establishment as they.

The anarchic heights to which their joint actions carry Azania in the briefest possible time exceeds anything Waugh treats us to even in his previous two novels and provides a miniature survey of the course of European politics in the 1920s and 1930s: inability to govern, followed by inflation, followed by a collapsing economy, followed by civil unrest and uprising, followed by coup and countercoup, followed by foreign intervention and accompanied, whenever possible, by totalitarian modernization of left, right, and even center, no matter how mindless and ill-conceived that modernization might be. The center, so assaulted, cannot hold, and one begins to doubt, seriously, whether with such as Basil in positions of leadership and trust — and he is but a slightly-exaggerated version of how the ruling class in Great Britain has always been portrayed in fiction — it ever could.

Basil's days of power and glory are brief and are ended with Seth's predictable fall from grace, precipitated by the death of the legitimate emperor, whom the Azanians regard as a god. He arrives at the coast just in time to witness Seth's funeral. At the funeral feast, which ends in an orgy of anarchic dancing that repeats the circular frenzy of Waugh's dominant metaphor for the madness of the contemporary world, Basil recognizes the red beret of his mistress, Prudence Courteney, on one of the dancers. Learning of her fate — she has just been served up as the *piece de resistance* of the ritual feast that precedes the dance — Basil learns that he has landed among the anthropophagi and has unwittingly become one of them. However much he seems to regret this, it is a propensity for which he has repeatedly demonstrated a natural inclination throughout the course of the novel.

Basil's return to London is anticlimactic. Everyone is the same — only poorer. This is Waugh's only fictional comment upon the global depression of the early 1930s. Azania, meanwhile, has become a joint protectorate of the British and French, who carry out the kind of reforms which would have filled Seth's heart with gladness, with an efficiency which puts Basil and Mr. Youkomanian's efforts to shame. This represents Waugh's strongest, indeed, his *only* fictional endorsement for imperialism, either ancient or modern<sup>4</sup>. Life thus settles down in Azania into a Kiplingesque-Maughamian-inspired, cinematic version of a proper nineteenth

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<sup>4</sup> Waugh's politics are well known and include flirtations with the Left while at Oxford as well as with the Right following his divorce from Evelyn Gardner Waugh in 1929. He drew the line at any sort of actual political involvement or outright endorsement of totalitarian dictatorships, preferring, instead to withdraw into his lifelong commitment to Roman Catholicism as the last and only "eternal" bastion of civilization against the barbaric propensities of both the masses and the ruling establishment.

century imperial outpost, itself an offspring of that most restrictive of British institutions, the private club, snobbish, insular and racist.

*A Handful of Dust* represents Waugh's first use of the solar quest as a primary motif within a clearly Arthurian romantic framework. Like Eliot's *Wasteland*, from which it derives both its title and its thematic focus, it presents a scathing indictment of the desultory emptiness of contemporary existence. As the novel opens, we are presented with a view of the sordidness and vulgarity of life and manners in contemporary London as Mrs. Beaver and her son, John, peripheral members of Margot Metroland's set, dispassionately discuss the profitable aspects that a recent fire in a client's house will have upon their interior decorating business.

The spent world of London of the mid-twenties, when the mad whirl of partying never ceased, has disappeared. People now have to work for a living or at the very least make curtailments in their expenditures. This represents a state of affairs never anticipated in the heady days of Margot's reign as they are described in *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*. Yet, for the Bright Young People, now entering adulthood, both jobs and curtailments have become necessary if they hope to maintain some outward semblance of the life their parents so long took for granted.

The title of the opening chapter, "*Du Côté de Chez Beaver*," presumes a Proustian influence; however, the dominant theme of the novel is not the remembrance of but the futility of the effort to undertake the preservation of things past and, on the whole, imperfectly understood. Anthony Last's sense of commitment to his past is made patent to us upon first acquaintance. It is not, we are immediately aware, part of his charm. On the symbolic level of the novel, however, equally obvious identification can be made between Tony and the Quester Knight of the Grail Legend, as well as with Llew Llaw Gyffes, the ancient British sun god and hero of the Mabinogion, who is betrayed by his bride, Blodenwedd, a maiden composed of the blossoms of the oak, the broom, and the meadowsweet<sup>5</sup>.

Tony Last's commitment to the stately life he lives at Hetton is one of practice rather than principle. He lives out his life in an altogether self-conscious imitation of the past. Indeed, there seem to be many parallels between the architecture of his stately home and Tony's romanticism. Both are imitative and have lost something in their efforts to translate to modern times. Tony's romanticism and chivalry, like Hetton's architecture, seem hatched in "the late generation of the Gothic revival, when the movement had lost its fantasy and become structurally logical and stodgy<sup>6</sup>". What is lacking at Hetton is a sense of the significance of the past traditions to which Tony is so committed. He maintains the life of a nineteenth century country gentleman in all high seriousness on a scale far beyond his means, dedicated to a purpose which has been lost in the dim recesses of his ancestral memories, one which has ironically been founded upon a fortune derived from the industrialism he so rightly perceives to be his enemy. All this he does for love of Hetton, a Neo-Gothic monstrosity for which even the guidebooks have scarcely a good word to say, whose very architecture and decor reflect the late-Victorian nostalgia for Tennysonian longings for an idyllic, imaginary past. Even the bedrooms have been named for the principal characters of Arthurian legend. John Beaver, the unwanted guest and intruder is sent to sleep in *Galahad*, the most uncomfortable room in the manor. Lady Brenda sleeps in *Guinevere*, between them stands Tony's dressing room, his former nursery, *Morgan le Fay*, where he continues to sleep among the relics of his childhood. In these opening chapters, Waugh never misses the opportunity to establish such comic and ironic examples of the Victorian fascination for but failure to understand the essence of medievalism.

In this idyllic retreat, Tony lives with his wife of seven years, Brenda. To all outward appearances, their marriage seems a great success. But this is merely an illusion. Brenda's

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<sup>5</sup> Squires, p. 265.

<sup>6</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1976.

antipathy for life at Hetton is as deep as Tony's commitment to it and can be sensed even before her affair with John Beaver begins. Her sense of uselessness is seen in her increasing boredom with the everyday details of its routine. Lady Brenda Last, Lord St. Cloud's daughter, is another one of Waugh's thoroughly modern women, a lineal descendant of Margot Best-Chetwynde, whose savage assault on Lord Pastmaster's ancestral home, King's Thursday, in *Decline and Fall* is the chief vehicle by which Waugh demonstrates her ruthlessness and destructive nature.

Like Margot, Brenda is beautiful, narcissistic and not only out of touch with, but completely out of sympathy for the things and the traditions of the past. Her betrayal of Tony is highly complex. Her liaison with John Beaver is as much a puzzle to herself as to her friends and is based upon her own search for identity. In some ways, she is a counterpart to Tony in that she, like the courtly ladies of the Arthurian Romance, is seeking a *serviteur* whom she can train to do her bidding. The fact that she settles upon John Beaver (whose resemblance to Mordred, like that of Basil Seal in *Black Mischief*, is quite strong) to fulfill this role is merely Waugh's ironic commentary upon the twentieth century deterioration not only of the chivalric but of the courtly ideal as well. For if Tony Last's tragedy is that he is a nineteenth century country squire with chivalric aspirations trapped in a twentieth century body, the poignancy of his dilemma is heightened by his wife's betrayal of him with that pure twentieth century essence of *gigolo-serviteur*, John Beaver.

Following Brenda's infidelity, which, in turn, indirectly precipitates the death of their son, John Andrews, in a hunting accident, the call of the south resonates in Tony's imagination and he begins his solar quest. Brenda's revelation of her affair with John Beaver following her child's death coupled with her request for an immediate divorce drives Tony from his contemporary Camelot to heal his psychic wounds and to search for his Grail — in Tony's case, the lost city of the Incas (the existence of which he learns about in a chance meeting at his club with the mad explorer Dr. Messinger). In Tony's imagination this city begins to blend with all of the romantic cities of the Western European past and bears close resemblance, as well, to Stephen Runciman's description of Byzantium:

Looking up from the card table, Tony saw beyond the trees the ramparts and the battlements of the City; it was quite near him. From the turret of the gate-house a heraldic banner floated in the tropic breeze. He struggled into an upright position and threw aside his blankets. He was stronger and steadier when the fever was on him. He picked his way through the surrounding thorn scrub; the sound of music rose from the glittering walls; some procession or pageant was passing along them. He lurched into tree-trunks... At last he came into the open. The gates were open before him and trumpets were sounding along the walls saluting his arrival; from bastion to bastion the message ran to the four points of the compass; petals of almond and apple blossom were in the air; they carpeted the way, as, after a summer storm, they lay in the orchards at Hetton. Gilded cupolas and spires of alabaster shone in the sunlight. Ambrose announced, "The City is served" <sup>7</sup>.

For Tony, it represents the City of Light. It is the New Jerusalem; it is the City of God; it is *El Dorado*. It is also, alas, a figment of Tony's imagination.

The purpose of Tony's quest is to find the order and stability which he had originally hoped to perpetuate at Hetton by his conscious withdrawal from the anarchic world of London society. At this point in the novel, Waugh shifts from his use of the metaphor of the great house as a symbol of the past to the metaphor of the City of Light as the great ordering principle in human experience. Like the great house, the city will assume major thematic significance, particularly in the 1950s for Evelyn Waugh, a significance which is best defined in his novel, *Helena*, where the emperor, Constantius, expostulates to his wife on the subject:

"I'm not a sentimental man," said Constantius, "but I love the wall. Think of it, mile upon mile, from snow to desert, a single great girdle around the civilized world;

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

inside peace, decency, the law, the altars of the gods, industry, the arts, order; outside, wild beasts and savages, forest and swamp, bloody mumbo-jumbo, men like wolf-packs, and along the wall, the armed might of the Empire, sleepless, holding the line. Doesn't it make you see what the City means?" "Yes," said Helena, "I suppose so". "What d'you mean, then; must there always be a wall?" "Nothing, only sometimes I wonder won't Rome ever go beyond the wall? Into the wild lands? Beyond the Germans, beyond the Ethiopians, beyond the Picts, perhaps beyond the ocean, there may be more people and still more until, perhaps, you might travel through them all and find yourself back in The City again. Instead of the barbarian breaking in might The City one day break out?"<sup>8</sup>

This, of course, is exactly what happens to the British Empire and, Waugh prophetically suggests, in the process, The City will be destroyed or, at least, transformed from the citadel of reason it has heretofore represented. It is not at all, he implies, a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Paradoxically, it is his desire to regain the stability of the Wall that summons Tony Last in his illusory quest for *El Dorado*. Accompanied only by the mad explorer, Dr. Messinger, he wanders through the labyrinth of the Amazonian jungle, crossing and recrossing the same paths, driven into delirium as much from his deluded hopes as from jungle fever. The widening and narrowing gyre motif which Waugh borrows from Yeats in his earlier novels to symbolize the frenetic madness of the modern world is molded and redefined into Conradian and Jungian dimensions in this novel thereby suggesting the labyrinthine convolutions of the journey within and resonating, as well, with echoes of Spenser's *Wandering Wood* and Browning's *Childe Roland*:

They walked for a fortnight, averaging about fifteen miles a day. Sometimes they would do much more and sometimes much less; the Indian who went in front decided the camping places; they depended on water and evil spirits. Dr. Messinger made a compass traverse of their route. It gave him something to think about. He took readings every hour from an aneroid. In the evening, if they had halted early enough, he employed the last hours of daylight elaborating a chart. 'Dry water course, three deserted huts, stony ground...' Next day they waded through four streams at intervals of two miles, running alternately North and South. The chart began to have a mythical appearance. "Is there a name for any of these streams", he asked Rosa. "Macushi people called him Waurupang." "No, not river where we first camped. *These rivers.*" "Yes, Waurupang." "This river here." "Macushi people call him all Waurupang." "It's hopeless," said Dr. Messinger. "Don't you think that possibly we *have* struck the upper waters of the Waurupang?" suggested Tony, "and have crossed and recrossed the stream as it winds down the valley." "It is a hypothesis," said Dr. Messinger<sup>9</sup>.

Tony's reverence for the past which has driven him, mildly, at first, at Hetton, and then with increasing madness in South America into the heart of darkness of the Amazonian wasteland ends with his rescue by Mr. Todd and the death of his romantic dream. He has indeed discovered the past, but it is not the ordered past of The Wall and The City. It is the atavistic, paleolithic past, the past of wild beasts and savages, forest and swamp. In a jungle clearing which bears strong resemblance to Kurtz' outpost in *Heart of Darkness*, as well as to the

<sup>8</sup> In this 1940s novel, it is significant that Waugh sides with St. Helena rather than with Constantius as the true citadel of civilization and order in a pagan world gone mad. One feels, always, that the "oceans of vast eternity" which Waugh perceived lying before him were what drove him to his equally lifelong struggle with substance abuse. The Church proffered him the only acceptable path to salvation and continued existence on the planet.

<sup>9</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust*, p. 180-181.



otherworldly isolation of the Perilous Cemetery of the Grail legend, Tony, who has heretofore been enchanted by his dream of an illusive Tennysonian past, becomes enslaved by a madman enamored of a Dickensian past, which is equally illusory. In *Du Côté de Chez Todd*, Tony suffers the living death which is one of the tests of the primary initiation of the Quester Knight. It is a hideous, mocking, nightmare of his deepest values, one from which he is never to escape.

Unlike Eliot's *Wasteland*, there is, in this novel, no redemptive suggestion of "Shantih", promising regeneration and rebirth. At least not for the likes of Tony. Not only does he fail to free himself; Hetton, ironically, is restored only through the unwitting sacrificial deaths of his son and himself and not, as he desires, in a triumphal return to Camelot<sup>10</sup>. As he awakens from his Arthurian dream, too late, in the Amazonian rain forest, following Mr. Todd's dismissal of the search party that has been sent to fetch him or confirmation of his death back to Hetton, we learn that that architectural monument to Victorian romanticism is inherited by the impoverished but prolific cadet branch of the family and where once the sound of the hunting horns stirred the ghosts of Lancelot and Guinevere, the mating calls of the silver foxes now drown them out.

Despite the titles of the opening and closing chapters of the novel, there seems to be little lasting serious Proustian influence on either a symbolic or literal level. Between Beaver's Way and Todd's Way lie no sinuous remembrances of things past for Tony, only a series of disenchanting and disillusioning experiences. Beaver's Way encompasses what Waugh perceives as the modern obscenity of Mrs. Beaver's chromium-plated and vulcanite, Art Deco world of the contemporary wasteland, where the grand passion of Guinevere for Lancelot — which Brenda's affair with John Beaver is meant to recall — has degenerated into a series of sordid assignations in a banal and tasteless bed-sitting room.

Todd's Way, on the other hand, involves the living death of boredom in the midst of a world as far removed from the urban hell of London as one can get. Todd's enclave in the heart of darkness represents a mirror image of Tony's own attempt to withdraw from the modern world at Hetton, a grotesque mockery of his spiritual alienation. Ritual death comes to Tony, conveniently arranged by Mr. Todd, whose very name supports his mythic and symbolic function in the novel — almost, perhaps, too glibly. But there is no spiritual rebirth or union with the living god that such a ritual death should traditionally entail for a mythic solar hero — only the existential, absurdist, Sisyphean-like torture which Mr. Todd devises for Tony, the reading of the complete works of Charles Dickens, over and over again, for the rest of his natural life<sup>11</sup>. Unquestionably, it represents a fitting punishment for Tony's incurable romanticism. The call of the south, in his case, has been a siren song, indeed.

*Scoop*, is the novel which contains Waugh's most scathing, satirical comments upon the absurdities of European imperialism and the power of the press to manipulate and mislead the public for the purpose of increasing its readership. In it, the call of the south is a call which the protagonist, William Boot, would just as soon not heed. In fact, he is thrust into his quest over his most fervently expressed and eloquent objections in an outrageous, but quite believable, case of mistaken identity, which ends in a wholly successful resolution of his problems and the preservation of the peace and quiet of the ancestral home from which he is literally abducted against his will. Significantly, it is the only one of Waugh's novels wherein the quester achieves his grail and returns to Camelot, regaining entrance to his rural paradise,

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<sup>10</sup> Waugh originally wrote two endings for this novel. In the alternative ending, Tony escapes from Todd, returns to a refurbished and redecorated Hetton, reconciles with Brenda, goes on to found a dynasty and lives happily ever after. To anyone familiar with Waugh's life, such was the pattern he hoped to establish for himself.

<sup>11</sup> It is a further irony that Mr. Todd has learned less from his long term dedication to the works of Charles Dickens, that quintessential democrat and believer in individual freedom and human rights, than Tony has from his equally ardent commitment to Tennyson and Malory.

infinitely wiser, materially richer and spiritually and emotionally unscathed, having prevailed over the madmen in control of the seats of power and money, in the meanwhile. Like Oedipus, William Boot is Fortune's Darling, but without his mythic forebear's tragic hamartia and dismal fate. The ultimate irony is, of course, that William of Boot Magna is perfectly content, despite his penury and anonymity, with his rural paradise from the beginning and has no desire for any change in his life whatsoever.

Although the world of Boot Magna appears to be as irrational as that of London or Azania, it is, in fact, a matriarchal enclave, an extended family, where the women rule and the men, of whom William is the only one of his generation, are permitted to live out their lives with indulgent acceptance of and support for their individual eccentricities:

The house was large but by no means too large for the Boot family, which at this time numbered eight. There were in the direct line: William who owned the house and estate, William's sister Priscilla who claimed to own the horses, William's widowed mother who owned the contents of the house and exercised ill-defined rights over the flower garden, and William's widowed grandmother who was said to own "the money". No one knew how much she possessed; she had been bedridden as long as William's memory went back. It was from here that such large cheques issued as were from time to time necessary for balancing the estate accounts and paying for Uncle Theodore's occasional, disastrous visits to London<sup>12</sup>.

As first born son and heir apparent, William contributes to the upkeep of this late Victorian zoo by writing a weekly nature column, entitled "Lush Places", for Lord Copper's *Beast*. It is by virtue of this connection and the existence of a distant cousin, also a writer, John Boot, a protégé of Julia Stitch, that William's great adventure begins.

In *Scoop*, we see, for the first time in Waugh's novels, a subtle switch in London's ruling establishment. Julia Stitch has replaced Margot Metroland as the reigning queen of London society and has, in so doing, thus become the real power behind its political life. She is quite a different type from Margot, and, apart from an outward frivolity of manner, which only heightens her charm, she uses her influence much more benignly than did her predecessor. She and her husband, moreover, unlike the Metrolands, are morally as well as socially eminently respectable. Politics thus takes a quantum leap upward from the seamy days when the Outrage and Brown cabinets were playing musical chairs in the power-sharing charade that passed for government in the 1920s and in the early 1930s in the world according to Waugh.

Underneath Julia's deliberate mask of outrageous naivete, abetted by her flawless beauty, she manages to hide her penetrating mind and her ability to manipulate all matters to her liking. She thus disguises her true purpose in her maneuvers to win an overseas assignment for her young protegee, John Boot, with an acceptable veneer of Victorian female helplessness, without committing Margot's unforgivable breach of tradition of actually appearing to run things herself. At the same time, however, she breaks almost every other restriction in the book with childlike impunity.

Julia's subliminal manipulation of Lord Copper while lunching at Margot Metroland's, as she persuades him to hire John Boot as his foreign correspondent to Ishmaelia, the latest hotspot in global politics, is a masterpiece of modern psychology and marketing technique.

From the moment of her entrance the luncheon party was transformed for Lord Copper; he had gotten a new angle on it. He knew of Mrs Stitch; from time to time he had seen her in the distance; now for the first time he found himself riddled through and through, mesmerized, inebriated. Those at the table witnessing the familiar process, began to conjecture, in tones which Lord Copper was too much entranced to overhear, what Julia could possibly want of him. "It's her model madhouse", said some; "she wants the caricaturists to lay off Algy," said others; "Been losing money," thought the second footman (at Lady Metroland's orders he

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<sup>12</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Scoop*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1943, p. 17-18.

was on diet, and lunchtime always found him in a cynical mood); "a job for someone or other," came nearest the truth, but no one thought of John Courteney Boot until Mrs. Stitch brought him into the conversation. Then they all played up loyally. "You know," she said, after coaxing Lord Copper into an uncompromising denunciation of the Prime Minister's public and private honesty, "I expect he's all you say, but he's a man of far more taste than you'd suppose. He always sleeps with a Boot by his bed". "A boot?" asked Lord Copper, trustful but a little bewildered. "One of John Boot's books." The luncheon party had got their cue. "Dear John Boot," said Lady Metroland; "so clever and amusing. I wish I could get him to come and see me more often." "Such a divine style," said Lady Cockpurse. The table buzzed with praise of John Boot. It was a new name to Lord Copper. He resolved to question his literary secretary on the subject. He had become Boot-Conscious<sup>13</sup>.

It is the ineptitude of Lord Copper's literary editor, Salter, and his confusion of John with William that lead to the mixup in the distant cousins' identity and result in William's fundamentally unsought-for and altogether unwanted mission to Ishmaelia, as stringer for the *Beast*. His existential predicament is either to accept or face immediate dismissal from his position as *The Beast's* nature correspondent. Confronted with such a dilemma, William chooses what for him represents an inhuman sacrifice, one which he nonetheless reluctantly yet heroically undertakes, like some Kierkegaardian knight of the absurd, in order to preserve his ancestral home and those family members who depend upon him for subsistence, ever hopeful that a benign deity will extricate him from his dilemma unscathed.

What ensues is a satirical insight into the nature and influence of the alliance between industry and politics and the corruption of those in power in a struggle that reflects Waugh's interpretation of both the Spanish Civil War and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia<sup>14</sup>. But more than anything else, the novel is a satire on the contemporary press and its management of news, as well as its manipulation of foreign policy, which, surprisingly, foreshadows Orwell's "Politics and the English Language," in its incisiveness. Thus, one might expect that Waugh's political feelings would be very much in evidence and that with his professed bias for Mussolini and Franco, he would seize the opportunity to make the novel an endorsement of Fascism. However, such is happily not the case. As in *Black Mischief*, all shades of the political spectrum are represented as equally incompetent and equally incapable of maintaining order. This, of course, only heightens the acid pessimism of the novel, where William begins to figure as a kind of modern-day Candide.

Salter, Lord Copper's secretary, tries rather ineffectually to point out the complexities of the goings on in Ishmaelia and the government's interest in them to an ingenuous William, early in the novel, in a scene which closely resembles Humpty Dumpty's *explication de texte* of *The Jabberwock* to Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*:

"I don't suppose that after what Lord Copper has said there is anything more you want to know."  
 "Well, there is one thing. You see I don't read the papers very much. Can you tell me who is fighting whom in Ishmaelia?"  
 "I think it's the Patriots and the Traitors."  
 "Yes, but which is which?"  
 "Oh, I don't know *that*. *That's* Policy, you see. It's nothing to do with me. You

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11-12.

<sup>14</sup> Waugh's endorsement or, at least, admiration for fascism stemmed from his fervently held belief that only authoritarianism could hold the forces besetting western civilization in the 1930s in check. In the war trilogy, in his letters and autobiographical writings, he acknowledges he was in error in his journalistic support. His novels, however, reveal a marked conviction of the shortcomings of all modern forms of government. It was a belief he clung to for the whole of his life.

should have asked Lord Copper."  
 "I gather it's between the Reds and the Blacks."  
 "Yes, but it's not quite as easy as that. You see they are all Negroes. And the Fascists won't be called Black because of their racial pride, so they are called Whites after the White Russians. And the Bolsheviks want to be called Black because of *their* racial pride. So when you say Black you mean Red, and when you mean Red you say White, and when the party who call themselves Blacks say Traitors they mean what we call Blacks, but what we mean when *we* say Traitors I really couldn't tell you.? But from your point of view it will be quite simple. Lord Copper only wants Patriot victories and both sides call themselves Patriots and of course both sides will claim all victories. But of course it's really a war between Russia and Germany and Italy and Japan who are all against one another on the patriotic side. I hope I make myself plain?"

"Up to a point, said William, falling easily into the habit<sup>15</sup>.

What might seem to be comic exaggeration in this exchange is only too believable in the light of what we know of modern tabloid journalism dating from William Randolph Hearst's reporting of the nonexistent war in Cuba to the suppression of the truth about "friendly fire" casualties in the recent U.S. invasion of Panama and attests to Waugh's professional penetration of the hypocrisy in which the press revelled in during the 1930s, which he, himself learned from first-hand experience.

William's naivete and youthful candor, as well as his acquaintance with the corporate spy, Mr. Bannister, the mysterious fellow-traveller he encounters on the plane to Paris on his way to Ishmaelia, combine to prevent him from being victimized by the manipulations of those in power to get the press out of Jacksonburg during the military coup. Getting the 'hang' of life in Jacksonburg, along with his precipitous love affair with the German refugee, Katchen, occupy all of William's time, and convince the Ishmaelian officials that his dispatches to *The Beast* deserve only perfunctory scrutiny. Nevertheless, it is because of his liaison with Katchen and her cache of "stones", treasures left behind by her former lover, a mining engineer, that William is catapulted from disgrace to international fame as "Boot of the *Beast*".

Alone of Waugh's heroes, he emerges from the infinite twists of fortune that beset him not only unscathed but undaunted. His ingenious reports of coups and counter coups make journalistic history, and he returns to England completely unspoiled and unconscious of the fact that he has become an international hero of Lindberghian dimensions. In a *deus ex machina* ending, everything works out for the best. John Boot receives the knighthood which he in no way deserves, (but which, we feel sure, he will make much better use of than his country cousin) that the grateful Lord Copper procures for William, throwing him a grand testimonial dinner in the bargain. William, on the other hand, returns to Boot Magna wiser and richer, guaranteed his weekly column for the *Beast* at a salary commensurate with his extended family's needs.

For the first and only time in Waugh's fictional world, a hero is content both before *and* after the main action of the novel. William emerges, then, as a kind of prelapsarian Adam who intuitively knows the efficacy of cultivating his garden and is happy to remain there forever, seeking neither fame nor fortune nor even contact with the outside world. He seems to have been born with the sagacity which Paul Pennyfeather and Adam Fenwick-Symes must undergo countless misadventures in order to attain. Instinctively, he seems aware that to be completely happy in a world gone mad is impossible — unless one has the good sense to withdraw from it. Nevertheless, he is forced to endure the purgatorial experience of the Ishmaelian civil war, before he is allowed permanent tenure.

In this novel, then, the protagonist's ordeal is less a quest than an exile, a departure from Camelot that is forced upon him, it seems, to render his simple country life, on his return, all the more Edenic in its harmless eccentricities and boring serenity. It represents the philosophy

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<sup>15</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Scoop*, p. 42-43.

closest to Waugh's own heart, one which he practised to the extent that the outside world and his own ego and material needs would permit him. For William, then, as for Waugh, the call of the south is the call to witness the madness of the external world, to comment upon it, survive economically as a result of this testimony, and, then, to beat a hasty retreat to the country, to a life of gentle, but really not at all that materially uncomfortable anonymity.

Waugh's novels of the 1930s capitalize on his own experiences as a journalist and travel writer in that same period. Although the war intervened and, in many ways, transformed his perception of the universe, rendering him more parochial, more catholic and, predictably, more conservative in his social outlook, the call of the south in his post-War novels continues; although it moves closer to home. In his war trilogy, the quester knight theme returns in the person of Guy Crouchback, who is, like Tony Last, a not altogether sympathetic hero, but one, who is ultimately able to shape the illuminating experience of William Boot into a Voltairean philosophical framework that is less condemnatory and somewhat more optimistic about life on this planet, while, at the same time, it is woefully less comic.