Unreal cities and undead legacies: T.S. Eliot and Gothic hauntings in Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* and Barnes's *Nightwood*

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By the mid 1930s, when Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* and Barnes's *Nightwood* were published, *The Waste Land* (1922) had been absorbed into high culture and T.S. Eliot was established as an important man of letters both in England and in the United States. The transatlantic nature of Modernism itself, exemplified by the lives and works of Eliot, H.D., Pound, Stein and Barnes, was part of a newly dynamised interchange between America and Europe that was to influence the course of culture and politics for the rest of the twentieth century. However, assessments of Eliot's role as poet and critic have been heavily coloured by his own self-representation as an intellectual in the European tradition. What we wish to argue here is that Eliot's ambivalence concerning the American dimension of his identity is significant for any study of transatlantic exchanges, especially in relation to Modernism and the Gothic. Eliot's embrace of European high culture (particularly the French symbolist tradition), so evident in his critical writings, is accompanied by an elision of the American and the popular, including the Gothic – despite the fact that his own poetry (*The Waste Land* in particular) contains powerful Gothic resonances. His enormous influence as a critic clearly shaped subsequent histories of Modernism and contributed to a dominant narrative which held sway until the latter part of the twentieth century, when new theoretical perspectives prompted the examination of the popular and Gothic in relation to Modernism.

As is now evident, the early canonisation of certain authors and certain Modernist texts produced a narrative which, while recognising a high level of intertextuality and cosmopolitan interchange, failed to include women writers and the influence of popular culture. At this time, Modernist written texts seemed to be eschewing the melodramatic and

the supernatural. The Gothic, a sensationalist and popular form, therefore appeared to have found its 'proper' home in the popular realm of film (as in, for example, Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) and Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931)). The academy itself, as an intellectual elite, has until recently been all too ready to accept Modernism's own narrative of itself, including this one. However, since the 1980s, feminist critics and theorists such as Rachel Blau du Plessis and Bonnie Kime Scott have successfully challenged and altered what was an essentially masculine conception of the Modernist canon.¹ Their work has been complemented by that of critics such as Andreas Huyssen and John Carey, who have argued that Modernist writers sought to distinguish themselves from what they perceived as a rising popular, more literate and increasingly feminised culture by creating texts that were difficult and abstruse.² The recent theorisation of the Gothic, however, allows us to recognise that many Modernist texts are also haunted by a Gothic legacy which remains persistently undead. It is now clear that the Gothic survived within Modernism in various shapes and forms; as Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace argue in their *Gothic Modernisms*, there is an intriguing relation between Modernism and the Gothic, not least in the fact that the Gothic's representation of a fragmented self is echoed by Modernist portrayals of the subject as shattered in the aftermath of the Great War.³ We wish to argue here, however, that although Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* selectively parody the Gothic, in so doing they draw upon its powerful resources in order to create a darkly comic critique of Modernity. In Chapter 3 of this volume, Anne-Marie Ford shows the influences which obtained in the exercise of the Gothic mode in the work of Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Stoddard. In using Eliot as a key reference point for this re-assessment, we also draw attention to the way in which both Barnes and Waugh use his work as a touchstone to negotiate the Gothic within their novels. We suggest that Eliot's relationships with these two texts, when taken together, offer an interesting perspective on the relationship borne by Modernism in its late phase to literary traditions, both English and American. Furthermore, Eliot's critical appraisal of Barnes's work is shown to be informed by a perspective which reveals an American anxiety concerning tradition and the individual talent.

The coupling of *A Handful of Dust* (1934) and Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936) might initially seem a strange one, given Waugh's image as an essentially conservative satirist of English society and the recent retrieval of Barnes as a radical lesbian Modernist. Furthermore, an initial reading

of the two novels suggests some sharp contrasts: *A Handful of Dust*, as a linear narrative, appears more conventional in form than *Nightwood's* fractured, dream-like narration. Whereas an apparently detached, third-person narrator leads the reader through Waugh's novel, *Nightwood's* lengthy monologues (like those of Joyce's *Ulysses*) create a more polyphonic effect. However, despite these differences, the two novels share more than such superficial contrasts would suggest. At the heart of both is an engagement with Modernism which is qualified by an explicit acknowledgement of a Gothic inheritance. This acknowledgment manifests itself in both texts through parodic reworkings of Gothic tropes. Their recourse to Gothic parody, while on the one hand mocking the forms and tenor of an older literature, paradoxically reaffirms it as a mode of articulating contemporary fear and anxiety. Also linking these two novels – one written by a male English eccentric and the other by an expatriate female American – is the transatlantic figure of T.S. Eliot. Eliot's Introduction to the 1937 edition of *Nightwood* constituted an influential critical response to the novel's unorthodoxies; in Waugh's novel, the imprint of Eliot is there throughout the text and signalled unmistakably in the title.⁴

Written at what has conventionally been thought of as the tail-end of the Modernist movement, the two novels express the disenchantment of a post-war generation and anticipate the comic nihilism of writers such as Beckett. Both Waugh's tale of the ill-fated English 'Gothic man',⁵ Tony Last, and Barnes's story of American expatriate Paris, however, have at their heart the characteristically Modernist preoccupation with the city and the wilderness as a binary which deconstructs itself. Yet even within this binary the meaning of the city is not stable. As Deborah Parsons suggests in a comment which seems particularly pertinent to a consideration of these two novels: 'The Modernist fascination with the formal studies of urban life . . . can be seen at its two extremes of 'concept' city, the radiant Utopia and the degenerate wasteland'.⁶ Furthermore, the location of these texts within Modernism is clearly signalled by their intertextual resonances. Waugh's borrowing of his title from Eliot is echoed by further allusion in the text but the influence of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is also clearly evident. In the words of Jeffrey Heath:

Tony's relationship with Todd resembles that of Marlow and Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. But unlike Tony, Marlow escapes from that deadly symbiosis when he realises that he, too, is capable of Kurtz's crimes.⁷

In contrast to Marlow, who, through this realisation, changes into an older and a wiser man, Tony Last regresses to a child-like dependency on

Todd as a Father figure, whilst being condemned to read and re-read, in perpetuity, the word of the literary father, Charles Dickens. Everything in this novel turns, like *Dracula*, to a handful of dust, a Gothic motif that, as we shall see, is highly significant.⁸ Similarly, but less obviously, Barnes's novel situates itself in relation to other Modernist texts. *Nightwood*, like several Modernist narratives of the city (for example, Joyce's *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*), uses both the freedom and the alienation intrinsic to the modern city as a backdrop to its characters' monologues and quests for meaning. Not surprisingly, given Barnes's eleven-year stay in Paris prior to writing the novel, there is also evidence of a strong French Modernist influence. Diane Chisholm and Deborah Parsons have both drawn attention to the influence of Surrealism – in particular, Breton's *Nadja* (1928), on Barnes's work.⁹ We would suggest other literary debts to the French: for example, Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1868–9) and also Céline's *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* (1932) which, according to Phillip Herring, Barnes had read during the early 1930s.¹⁰ Indeed, the *Times Literary Supplement* review of *Nightwood* likened its 'sickness of the soul' to that of Céline's experimental novel, suggesting that contemporaries recognised such influence.¹¹

Waugh's use of the Gothic for parodic purposes in *A Handful of Dust* is overt. By 1934, he had already gained a reputation as a writer of surreal satirical comic novels. All of these had taken as their subject the moral bankruptcy of contemporary urban society. *Vile Bodies* (1930) presents an unrelenting portrait of futility in the party-going society of 1920s London: its narrative exposes the underlying barbarity of the amorality of this modern 'unreal' city and culminates in a scene set on 'the biggest battlefield in the history of the world'.¹² His 1932 novel, *Black Mischief*, however, unlike Huxley's *Brave New World*, offers no redemptive vision of the noble savage but turns the same sharp satiric eye on an equally corrupt and barbarous African society. Tony Last, Waugh's 'hero' in *A Handful of Dust*, is – like *Decline and Fall*'s Paul Pennyfeather and *Vile Bodies*' Adam Symes – a passive figure who takes much for granted and is motivated by a vague desire to do the right thing. He is a man who, in the words of a contemporary reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 'is so incapable of helping himself that he is not worth helping'.¹³ Like them, he is defenceless against the depredations of the ruthlessly selfish characters who people Waugh's metropolis. London is the scene of modern life where human relationships have become debased and meaningless. This is Eliot's 'unreal city' with its 'dead' population. In his representation of the city in this way, Waugh is conforming to the prevailing intellectual

orthodoxy of his time, an intellectual orthodoxy which, according to John Carey, was created largely through Eliot's influence.¹⁴ The adultery of Tony's wife, Brenda, is represented as a further development of her regular visits to London for such banal pursuits as shopping and probably unnecessary visits to the 'bone-setter' Mr Cruttwell.¹⁵ There are echoes, too, of Eliot's Madame Sosostriis in Brenda's visit to the home of her friend Polly Cockpurse to consult Mrs Northcote, a fortune-teller, 'who read fortunes in a different way, by reading the soles of the feet'.¹⁶ The affair with the penniless and worthless socialite, John Beaver, is no grand passion but rather a project taken on by a bored wife with no apparent moral compass. Tony's all-too-ready compliance with her demand for a divorce in which he will be cited as the guilty party is without conscience turned by Brenda, her family and, not least, the unlikeable Beaver into an assumption of his guilt and a licence to ruin him financially. The emotionless and conscienceless behaviour of those who find their natural home in London is the marker of a specifically modern barbarity. Waugh's representation of human nature in this way accords with both Eliot's portrayal of London citizens within *The Waste Land* and David Punter's definition of the Gothic:

Gothic is ... intimately to do with the notion of the barbaric ... (since) those writers who are referred to as Gothic turn out to be those who bring us up against the boundaries of the civilized, who demonstrate to us the relative nature of ethical and behavioural codes, and who place, over against the conventional world, a different sphere in which these codes operate at best in distorted forms.¹⁷

In contrast with the rootless anti-heroes of the earlier novels, Tony is the owner of a large country estate and sees himself as the custodian of a valuable heritage. Initially, it might seem that Tony's rootedness in the countryside and his identity as an English squire is the counterbalance to the spiritual 'waste land' of London. However, this very identity is the means through which the novel introduces its element of Gothic parody, an identity which led Waugh to describe him as 'a Gothic man in the hands of savages'.¹⁸ Hetton Abbey, Tony's country seat to which he dedicates both his emotional and financial resources, has been since the middle of the previous century an elaborate fake, as the 'quotation' from the county Guide Book at the opening of Chapter Two indicates: 'This, formerly one of the notable houses of the county, was entirely rebuilt in the Gothic style and is now devoid of interest' (*HD*, p. 14). The outward and visible sign of the heritage that Tony is so committed to maintaining

is, to use one of the key words of *Vile Bodies*, 'bogus'. Hetton, with its elaborate Gothic features, its 'lancet windows of armorial stained glass', its 'dining hall with its hammer-beam roof and pitch-pine minstrel gallery', its bedrooms named after Arthurian characters is, like Walpole's 'Gothic Villa', an artefact dedicated to the assertion of a remote and unreliable history. For Tony, 'all these thing with which he had grown up were a source of constant delight and exultation ... things of tender memory and proud possession' (*HD*, p. 15). Walpole's Gothic imagination, however, provides a means of giving shape to fear and the literature of which he is considered a founding father constituted a powerful means of engagement with the anxieties generated by the formation of new subjectivities in a modern world. In contrast, the Victorian use of Gothic forms, adopted in order to create myths of origin, represented a sentimental attempt to recreate a world from which the rapidly modernising nineteenth century felt exiled. This Victorian fascination with a sanitised Middle Ages, particularly its version of the Arthurian legend, has been enshrined in Hetton and edifices like it. The corollary of this is Tony's ritual observance of religion: church-going is portrayed as part of his social duty but provides no source of strength in times of trouble ('the last thing one wants to talk about at a time like this is religion', he remarks after the death of his son: *HD*, p. 115). The domestication and trivialisation of Gothic represented by Hetton, therefore, is a symptom of his exile from the possibilities of spiritual fulfilment, an exile that is made physical at the end of the novel. This 'Gothic man' is therefore also a 'modern' man.

Tony's perception of himself as guardian of this history is at odds with the events of his life in which his Guinevere deserts him not for a Lancelot but for Beaver and the heir to his line is killed in a random accident. Brenda is often shown in Guinevere, her room at Hetton, being visited by her husband while resting in her bed on a dais or attending to her hair and make-up. His visits are not particularly welcome and he is kept cordially at arm's length; the echoes of Eliot's woman in her chamber in Part II of *The Waste Land* are subtle but unmistakable. Tony's affectionate espousal of Gothic has been selective: his is an 'English Gothic', purged of its power to represent darkness and barbarity and leaving Tony prey to a savagery which he cannot identify. On realising that Brenda and her lawyers intend to take everything:

His mind had become suddenly clearer on many points that had puzzled him. A whole Gothic world had come to grief ... there was now no armour

glittering through the forest glades, no embroidered feet on the green sward; the cream and dappled unicorns had fled (*HD*, p. 151)

This bleak vision of loss is what tempts Tony into joining the explorer Dr Messinger in his search for a fabled South American city. Here the city as utopia beckons and its achievement will entail sacrifice and quest. The city can only be reached by crossing the perilous wilderness of the Brazilian jungle. In Tony's mind, this city is a place whose discovery will, in his naive imagination, restore the joy of Hetton to his besieged soul. He embarks upon his quest still ensnared by the delusion that is Hetton. He conceives of the fabled city as a 'transfigured Hetton', a city:

Gothic in character, all vanes and pinnacles, gargoyles, battlements, groining and tracery, pavilions and terraces . . . pennons and banners floating on the sweet breeze, everything luminous and translucent. (*HD*, p. 160)

If, in his fevered delirium, alone in the Brazilian jungle, Tony's vision almost transmutes into a spiritual apprehension of the metaphysical Augustinian *civitas dei* with 'gilded cupolas and spires of alabaster', it is rudely and bathetically interrupted by the imagined sound of the voice of Ambrose (Hetton's butler) announcing, 'The City is served' (*HD*, p. 203).

From this point in the novel it becomes apparent that Tony is to be denied a heroically tragic outcome in any conventional sense. It remains for him to be shown fear in a handful of dust, through an horrific incarceration in the middle of the Brazilian jungle where he is condemned to read over and over again the novels of Dickens to the illiterate Mr Todd. Thus is his life measured out not in coffee spoons but through the dusty and ant-ridden pages of a Victorian optimistic humanist narrative about the possibility of human fulfilment in that seat of barbarism, London. (It should be noted that Waugh apparently loathed Dickens, considering his novels to be smug and complacent and dubbing him 'unhappy hypocrite'.¹⁹) The closure of the novel, therefore, offers no consoling end but gives us a Modernist vision of eternal exile and a Gothic stasis of perpetual torture. This is a parodic comic Gothic: after the desertion of the Brazilian 'savages' (frightened by a clockwork mouse), the undramatic death of Dr Messinger (drowned in ten feet of falls), and Tony's fevered solitary journey haunted by visions of Brenda and other English 'savages', there is no body horror (indeed, Mr Todd rescues the delirious Tony with his body swollen, cut and covered with insect bites and restores him to physical health). There is no more haunting by visible ghosts, only the monotonous reiteration of the Word of a bogus literary Father. Hetton meanwhile falls into the hands of the thrifty, bourgeois and irredeemably

modern 'impoverished Lasts' who hope to restore its fortunes by means of a silver fox farm (the third set of savages to which Tony succumbs, according to Waugh²⁰) while the human savage, Mrs Beaver, in truly modern entrepreneurial spirit, has taken the opportunity to arrange the erection of a memorial to 'Anthony Last of Hetton, Explorer'. Last things, indeed. This is a bleaker vision than Eliot's: there is no 'Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata', no 'Shantih shantih shantih', only a living death for Tony Last and for Hetton a destiny perhaps already mapped out with the destruction of the old pre-Reformation house and the erection of the bogus Gothic edifice that in the end betrays him. In Waugh's work, it is not until *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) that such an act of vandalism is redeemed through spirituality. Waugh's vision is profoundly conservative and his hope lies in an older religious commitment not dreamt of by the hapless Tony Last who, it transpires, believes himself to be a Gothic man but is irredeemably a modern man.

We would suggest, then, that the effect of Waugh's borrowings from and debts to Eliot's work is to foreground the Gothic strain within Eliot's own writing. *A Handful of Dust* both lightly nods to the moment of high Modernism whilst pillaging the Gothic tradition for the appropriate tropes and motifs with which to represent the alienation inherent in the modern condition. Moreover, the Gothic element in Eliot's poetry – which his critical silence in this respect obscures as an intellectual legacy – is made entirely evident in Waugh's novel. *A Handful of Dust*, in making us conscious of that element within Eliot's work, offers a dialogue with Modernist writing which reveals an intuitive awareness of the importance of the Gothic within Modernism long before critics set their minds to this conjunction.

Eliot's work also influenced that of Djuna Barnes. Ahmed Nimeiri argues that in Barnes's works 'the similarities to Eliot's poems are abundant and the debt to Eliot is obvious' – not least in the likenesses to be drawn between the character of O'Connor in *Nightwood* and the Tiresias of 'The Waste Land'.²¹ *The Antiphon*, published in 1958, while drawing on European sources such as Ibsen, Strindberg and O'Neill, clearly owes much to Eliot's *The Family Reunion*, which Barnes saw performed in 1939, the year of its publication (significantly, *The Antiphon* is set in 1939).²² However, Eliot had a direct involvement in the publication of Barnes's work whereas he had no such link with Waugh. After rejection by several publishing houses, both *Nightwood* and *The Antiphon* achieved publication in Europe mainly because of Eliot's support for, and intervention on behalf of, Barnes's writing. His role in enabling the publication of

Nightwood by Faber and Faber is well known. The revival of critical interest in Barnes's work during the 1990s has tended to construct his editorial role as a negative one, a prevailing view that has been challenged by Georgette Fleischer who suggests that:

Eliot published *Nightwood*, despite the anticipation that it would not do well commercially and despite the danger of censorship, because he identified with its spiritual crisis and because he recognized it as a work of genius.²³

Fleischer's article argues persuasively that feminist retrievals of *Nightwood* have constructed Eliot as the 'high priest of patriarchal Anglo-American high Modernism', exercising a negative influence on the work of the woman writer.²⁴ It is not our intention to enter into this debate but to suggest that in recognising *Nightwood* 'as a work of genius', Eliot aligned it critically with a European poetic tradition and failed to acknowledge the novel's debt to more populist Gothic traditions, both European and American. His introduction to *Nightwood*, in recommending the novel to readers, identifies qualities which place it in a poetic and dramatic tradition. It also defines it as a work which will appeal mainly to a highly cultivated elite:

A prose that is altogether alive demands something of the reader that the ordinary novel-reader is not prepared to give. To say that *Nightwood* will appeal primarily to readers of poetry does not mean that it is not a novel, but that it is so good a novel that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it.²⁵

For Eliot, then, *Nightwood*'s Modernist credentials as a difficult text are to be applauded. He exhorts the reader not to dismiss 'this group of people as a horrid sideshow of freaks', condemning such a judgement as being symptomatic both of a Puritan morality and of a modern tendency to ascribe individual misery to 'society'. Without dismissing the novel's grotesque elements, he accommodates them in an identification of its 'quality of horror and doom' with Elizabethan tragedy. This is not surprising, given Eliot's anglophilia and his rejection of American culture in favour of the European tradition. Like Eliot and Pound, Barnes also reconstructed her identity along European lines. Herring goes so far as to suggest that Barnes's 'intense alienation from both family and nation' resulted in her developing a sense of herself as a European rather than an American writer:

Her values and loyalties were much more English, and what she knew of the United States was mostly New York. She became convinced that European

culture was superior to American; other than love and friendship, art and culture were about all that she valued.²⁶

What interests us here, however, is the fact that Eliot's construction of himself as a European intellectual blinds him to certain aspects of *Nightwood*: he does not place its grotesque elements in a tradition of Gothic fiction, a tradition which was considered to be populist and sensational, nor is he alert to the novel's particularly American inflection of the Gothic, which places the city in direct contrast to the wilderness.

In contrast with *A Handful of Dust*, the Gothic parodying in *Nightwood* is more implicit than explicit although a careful reading of the book reveals the appropriation of several Gothic tropes. The title evokes not only the wilderness of Modernist preoccupation but also the tradition of American Gothic in which, as Leslie Fiedler has pointed out, the haunted forest and the haunted cave were substituted for the haunted castles, ruined abbeys and dungeons of its European precursor.²⁷ In a country whose early settlers were conscious of living on the edge of a vast wilderness, the virgin forest became an enduring setting within American Gothic, particularly in the fiction of authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne (his 'Young Goodman Brown' is an obvious example). In Barnes's representation of expatriate Americans in a modern European metropolis, this American legacy is never far away and indeed the novel's climactic final scene takes place in a ruined chapel in the rambling woods on Nora Flood's American estate. Paul West's comment on *Ryder* (1928) that 'One of the most fascinating things about Barnes's antic novel is to watch her partly Anglo mind whisk across the Atlantic only to hustle back to the States', also holds true for *Nightwood*.²⁸ Much of the setting, however, places the action in several European cities but predominantly Paris, which appears as another modern 'unreal city'. The novel's plot revolves around the life and relationships of Robin Vote who, as a young American living in Paris, marries into the Austrian Volkbein family and bears her husband a son whom she deserts within the space of a few weeks. The novel follows her quest for emotional, sexual and intellectual liberation enacted through lesbian relationships with Nora Flood and Jenny Petherbridge, both fellow American expatriates in Paris. Robin herself speaks very little in the novel and the reader is rarely made privy to her thoughts; however, the unsatisfactory nature of her relationships with others is perhaps signalled by the fact that the novel's final scene involves an interaction that is outside human relationships. The unfolding of this bizarre plot is counterpointed by the anguished but comic

monologues of Matthew O'Connor, an Irish American expatriate living in Paris.

As in Waugh's novel, fakery and fraudulence are seen to be aspects of the human condition within Modernity. The portraits of Guido Volkbein's mother and father, for example, turn out to be fakes ('Had anyone cared to look into the matter they would have discovered these canvases to be reproductions of two intrepid and ancient actors'²⁹). This false ancestry, however, is not mere snobbery but a ruse for survival: as a Jew of Italian descent living in Vienna in the 1920s (where anti-Semitic feeling was stronger than in Berlin), Guido Volkbein is a potential victim of an incipient fascism and therefore seeks refuge in a false Austrian aristocrat identity. An unqualified 'doctor' and a transvestite, Matthew O'Connor is also a fake, a man who goes 'back into his dress' at night:

In the narrow iron bed, with its heavy and dirty linen sheets, lay the doctor in a woman's flannel night gown. The doctor's head, with its over-large black eyes, its full gun-metal cheeks and chin, was framed in the golden semi-circle of a wig with long pendent curls that touched his shoulders, and falling back against the pillow, turned up the shadowy interior of their cylinders. He was heavily rouged and his lashes painted. (N, pp. 116–17)

As a man who has wanted nothing more in life than to be a woman with 'deep corn curls to my bum, with a womb as big as the king's kettle, and a bosom as high as the bowsprit of a fishing schooner' (N, p. 132), O'Connor's daytime identity is deeply dislocated from his more authentic night 'self'. Robin's fake appearance as young male *flâneur* on the streets of Paris (she dresses like a boy and enacts a 'masculine' sexual promiscuity) indicates a similarly fractured identity. The binary of 'fakery'/'authenticity' that helps structure the novel is indicative of a specifically modern and fractured subjectivity. As Jerrold E. Hogle has pointed out, however, this particular binary is intrinsic also to the Gothic mode and, indeed, is one which is self-consciously played out in Gothic texts and artefacts.³⁰ Hogle argues that:

the Gothic refaking of fakery becomes a major repository of the newest contradictions and anxieties in western life that most need to be abjected by those who face them so that middle-class westerners can keep constructing a distinct sense of identity. The progress of abjection in the Gothic is inseparable from the progress of the ghost of the counterfeit, particularly as that symbolic mode and the ideologies at war within it keep employing each other – and acting out abjections – both to conceal and to confront some of the basic conflicts in western culture.³¹

Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Hogle suggests that the rise of Modernity, from the Renaissance onwards, resulted in a crisis of identity in the western world. The stability of the feudal world was replaced by the social mobility and geographical displacements/relocations characteristic of a post-Renaissance world; the resulting psychological instability manifested itself in a breakdown between the sign and its referent: 'Educated Europeans felt that they were leaving behind the age of the "obligatory sign", the notion of signifiers as always referring to an ordained status in people and things where "assignation is absolute and there is no class mobility"'.³²

It is not surprising, then, to find that the binary of fakery/authenticity within *Nightwood* is overlaid by a Gothic patina. As in Eugène Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris*, Barnes's Paris is presented as an 'unreal city' which is dark and labyrinthine – as a Gothic space in which the boundaries of an everyday reality threaten to dissolve. The novel's emphasis on the grey areas between night and day draws attention to borderline states and blurred identities. More specifically, the novel offers parodic reworkings of the Gothic tradition in, for example, the Volkbeins' expensive Viennese home, described as a Gothic mansion: 'large, dark and imposing', its floors covered with a 'thick dragon's blood pile of rugs from Madrid' (*N*, p. 17). Furthermore, whilst Felix Volkbein is explicitly linked with the Wandering Jew (*N*, p. 20), Robin is implicitly associated with the figure of the Vampire. As a *flâneuse* on the streets of Paris in the 1920s, Robin enacts a masculine promiscuity that drives her lover, Nora, to distraction. In her predatory wanderings and her 'feeding off' her café victims, however, Robin demonstrates not only the sexual voracity of the vamp, but also the desires of a quasi-vampiric figure. Keith Tester has asked 'Could it be that the flâneur is rather like a metropolitan vampire – a domesticated variant of the figure popularized by Bram Stoker?'³³ In this respect, we should perhaps view Robin in the context of Barnes's complete oeuvre, in particular the early play *The Dove*, in which, as Bonnie Kime Scott notes, intimacy is associated with 'vampirism and eating the beloved'.³⁴

The parodic reworking of the Gothic that we see in Barnes's *Nightwood* allows her to present a vision of the Gothic sublime through the eyes of the socially abjected (the Jew, the lesbian, the transvestite) and to question the very validity of terms such as 'transgression' and 'normality'. This, in turn, allows the envisioning of a different social/sexual reality typical of Modernity's restless instability. The first is apparent in the novel's erasure of the 'normal' nuclear family and its replacement by alternative structures. Thus the holy trinity of father, mother and child which has so

dominated Western religion and culture is replaced by other trinities: Jenny, Robin and the child (Sylvia); Robin, Nora and the doll; Felix, Frau Mann and young Guido; Nora, Robin and the dog. Despite the emotional anguish of these triads, such 'families' are seen as no more damaging than the conventional nuclear family; 'normality' as benign is therefore thrown into question. In this spirit, the novel's disconcerting closure, which portrays Robin's union with a dog, offers a celebration of bestiality in a final moment of bleak climax and reconciliation:

He ran this way and that, low down in his throat crying, and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, until she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees. (N, p. 239)

This scene recalls the traditional Gothic novel's fondness for the sacrilegious act – for example, the rape of the drugged Antonia by Ambrosio the monk in the Convent of St Clare that we find in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) or the staking of Lucy Westenra's body in the churchyard in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). However, like the climax of Waugh's novel, the final scene of *Nightwood* offers us parodic Gothic. There is no violence or demonic presence conjured up within the ruined chapel: only its sanctity, already dissipated through neglect, is violated. Thus the only boundary breached is that between the human and the bestial in so far as the encounter leads to mutual fulfilment for woman and beast. However, this is in itself radically ambiguous: on one level, the act harms no one and merely exposes the relativity of moral values (particularly in relation to the sexual act). On the other hand, however, it symbolically suggests – in its erasure of the boundaries between the human and the animal – a possible descent into irrationality, one all too readily illustrated by the rise of fascism in the 1930s. In thus dissolving the line between the civilised and the barbaric, *Nightwood* – like *A Handful of Dust* – reveals its Gothic credentials. Parodic though it is, the ending of Barnes's novel remains Gothic in that it questions the notion that Modernity is synonymous with progress. Indeed, such parodic Gothic, while parading its credentials as a sophisticated form of intertextuality, is able to offer a critique of Modernity quite as disturbing as that afforded by 'serious' Gothic. It would seem, therefore, that on one level the novel's climax articulates the insight that Modernism's anxieties concerning the fragmentation of the self are essentially Gothic. Mocking the vile body of Modernity in this novel, then, indicates a deep anxiety about

what it means to be human. *Nightwood's* strange inconclusive closure, like that of Waugh's novel, asserts that despair, alienation and homelessness are characteristic of Modernity. Mr Todd, as his name suggests, represents a slow, lingering death of the soul in a place far from home where Tony's waiting for rescue is tantamount to waiting for Godot. Robin's coupling with a dog reduces her to something we might see as less than human. Significantly, the blackly comic nature of both endings has much to do with their incongruous juxtaposition of the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*: a celebrated English novelist's works which centre on London, becoming instruments of torture in a Brazilian jungle; man's best friend becoming, as it were, woman's. Neither novel's ending offers a reabsorption into society, despite the strong comic element in both. Significantly, while both authors reject Modernity and its myth of progress, both recognise – with regret, perhaps – the impossibility of return to the values of a pre-Reformation world. The only possible solace lies in religion: Catholicism hovers in the margins of *Nightwood*; for Waugh, the Catholicism he embraced in his own life during the 1930s had yet to take central place in his novels. Eliot's adoption of Anglo-Catholicism is well-known. In the words of Delmore Schwartz, 'only one who has known fully the deracination and alienation inherent in modern life can be moved to make so extreme an effort at returning to the traditional community as Eliot makes in attaching himself to Anglo-Catholicism and Royalism'.³⁵

In recognising genius in *Nightwood*, Eliot places it in the literary tradition of high culture. He sees the skull beneath the skin in describing its 'quality of horror and doom' as 'very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy'.³⁶ Not dissimilarly, Waugh described the end of his novel as 'a "conceit" in the Webster manner'.³⁷ What was perhaps not so evident to contemporary readers is the fact that the element of Gothic parody used by both authors allowed them to deal with twentieth-century horrors in the wake of the Great War in a manner which avoided either gratuitous textual violence or the deliberate mimesis of dismembered bodies and butchered corpses. In a sense, that scenario is taken for granted as part of the modern consciousness: Frau Mann comments in *Nightwood*, 'I've an album of my own . . . and everyone in it looks like a soldier – even though they are dead' (N, p. 47). The Gothic dismembered body is all too present as a shared cultural memory. Thus Gothic as body horror is eschewed and replaced by Gothic parody or comic gothic – a generic appropriation which allows engagement with horror at one remove. If Linda Hutcheon is right in defining parody as 'repetition with critical difference',³⁸ what we

have in these two 1930s texts is an appropriation of Gothic which allows exploration of metaphysical rather than physical horror. The scene of horror is both the 'unreal city' and the wilderness; they are ultimately interchangeable. Just as Robin returns to her American origins in her ultimate embrace of the primitive, Barnes implicitly acknowledges the locus of a specifically American Gothic in her title which, in her own words, 'makes it sound like night-shade, poison and night and forest'.³⁹ Such a legacy is not accommodated by Eliot's determinedly Eurocentric critical paradigm which, in seeking cultural authenticity in the past and across the Atlantic, ignores the significance of both the Gothic in Modernist texts in general and the legacy of American Gothic in Barnes's *Nightwood* in particular.

Notes

- 1 See Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1985, and Bonnie Kime Scott, *Refiguring Modernism: Postmodern Feminist Readings of Woolf, West, and Barnes*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1995.
- 2 See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, PostModernism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1986, and John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880–1939*, London, Faber & Faber, 1992.
- 3 Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace (eds), *Gothic Modernisms*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2001.
- 4 And I will show you something different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; / I will show you fear in a handful of dust. T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', in *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, London, Faber & Faber, 1922.
- 5 Waugh in a letter to Henry Yorke (Green), describing Tony Last. Cited in Martin Stannard (ed.), *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 157.
- 6 Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 9.
- 7 Jeffrey Heath, *The Picturesque Prison: Evelyn Waugh and his Writing*, London, Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1982, p. 119.
- 8 'It was like a miracle, but before our very eyes, and almost in the drawing of a breath, the whole body crumbled into dust and passed from our sight.' (Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, [1897] 1993, p. 484.)
- 9 See Diane Chisholm, 'Obscene Modernism: Eros Noir and the Profane Illumination of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*', in *American Literature*, 69:1

- (March 1997) pp. 167–206, and Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, pp. 173–6 and 180.
- 10 Phillip Herring, *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes*, New York, Viking, 1995, p. 219.
 - 11 Jane Marcus, 'Mousemeat', in Mary Lynn Broe (ed.), *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois Press, 1991, p. 196.
 - 12 Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, [1930] 1938, p. 220.
 - 13 Unsigned review, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 September 1934, cited in Stannard (ed.), *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage*, p. 149.
 - 14 'Largely through Eliot's influence, the assumption that most people are dead became, by the 1930s, a standard item in the repertoire of any self-respecting intellectual.' Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, p. 10.
 - 15 The name 'Cruttwell' appears attached to a variety of unglamorous characters in Waugh's fiction, a low-key but enduring revenge against Waugh's hated Dean of the same name at Hertford College, Oxford.
 - 16 Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, [1934] 1951, p. 116. Hereafter, *HD*.
 - 17 David Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, Vol. 2, *The Modern Gothic*, London, Longman, 1996, pp. 183–4.
 - 18 Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, p. 9.
 - 19 Cited in Heath, *The Picturesque Prison*, p. 118.
 - 20 Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, p. 9.
 - 21 Ahmed Nimeiri, 'Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and "the Experience of America"', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 34:1 (1993), p. 111.
 - 22 Herring, *Djuna*, p. 262.
 - 23 Georgette Fleischer, 'Djuna Barnes and T.S. Eliot: The Politics and Poetics of *Nightwood*', *Studies in the Novel*, 30:3 (Autumn 1998), 405–35.
 - 24 Fleischer, 'Djuna Barnes and T.S. Eliot', p. 416.
 - 25 T.S. Eliot, 'Introduction', in Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, London, Faber & Faber, 1936, p. 3.
 - 26 Herring, *Djuna*, p. 85.
 - 27 Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, London, Jonathan Cape, [1960] 1967, p. 144.
 - 28 Paul West, "'The Havoc of this Nicety'", Afterword to Barnes's *Ryder*, Elmwood Park, Dalkey Archive Press, 1999, p. 243.
 - 29 Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*, London, Faber & Faber, [1936] 1985, p. 19. Hereafter, *N*.
 - 30 As in, for example, Walpole's Strawberry Hill home and in the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 as a true translation by 'William Marshall, Gent.' of a sixteenth-century Italian manuscript by 'Onuphrio Muralto', supposedly a 'Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas at Otranto'.

- 31 Jerrold E. Hogle, 'The Ghost of the Counterfeit and the Progress of Abjection', in David Punter (ed.), *A Companion to the Gothic*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, p. 297.
- 32 *Ibid.* p. 297.
- 33 Keith Tester (ed.), *The Flâneur*, London and New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 19.
- 34 Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*, p. 112.
- 35 Delmore Schwartz, 'T.S. Eliot as the International Hero', in Jay Martin (ed.), *A Collection of Critical Essays on 'The Waste Land'*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1968, p. 104.
- 36 Eliot, 'Introduction', in Barnes, *Nightwood*, p. 7.
- 37 Waugh in a letter to Henry Yorke (Green). Cited in Stannard (ed.), *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage*, p. 157.
- 38 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, London, Methuen, 1985, p. 7.
- 39 Letter from Barnes to Emily Coleman, 23 June 1935, cited in Fleischer, 'Djuna Barnes and T.S. Eliot', p. 411.

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