

# **“A Dark and Hidden Thing”: Evelyn Waugh, Cannibalism, and the Problem of African Christianity**

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## **I. Introduction: Evelyn Waugh and Ernest Oldmeadow**

In a series of editorials published in the conservative Catholic weekly *The Tablet* during January and February 1933, editor Ernest Oldmeadow condemned Evelyn Waugh's third novel, *Black Mischief*, as “a disgrace to anyone professing the Catholic name.”<sup>1</sup> While Oldmeadow took issue with a number of aspects of Waugh's novel, he appears to have been particularly outraged by Waugh's representation of a cannibal feast, which literary critics have often read as a parody of the Eucharist. Despite the fact that a number of eminent literary figures including Wyndham Lewis rushed to Waugh's defence, Waugh was sufficiently incensed to compose a lengthy response to Oldmeadow's charges. In May 1933, Waugh wrote a letter of protest to Cardinal Bourne, the Archbishop of Westminster, who, as owner of *The Tablet*, had appointed Oldmeadow editor. In this letter, Waugh argues

*The Tablet* quotes the fact that she [Prudence Courtenay, the protagonist Basil Seal's lover] was stewed with pepper, as being in some way a particularly lubricious process. But this is a peculiar prejudice of the Editor's, attributable, perhaps, like much of his criti-

cism, to defective digestion. It cannot matter whether she was roasted, grilled, braised or pickled, cut into sandwiches or devoured hot on toast as savoury; the fact is that the wretched girl was cooked and eaten.<sup>2</sup>

Waugh gives us a witty play on the (apparently unconscious) ambiguity of Oldmeadow's choice of terms in describing the scene: "unsavoury."<sup>3</sup> Does this term refer to a culinary or a moral judgment? Or, as Waugh argues, are the two conflated, since such a sour disposition as Oldmeadow's can only result from indigestion, which has been aroused by an allusion to spicy food? Oldmeadow unsurprisingly turns out to be an easy target for Waugh's wit.

In light of the generally serious tone of Waugh's letter, however, it would seem that he intends for us to accept his claim – that the manner of representing the taboo act is irrelevant to its ultimate meaning – at face value. Oldmeadow's charge, as Waugh recognizes in this extract, is not simply that the story ought not to portray acts of cannibalism. Rather, it ought not to portray them in a certain fashion. For Oldmeadow, Waugh's tendency to dwell on "the nasty details" of the cannibal feast attests to an unseemly pleasure in their description.<sup>4</sup> Waugh's response to this charge is that Prudence was simply eaten, and the referent, "cannibalism," is stable, its meaning unchanged by the context or manner of representation.

Yet there is a palpable tension within this passage between Waugh's assertion that it "does not matter" how cannibalism is described, that the only relevant "fact is that the wretched girl was cooked and eaten," and Waugh's vivid imaginings of the various ways that one might go about eating a person, "roasted, grilled, braised or pickled, cut into sandwiches or devoured hot on toast as savoury."<sup>5</sup> He not only refers to creative ways to devour one's lover, but additionally invokes the sensations of taste, touch, and scent that would accompany the act of delectation. At the very moment of emphatically declaring the meaning of "cannibalism" uninflected by his desire, impervious to the act of signification, Waugh's lurid description of the ways to eat one's lover betrays a taboo fascination with the forbidden act that troubles the boundary between the Catholic self and its cannibal other, and in doing so demonstrates the power of semiotic desire to destabilize meaning. In this extract, the tension between the constative meaning of "cannibalism" and the linguistic performance required to conjure this meaning would appear to be deliberately emphasized.

If we were to take this passage in isolation, or in the context of the raucous comedy of his first two novels, *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *Vile Bodies* (1930), we might therefore conclude that Waugh adopts the stance that meaning is innocent of desire as a mere ruse to create a satiric effect.

I will argue, however, that we can identify a genuine source of friction within Waugh's thought in this passage. In both the travelogue *Remote People* (1931) and the novel *Black Mischief* (1932), there exists a persistent conflict between (1) a naive understanding of language and literature, which Waugh apparently felt was required in order to sustain the absolute truths demanded by his new-found Catholicism, and (2) a desire to recognize, as a source of comedic pleasure, the inevitable failure of any such absolute in the linguistic performance required to conjure it. It is, moreover, significant that the tension between these two tendencies of thought initially appears when Waugh turns his attention to African religious rituals, particularly the practices of African Christians. At the site of African religion, Waugh's inclination to revel in the pleasures of linguistic performativity runs up against his desire for an absolute distinction between his own religious practice – European Catholicism – and that of Africans.

To fully appreciate the depth of the tension between Waugh's desire to encounter African religion as a form of absolute alterity and his quite contrary impulse toward an essentially deconstructive satire, we must attend to "desire rather than words."<sup>6</sup> That is, we must approach Waugh's dissonant urges as conflicting responses to the economy of desire that is set in motion with his demand for a religious and racial absolute. Doing so will allow us to move beyond the critical commonplace that *Black Mischief* maintains a "strict dichotomy between civilization and savagery."<sup>7</sup> We will analyse Waugh's notions of identity not in terms of a set dichotomy between a European self and an African other, but in terms of the dialectical interaction of self and other created by Waugh's demand for unadulterated racial and religious alterity. Adopting this methodology allows us to emphasize the fragility and contingency of the process through which notions of identity based on such a demand are erected and maintained, and forces us to attend to the fact that such an ideal of identity cannot be separated from this process. More to the point, my approach will allow us to do justice to the complex logic that governs Waugh's confrontations with racial and religious alterity, a logic whose contradictions Waugh will alternately embrace and reject.

Within this critical frame, I will utilize Lacan's insight that the demand for absolute barriers between self and other produces an economy of identity within which "resemblance is... *the guarantor of non-identity*."<sup>8</sup> We discover a blunt manifestation of this paradoxical equation of resemblance and alterity in Waugh's notorious depiction of the cannibal feast in *Black Mischief*. We can also observe Waugh's conflicting attitudes toward this problem of identity in the disparity between the scene itself and his surprisingly prim defence of the scene.

## II. Cannibalism, the Eucharist, and the Critics

At the cannibal banquet in *Black Mischief* that Waugh so ambivalently defends in his response to Oldmeadow, the protagonist, Basil Seal, consumes his lover, Prudence Courtenay, whose body has been reduced to “meat, stewed to pulp among peppers and aromatic roots,” on “flat bread,” while “blood,” “sweat,” and an alcoholic “toddy” “mingle... in shining rivulets over [the] dark skins” of his fellow celebrants.<sup>9</sup> “[W]itch doctors” preside over the orgiastic scene bearing a litany of mystical objects, including “leopard’s feet and snake-skins, amulets and necklaces, lion’s teeth and the shriveled bodies of bats and toads” (190-91). In this scene Waugh invokes, on one hand, signifiers of absolute difference, shocking images that are supposed to provide a self-evident distinction between civilization and its others as well as Christianity and its pagan others (in this scene, as in the letter cited above, these two sets of oppositions are scarcely distinguishable). On the other hand, Waugh undercuts the effect of these generic signifiers of primitivism with subtler references to a Catholic communion service in the wafers of bread on which Basil consumes the body of Prudence; in the allusion to the mingling of human blood and liquor on the bodies of the African tribesmen that suggests the transubstantiation of blood into wine; in the fact that the scene takes place under the supervision of priests, or “witch doctors” and “wise men”; and through the attention given to religious ornaments and “amulets” adorning the bodies of the “wise men” (190-91). Waugh simultaneously invokes the ultimate taboo of Christian belief – cannibalism, a master signifier of the foundational difference between the Christian self and the pagan other – and collapses the distinction between this practice and a sacred Catholic ritual.

These allusions to the Eucharist are underscored by suggestions that the civilized Basil is essentially indistinguishable from his savage counterparts in regard to the act of cannibalism. Waugh’s techniques of collapsing Basil into his savage others are sometimes subtle, as is the case with the indeterminate use of the pronoun “they” to describe the enjoyment that the group derives from eating Prudence (190). At other times, Waugh’s methods of accomplishing this collapse are more obvious, as when the stew made of Prudence is described, from Basil’s viewpoint, as “aromatic”; or when Basil, alongside his African counterparts, consumes the Prudence stew with great zest, “plunging with his hands for the best scraps” (190). In this scene, Waugh describes the reaction of both Basil and his fellow revelers in terms of appetite and sensation, and, on this level, there is no dis-

cernible difference between Basil and the members of the fictive African tribe.

It is certainly no accident that this failure of difference at the site of a moral absolute becomes the occasion of an ecstatic explosion of provocatively racialized sexuality. African bodies come to manifest a polymorphously perverse desire – the terrifying truth of desire stripped of the structuring element of taboo – as, “dazed with dance and drink, stamping themselves into ecstasy” under the thrall of “the crude spirit and... insistence of the music,” they come together in sexual couplings: “black figures sprawled and grunted, alone and in couples” as the “hand-drums throbbed and pulsed” (190). It is not until the sexually-charged scene culminates in these acts of coitus – “glistening backs heaving and shivering in the shadows” – that Basil becomes aware of Prudence’s absence (191). Basil, it would seem, experiences the same erotic stimulation under the influence of demonic drumming and the consumption of human flesh as the others.

Within the context of Basil’s indistinguishability from his fellow celebrants in terms of appetite, Waugh’s choice of the name “Prudence” acquires a particular significance. This term denotes a moral value based on a withholding of desire, and suggests a Christian economy of desire according to which desire becomes more valuable, possibly even divine, through this act of withholding (e.g. a woman might become a nun, or “bride of Christ,” through repression of her sex drive; through this act of withholding, her desire is consecrated and becomes an offering worthy of God). “Prudence” can, therefore, name a moral value expressive of a properly civilized and Christian economy of desire, and it is the body representing this value that Basil ingests. Within Christian ritual, the ingestion of the body of Christ connotes the most intimate communion with God, a transcendent sharing of the divine spirit. Because, in this episode, a Christian moral value is corporealized and ingested, we might expect that the consumption of Prudence / prudence would lead to a similar mystical enrichment; a spiritual transfiguration of the self through an intimate communion with the very spirit of Christian civilization. Basil’s ingestion of Prudence / prudence is obviously fraught with contradiction, however, which interferes with any such straightforward sanctification of one’s civilized and Christian self. Because the very medium of the allusions to communion, discussed above, is a vivid depiction of a literal act of cannibalism, rife with images that unmistakably signify racial and cultural degeneracy, we cannot help but read this scene in terms of an emphasis on the fact that the figure for Christian communion is its own antithesis, cannibalism.<sup>10</sup> Basil’s act of consuming Prudence / prudence is, for this reason, ultimately equated not only with communion, but with the obscene pleasure of the cannibal, the

presumed contrary of an economy of desire based on withholding. I would therefore argue that with Basil's consumption of Prudence, the Christian economy of desire collapses into its demonic antithesis.

Perhaps because Basil's African adventure concludes with this event (there is a short denouement setting Basil back in London), interpretations of *Black Mischief* often seem to pivot on one's understanding of this scene.

Waugh argues, in his letter to Cardinal Bourne, that *Black Mischief* "deals with the conflict of civilization... and barbarism," and that the cannibal feast marks the point at which the distinction between civilization and its others is unequivocally confirmed by the "tragedy" of barbarism's triumph.<sup>11</sup> This argument is worthy of close consideration, not only because it is the crux of Waugh's response to Oldmeadow's criticisms, but because critics have most often borrowed their interpretive cues from this claim. For Frederick Stopp, this scene reveals any similarities between Europe and Africa suggested by the text to be superficial, an illusion caused by the "superimposed veneer" of "Western culture."<sup>12</sup> Christopher Hollis echoes this sentiment almost exactly, arguing that any such resemblances are exposed as an illusion caused by "the superficial pattern of European culture" adopted by Waugh's Africans.<sup>13</sup> William Cook finds that Western moral superiority is affirmed by this "scene of *ultimate savagery*" [*italics added*].<sup>14</sup> For James Carens, the end of the story epitomizes the way that Western ideas become so "grotesquely altered" when adopted by Azanians that "the primitive African country is [shown to be] impervious to civilization."<sup>15</sup> More recently, Frederick Beaty and William Myers have argued along similar lines despite acknowledging the references to communion "to which Oldmeadow took particular offense."<sup>16</sup>

Mark Falcoff, perhaps, most effectively captures this rationale. In a recent article, Falcoff asserts that *Black Mischief* demonstrates that "modernity is not a series of material objects but a state of mind. It cannot be imported."<sup>17</sup> In this analysis, the act of cannibalism with which the novel culminates clearly and unequivocally demarcates the line between modernity and its others. It is the act that attests to the disparity between the mere appearance of civilization – civilization as a "superimposed veneer" or a "superficial pattern" – and true civilization.<sup>18</sup> It is a foundation of the civilized self, for it is the absolute on which one might hang a metaphysical certainty regarding the truth of difference. Cannibalism is the point in the signifying chain at which we are able to insert or remove that immaterial and amorphous yet unifying something – an essence or "state of mind" – into a "series of material objects" – that, through its insertion or removal, consecrates or desecrates these objects. It is the point at which image and affect, meaning and the world, are indissolubly linked. For these critics,

Waugh's collapse of communion and cannibalism cannot put a dent in the assurance of European moral superiority because certainty regarding one's moral bearings is instilled by the fetishized images of otherness, organized under the rubric of cannibalism. Waugh bestows the truth of difference on them in the form of a thing, or a list of things.

Jerome Meckier, Jonathan Greenberg, and Michael Gorra all sharply break with this interpretive tradition. Meckier argues that Basil's "cannibalistic consumption" of Prudence "seem[s] close... in spirit to life-giving transubstantiation."<sup>19</sup> Greenberg extracts his own share of satiric pleasure from this recognition when he argues that Waugh makes the "link" between "cannibalism and Christian communion" evident through his choice of language, which reveals Waugh's "*appetite* for the horrors he perpetrates" [*italics added*].<sup>20</sup> Michael Gorra considers the implications of this recognition, asserting that the culminating act of cannibalism in *Black Mischief* marks the "limits" of his "comic imagination."<sup>21</sup> Within Gorra's reading, Waugh's equation of cannibalism and communion marks the point at which his satiric detachment fails.

A possibility that has not been addressed, however, is that the tension between Waugh's comic and religious tendencies acts as a productive force within his fiction. Waugh's demand for permanent and stable distinctions between self and other is not simply a wall against which his comedy smashes and burns, to be superseded by the serious and often melodramatic work more prevalent later in his career. Rather, this demand serves as a consistent source of comic pleasure, for *Waugh's satire feeds off of the persistent failure of his demand for religious and racial absolutes*. We witness an example of such satire in the notorious finale of *Black Mischief*, in which communion falls into its antithesis, cannibalism, at the very site of the fetishized images of racial and religious otherness that are supposed to sustain this dichotomy.

### III. Racial Misrecognition in *Black Mischief*

The evaluation of Waugh's travel writings and his novels about Africa has increasingly taken place within the context of the current discussion of modernism and its relation to ideologies of Western colonialism. Despite the welcome focus on constructions of racial and national identity that this discussion has brought to Waugh's work, his varied and frequently conflicting views of racialized and colonized peoples have been oversimplified, a situation that I seek to correct through my analysis of his comedy. The reduction of Waugh's views has occurred, in part, because the centrality of a process of misrecognition to modernist formulations of racial identity has

usually been either dismissed or misunderstood within this discussion.

Acknowledging the role of misrecognition within constructions of the racial self allows us to engage Waugh's ideals of identity on something much closer to his own terms, for Waugh frequently utilizes his awareness of the fragile and ultimately contingent nature of the racial self quite deliberately for the purpose of creating comic pleasure. As I have argued, we find Waugh doing so in the culminating scene of *Black Mischief*, or, quite at cross-purposes with himself, in his response to Oldmeadow. Acknowledging the role of misrecognition would also enable us to more adequately understand the range of Waugh's responses to his racial and religious others. If, at times, he utilizes his awareness of the constitutive contradictions of racial and religious identity to create comedy, at other times he sublimates and transforms these contradictions into a mystical belief in religious and racial absolutes. Critical acknowledgement of this process would, additionally, permit contemporary literary and cultural critics to utilize the insights of the previous generation of theorists of colonialism and postcolonialism in a more productive way.

An example will help illustrate my point. In the critical anthology *Modernism and Colonialism* (2007), co-editor and contributor Michael Valdez Moses distinguishes his view of modernism's engagement with colonialism from that of Fredric Jameson. Moses asserts that Jameson, in his 1990 article "Modernism and Imperialism," "maintains... the depredations of European imperialism are *ultimately occluded* by a modernist literary style," to which Moses opposes his own claim that modernist innovations instead enable the expression of disturbing truths about the imperial experience [italics added].<sup>22</sup> In the same anthology, Rita Barnard contrasts her approach to reading *Black Mischief* to Jameson's claims about modernism on the grounds that "Waugh's fictions about remote places," though "rigorously modernist in form... do attempt some sort of representation of the margins of the colonial world."<sup>23</sup> Both authors distinguish themselves from Jameson on the basis of an opposition between representation and exclusion, alleging that Jameson believes modernist texts exclude representations of those at "the margins of the colonial world" and therefore occlude the realities of colonialism. A close reading of "Modernism and Imperialism," however, exposes this interpretation as a misreading resulting from an apparent refusal or inability to recognize that the dichotomy between revelation and concealment does not hold within Jameson's article (or, we might add, anywhere within Jameson's work).

In "Modernism and Imperialism," Jameson works in the psychoanalytic tradition utilised by many of his contemporaries such as Abdul R. JanMohamed, Homi K. Bhabha, Terry Eagleton, Edward Said, and Chinua



Achebe – as well as theorists of colonial mentality such as Frantz Fanon – when he models the relation between colonizer and colonized on Lacan's mirror stage. In order to adequately comprehend Jameson's assertions about modernism, we must first understand the theory of subjectivity on which he builds his claims.

Within Lacan's theory of subjectivity, there can be no imagining of the "ego," no thought even of the pre-linguistic self, without representation; for even the recognition of oneself in the mirror requires an act of self-representation.<sup>24</sup> The self therefore must remain split between that which is represented and the act of representation, which eludes incorporation into the field of the represented that it generates.<sup>25</sup> The act of representation – in this case the identification of the self with the mirror image – serves as the "Ground of the totality... which itself cannot be 'Grounded.'"<sup>26</sup> Because the self is divided by the act of representation, any recognition of the self in the imagined unity of the mirror image is a "misrecognition," masking the "primordial Discord" of the self.<sup>27</sup> It is at the site of this primal self-division – the mirror image – that Jameson situates the colonized within colonial ideology when he argues that "the... radical otherness of colonized, non-Western peoples" comes to occupy the place of a "constitutive... lack," like "the other face of a mirror."<sup>28</sup>

Jameson figures the colonized other as a Lacanian other, an other who conceals the radical otherness of the self in order to allow one to think of oneself as a "totality,"<sup>29</sup> when he adopts "Lacanian language" in order to explain that "the colonized" act as "the marker and substitute of the unrepresentable totality."<sup>30</sup> It is within this critical framework that Jameson argues "imperialism" is "constitutive" of "Western modernism."<sup>31</sup> Because Jameson locates representations of the colonized at the site of the Lacanian "real" – or in the place of the face that looks back at you from the mirror, the site of the primal aporia of the self – these representations exceed any reduction to "content," just as the self exceeds any reduction to a mirror image. Images of the colonized must therefore be evaluated not only in terms of "content," but additionally as the "formal symptoms" that "structure... modernist texts themselves."<sup>32</sup> In this way, Jameson argues for the centrality of the representation of colonized others to the generation of modernist formal innovations.

Through their breathtaking theoretical simplicity, both Moses and Barnard manage to completely miss the central argument of Jameson's article. (Moses, not incidentally, performs similarly reductive readings of Said and Achebe). In Barnard's case, the fallout of this intellectual lapse is apparent in her inability to recognize Waugh's various strategies of dismantling the "strict dichotomy between civilization and savagery" that she perceives in

*Black Mischief*.<sup>33</sup>

Contrary to Barnard's claim that Jameson's formulation does not apply to the novel because Waugh depicts "the margins of the colonial world," Jameson's critical tenets are required to make sense of Waugh's frequent attempts to discover in African Christians an other that presents difference in the form of self-evident truth.<sup>34</sup> Such an other provides sharp resolution to the boundaries of the self. It shores up these boundaries against the indeterminacy created by the otherness within the self, and therefore acts as a form of "compensation" for a "constitutive... lack."<sup>35</sup> Such a construction of otherness, moreover, provides the ideal circumstance for Waugh's humour, which thrives on the failure of the demand for absolute alterity. As a satirist, Waugh cannot resist the pleasure of exposing the process of misrecognition that is implicit in this demand. Waugh's humour in *Black Mischief* relies on the repeated discovery of what Lacan terms "the ecstatic limit" of the self in fetishized images of otherness, a discovery that corresponds to the reiterative failure of such images to establish impermeable boundaries between Christians and cannibals or Europeans and Africans.<sup>36</sup>

My thesis is that while Waugh at times seeks to establish a dichotomy between civilization and its others, he often simultaneously undermines his own attempts to establish this dichotomy, and the humour in *Black Mischief* depends on this process of positing absolutes only to subvert them. At such moments, we can observe how the tension between his tendency to seek absolutes and his tendency to revel in the deconstruction of absolutes – often at the moment he posits them – produces comic pleasure.<sup>37</sup> It is, moreover, significant that the cleavage between Waugh's religious and comic impulses first emerges, in stark and unmistakable form, in his reflections on African Christianity in *Remote People*, published in 1931, one year prior to *Black Mischief*.

#### IV. The "Dark and Hidden Thing" of Ethiopian Christianity

The tenor of much of *Remote People*, Waugh's non-fiction account of his trip to Ethiopia to cover the coronation of Haile Selassie, is dictated by Waugh's frequently expressed interest in what he perceived as the chaotic mixture of modern and archaic cultural elements in Ethiopian society. Moreover, the satiric detachment that characterizes Waugh's early fiction is ostentatiously on display throughout much of *Remote People*. Within this work, then, one can quite easily remark the mutual influence between the fluid comedic displacement of meanings – particularly the meanings of sacrosanct religious, political, and cultural truths – that distinguishes Waugh's prose style, and Waugh's self-professed "fascination" with the dislocation of

cultural meanings that takes place in those regions of the world “where ideas, uprooted from their traditions, become oddly changed in transplantation.”<sup>38</sup>

In *Remote People* the mutual influence of these two elements is, perhaps, most evident in Waugh’s discussion of the sensationalism of the British media’s coverage of Selassie’s coronation. A tone of light humour predominates throughout this section, which opens with Waugh’s validation of the tendency of his “more impetuous colleagues” to produce exotic fantasies rather than factual accounts.<sup>39</sup> Waugh argues “that a prig is someone who judges people by his own, rather than their, standards; criticism only becomes useful when it can show people where their own principles are in conflict.”<sup>40</sup> Waugh therefore begins by explicitly discarding the standard of empirical accuracy in journalism on the grounds that to apply this standard to “the Yellow Press” exposes one as a “prig.”<sup>41</sup> One must judge such journalism by its standards, not one’s own.

However, while Waugh accepts the amoral pleasures of storytelling as the relevant criteria for judging newspaper accounts of faraway places, he nevertheless concludes that a belief in the factual accuracy of such accounts serves an important purpose. In the midst of playfully imagining various ways that Selassie’s coronation might be misrepresented, Waugh observes that “[a]ll these things would be profoundly exciting to the reader so long as he thought they were true. If they were offered to him as fiction they would be utterly insignificant.”<sup>42</sup>

In this passage, Waugh discovers a quite different use of “truth” than the one that is usually presumed to apply in journalism. For Waugh, it would seem that the truth of “truth” is that anyone who regards it as an ethical imperative, rather than as a means to “amuse” the reader, is a mere “prig”; for “truth,” in this formulation, becomes simply another stratagem available to journalists in the fabrication of narrative pleasure.<sup>43</sup> A presupposition on the part of the reader of the empirical accuracy of media representations is valued not because it creates the conditions of stability and certainty in one’s relation to the world, but because it generates amusement where amusement would not otherwise exist. Waugh esteems the ideal of “truth” in reporting, it seems, primarily because a belief in such a thing is a potential source of pleasure.

Waugh proceeds to demonstrate his facility at the game of using the guise of truth in this fashion by suggesting several improvements in actual news articles about the coronation. Instead of reporting that Selassie’s coach was “drawn from the church by six milk-white horses – a wholly banal conception of splendor,” “why... not say gilded eunuchs, or ostriches with dyed plumes, or a team of captive kings, blinded and wearing yokes of

elephant tusk?"<sup>44</sup> Waugh concludes this discussion with the reflection that, given the "poverty of imagination" that characterizes the inventions of the Yellow Press, "why should they not content themselves with what actually happened?"<sup>45</sup> The reality of Ethiopian society, as "a system of life, in a tangle of modernism and barbarity," is, in this case, "stranger than the newspaper reports" and far more interesting.<sup>46</sup>

Waugh's criticism of the Yellow Press, then, is not that they report inaccurately – such a judgment would require one to apply a standard foreign to the Yellow Press itself – but that they do not manipulate the guise of truth ably to create pleasure; his own treatment of exotic images of Africa, which are, by his own account, gratifying only under the guise of truth, is much more amusing. Waugh's concluding remark that the press might as well report what actually happened is not, in this context, a rebuke for dereliction of duty, but an insult directed at both their lack of creativity and their dull inability to find interest in the "tangle of modernism and barbarity" that characterizes both the events of the coronation and the society as a whole.

Waugh's tone in this section, marked by a light-hearted willingness to playfully dismantle revered ethical standards, abruptly changes in the following chapter, however, when he gives an extended account of a Christian service at Debra Lebanos:

I will not attempt any description of the ritual; the liturgy was quite unintelligible to me... For anyone accustomed to the Western rite it was difficult to think of this as a Christian service...

I had sometimes thought it an odd thing that Western Christianity, alone of all the religions of the world, exposes its mysteries to every observer, but I was so accustomed to this openness that I had never before questioned whether it was an essential and natural feature of the Christian system... At Debra Lebanos I suddenly saw the classic basilica and open altar as a great positive achievement, a triumph of light over darkness consciously accomplished, and I saw theology as the science of simplification by which nebulous and elusive ideas are formalized and made intelligible and exact. I saw the Church of the first century as a dark and hidden thing... encumbered with superstitions, gross survivals of... paganism... hazy and obscene nonsense seeping through from the other esoteric cults of the Near East, magical infections from the conquered barbarian. And I began to see how these obscure sanctuaries had grown, with the clarity of the Western reason, into the great open altars of Catholic Europe, where Mass is said in a flood of light, high in the sight of all.<sup>47</sup>

The pleasures of comic playfulness that Waugh has both practiced and en-

dorsed in the preceding chapter have found their limit. The attitude of mischievous indulgence that marks the discussion of the sins against truth of white journalists, whom one might criticize, but only on the basis of “their own principles,” is quite insufficient when Waugh is confronted with the task of describing a service in the Nestorian church. There is, obviously, no attempt to criticize this foreign-appearing ritual according to its own internal principles. Satire, it seems, must be replaced with precisely the sort of humourless insistence on absolutes that Waugh has just finished ridiculing.

Moreover, it is significant that Waugh perceives the challenge of reaffirming a foundational ethical distinction between “Western Christianity” and its dark and mysterious other not in response to a doctrine deemed heretical, but as a reaction to the foreign *appearance* of a ritual in a Nestorian church in Ethiopia. Merely observing a service in this church inspires Waugh with the need to affirm the virtues of “Catholic Europe” against the threat of “magical infection” from the Ethiopian church. Here we witness a concrete example of “the specular image” determining the “ontological structure of the human world”,<sup>48</sup> we might read this entire passage as Waugh’s attempt to establish the truth of alterity in light of the failure of the image to provide the sought after visual confirmation of his (Catholic) identity. Much to Waugh’s chagrin, no material detail of the ritual seems adequate to this purpose, and as a result he experiences the service as so “nebulous and elusive” that he is unable to “attempt any description of” it, although it literally takes place within his field of vision. In a depressingly formulaic trope of colonialist thought, the very failure of the image of the African other to provide a visual confirmation of the boundary between identity and difference – or, the failure of any list of material differences or physical attributes to amount to the sort of difference that Waugh seeks – comes to be perceived as a defining characteristic of Africans, in this case African Christians. Waugh imagines Ethiopian Christians to be hiding this elusive truth somewhere in the mysterious recesses of their church. The religious practices of Ethiopian Christians become imbued with an impenetrability that contrasts with the clarity of European Catholicism: their “darkness” is opposed to European “light,” European “science” and “reason” is opposed to African “superstition” and “magic,” and “the great open altars” of Europe, with their “flood of light,” are contrasted to the suggestive mysteries of “a dark and hidden thing.” Waugh’s satiric elegance abandons him as he oppressively recites a series of clichéd binary oppositions between Europe and Africa, piling one on top of the other. Each opposition seems to carry the weight of a foundational certainty; each requires, ironically, the others in the series to reiteratively shore it up against the threat of uncertainty in the wake of the failure of the image.

In reading this section of the travelogue, we become aware that Waugh has encountered a boundary of a very different sort than the ethical guideline that he playfully manipulates and dismantles in the preceding section. The site “where ideas, uprooted from their traditions, become oddly changed in transplantation” no longer provides an occasion for pleasurable displacements of meaning.<sup>49</sup> It is, instead, the place where one must confront the anxiety endemic to the demand for absolute alterity.

## V. Religion, Race, and Difference in *Black Mischief*

Various correspondences between *Remote People* and *Black Mischief* have been noted by critics. These resemblances range from the near repetition of specific passages to general correlations between people and places Waugh encountered on this trip with characters and settings in the novel.<sup>50</sup> I would argue, however, that more significant than any of these specific similarities or repetitions is Waugh's transfer, from *Remote People* to *Black Mischief*, of the intersection of race and religion as a site of a very particular sort of semiotic density.<sup>51</sup> This intersection serves, in both texts, as the place where the dissemination of meaning runs aground on an absolute. In the novel, as in the travelogue, Waugh attempts to create unmistakable racial and cultural delineations within Christian identity. In *Black Mischief*, however, Waugh also frequently perceives that this intersection provides the occasion for the creation of semiotic pleasure precisely, it would seem, because it is the site of an absolute.

Within *Black Mischief* Waugh's inclination toward metaphysical certainty emerges most startlingly, perhaps, in the midst of the outrageously self-absorbed contemplations of the British ambassador to Azania, Sir Samson Courtenay. As Courtenay reflects on how the civil war raging throughout Azania might affect his ability to get his preferred brand of marmalade, the narrative abruptly cuts to a scene from the war:

Sixty miles southward in the Ukaka pass bloody bands of Sakuyu warriors played hide-and-seek among the rocks, chivvying the last fugitives of the army of Seyid, while behind them down the gorge, from cave villages of incalculable antiquity, the women crept out to rob the dead. (*Black Mischief* 46)

This passage is immediately followed by a return to the conversation of the embassy delegation, who are now lamenting the war because it prevents them from acquiring new tennis balls.

The “bloody” Sakuyu here unmistakably serve as the “black and mischievous background against which the civilized... characters perform...

their parts," and against which the fates of the white English characters eventually emerge.<sup>52</sup> Particularly because of its abruptness and brevity, this interruption of the conversation of the Courtenay household foreshadows tragedy. As the Sakuyu seek to kill and devour the survivors of a battle from the previous day (we learn later that Seyid, the former ruler, has been eaten), they represent a savage threat against which the careless detachment of the Courtenays will prove fatal.

This melodramatic cut in the text indicates the same tendency to suspend the comic dissolution of meaning through the appeal to a racial absolute that we witness in *Remote People*. Moreover, Waugh employs a rhetorical strategy similar to the one utilized in his description of the church service in *Remote People* in his introductory description of the Sakuyu as "black, naked, anthropophagous" (6). In *Remote People* Waugh appeals to a series of presumably unquestionable binary oppositions between civilized Europeans and primitive Africans to confirm the distance between the "science" of European Catholicism and the infectious magic of Ethiopian Christianity; in this three-word description we witness a similar cumulative effect, rhetorically superior, however, because it is amplified by concision. Each image bears the weight of difference in the form of an absolute. The Sakuyu represent aboriginal humanity in its most threatening guise, and the truth of their dissimilarity is compact; it is certain; it is simple. The Sakuyu manifest the opposition between "barbarism" and "civilization" in such a way that the reality of this form of difference – against which, according to Waugh, the "sudden tragedy" of the novel's conclusion "emerges" – appears indisputably true.<sup>53</sup> The Sakuyu are the negative embodiment of "the glory of race," which, Waugh had argued three years earlier, must exist "in the very limits and circumscription of language... so that one does not feel lost and isolated."<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, the three reference points of difference – complexion, nakedness, and cannibalism – that Waugh invokes are, certainly not coincidentally, all terms that bear significant weight within both religious and racial contexts. It would be difficult to say if the Sakuyu serve as the manifestation of a primarily racial or religious form of degradation, for the criteria of difference used to define them transfer smoothly from one context to the other.

If episodes such as this one exhausted Waugh's strategies of representing difference in *Black Mischief*, the critical appeal of the novel would be limited to the interest that one might generate from reading the symptoms of its relatively crude representational practice. (And, from this vantage point, virtually anything written about Africa by scores of other pro-imperial writers, ranging from Haggard to Naipaul, would easily surpass

*Black Mischief* due to their more complex methodologies of constructing difference.) Waugh's tendency to conjure racial and cultural absolutes in order to safeguard the truth of difference between civilization and its others, however, is complemented in *Black Mischief* by Waugh's comic tendency, the propensity that would lead him to have bawdy fun at the expense of "prigs" in *Remote People*. Very much in line with his conclusions regarding the proper role of "truth" in reporting, the requirement of an absolute distinction on which to hang moral truths frequently becomes the event of pleasurable displacements of meaning. Our previous analysis has emphasized two very different positions that Waugh adopts, sometimes in rapid succession, when confronted with the dilemma of the absolute. Within *Black Mischief*, both of these conflicting positions are adopted in reference to the same subject, African Christianity. References to African Christianity and cannibalism in *Black Mischief* frequently reveal Waugh's tendency to seize semiotic pleasure from the playful and unrepentant deconstruction of moral absolutes, therefore providing an alternative interpretive frame for the concluding episode in which Basil devours Prudence. I would assert that it is, moreover, the various interpretive possibilities contained within this latter position that make *Black Mischief* critically interesting.

In the short denouement of the novel, Basil's comments to his friends in London regarding his experience at Moshu – the site of "the cannibal banquet" – presents at least a couple of contrasting interpretive possibilities (193). In response to a friend's suggestion that, now that he has returned to London, "[w]e'll have some parties like the old ones," Basil retorts that "I'm not sure I shouldn't find them a bit flat after the real thing. I went to a party at a place called Moshu..." (193) Basil, in the only comment within the novel on the cannibal scene, compares the leisure activity of privileged Londoners to cannibalism, implying that their parties are pale imitations of the orgiastic pleasures of cannibal revelry, "the real thing" (193). In this neat inversion of the claim that the cannibal scene establishes the truth of difference – the claim put forth by Waugh in his letter to Oldmeadow and repeated by many critics – Basil suggests that the truth of civilized desire is located within a primitive other, who is, in turn, obscenely satiated with pleasure. The African cannibals within this formulation assume the status of what Slavoj Žižek has termed "subject presumed to enjoy," others who unrepentantly claim pleasure at its source, in contrast to civilized folk, who can only approach enjoyment indirectly, through the numerous complex detours provided by advanced moral norms and conventions.<sup>55</sup> Such a construction of otherness would indicate that Waugh has ascended to a higher and more properly literary plane of racism than the simple fetishism discussed earlier. Within Waugh's portrayal of the Sakuyu, certain signifiers –



“black, naked, anthropophagus” (6) – carry the weight of a desire for pure alterity. The Sakuyu represent Waugh’s attempt to sustain a fantasy of unadulterated difference. The idea of difference suggested by Basil’s formulation is, in contrast, sturdier (if more melancholy) because it is capable of incorporating an acknowledgement of similarity at the site of foundational difference. According to Basil’s formulation, we might construe the cannibals as possessing “an insupportable, horrifying *jouissance*,” a monstrous gratification unavailable to our civilized selves, yet telling us profound and unpleasant truths about ourselves and our own desire precisely because they are imagined to possess direct access to (our) enjoyment.<sup>56</sup> Such a construction of otherness would be very much in line with literary depictions of Africans in the work of British modernist writers such as Joseph Conrad and T. S. Eliot as well as a great many of Waugh’s contemporaries, ranging from right-wing populists such as Louis-Ferdinand Céline in *Journey to the End of the Night* to liberals sympathetic to the plight of colonized Africans, such as Andre Gide in *Travels in the Congo* and Graham Greene in *Journey without Maps* and *The Heart of the Matter*.

There are certainly interpretive cues directing us toward this conclusion in Waugh’s lurid depiction of the cannibal feast, during which the narrative gaze lingers on black bodies “slashing themselves on chest and arms with their hunting knives” so that “blood and sweat mingled on their dark skins,” while “dazed with drink” and “stamping themselves into ecstasy,” the “two chains” of bodies, one male, one female, “jostled and combined” into “glistening backs heaving and shivering in the shadows” (190–91). In this scene African bodies are frozen under the fascinated gaze of the narrator in grotesque postures of ecstatic violence and sexual excitement reminiscent of a cinematic montage. These bodies materialize the radical disorganization of desire; they capture the terrifying truth of a desire that has shed the structuring element of taboo with the collapse of cannibalism into its ideological antithesis, communion. They manifest the monstrous gratification against which this taboo protects the “civilized” Christian reader, and force this reader toward a startling (mis)recognition of himself or herself in the horrifying pleasure of the savage. I would argue that the violent ambivalence of the narrative gaze, which remains trapped between terror and fascination as it pours over African bodies, is one of the most conspicuous manifestations in *Black Mischief* of Waugh’s fascination with the boundary between communion and cannibalism as a site of the inconsistency of his own racial and religious being.

If the narrative tone of the cannibal feast suggests such an interpretation, there is, I believe, a second interpretive possibility contained in the fact that Waugh leaves the only comment on this scene to Basil, who conveys

none of the horrified fascination that marks the narrator's tone in the preceding scene. Basil's terse reference to his experience at Moshu suggests that the misrecognition of oneself in one's other is, for him, simply another banal truism. Waugh leaves us, in short, with a distinct contrast between the narrator's lurid fascination with black bodies coated in blood and liquor engaging in carnal acts in the preceding scene and Basil's marked lack of interest in the event in the denouement. His experience with anthropophagy seems equally unexciting to his self-absorbed friend Sonia Digby-Vaine-Trumpington, who mentions the rumour that Basil has attended "a cannibal banquet" only to remind him that "I just don't want to hear about it," and then interrupts his statement about Moshu to remind him that "we don't want to hear travel experiences. Do try and remember" (193). For Sonia, Basil's insight represents nothing more than a tedious interruption to a game of cards. Basil's statement that the truth of civilized humankind's desire resides in its cannibal other, within this conversation, carries none of the freight of an awful realization, connotes none of the fascination with the failure of difference at the site of an absolute, of the narrative voice in the preceding scene. It is reduced to simply another unremarkable notion whose truth or falsehood is of no particular interest; a rather boring observation; a particularly unimpressive thought in a dull and directionless conversation; just another signifier in a signifying chain whose origin or destination are of no real concern.

While Basil's urbane boredom regarding this realization about human difference starkly differs from the narrative tone of the preceding scene, earlier references to cannibalism within the novel anticipate the dry, satiric note of Basil's observation. Such is the case with the narrator's reference, in the midst of a history of the Nestorian Church in Azania, to "the painful case of the human sacrifices at the Bishop of Popo's consecration," which, like the final scene, irreverently evokes the fact that the paradigm of Christian communion is human sacrifice (120). While this is one of many suggestions within *Black Mischief* that the practices of African Christians literalize the tenets of Christian dogma, the problem of whether or not this literalization simply desacralizes Christian belief or reveals deeper truths about Christianity would seem to be a matter of little or no concern to the narrator at this point, who simply categorizes the distinction between Christian ritual and human sacrifice as an "uncertain topic" (120). This distinction is framed as a matter of correctness, or "orthodoxy," rather than transcendent truth (120).

Such is also the case when Basil explains to the Azanian emperor's Lord Chamberlain that serving "raw beef" to Wanda tribesmen – an unmistakable allusion to their cannibalism – at a banquet for foreign diplomats "is

in accordance with modern thought" so long as it is called "steak tartare" (105). From Basil's standpoint, the difference between being "primitive" and "modern" is here merely a matter of the proper manipulation of language. By renaming the practice of eating raw meat, it becomes "[p]erfectly" compatible with modernity, and the Wanda are shifted from the category of primitive to that of modern (105). Moreover, the fact that it is the Wanda who consume Prudence creates a direct link between Basil's understanding of cannibalism as a purely symbolic marker of difference – a matter of proper or improper naming – in this scene and in the novel's conclusion. That is to say, Basil's attitude toward the cannibalism of the Wanda is consistent from this point to the end of the novel. His experiences in Africa do not alter this attitude, as he is unmoved to change it even by his own participation in the cannibal banquet. If, in this scene, the eating of raw beef is properly purified of its connotations of cannibalistic desire by renaming the raw beef steak tartare, in the final scene, the desire aroused in the cannibal orgy is subject to the same process; it becomes the property of "parties like [our] old ones" (193).

There is much else in the novel to encourage us to interpret Basil's attitude toward cannibalism in these terms; to conclude that for Basil, cannibalism serves as a symbolic marker of a *particular but purely contingent* importance; to deduce that for Basil, the realization that people regard cannibalism as the site of a moral absolute is important not because cannibalism actually names any transcendent truth about the nature of good and evil, but because the recognition that people think that it does is a valuable tool for the manipulation of the gullible. Foremost among these reasons is the fact that the "steak tartare" scene is quite representative of the relationship between Basil and Seth, the Azanian emperor morbidly concerned with modernizing his country. Throughout the story, Seth's credulous belief that modernity names some transcendent truth of difference, that it offers a definitive break with the primitive past, becomes the object of humour when aligned with Basil's unrepentant manipulation of this belief. Seth's clownishness in the "steak tartare" scene results largely from his dim-witted assumption that the distinction between modernity and barbarism names a reality transcending the symbolic realm. Here, as throughout much of the novel, Basil's seemingly limitless cynicism serves as the measuring stick of Seth's uncritical belief in modernity, which provides a clue regarding how to interpret the contrast between the lurid fascination of the narrator and the careless nonchalance of Basil in the story's conclusion. Basil has, throughout the story, provided the satiric frame for Seth's stupid belief in the truth of difference. The fact that Waugh gives the satiric Basil the final word on the fall from this form of simple belief within the narrative – a fall

that is marked by the death of the naive Seth, and the narrator's realization of the failure of difference at the site of its absolute, cannibalism – is perfectly consistent with the fact that Basil has provided the satiric foil to this kind of innocent belief for the majority of the story.

If, within our interpretation, we wished to grant Waugh's story consistency, I would therefore argue that we should accept Basil's satiric remark regarding the truth of difference as definitive of the overall narrative viewpoint. Within this interpretation, the narrator's gaze lingering on the black bodies that no longer simply attest to an unproblematic truth of difference, but suddenly tell us unpleasant truths about ourselves; the subtle but insistent emphasis on uncanny similarity between the Eucharist and cannibalism; the entire fascination with the spectacle of the failure of difference at the foundation of one's civilized identity; all of this becomes simply another occasion for humour when the beliefs of the credulous fail. It all amounts to nothing more than Basil's terse, offhand remark about this entire spectacle revealing the truth of "our" desire, a remark that is, moreover, of very little concern. If this remark seems mildly biting rather than riotously funny, it is, perhaps, because the credulity of the true believers is not sufficiently interesting, in this case, to generate much humour among the urbane.

In short, there are substantial reasons to read *Black Mischief* as a book that not only stages the failure of difference between a civilized self and a primitive other, but that encourages us to interpret this failure in a particular way. From Basil's standpoint, the failure of cannibalism as the site of an absolute that might sustain a belief in the unadulterated alterity of the other connotes no lurid fascination. It does not necessarily result in a belief in "the subject presumed to enjoy," a construction of otherness prevalent in European representations of Africans among Waugh's contemporaries, or sustain the economy of difference implied by such a belief. For Basil, the realization that people believe in such things rather provides the circumstance to assume different personas – to embrace a fluid and performative ideal of identity – and to enjoy the satiric pleasures available from the easy manipulation of such beliefs and the people who hold them. The realization that people actually believe that their fetishes of modernity contain important metaphysical truths about themselves and their others becomes, in other words, the occasion for unapologetic and unrestrained enjoyment in a world that seems to require such beliefs to sustain itself. If we choose to read *Black Mischief* in this way, we would discover Waugh coming as close as he ever would to embracing the failure of the absolute as a simple recognition of an ontological necessity, an interesting and potentially enjoyable property of thought or language that he might harness to serve as an engine of his fiction.<sup>57</sup>

To read the novel in terms of any consistent vision, including the one suggested by Basil's cynical remarks, however, would certainly be to deny the inescapable tension within the novel between Waugh's desire for some form of metaphysical certainty on which to establish his religious beliefs and his conflicting tendency to exploit this desire for its satiric possibilities. I have argued that this tension produces at least three largely incompatible ways of conceptualizing human difference within *Black Mischief*: the fantasy of pure alterity represented by the "black, naked, anthropophagous" Sakuyu; the portrayal of the African other as "the subject presumed to enjoy," an other containing the truth of our own desire and, for this reason, satiated with a limitless and terrifying *jouissance*; and, finally, Basil's recognition of the aporetic foundation of the "civilized" self as a simple ontological truism. And to attempt to reduce any of these constructions of otherness to the others would certainly be to oversimplify a complex text that can otherwise tell us a great deal about perceptions of racial and religious difference in modern fiction.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Waugh: *The Critical Heritage*, ed. Martin Stannard (New York: Routledge, 1984) 135.

<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Mark Armory (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1980) 77.

<sup>3</sup> *Critical Heritage* 139.

<sup>4</sup> *Critical Heritage* 133.

<sup>5</sup> It is also clearly at odds with Waugh's own frequent and knowledgeable engagement with various philosophies of literary and artistic modernism throughout his writing. Noteworthy discussions of the influence on Waugh of specific trends and movements within modernist thought are provided by Archie Loss, "Vile Bodies, Vorticism, and Italian Futurism" (*Journal of Modern Literature* 18.1 [1992] 155-64), and Michael Gorra, "Through Comedy Toward Catholicism: A reading of Evelyn Waugh's Early Novels" (*Contemporary Literature* 29.2 [1988] 201-20). Loss discusses Waugh's engagement with and critique of vorticism and futurism in *Vile Bodies*; Gorra's article contains an interesting discussion of the tensions between modernist and aestheticist representational practices in Waugh's early fiction. In "Brideshead Revisited and the Modern Historicization of Memory" (*Studies in the*

*Novel* 25.3 [1993] 318-31), David Rothstein argues that Waugh's concern with a characteristically modernist problematic of language and identity is a central concern in his later fiction, notably *Brideshead Revisited*. Rothstein claims that Waugh's sense of "historical identity is uniquely modern and... results from an awareness of the distance between a coherent, meaningful past identity, enclosed and enshrined in memory, and a present experience of dislocation" (319). Literary language, in this formulation, must tackle the task of creating meaningful "temporal continuities" out of this fragmented "experience of modernity" (319-20). While it is beside the point to endorse or deny any of these arguments as a whole, they demonstrate conclusively that for Waugh reality is not innocent of language.

<sup>6</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994) 14.

<sup>7</sup> Rita Barnard, "'A Tangle of Modernism and Barbarity': Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief*" in *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature 1899-1939*, ed Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 164.

<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute* (New York: Verso, 2000) 51.

<sup>9</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Black Mischief, Scoop, The Loved One, The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2003) 190. All in-text parenthetical references are to this book.

<sup>10</sup> Freud famously examines the problems that this aporetic structure of Christian identity presents to psychoanalysis in *Totem and Taboo* (trans. A. A. Brill [New York: Vintage Books, 1946]), placing his discussion in the context of the logic of expiation through sacrifice that is implicit in "the Christian myth of man's original sin" (198). Freud contends that the practice of communion provides evidence in support of his theory that society originated with the ritualistic sublimation of the murder of the primal father; he argues that "the Christian Eucharist" is a variation on "the old totem feast... in which the band of brothers now eats the flesh and blood of the son and no longer of the father" (199). As a precedent for his reading, he cites "Frazer's dictum that 'the Christian communion has absorbed within itself a sacrament which is doubtless far older than Christianity'" (199-200). Christian communion, in this analysis, becomes a historical palimpsest of cannibalism, which operates in such a way that its performance simultaneously enacts the logic of other cannibalistic rituals and obscures its historical connection to them.

Maggie Kilgour examines the metaphors of cannibalism in Western literature in *From Communion to Cannibalism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990). Much of this study focuses on the role that the figure of the cannibal plays in maintaining the division between "ego" and "object" (13). Within this wide-ranging study, Kilgour analyses how the effort to sustain the dichotomy between cannibal and Christian creates a process of sublimation that dictates that the cannibal other cannot ultimately be "transcended," only "internalized" and "perpetuated" (13).

William Arens traces the centrality of cannibalism for constructions of the other in European thought from the era of the conquest of the Americas through the 1970s in *The Man-Eating Myth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). Of particular relevance to my analysis is Arens's discussion of the problems posed to Christian

dogma when encountering acts of symbolic cannibalism in the religious rituals of other peoples, such as the practice that came to be known as “Aztec communion” among sixteenth-century Spanish writers (69).

The anthology *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, edited by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iverson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), contains both literary and anthropological analyses of the symbolic importance of cannibalism in the construction of racial otherness in literature, film, and within the social sciences. Psychoanalytic approaches influence many of the contributions to this collection, particularly those of Peter Hulme and Maggie Kilgour.

<sup>11</sup> Waugh, *Letters* 77.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in William J. Cook, *Masks, Modes, and Morals: The Art of Evelyn Waugh* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971) 116.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Cook, *Masks* 115.

<sup>14</sup> Cook, *Masks* 114.

<sup>15</sup> James F. Carens, *The Satiric Art of Evelyn Waugh* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966) 142; 140.

<sup>16</sup> The quote is from Frederick L. Beaty, *The Ironic World of Evelyn Waugh: A Study of Eight Novels* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992) 68. Also see William Myers, *Evelyn Waugh and the Problem of Evil* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1991) 35-36.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Falcoff, “Waugh’s Postcolonial Studies,” *The New Criterion* (Sept. 2006) 87.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Cook, *Masks* 116; 115.

<sup>19</sup> Jerome Meckier, “Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, and Birth Control in *Black Mischief*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 23.3 (1999) 281.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Greenberg, “Cannibals and Catholics: Reading the Reading of Evelyn Waugh’s *Black Mischief*,” *Modernist Cultures* 2.2 (2006) 129.

<sup>21</sup> Gorra, “Through Comedy” 212.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Valdez Moses, “Disorientalism: Conrad and the Imperial Origins of Modernist Aesthetics” in *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature 1899-1939*, ed Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 46.

<sup>23</sup> Barnard, “Tangle of Modernism” 176.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002) 6.

<sup>25</sup> Lacan, “Mirror Stage” 4-6.

<sup>26</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (New York: Verso, 2001) 98.

<sup>27</sup> Lacan, “Mirror Stage” 6-8.

<sup>28</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Modernism and Imperialism” in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) 49; 51.

<sup>29</sup> Lacan, “Mirror Stage” 6.

<sup>30</sup> Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism" 58.

<sup>31</sup> Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism" 64.

<sup>32</sup> Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism" 64.

<sup>33</sup> Barnard, "Tangle of Modernism" 164.

<sup>34</sup> Barnard, "Tangle of Modernism" 176.

<sup>35</sup> Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism" 58; 51.

<sup>36</sup> Lacan, "Mirror Stage" 9.

<sup>37</sup> While psychoanalytic theories of humour abound, I think that Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks's Lacanian analysis of racial jokes in the writing of Waugh's antagonistic contemporary, George Orwell, is most relevant here. In "The Comedy of Domination: Psychoanalysis and the Conceit of Whiteness" (in *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, ed Christopher Lane [New York: Columbia University Press, 1998]) Seshadri-Crooks argues that race "internally ruptures" the white subject as "the structuring presence of alterity in the very formulation of the 'I'" (359). Jokes, within this analysis, potentially reveal this internal rupture – "the unconscious" – within the white subject (358). While this "process of exposure" can potentially prove disruptive of white subjectivity, it can also be utilized to strengthen one's attachment to a white subject position (360). Waugh's writing certainly encompasses both of these possibilities.

James F. English's *Comic Transactions: Literature, Humor, and the Politics of Community in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) also influenced this discussion. English argues that "[i]f we could always pin down... exactly where the lines of identity and difference must be drawn, then jokes themselves would cease to exist" (10).

For studies of the interconnection of race and humour in Waugh's writing, see Michael Gorra, "Through Comedy Toward Catholicism: A reading of Evelyn Waugh's Early Novels," and Michael L. Ross, *Race Riots: Comedy and Ethnicity in Modern British Fiction* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), both of which include substantial discussions of *Black Mischief*.

<sup>38</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *When the Going Was Good* (London: Duckworth, 1946) 197.

<sup>39</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Remote People: A Report from Ethiopia and British Africa 1930-1931* (New York: Ecco Press, 1990) 40.

<sup>40</sup> Waugh, *Remote People* 40.

<sup>41</sup> Waugh, *Remote People* 40.

<sup>42</sup> Waugh, *Remote People* 41.

<sup>43</sup> Waugh, *Remote People* 40-41.

<sup>44</sup> Waugh, *Remote People* 41-42.

<sup>45</sup> Waugh, *Remote People* 42.

<sup>46</sup> Waugh, *Remote People* 41.

<sup>47</sup> Waugh, *Remote People* 67-68.

<sup>48</sup> Lacan, "Mirror Stage" 4-5.



<sup>49</sup> Waugh, *When the Going Was Good* 197.

<sup>50</sup> Ann Pasternak Slater notes resemblances between people and characters – notably Selassie and Waugh's fictional emperor Seth – as well as remarking specific passages from *Remote People* that are very nearly repeated in *Black Mischief* or, more generally, suggest important ideas in the novel (Introduction, *Black Mischief, Scoop, The Loved One, The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* [New York: Everyman's Library, 2003] ix-xv). Selena Hastings also notes influences in some detail, commenting that "many of the landmarks and *dramatis personae*" of *Black Mischief* "are recognizable... from *Remote People*" (*Evelyn Waugh: A Biography* [New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1994] 261).

<sup>51</sup> Waugh comments in his response to Oldmeadow that the references to Nestorian religious practices in *Black Mischief* "are authentic," based upon the actual practices of "a notoriously heretical Church" that he had personally witnessed in Ethiopia (*Letters* 74-75).

<sup>52</sup> Waugh, *Letters* 77.

<sup>53</sup> Waugh, *Letters* 77.

<sup>54</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Labels* (London: Duckworth, 1974) 205.

<sup>55</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2001) 186.

<sup>56</sup> Žižek, *Sublime Object* 186.

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Goodstein's recent theorization of boredom in modern literature in *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) seems inadequate to explain the alignment between the rejection of cherished ideological and moral absolutes and identity as jubilant performance that Waugh presents in *Black Mischief*. For Goodstein, "[b]oredom" is a name for the state in which the lived discrepancy between the involvement with transient means and their value in a larger vision of existence enters subjective awareness"; this state, moreover, seems invariably to lead to a "nihilistic dynamic of experience" (259; 12). However, since Basil recognizes that the "larger vision of existence" results from one's "involvement with transient means" – something quite similar, in other words, to contemporary theories of performativity – even Goodstein's description of this state of awareness of a subjective aporia as a "discrepancy" would appear irrelevant in this case (although quite relevant to many of Waugh's later works, such as *Brideshead Revisited*). Basil's rejection of fetishistic absolutes does not lead to a condition that can be reduced to "existential despair" (Goodstein 12). I would argue that the case of Basil rather provides an example of the possibilities inherent in the recognition that, in Rei Terada's terms, "experience is experience of self-differentiability" (*Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the "Death of the Subject"* [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001] 156). Self-differentiability is in no way a dilemma to be overcome, in this case.