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“Too, too shaming”: Evelyn Waugh’s *Vile Bodies*

In 1946 the English novelist Evelyn Waugh infamously proclaimed that he did not write satire. Satire, Waugh wrote, “presupposes homogeneous moral standards” which, he suggested, did not exist in the twentieth-century West:

Satire [...] exposes polite cruelty and folly by exaggerating them. It seeks to produce shame. All this has no place in the Century of the Common Man where vice no longer pays lip service to virtue.¹

Like much of what Waugh wrote, this statement is a sophisticated satirical performance that seeks to produce the very feeling it denies the twentieth century is capable of: shame. Waugh’s use of this word recalls the unforgettable entry of the feeling (or its signifier) sixteen years earlier, in the second chapter of 1930’s *Vile Bodies*. Upon entry to England, party girl Agatha Runcible is mistaken for a jewel smuggler and strip-searched by Dover customs officers: “too, too shaming” says Agatha of her abuse by the customs officials, before relating all to the evening newspapers.²

Vile Bodies has disturbed readers and critics alike since its publication. Particularly troubling is the novel’s abrupt shift in tone, from delight in the Bright Young People’s “too, too shaming” scandals to the unsettling pitch of the final chapters as their giddy world descends into total war. Waugh, though long seen as a conservative moralist, has increasingly come to occupy a position at the fringes of modernism; certainly he is a major satirist of modernity. *Vile Bodies* in particular is frequently read as modernist in feeling and construction, particularly in its rejection of sentimentality and emotion. Waugh ruthlessly expunges all interiority from his characters; they become as Rebecca West remarked in a

¹ Evelyn Waugh, “Fan-Fare,” in *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Donat Gallagher (London: Methuen, 1983), 304.

² Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1949), 24.

contemporary review of the novel, like a deck of cards shuffled and spread out. In this flat world, intimacy or emotion is rendered illegible; it is effaced and replaced with mere talk.

Waugh's innovations with talk (particularly telephone talk) were early noted in reviews of *Vile Bodies*, but, as this essay will argue, the novel can fruitfully be approached by its interest in text, particularly in the visual qualities of text. Typography, textual space, and textual markers are central effects in Waugh's satiric portrait of a coterie whose members are, internally, empty. The Bright Young People respond to their world with a totalising emotional blankness manifested in finely planed, brittle talk; indeed, while they talk endlessly of "shaming," their affect range is as flat as the page.³ Yet, as any reader knows, Waugh's novel skilfully prompts those feelings his characters seem to lack: shame, disgust, and satiric laughter. In *Vile Bodies*, Waugh produces shame by making visible the affective flatness implicit in his characters' textual construction of selfhood. The textual selves of *Vile Bodies*, as this essay will argue, are peculiarly modernist constructs produced in an historical moment in which the conflation of literary and bodily indecency coincides with increasing anxiety about, and exhibition of, both the physical and psychical self.

Significant writing has been achieved in the intersection of aesthetics and affect: work by Jonathan Flatley and Rei Terada among others, as well as more fundamental theorisations by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Silvan Tomkins.⁴ Here, much scholarly exploration focuses on a landscape dominated by the

³ In a 1962 interview conducted by Julian Jebb and published a year later by the *Paris Review*, Waugh would argue, against Forster that "[a]ll fictional characters are flat. A writer can give an illusion of depth by giving an apparently stereoscopic view of a character—seeing him from two vantage points; all a writer can do is give more or less information about a character, not information of a different order." See "The Art of Fiction No. 30: Interview with Evelyn Waugh," by Julian Jebb, *The Paris Review* 30 (1963), <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4537/the-art-of-fiction-no-30-evelyn-waugh>.

⁴ Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

affects of melancholia, sadness, rapture, and Charles Altieri's "big passions"⁵: affects most readily aligned with a broadly Romantic model of the individual and individuated self. But there are significant aesthetic works which do not explore, or provoke, such expansive affective responses, which seem to both represent, and aim towards eliciting, negative, small, petty feelings, as Sianne Ngai has memorably theorised.⁶ This is particularly true of the satiric mode, whose affective compass maps the nastiest of human emotions and motivations: those "ugly feelings" explored by Ngai, such as envy, irritation, contempt, hatred, snobbery, desire for violence, and moral and physical disgust.⁷ It has generally been the (often unrewarding) task of critics to recuperate for satire a place within aesthetic theory, a way to account for the feelings satire is produced by and produces.

Shame is one ugly feeling that has not suffered theoretical neglect. In Silvan Tomkins's account, shame is "the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation," and importantly for the purposes of satire, "shyness, shame, and guilt are not distinguished from each other at the level of affect."⁸ Shame as Tomkins describes it is a peculiarly ocular affect, related to the experience of being looked at and the desire to halt the looking. In the shame response, the shamed person drops the eyes, the head, the upper body, in order to "stop the other's looking at him, particularly at his face."⁹ Shame's close relation to the face, to the feeling of facial exposure or the transection of facial communication,

⁵ Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: The Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 141.

⁶ Ngai focuses on "weaker and nastier" affects such as paranoia, envy, irritation and anxiety; see Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 7. A fruitful area of research in modernist studies of the past ten years focuses on boredom, with excellent studies by Elizabeth Goodstein and Sara Crangle among others. See Elizabeth Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); and Sara Crangle, *Prosaic Desires: Modernist Knowledge, Boredom, Laughter, and Anticipation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

⁷ Disgust—Kant's strong sensation—has an equally strong critical history. See for example William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁸ Tomkins, *Shame and its Sisters*, 133.

⁹ Tomkins, *Shame and its Sisters*, 134.

is in Tomkins's formulation due to the fact that "the self lives in the face, and within the face the self burns brightest in the eyes. Shame turns the attention of the self and others away from other objects to this most visible residence of the self, increases its visibility, and thereby generates the torment of self-consciousness."¹⁰ The centring of shame within the ocular realm is particularly enlightening: there is at the heart of Tomkins's theorisation an awareness of shame's intense visuality which intersects with the concerns of modernist satire generally, the satiric theory of Wyndham Lewis, and the satire practised by Waugh.

Jonathan Flatley has suggested of modernism that its attempts to represent the experiences of modernity have done so by "being especially attentive to the affective—as distinct from the cognitive or the corporeal for example—components of modern experience. [...] behind the extraordinary level of aesthetic experimentation that we sometimes call 'modernism' we can see the desire to find a way to map out and get a grasp on the new affective terrain of modernity."¹¹ In the case of an anti-modernist—or as Jonathan Greenberg has suggested—a modernist satirist like Waugh, literary experimentation tends not towards the mapping of the affective at all. Indeed, in *Vile Bodies*, Waugh expunges all traces of feeling. Authentic emotion is explicitly mocked in the novel's Carrollian epigraph, revealing a modernist geography that is flattened—an affectless plain.

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

"I hope you don't suppose those are real tears?" Tweedledum interrupted in a tone of great contempt.¹²

But is the world of the Bright Young People really so void of emotion? To put the question another way, do the actions and operations of the people moving within this world, lacking in real emotions themselves, fail to produce feeling in the reader? Hardly. Waugh's success as satirist is tied to the production of

¹⁰ Tomkins, *Shame and its Sisters*, 136.

¹¹ Flatley, *Affective Mapping*, 4.

¹² Carroll in Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 7.

feelings in his readers, though these feelings are not noble. Waugh is interested in producing at least two emotions, neither of them highbrow: first, moral outrage—the feeling of shame either in oneself or for another's outrageous behaviour; second, he wishes to produce laughter.

Modernist Laughter: Satire

The dominant story of modernism (if, indeed, it is any longer possible to tell one dominant story) is all too familiar: a story of aesthetic experiment and affective alienation, an Eliotic escape from emotion simultaneous with a deeper burrowing into psychological truth undertaken by high modernists like Woolf, Joyce and Mansfield. Yet, as Tyrus Miller and Jonathan Greenberg have outlined, a parallel story emerges when we look back from the 1930s, a story of an emergent modernism closely allied with a finely tuned satiric sense. Greenberg names *Ulysses* and Aldous Huxley's *Antic Hay* as exemplars of the "emergence of satire as an increasingly prevalent cultural mode";¹³ in contrast to Virginia Woolf's "luminous halo,"¹⁴ pre-modernist writers such as Wilde "cultivate [satiric] indifference" while high modernists like Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis "exemplify satiric aggression."¹⁵ Miller, in his important study *Late Modernism*, argues that the satiric strain is symptomatic of modernity's affects: "the vision of a general depersonalization and deauthentication of life in modern society"¹⁶ jeopardises the self, putting subjectivity "at risk of dissolution."¹⁷ Satiric laughter and a concern with the grotesque human body are, Miller argues, thus simply a response to a generalized perception of modernity's dehumanizing tendencies.

Laughter, then—particularly satiric laughter—is both originary (in terms of modernism's roots in Wildean Symbolism) and pivotal in any story of modernist feeling. Justus Nieland notes of laughter that it is:

¹³ Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 22.

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 106. Of course, Woolf frequently used satire.

¹⁵ Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire and the Novel*, 22.

¹⁶ Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 42.

¹⁷ Miller, *Late Modernism*, 63.

essential to any complete story of modernism's affective energies, and to any full account of how the moderns actually *experienced* modernity—experienced it as an embodied affair that made acute and pressing demands on the body, the senses, the very life of the feelings.¹⁸

Here the link between the affective, the cognitive, and the corporeal is made explicit: in laughter, the body is moved as much as (or perhaps because of) the emotional pressure brought to bear upon the listener or reader by the joke. This is certainly the result in the reader, but what is interesting to note about Waugh's satires, in particular *Vile Bodies*, is that they dramatize a disconnect between the human body moving in space, the human mind or soul that thinks and feels, and—crucially—the limits of textual representation of those bodies and minds.

In their division between matter and spirit, Waugh's satires echo the modernist “external method” of satire proposed by Wyndham Lewis. In his satiric theory, Lewis advocated excising psychological interiority to focus instead upon the absurd externals of the human animal—the “*thing* behaving like a person,” as Lewis described it in his reversal of Bergsonian comic theory: “all men are necessarily comic: for they are all *things*, or physical bodies, behaving as *persons*.”¹⁹ For Lewis, the human body is a thing; the spirit or consciousness, trapped inside this ludicrous object, is the “person” who recognizes her own inherent comedy.

In October 1930 (some ten months following the publication of *Vile Bodies*), Waugh favourably reviewed Lewis's pamphlet “Satire and Fiction,” concluding that “no novelist and very few intelligent novel readers can afford to neglect” the essay.²⁰ “Satire and Fiction” (later published in *Men Without Art*) attacks modernism's attempt to portray the inner workings of the human mind. Setting himself in direct opposition to Joyce, Woolf, Stein, and Lawrence (repeatedly attacked in the pamphlet for their privileging of emotional truth) Lewis proposed showing humans in their “shells, or [...] the language of their bodily

¹⁸ Justus Nieland, “Editor's Introduction: Modernism's Laughter,” *Modernist Cultures* 2.2 (2006): 80-86 (84); doi: 10.3366.

¹⁹ Wyndham Lewis, *The Wild Body* (New York: Haskell House, 1970), 246.

²⁰ Evelyn Waugh, “Satire and Fiction,” in *Essays*, 102.

movements.”²¹ Lewis argued that, though the descriptions of humans in their “pelts” may appear satiric, such art in fact represents “objective, non-emotional truth.” While it could be “disagreeable,” he argued that satire followed “the ‘truth’ of the intellect” rather than “the ‘truth’ of the average romantic sensualism.”²² The traditional oppositions of mind/body, intellect/emotion, and truth/falsehood, are mobilised to support Lewis’s modernist satiric project. For late modernists such as Lewis and Waugh, satire becomes the dominant cultural mode, and is aesthetically enticing precisely because it offered literary artists a mode by which they could express the affective truths of their experience of modernity; because, as Greenberg argues, satire “recognizes paradoxes and problems in the moral, aesthetic, and affective standards developed during historical modernity.”²³

The Most Shy-Making Details: Vile Bodies and the Production of Shame

It is apt to discuss *Vile Bodies* in the contexts of shame and satire, precisely because by embracing a pose of modernist detachment, the novel paradoxically seeks to provoke the kinds of feelings its characters are apparently unable to access. Indeed, it is so successful in its pursuit of affectlessness that the novel often reads as lacking in feeling, even to its author: to Henry Yorke Waugh wrote that the novel seemed “to shrivel up & rot internally.”²⁴ Many early reviews agreed with Waugh’s condemnation of the novel.²⁵ Later scholarly exegesis of the novel has largely centred on accounting for the novel’s uncertain tone, which has been variously described as satirical, ironic, antagonistic, sympathetic, detached, bland, and as an example of both “dark” and “grey” humour.²⁶

²¹ Wyndham Lewis, *Satire and Fiction* (London: Arthur, 1930), 47.

²² Lewis, *Satire and Fiction*, 48.

²³ Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire and the Novel*, 46.

²⁴ Waugh to Henry Yorke, September 1929, in *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Mark Amory (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 39.

²⁵ For example, Ralph Straus saw it as a “masterpiece of inconsequence” and a “subtly ironical commentary on the juvenile absurdities of to-day.” See Ralph Straus, “Bystander” 15 January 1930, in *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Martin Stannard (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 95-6.

²⁶ For example: Terry Eagleton sees the novel as characterised by “bland externality.” See Terry Eagleton, “Evelyn Waugh and the Upper-Class Novel,” in *Critical Essays on*

While the behaviour of the Bright Young People appears to escape censure—even to be celebrated—in the wake of the novel’s lurching hilarity, the reader can nevertheless detect sharp narratorial disapproval emerging at key moments. The novel’s apparent tonal vacillation can be resolved by paying close attention to its typography, most especially its punctuation and “white lines,” largely effaced in the Chapman & Hall editions. Richard Jacobs’s splendid 1996 Penguin edition, with punctuation restored from a photocopy of the manuscript of the novel, and the typescript fragment held at the Harry Ransom Center, reveals the specificity of Waugh’s punctuation.²⁷ The restoration of parentheses and white lines indicate the purposeful seen quality of *Vile Bodies*, which uses typographical demarcation to visually distinguish certain areas of the text. This technique is registered, perhaps, from Waugh’s awareness of the visual aspects of Wyndham Lewis’s writing. Pages from *Blast*, wherein words and phrases are slapped against one another, present a complex of visual and verbal juxtapositions. Waugh mimicked, perhaps bathetically, *Blast*’s visual appeal in his 1929 Christmas card.²⁸ The design of the card collages words and phrases from advertising and newspaper headlines: Below “new year” is the phrase “I used a razor once,” from which the eye travels to “Child stabbed 35 times.” Liberty is obliquely satirized in this visual jumble: the word “Free!” is uniquely placed upside down. Particularly of interest in this paper is the location of what should be the card’s central word: “Christmas” is sliced in half and placed directly underneath the words “Art” and “Disgraceful Facts” (a peculiarly modernist vanguard linkage).

Waugh’s Christmas card, designed in the year he wrote *Vile Bodies*, offers clues on how to read his novel. The juxtaposition of words indicates Waugh’s engagement with Lewis’s visual hijacking of verbal forms; moreover, it shows

Evelyn Waugh, ed. James Carens (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1987), 106. Alain Blayac coins the term “grey” humour in describing *Vile Bodies*. See Alain Blayac, “Evelyn Waugh and Humour” in *Evelyn Waugh: New Directions*, ed. Alain Blayac (London: Macmillan, 1992), 117. Frederick Beaty maintains that the tone is both antagonistic to and sympathetic with the Bright Young People. See Frederick Beaty, *The Ironic World of Evelyn Waugh* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992), 53.

²⁷ Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, ed. Richard Jacobs (London: Penguin, 1996).

²⁸ Reprinted in *Evelyn Waugh and His World*, ed. David Pryce-Jones (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 69.

Waugh's awareness of the way in which the mind can be led by the eye to separate concrete or to connect disparate ideas, chopping away at the glossy surface of rhetoric to reveal the instability or emptiness within discourse. When we consider the visual separation of certain sections of the text of *Vile Bodies* in parentheses and footnotes, stupefaction at the novel's tone vanishes with the realisation that there is not one ambivalent narrator, but two competing narrators, the first detached, insouciant, and smiling; the second, grim, factual, and dour.²⁹

Vile Bodies is unique in Waugh's fictional work in its use of footnotes (an odd quirk in a novel so utterly removed from the schoolroom), the dictionary, and the rules of realistic representation. Hugh Kenner has suggested of Swift's exploitation of typographical detritus in *A Tale of a Tub*, that the footnote allows the writer "a way of speaking in two voices at once [...] a step in the direction of discontinuity: of organizing blocks of discourse in space rather than consecutively in time."³⁰ As in the Christmas card or Lewis's *Blast* bricolage, the footnotes, parentheses, and visual demarcation of white lines distinguish the two worlds and the two narratorial voices of *Vile Bodies*. The first world, of the Bright Young People, the gossip column, and the racetrack, is dazzling, swift, a world of ungoverned action. The second world, of the footnote, the parenthetical remark, and the battlefield, is a world of moral consequences, brought into sharp relief against the blurred dazzle and "sick-making" movement of the first. *Vile Bodies* is a satire concerned with modes of representation, with truth (or lies) on the page as opposed truth as it represents itself grimly and confusedly in the modern world; hence its grave concern with the gossip column, and with mistaken, assumed, or false identities.

Waugh's use of the visual and typographical aspects of the text to effect satire is original to the novel's writing, as Jacobs's restored edition and the typescript fragment held at the Harry Ransom Center both demonstrate. In the typescript fragment, the Carrollian epigraphs do not appear. Instead, Waugh addresses a "Note" to the Bright Young People, brazen in its attention-seeking capitals:

²⁹ Heath uses the term "editorial" to describe the parenthetical remarks (but does not posit a second narrator). See Jeffrey Heath, *The Picturesque Prison: Evelyn Waugh and his Writing* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), 89.

³⁰ Hugh Kenner, *The Stoic Comedians: Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett* (London: W.H Allen, 1964), 40.

BRIGHT YOUNG PEOPLE AND OTHERS KINDLY NOTE THAT ALL CHARACTERS ARE WHOLLY IMAGINARY (AND YOU GET FAR TOO MUCH PUBLICITY ALREADY WHOEVER YOU ARE.)³¹

Here, the parentheses punctuate the novelistic gap between truth and falsehood, fantasy and reality. The novel's overtly textual manipulation of meaning through the various devices of type (parentheses, white lines separating passages of text, footnotes), both foregrounds Waugh's concern with the way the eye moves on the page, and mimics the novel's obsession with the radical visibility of the Bright Young People. Waugh conjures a society that, obsessed with the columnar texts of "gossip writer and novelist," wilfully averts its gaze from the murky creep of moral corruption and societal decay. It is through the glaring visibility of the parenthetical narrator (made prominent through typographical demarcation) that the shameless world of the Bright Young People is exposed, and the text charged with a satire characterised by laughter and outrage.

Greenberg suggests of modernist satire that it aims towards the denunciation and exposure of "affective excess."³² Certainly what Lewis argues for in his advocacy of the external method, and what seems to happen in *Vile Bodies* through its radical textuality, is a hardening against sentiment (remember Lewis's characterisation of the satiric truth as "non-emotional"). In place of sympathy the novel encourages outrage, disgust, censure, and laughter. It is not surprising that these feelings should co-exist. In Freudian theory, the feelings associated with satire—moral outrage and laughter or pleasure in the face of cruelty—"have the same stimulus"; as Greenberg relates, "whether a joke appears in good or bad taste depends only on the strength of the internal and external inhibitions."³³ The notion of inhibitions—or their absence—is implicitly connected to the feeling and production of shame. Shame, in psychoanalytic terms, is a reaction formation against exhibitionism; it is prohibitive and

³¹ While the manuscript of the novel is in private hands, a fragment of the emended typescript, encompassing the beginning of the novel up to the middle of Chapter 5, is held in the Evelyn Waugh Collection at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas. See Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies* typescript with author revisions, 1929, Evelyn Waugh Collection 10:5, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

³² Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire and the Novel*, xiv.

³³ Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire and the Novel*, 5.

inhibitory, originating in the human acquisition of the upright position and correlative exposure of the genitals. As Adam Parkes notes in his study of modernism and censorship, during the early twentieth century shame was a term associated with sexual deviance: it had a close association with sodomy and, as Parkes observes of the obscenity trial following D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, with lesbianism.³⁴ Parkes notes the intersection of aesthetic questions with sexual and political concerns that were a feature of early twentieth century censorship trials, showing the perceived connection between modernist art and obscenity.

This connection makes itself felt early in *Vile Bodies*, and is linked to its memorable evocation of shame. In Chapter 2, having crossed the Channel from Calais, the novel's hero Adam Fenwick-Symes is stopped by Customs at Dover. He has nothing to declare, he remarks, except for "some very old clothes and some books," but as the narrator remarks, Adam here shows himself "deficient in tact," for it is precisely books that cause alarm with the Customs officials. Here is the initial conversation between Adam and the Customs officer:

"Books, eh?" [the customs officer] said. "And what sort of books, may I ask?"

"Look for yourself."

"Thank *you*, that's what I mean to do. *Books*, indeed."

Adam wearily unstrapped and unlocked his suitcase.

"Yes," said the Customs officer menacingly, as though his worst suspicions had been confirmed, "I should just about say you had got some books."³⁵

Adam's weary unstrapping and unlocking, and the command to "Look" seems to suggest the exhibition of something hidden, secret being brought to view—in particular when coupled with the Customs officer's "worst suspicions" of the suitcase's contents (though of course, Adam is not aware of the need to be ashamed of his books). As in Tomkins's formulation, the shame affect is coupled with the experience of looking, the sense of seeing. As the Customs officer

³⁴ Adam Parkes, *Modernism and the Theater of Censorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 54-6.

³⁵ Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (1949), 22-3.

empties the books from the suitcase “one by one” he takes note of the types of books. Dante (“French, eh?”) excites his “especial disgust,” and he remarks that the book is “pretty dirty, too, I shouldn’t wonder.” While Waugh aims broad satire at the officer’s cultural ignorance, the joke then turns on the censorship of literature in the name of moral, social or national interests. The Customs officer remarks that the “home secretary” is “[p]articularly against books,” but adds that “[i]f we can’t stamp out literature in the country, we can at least stop its being brought in from outside” (23).

There are several conclusions to be drawn from this scene, about the relationships between, on the one hand, shame and visibility; and on the other, between distasteful or disorderly writing and deviant morality. Waugh elaborates a series of motifs, centring upon books, text (manuscript or newsprint), and visibility, which highlight the textual/ocular matrix of the shame affect. Shame exists, in the Dover Customs sequence, in the black and white of letters on the page: it is pre-eminently something to be read. As Marshik has demonstrated, obscene literature and obscene acts were, in the first half of the twentieth century, seen as “overlapping issues”: “reading obscene work was thought to lead to prostitution, while prostitution supposedly inculcated a desire to peruse obscene materials.” Textual regulation followed sexual regulation, and what Marshik terms the “censorship dialectic” simultaneously “enabled and compelled” the modernist writer’s assertion of their modernity through the representation of obscenity.³⁶

The Customs officer (and the Home Secretary evoked here—based, as Jacobs suggests, upon the censorship crusader William Joynson Hicks) clearly link outrageous, reprobate, or shameful behaviour to dirty literature. The Customs officer reasserts his moral authority in the most outrageous fashion, taking the censorship order to its logical limit: that all books in some way lead to bodily corruption. Thus it is well within the logic of the novel’s world that Adam’s own literary creation—the typescript of a memoir due for submission to his publishers—should be confiscated along with his shameful library. In a room “lined with contraband pornography and strange instruments” the Customs

³⁶ Celia Marshik, *British Modernism and Censorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.

officials examine Adam's memoirs with lascivious glee, eventually pronouncing the typescript "downright dirt."³⁷ Of course, we are never given access to what it is, precisely, that makes Adam's memoir dirty. The memoir is confiscated and burned before we find out what it says.

Text, in the world of *Vile Bodies*, is inflammatory material. Literary texts are morally questionable, offering scandalous potential for dirt; but more than this, text marks out the borders of the self. Adam's typescript is described as his "livelihood": his living, his way of making money but also of course, as a memoir, his inner life and experiences up until this moment, a collection of typographic markers operating as the material manifestation of Adam's interior self. After its destruction in the novel's opening, the narrative charts Adam's efforts to establish individual identity through text or writing, most spectacularly so in the Mr Chatterbox gossip column where individuals are literally created through type (the Mr Chatterbox persona is ontologically shifty: several characters "become" Mr Chatterbox, among them Adam and Miles Malpractice, though none of them can fully "be" Chatterbox—one of the novel's Bergsonian jokes). Appropriately to Waugh's concerns, Adam's "self" does not exist, per se, any more than any of the other characters in the novel possess selves. Adam's invention, in his guise as Mr Chatterbox, of the society belle Imogen Quest belies the radical emptiness of the other Bright Young People: Imogen (unlike her "real" peers) is said to possess "a marked personality"; more than this, she is seen to "justify[...] the century" (110). The deliciousness of this joke lies in the idea that Imogen, her self thickening in ink and paper, seems more tangible, more living, than the Bright Young People; like the Alice of the epigraph, Adam and the Bright Young People don't seem as "real." In fact, literally as well as figuratively, they aren't. They, like Imogen, are simply collections of type, and in that they are, are subject to the rules of censorship, their moral outrages eventually censured—and censored—by the expurgating hand of the satirist.

What further fuels the satire of the Dover-Customs scene is the revelation of what is happening "in the next room": as Adam's book is being confiscated in the name of morality, his friend Agatha Runcible, the daughter of a peer and the centre of the book's coterie of Bright Young People, having been mistaken for a

³⁷ Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (1949), 23-4.

jewel smuggler, is in next room “being stripped to the skin by two terrific wardresses” (23). Adam and the Customs officers can hear her “shrieks and yells” over their discussion of Adam’s books. Here, while the Customs official pays lip service to social purity through censorship, his colleagues commit the very acts which the suppression of obscene literature was supposed to prevent: physical “outrage” and sexual humiliation. (In combination with Agatha’s strip search, the officials’ “sinister chuckling” in this scene seems to correlate with the risk of contamination suffered by what William Ian Miller describes as “moral menials.”)³⁸ Having been strip searched, Agatha enters the room filled with contraband, and addressing Adam as his typescript is being burned, describes her “ordeal”:

“My dear, I can’t tell you the things that have been happening to me in there. The way they looked... too, too shaming. Positively surgical, my dear, and such *wicked* old women, just like *Dowagers*, my dear. As soon as I get to London I shall ring up every Cabinet Minister and all the newspapers and give them all the most shy-making details.”³⁹

This passage highlights the central place of the visual—the perception of looking and being looked at—in Agatha’s experience. Indeed, the perception of regard, of being observed, characterises the general experience of the Bright Young People, who are continually photographed (or avoiding being photographed). Agatha in particular is painfully observable—in Shepherd’s Hotel, seen as a “tart,” (42) en route to the car race, where she is ejected from several hotels for wearing trousers (147-8), and at Dover, mistaken for a smuggler—and it is this persistent visibility which marks her out as a creature of shame. In the scene at 10 Downing Street, Agatha is still dressed in the previous night’s party’s “Hawaiian costume” as she breakfasts with the shocked family of the Prime Minister, Sir James Brown (56). In this sequence, the characters’ awareness of the exposure of looking is contrasted with the cocooning qualities of text and speech. Agatha repeats her “shy-making” phrase when accidentally seen by Sir James in his study, and Sir James mirrors her embarrassment when he “[catches] sight of Miss Runcible” again in the dining room, begging “desperately” for

³⁸ Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 184.

³⁹ Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (1949), 24

someone to “say something.” Agatha’s reading aloud of the newspaper report likewise is intended to ease the shameful pressure of being seen, but the report, with its emphasis on “witness,” and the irony of Agatha’s comment (“How I should have loved to have seen it”), ultimately directs a glaring spotlight upon Agatha (“suddenly light came flooding in [...]”), exposing her literal nakedness in concert with her breaking of social taboo. After she “once more” meets the “eyes of the Brown family,” Agatha flees the house, only to have her shame rendered publicly visible by the “crowd of reporters and Press photographers” waiting at the door, eager to record her exposure in print (57).

To return to the Dover-Customs sequence: Agatha’s use of the word “shaming,” while appropriate to the situation, is odd only because she doesn’t seem to be very concerned with hiding an experience explicitly associated with genital exposure. In the manuscript, the violative nature of this experience is even more overt: while the published text notes the “way they look,” in the manuscript Agatha complains of the “places they delved.” This phrase, original to the manuscript but deleted in the published text—perhaps in response to the need for greater delicacy—exposes just precisely how physical Agatha’s shaming is. (It’s significant that this reference to the inside of Agatha’s body is removed; Waugh’s revisions consistently reiterate the textual flatness, rather than the embodied roundness, of his characters.) The revision, moreover, highlights Waugh’s acute awareness of the danger of a book’s withdrawal due to obscenity—his first novel, *Decline and Fall*, was published shortly after the scandal surrounding the publication of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (significantly, called by the conservative publication *John Bull* the “Shame Epic”), and Waugh was forced by his publishing house Chapman & Hall to undergo radical revisions as a result. Indeed, from the elisions and substitutions made in *Decline and Fall* onwards, most of Waugh’s novels are characterised by a peculiar reticence, a cloaking of particulars in sadistic suggestion. In an amusing case of authorial return, Waugh recycled this expunged verb (“delve”) in an article titled “People Who Want To Sue Me,” published in 1930, to describe the act of novel writing: “One does not just sit behind a screen jotting down other people’s conversation ... [O]ne has to go over that vast, smouldering rubbish-heap of experience, half-stifled by the fumes and dust, scraping and delving until one finds a few

discarded valuables.”⁴⁰ Again, the relationship between the secret “valuable” (Agatha has been mistaken for a jewel thief) and the defiling process of its recovery, resolves itself in the form of material manuscript.

The Dover-Customs joke sequence, incorporating bodily exhibition with the erasure of the self, demonstrates some key concerns of Waugh’s satire: the effacement of individual identity, the disconnect between body and soul, and modernity’s emptying out of moral and ethical concerns. And it ends, of course, in the fulfilment of Agatha’s promise. On the train to London, she tells the Bright Young People, who sympathise: “how too, too shaming, [...] how devastating, how unpoliceman-like, how goat-like, how sick-making, how too, too awful.”⁴¹ After Adam arrives in London from Dover he visits his publisher to tell him of his memoir’s destruction; by the time he exits the meeting, a mere six pages after the train conversation, the evening papers are filled with Agatha’s story. If, as psychoanalytic theory suggests, shame is a product of, or reaction against genital exhibition, then Agatha’s “ordeal,” involving both genital exhibition and—the novel sadistically suggests, violation—*should* produce shame. Agatha certainly asserts this feeling, in her newsprint account: “HON. A RUNCIBLE SAYS/ ‘TOO SHAMING’” (33). And yet, this “SHAMING” is so textually and typographically overt, and as the book progresses, Agatha multiplies her retellings (to her friends, to the newspapers, to strangers) to the extent that the reader soon suspects that shame is the last thing that has been produced. As she tells her story one more time to a collection of drinkers in the bar at Adam’s hotel, the narrator remarks that the story “began to sound [...] more and more like the most lubricous kind of anti-Turkish propaganda” (45). “Lubricous” suggests wanton, lascivious, but it also suggests unstable, shifting, slippery, and glib: all very far from the stable system of morality designed to evoke shame and outrage that, according to Waugh, is the basis for satire. In Agatha’s recycling of her story, looking is transformed into telling, the judgment of the eye corrupted by the chaos of the ear. “Too shaming” thus becomes simply another catch phrase, and shame another signifier stripped of its signification, an empty word used by the Bright Young People in their endless party talk.

⁴⁰ Evelyn Waugh, “People Who Want To Sue Me,” in *Essays*, 73.

⁴¹ Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (1949), 27.

The power of the eye to induce shame (and the concomitant role of talk in diffusing it) is vividly recorded in the scene at the party at Lady Metroland's. Mrs Ape, the guest of honour, begins an "oration about Hope" with the accusatory phrase "*Just you look at yourselves*" (96). The power of these words—coupled with the "magnetism" of her eyes—causes "self-doubt" to spread. Agatha Runcible takes the command literally, asking Nina whether her "nose is awful," but other characters present recall moral or social failings, looking inward, shamed by a "silence vibrant with self-accusation" (96-7). Luckily for Lady Metroland's social standing, collective shame is deflated by sound: the derisive "snort" of Lady Circumference is followed by the giggles of the Bright Young People, and the "awkward moment" of looking is bypassed. The shame affect cannot occur in a world in which selfhood is simply an accretion of typescript. However, the shame introduced by Mrs Ape's command is returned to, in the set-piece of the chapter, in Simon Balcairn's final suicidal gossip column. In the column, "lie after monstrous lie" recreates the party scene as Mrs Ape intended it, witnessing of the shameful secrets of Society (101). Importantly, though, Simon's falsified shame is expressed aurally. The imaginary scene is filled with "crying" and "sobs of contrition"; sins are confessed in voices "broken with emotion" and "tearful" and feverish singing balms shameful wounds (101-102). The looking that provokes shame is effaced by Balcairn's column, truthfully described as "libel" in the following chapter precisely because shame is an affect of the eye, not the ear, and associated with print, not sound (103).

It is consistent with the duality of Waugh's novel that the revelation of Agatha's "lubricous" retelling of the Dover-Customs incident occurs within parenthetical boundaries. Typographical markers such as parentheses, footnotes and white lines are, in *Vile Bodies*, paratextual devices that frame the text; using this visual-typographic device, Waugh resituates moral standards using narrative division in the text itself. It is the parenthetical voice that pulls at the outrageous party world, exposing the moral failings for which shame *should* be felt. This happens most explicitly in the "vile bodies" passage, presented in parentheses—as if these are not the words of the narrator, but those of some new voice imposing upon the text:

(... Masked parties, Savage parties, Victorian parties, Greek parties, Wild West parties, Russian parties, Circus parties, parties where one had to dress as somebody else, almost naked parties in St John’s Wood, parties in flats and studios and houses and ships and hotels and night-clubs, in windmills and swimming-baths, tea parties at school where one ate muffins and meringues and tinned crab, parties at Oxford where one drank brown sherry and smoked Turkish cigarettes, dull dances in London and comic dances in Scotland and disgusting dances in Paris – all that succession and repetition of massed humanity... Those vile bodies...) (118)

The tone of this section, significantly within parentheses, moves from an affectless enumeration of the frenetic disorder of the party-world of the Bright Young People, into open outrage at the spectacle of “disgusting dances” and “massed humanity.” Parenthetical paragraphs such as this demonstrate the essential otherness of such demarcated remarks—the textual and visual separation occurring between the narrative voices suggests, therefore, that the parenthetical remarks provide commentary on the novel world. The typescript suggests that parenthetical demarcation of the text was a technique that appeared late in the novel’s genesis. While some of the parentheses were already in place, others—such as those around Angela’s “lubricious [...] anti-Turkish propaganda”—were added by Waugh in the emended typescript.⁴² The parentheses and footnotes that cluster around certain sections of *Vile Bodies* are intended to separate them from the voice of the dominant narrator. The parenthetical narrator thus represents a moralistic intruder intent on passing judgment in a novelistic world characterised by the refusal to let shame and judgment do their corrective work.

This technique has its model in a more stridently moralist ur-text: St Paul. The Philippians text from which *Vile Bodies* takes its title—significantly, this is the text used in the Anglican burial service—offers its own clues to how to read the parenthetical narrator. While the text suggests transformative salvation achieved through divine means (“the Lord Jesus Christ [...] shall change our vile body”), it also encloses its acknowledgement of shame within parenthetical bounds:

⁴² Evelyn Waugh Collection, 10.5, 51.

(For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* the enemies of the cross of Christ:

Whose end *is* destruction, whose God *is their* belly, and *whose* glory *is* in their shame, who mind earthly things.)⁴³

The use of parenthesis is, in this chapter of Philippians, unique; from evidence from Waugh's writing elsewhere, the King James is a strong stylistic intertext. The parentheses in the Pauline text remind the reader of the very embodied shame and disgust that occur simultaneous to moral corruption. Shaming and judgment appear within parenthetical bounds, and Waugh's novel positions the Bright Young People in precisely the way the Pauline text characterizes those who sin, as abject textual bodies, enclosed, isolated, and grossly illuminated by typographical markers.

How can shame exist in a modern world in which, as Waugh argued in 1946, "vice no longer pays lip service to virtue"? Indeed, how can vice exist in a world that is, in fact, purely textual, where selfhood is an invention of gossip columnists and novelists? Adam's self, represented by his memoir, is burned at the novel's beginning, and the relation between textuality and selfhood remains close throughout the novel; as the novel stretches towards its grim conclusion, and the Bright Young People die or are driven into exile, Agatha remarks presciently that "people are *disappearing*,"⁴⁴ which of course happens literally on the surface of the page. Reduced to mere marks on paper—a bundle of typescript—Waugh's modern characters are deprived of interiority and incapable of shame, picture cards shuffled out and laid flat. Lying immodestly bare on the affectless page, they are textually naked, and morally blank.

In spite of his characters' refusal of shame, however, Waugh's novel is not in itself without affect. While *Vile Bodies* may appear to celebrate the giddy world of the Bright Young People, Waugh is very much concerned with the ability to access and produce shame in a world in which humans are reduced to mere

⁴³ Philippians 3:18-21. The parentheses appear in the Authorized King James Version. "It is unquestioned that for the past three hundred years the Authorized Version has been the greatest single formative influence in English prose style." See Evelyn Waugh, "Mgr Ronald Knox," in *Essays*, 347-56.

⁴⁴ Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (1949), 180.

externals, to text or to newspaper copy. Waugh's careful attention to the visual, seen aspects of the text strips interiority and sentiment from his novel precisely in order to produce the feeling of shame that is so necessary to the satirist's art. The things behaving like people that litter the pages of Waugh's novel cannot themselves feel; this is both symptomatic of modernity's relentless dehumanisation and (in Wyndham Lewis's formulation) a cause for comedy. The Bright Young People may be emotionally empty, but their actions cause us to feel those things that they themselves are incapable of: laughter, outrage, and shame.

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