

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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FICTIONAL SELF-THEORISING ACROSS LITERARY HISTORY

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Based on the assumption that all fictional literature contains its own reading instructions, I argue in this article that two literary works written at great historical distance, Evelyn Waugh's short novel *The Loved One* (1948) and John Milton's pastoral elegy "Lycidas" (1638), are "critical" fictions in this sense, that is, texts reflecting upon themselves and (thereby) literary art more generally. I treat these seemingly incongruous works as companion pieces in the way they make each author's experience of modernity their topic and present responses to this experience that appear strikingly similar. My comparative reading reveals how similar mindsets manifest themselves across historical periods and ideological divides, revealing both continuities and culturally specific differences. As Waugh's and Milton's works reveal, modernity is a recurring event realised in literature in multifarious ways, both a matter of continuity and creative difference.

Keywords: John Milton, Evelyn Waugh, self-referentiality, metafiction, modernity, experimentalism, authorship

I SUGGESTIVE ENDINGS

Although the assumption that "criticism" is something that lies beyond the limits of a literary text is widespread amongst literary scholars (giving rise to the ubiquitous formula that fiction needs to be brought "into dialogue" with criticism by the interpreter), it is important to remember that literature typically requires no reading manual to be meaningful. To appropriate the terminology suggested – in a slightly different context – by the narratologist James Phelan, fictional texts are not only mimetic, representing imagined worlds in ways that enable readers to take them as real, they also, "synthetically", draw attention to their own construct-

edness and invite exploration of their principles of construction in turn.¹ That is, fiction contains instructions on how to understand it, and heeding them not only minimises the risk of misinterpretation, but also draws attention to the creative process that goes into the production of the literary artefact, thereby emphasising its humane grounding. However fantastic and otherworldly a text might be, its origin lies in a human mind, and the very textual moments that make readers stop in their tracks to reflect about the nature of what they are reading serve as reminders of precisely that. In emphasising this point I am consciously positioning myself against the widespread assumption that metafiction is an abstracting technique which, in questioning the relationship between fiction and reality, ultimately questions reality itself (Waugh 1984: 3), and I argue to the contrary that fictional techniques of self-reflection make the presence of the materially real creative force in the background pertinent. Furthermore, self-reflective fiction is not an invention of “playful” but ultimately pessimistic postmodernity, but is present across literary history, becoming an issue whenever writers (for whatever reason) are drawn to the matters of authorship and the nature of fiction itself.

74

I will discuss these interwoven topics – the intrinsically (self-)critical dimension of fiction, the literary strategies employed to bring it to the fore, and the broader issues these transport – through two literary sources that, given the historical distance that separates them, might at first glance seem unconnected. As I will show, they are linked by their shared interest in the perennial problem of the possibility and function of literature and the strategies they deploy in response; they are also, however, separated by significant cultural differences that come to bear on their work, and that a comparative reading brings to the fore. I begin my investigation by considering the suggestive ways in which these texts end. My first example is taken from the more recent of the two, Evelyn Waugh’s *The Loved One*:

On the last evening in Los Angeles Dennis knew he was a favourite of Fortune. Others, better men than he, had foundered here and perished. The strand was littered with their bones. He was leaving it not only unravished but enriched. He was adding his bit to the wreckage, something that had long irked him, his young heart, and was carrying back instead the artist’s load, a great, shapeless chunk of experience; bearing it home to his ancient and comfortless shore; to work on it hard and long, for God knew how long. For that moment of vision a lifetime is often too short.

¹ This is different from the interpretive strategy of “close reading” in that its focus is not on a presumed ideal textual form (or formula), but on the communicative intention that gives rise to that form (Phelan 2022: 257).

He picked up the novel which Miss Poski had left on his desk and settled down to await his loved one's final combustion. (Waugh 1951: 127)

This is the final paragraph of Waugh's short novel, which reports the thoughts of British poet Dennis Barlow, ostensibly the book's protagonist, about his return to his homeland after an unsuccessful stint as a Hollywood scriptwriter. At that moment, he is overseeing the incineration of the body of his one-time fiancée Aimée Thanatogenos (the "loved one" referred to in the last sentence, which points back to the book's title) in the pet crematorium where he had been employed, while simultaneously contemplating his imminent exit from the United States. Thus concludes this black comedy with a set of related and eminently self-reflective questions: What will Dennis write once he has returned to his homeland? And if the real *opus magnum* is still pending, what kind of text has the reader been reading up to this point?

First published in 1948 in the English literary magazine *Horizon*, *The Loved One* was inspired, among other things, by Waugh's visit to Forest Lawn Memorial Park Los Angeles, during the American tour he undertook to negotiate a contract for a film version of *Brideshead Revisited*. Waugh was captivated by this vast and flamboyant graveyard (to this day a favourite resting place for representatives of the culture industry) and immortalises it in his book as Whispering Glades cemetery: an all-American microcosm in which a workforce of morticians and make-up artists (Aimée Thanatogenos among them) toil to "beautify" corpses according to Hollywood ideals and aesthetics before committing them to their appropriately histrionic funerals.

Yet *The Loved One* is by no means the "Swiftian satire on the burial customs in Southern California" as Cyril Connolly depicts the book in his introduction to the first English edition (qtd. in Stannard 1984: 300), and Waugh himself dismissed sociological intentions, laying out the issues that moved him to write the book in a letter to his editor and friend:

The ideas I had in mind in writing were: 1st & quite predominantly over-excitement with the scene of Forest Lawn. 2nd the Anglo-American impasse – "never the twain shall meet", 3rd there is no such thing as an American. They are all exiles uprooted, transplanted & doomed to sterility. The ancestral gods they have abjured get them in the end. I tried to indicate this in Aimée's last hours. 4th the European raiders who come for the spoils & if they are lucky make for home with them. 5th Memento Mori, old style, not specifically Californian. (qtd. in Stannard 1984: 299)

Arguably, the book's core interest is contained in the last item on Waugh's list, which is linked to a theme that runs through his entire oeuvre: the role of aesthetic

forms whose express function is to confront humans with their mortality in a secularised context in which the fact of death has been pushed to the margins of conscious experience. The closing passage speaks of his profound doubt that real art is possible in such a world, as the recognition of death is the foundation of all serious aesthetic endeavour. Here, *The Loved One* not only metafictionally raises the question of what kind of text we have been reading, but also metaleptically invokes the work Dennis will produce after his return to England (and thus outside of the book's plot), based on the "shapeless chunk of experience" he has gathered stateside. The nature of the artwork he will be toiling over "hard and long" in the future is not specified, but the fact that Dennis's final act is to turn to a novel left lying around by a co-worker to while away the time until Aimée has become ashes, seems to suggest that this is unlikely to be his chosen format: the novel as a commodity produced and read for entertainment is too ephemeral to fulfil the "vision" Dennis is striving for.

Neither such scepticism about the value of literature in a world without faith nor the techniques and strategies to express this attitude were anything new at the time Waugh was writing, and *The Loved One's* conclusion might remind some readers of another, much older literary ending:

76

Thus sang the uncouth swain to th'oaks and rills,
While the still morn went out with sandals gray;
He touch'd the tender stops of various quills,
With eager thought warbling his Doric lay;
And now the sun had stretch'd out all the hills,
And now was dropp'd into the western bay;
At last he rose, and twitch'd his mantle blue:
To-morrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.

(Milton 2007: lines 186–193)

These are the concluding lines of John Milton's pastoral elegy "Lycidas" (1638), which also ends with the image of a character already half turned away from the text in which – the reader realises at this point – he plays a central role, and on an almost ruthlessly self-confident, future-directed affirmation of the lonely artist's creative energy. This creative optimism might seem to run counter to the sombre context for which the poem was written: an anthology of poems entitled *Justa Eduardo King Naufrago* commissioned to commemorate Milton's fellow student at Cambridge, Edward King. He had drowned off the Welsh coast en route to his native Ireland, where he was supposed to take up a position in the Church, at the age of 25. With his grand final gesture, the speaker of Milton's poem identifies

its previous 185 lines – in which he had conscientiously rehearsed the standard components of pastoral poetry – as a performance by another speaker, an “uncouth swain” seemingly eager to enter “fresh woods, and pastures new”. The new anticipated here is as yet unknown, but by implication the adjective suggests that what has been read so far is outmoded. The poem’s famous (even proverbial) final words dismiss its initial brief of remembering the deceased Edward King, proclaiming that the future belongs to the living, even though what it holds remains entirely open. That it is a shepherd who is thinking these words underlines the self-reflectiveness of the passage: shepherds are pastoral shorthand for poets and what is being questioned here is the nature and significance of the poem itself.

In placing these endings alongside each other I do not mean to suggest that *The Loved One* is consciously modelled on Milton’s poem or constitutes an extended intertextual allusion by its erudite author.² Instead, my very humble contention is that Waugh and Milton were motivated by similar concerns about the nature and purpose of literature which, although shaped by the specifics of the historical moments in which they wrote, are essentially timeless. What unites the two authors and their work, all overt formal and stylistic differences notwithstanding, is their acute awareness that they lived in a moment of modernity and responded in their writing as “moderns” in turn.

This claim requires elucidation. After all, for Waugh the modern world was sordid, and the root of this state was its profanity. Since he took aesthetics to be an issue of faith, art that had severed this spiritual connection was considered by him as “bogus” (Waugh’s term qtd. in Heath 1982: 35). *The Loved One*, too, hinges on the argument that there can be no spiritually engaging art in a world that denies the reality of pain and instead reimagines even death as “easeful” (Heath 1982: 191) (in a glib appropriation of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”). Yet despite these ostensibly traditionalist assumptions – and Waugh’s own active shaping of a public image of an “anti-modernist” Catholic convert lamenting the secular decadence whose onset he saw in the Reformation (cf. Dale 2006: 112) – he was

² Waugh’s intertextuality is discussed with reference to other texts by Ferrand and Ortega. An intertextual link with Milton is far from self-explanatory, however, given the two authors’ different denominational allegiances. The only direct reference to Milton in Waugh’s oeuvre that I am aware of is in *Put Out More Flags*; “Lycidas” is, to my knowledge, never mentioned explicitly. However, as a converted Catholic, Waugh was inevitably interested in post-Reformation English culture and his expertise in this context is documented not least by his biography of the martyred Jesuit priest Edmund Campion (1935). Heath suggests that Milton and Waugh were similar in character, both “believ[ing] that unrestrained freedom was slavery, while the right sort of constraint could be liberating” (1982: 4).

in fact, as Malcolm Bradbury notes, "obsessed with the world of an irrevocable modernity, a world of psychological stress, dissolving relationships, new life-styles, novel technologies and environments" (1972: 172). And, as Bradbury maintains further, he treated this world with "a curiosity divorced from moral judgment" that resulted in a "modern form of comedy" at once "vigorous" and "bleak" (Bradbury 1972: 172). This comedy was not only *thematically* modern, depicting a colourful wasteland of rampant consumerism and self-delusion, but also formally, because in doing so he appropriated, already in his first literary efforts, techniques from modernism's principal medium, cinema (cf. Liu 2017: 609, Lodge 1999, Pasternak Slater 1998: xxii). *The Loved One*, with its episodic, montage-style structure, is an appropriately cinematic narrative for a plot set in Hollywood, but Waugh's "synthetic" strategies of self-referentiality assert a sense of authorial distance towards this world as well as the techniques employed to depict it.

Milton, by contrast, still found himself "on the threshold of a post-theological world", Gordon Teskey maintains (2006: 5), confronted with a prospect of change that impacted his self-understanding as a poet. The gap in the spiritual landscape rent up by the scientific secularism shining up on the horizon promised Milton "a new and unfamiliar role, as one who mediates spiritual power like a shaman" (Teskey 2006: 2), but this novel sense of authority also gave rise to an "inner conflict" (2006: 5), reflected in the eminently "theoretical" (2006: 1) nature of his poetry. For Teskey, this quality comes to the fore in the "doubleness" of Milton's work, specifically in *Paradise Lost*, which embraces contemporary cultural conventions at the same time as pointing towards an aesthetic future of which it is itself a foundational text (Teskey 2006: 7–8). This double directionality can also be seen at the aforementioned radical shift in perspective at the end of Milton's "Lycidas": from the words marking the swain's pastoral performance to the "pastures new" beyond the limits of the convention, in which the shepherd-poet plays a central role. This self-reflective gesture, too, illustrates Phelan's concept of "synthesis" introduced earlier. It invites the reader to reconsider the poem in light of the new information revealed at the end of the poem, even to question the adequacy of its form and techniques.

In this paper I treat Waugh's short novel and Milton's poem as companion pieces in the way they make each author's specific experience of modernity their topic and respond to this experience in surprisingly similar ways. My comparative reading of these seemingly incongruous works allows us to understand how similar mindsets manifest themselves across historical periods and ideological divides while also underlining that they are, in the end, of their times. Waugh's and Milton's works reveal modernity to be a recurring event that is realised in

literature in multifarious ways – and as such is both a matter of continuity and creative difference.³

II TESTING THE LIMITS OF CONVENTION

In *The Loved One*, the troubled role of poetry in the modern world is incarnated by the unwritten poem that haunts the narrative. Early in the book, Dennis is tasked with composing a commemorative ode for Sir Francis Hinley, a fellow British expatriate who committed suicide after losing his job as a scriptwriter at Megalopolitan Studios. That goal falls by the wayside, however, as Dennis, who seems unable to write original poetry any longer and resorts to parodies of poems by Callimachus and Tennyson (Manley 2011: 30), embraces his own writer's block and instead begins to court Aimée, a certified beautician working at Whispering Glades cemetery, with poems pilfered from the *Oxford Book of English Verse*.

On the one hand, Dennis's brazen recycling is of course merely a pragmatic variation on a way of life inspired by the film industry, with Whispering Glades cemetery something of a spiritual pinnacle. Its business of death takes place on vast grounds that call to mind those of Hollywood's film studios, containing copies of old-world buildings "perfectly replicated" in grade A steel to withstand even a nuclear strike (Waugh 1951: 64), artworks from the canon of Western culture (such as Rodin's "The Kiss" in marble, [Waugh 1951: 37]), even natural landmarks (the Lake Isle of Innisfree immortalised by W. B. Yeats, [Waugh 1951: 66]), like props on a movie set (or rides at an amusement park). No attempt is made to disguise that these artefacts are vulgar imitations; to the contrary, the cemetery's founder prides himself on the fact that its indestructible copies are an improvement upon the flawed and time-ravaged originals.⁴ Authenticity or faithfulness to reality – whether historical or contemporary – are undesirable in a world enthralled by imperishable perfection and Dennis's abandonment of poetry

³ While in so arguing, I might seem to echo Susan Stanford Friedman's "planetary" reassessment of modernism in principle, my point is ultimately far less ambitious in scope. It is also far less suspicious of modernity, which I simply take to denote the inevitable transformation of human existence across history, without judging the nature and value of this developmental process.

⁴ Hence the copy of "the Church of St Peter-without-the-walls, Oxford" is celebrated as "a building-again of what those old craftsmen sought to do with their rude implements of bygone ages. Time has worked its mischief on the beautiful original. Here you see it as the first builders dreamed of it long ago" (Waugh 1951: 64).

merely acknowledges that in an environment where copies are seen to trump the original, the very idea of originality has become obsolete.

On the other hand, giving up on his literary vocation is one of several steps taken by Dennis towards "going native" (Waugh 1951: 13) and succumbing to the temptations of the American way of life. To ward off this threat to their cultural superiority, the other British expatriates in Hollywood decide to club together and send Dennis packing (Waugh 1951: 123–124). But in Waugh's Hollywood, where performance is everything, the "limeys" are thoroughly entangled in what they claim to despise. Sir Ambrose Abercrombie, another British expatriate stranded in Los Angeles, literally has become an amalgam of the characters he had once embodied in popular cinematic "travesties of English rural life" (Waugh 1951: 121) – sporting cape, deerstalker-cap and shepherd's crook even when off the set. What is parodied here is not only the outrageousness of this pastoral kitsch, but the failure of Sir Ambrose and his fellow expatriates to recognise that they – like the Hollywood actors for whom they are providing scripts – are not merely *performing* their roles but have been taken over by them.⁵

80

Herein lies the fundamental difference between Waugh's book and Milton's poem, whose concluding acknowledgement that it is a performance of pastoral convention never reaches the point of questioning reality itself. And yet even though the speaker appears to rise to the "sad occasion dear" (line 6) more willingly than Dennis to his, and "Lycidas" opens conventionally enough, the poem is persistently ambiguous. As befits a *pastoral* elegy, the act of commemoration through mourning is accompanied by standard elements and tropes of the pastoral tradition (such as woebegone shepherds, singing nymphs and an altogether doleful environment) as well as references to or borrowings from Theocritus and Virgil. From the outset, however, a tone of reluctance mars this apparent compliance

⁵ This idea is entailed in the awkward transformation of the actor formerly known as Baby Aaronson, first into a Spanish, then an Irish persona, which ultimately leads to Sir Francis's dismissal by his studio and subsequent suicide (Waugh 1951: 10–11; 24). The inversion of fact and fiction incarnated by this marginal figure is a variation on a topic that runs through Waugh's whole oeuvre up until his last published book *Basil Seal Rides Again* (1963), in which the protagonist ponders how the parodic character of middle-aged fogey initially adopted to entertain his daughter as a small child "had become the *persona*" (Waugh 1998: 503). Waugh voices the view that imitation is a threat to art already in his architectural writing of the 1930s, in which he asserts that imitation in architecture "debauch[es] one's taste for the genuine" (qtd. in Gaston 2016: 31). Whispering Glades, too, is debauched because it lacks reference: it does not point to elements of old-world reality, but – to modify a formulation used in another context by Roland Barthes – invokes "the condensed essence of what the Old World might be" (1977: 48).

with convention and already the first few lines suggest that the speaker finds his task tedious and feels coerced to complete it:

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more
 Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,
 I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude
 And with forc'd fingers rude
 Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.

(Milton 2007: lines 1-5).

As Milton's own revisions of the poem show, these negative connotations are not coincidental, but the result of a careful and goal-directed editing process; they mark the beginning of his sustained "experimental" (Rutherford 2012) transformation of a time-honoured poetic tradition. That Milton's poem has elicited contradictory responses – is celebrated, on the one hand, as "the high-water mark of English poetry" by the nineteenth-century theologian Mark Pattison (qtd. in Forsyth 2009: 684), while singled out, on the other, as "odd" (Forsyth 2009: 684) – may be related to its being, in B. Rajan's words, "both a powerfully allusive essay in a convention and a highly controlled denial of that convention" (1967: 56).

The semantic, syntactic and metrical dimensions on which this denial takes place have already been discussed by other scholars (e.g. Rutherford, Womack); I am interested in how the poem foregrounds its rejection of the convention on which it draws by emphasising the fact that it is a performance, as this also provides the conceptual link with *The Loved One*. This self-awareness becomes apparent most dramatically at the very end of *Lycidas*, when an intrusive new voice suddenly identifies its speaker up until this point as a shepherd. Very belatedly the poem foregrounds a conventionality that is already announced in the title: since Theocritus, *Lycidas* is the name given to a character who sings (Forsyth 2009: 685) (and thus an apt pseudonym for the dead Edward King, a Renaissance man of many talents, including one for poetry). Within the bracket created by the title and the concluding appearance of the swain, Milton invokes the pastoral only to expose it as an elaborate but outmoded fiction, for instance in the poem's extensive "flower passage" in which the speaker bids a procession of flowers – from primroses to daffodils – to "strew the laureate hearse" (line 151). But this section is entirely fictitious: as King was lost at sea, there was no hearse to be bedecked with flowers. And so apart from documenting Milton's poetic skills, it points to a fundamental constructedness that will be reiterated at the end, when Milton has his shepherd turn away from his own words. In thereby addressing the gap that exists between poetry (including that of the pastoral kind) and reality, "*Lycidas*"

also is testimony to the productive implications of their incongruence: this is where art arises. Its final scene, at the same time as casting doubt about the poem and the convention it invokes, throws into relief Milton's creative self-confidence.

In *The Loved One*, this conventional notion of the relationship between life and art is expressed in a moment of narrative frame-breaking that anticipates the novella's metaleptic closing scene; in it, the narrator depicts Dennis – at that point standing in front of a door on whose other side he knows is Aimée – drawing on literature to make sense of his own situation: "Dennis hesitated with his fingers on the handle and was aware of communication with another hand beyond the panels. Thus in a hundred novels had lovers stood" (Waugh 1951: 60). What Dennis fails to recognise when he uses literature as a frame of reference for his own experience, however, is how much this has become reality in Hollywood, where life has been overtaken by fantasy. Aimée at least – contrary to his initial assumption that "the girl [is] a decadent" (Waugh 1951: 46) – is merely another exchangeable manifestation of artificial American femininity:

A man could leave such a girl in a delicatessen shop in New York, fly three thousand miles and find her again in the cigar stall at San Francisco, just as he would find his favourite comic strip in the local paper; and she would croon the same words to him in moments of endearment and express the same views and preferences in moments of social discourse. (Waugh 1951: 45)

Following this recognition, Dennis is forced to acknowledge that he is on the path of becoming a fantasy himself. Instead of being the experienced European exploring American innocence via learned references to Henry James, he has become "the protagonist of a Jamesian problem" (Waugh 1951: 96). Life, in other words, imitates art; yet in a world in which the relationship between art and life has been reversed, poetry – whether of love or commemoration – becomes meaningless, doomed to disappear in the abyss of the very representations on which it draws. From today's perspective, this mid-twentieth-century vision of a world that has abandoned notions of truth and reality might of course seem prophetic, but it must be underlined that it is not one that Waugh endorses: for him, the confusion of fact and fiction is only another element of the all-encompassing cultural demise that he denounces throughout his work.

III WAUGH'S WORLD WITHOUT SUBSTANCE

Waugh's inversion of the relationship between art and life is based on his recognition of a groundlessness unimaginable for Milton. For the twentieth-century writer, faithless America is a world that has been robbed of its core, an idea expressed unequivocally in *The Loved One* by the recurring reference to "Kaiser's Stoneless Peaches" – fruit that promise the "full weight of succulent peach flesh and nothing else" (Waugh 1951: 112) but taste like cotton wool. Like other elements of the book, the peaches are not to be taken – realistically – as a plausible commercial gimmick to please palates sensitised by a culture whose "rationale is to bypass anything painful or frustrating (Barnard 1979: 176): Waugh's stoneless peaches echo the fruit's tangled discursive significance in Western culture as a "forbidden fruit" alongside the apple (Khoddam and Hodges 2016: 116–118) and identify Whispering Glades as a pseudo-Eden for a world without a spiritual centre.

Eating forbidden fruit leads to knowledge, which ultimately means consciousness of death. Whispering Glades, by contrast, is meant to be seen as a place where death has lost its sting, as is spelt out rather bluntly by the removal of real bees from the site and their replacement by a recorded humming projected via a sound system. A "necropolis" (Waugh 1951: 33) only in name, the cemetery is based on the idea that death is merely another role to be enacted, in fact only another effortlessly achieved extension of life. Waugh, whose rigorous Christianity was grounded on the assumption that death is always "at one's elbow",⁶ reflected on modern America's theological naivety in "Death in Hollywood", the 1947 essay about the real cemetery on which Whispering Glades was modelled: "In Forest Lawn [...] [t]he body does not decay; it lives on, more chic in death than ever before in its indestructible Class A steel-and-concrete shelf; the soul goes straight from the Slumber Room to Paradise, where it enjoys an endless infancy" (Waugh 1947: 84).

Dennis's going native is thus more than an admission that creativity is meaningless in a world in which reality has been replaced by replica, it is a symptom of the devastating theological problem by which the United States (and, to a lesser extent all other secularised societies) are haunted: the replacement of *belief* by Hollywood-style *make-believe*. It only follows that cults and sects should abound in a world in which religious commitment is essentially performance. Dennis's plan to become a non-sectarian priest to fund his future with Aimée is only one

⁶ In a short unpublished piece called "Words to Live by" (1946) (qtd. in Milthorpe 2010: 201).

realisation of this all-encompassing principle, and in that he is mirrored by the hack agony columnist Mr Slump who, offering advice under the name of "Guru Brahmin", prompts Aimée's suicide. Waugh's America is not faithless *per se* – in fact, it abounds in faiths and in Whispering Glades itself the divinations of its founder and self-appointed prophet Wilbur Kenworthy are accompanied by the equally ubiquitous tune of a "Hindu love-song" (Waugh 1951: 35) – but these are regressions into a facile esotericism unconnected by an "overarching theosophical system" (Dale 2006: 109). Even Aimée's family is spiritually divided: while she is named after Aimée Macpherson (Waugh 1951: 73), a mass-media savvy Pentecostal evangelist revered by Aimée's father, her mother takes to "New Thought and wouldn't have it that there was such a thing as death" (Waugh 1951: 75). In this context of spiritual anarchy, the creation of art inevitably leads to its "abuse" (Heath 1982: 194), reducing the aesthetic – in whatever manifestation – to a mere display of style without substance.

By way of countering this vacuity, Waugh foregrounds the materially real. This culminates in the grotesque depiction of Sir Francis's corpse, which Dennis is the one to discover: "the sack of body suspended and the face above it with eyes red and horribly starting from their sockets, the cheeks mottled in indigo like the marbled end-papers of a ledger and the tongue swollen and protruding like an end of black sausage" (Waugh 1951: 39). Apparently returning to the style of his pitiless pre-war satires (*Vile Bodies* and *A Handful of Dust*),⁷ Waugh's blunt vision is a vehicle for Waugh's "spiritual absolutism" (Dane 2006: 112). Far from identifying the body as merely "disposable" (Milthorpe 2010: 210), or indeed formally flawed (Lewis 2020: 36), his almost Rabelaisian depiction of Sir Francis's corpse underlines that the human body is bound to undergo a gruesome transformation after death, and that only the candid confrontation with this terrifying prospect can lead to spiritual insight.⁸ Aimée's quick and hygienic "combustion", by contrast,

⁷ Waugh himself questioned the idea that there can be satire in the modern world. For a contrary position, see Greenberg, who not only asserts the compatibility, indeed similarity, of satire and modernism, but also draws attention to the role of the grotesque as both a means and an end of modernist satire (2011: 7, 9, 11).

⁸ I here beg to differ with Lewis's interpretation of the scene. Noting that Sir Francis's suicide results in the "radical deformation" of his body, Lewis maintains that it thereby serves as an example of "formalism gone bad" (2020: 36). But clearly the contrary is the case: the decaying body is the only thing that is manifestly real in a world that denies the fact of death and rather than representing failed modernist form, it functions as a *memento mori* in the Christian tradition to which Waugh subscribed. His Forest Lawn essay concludes by comparing the beautified bodies in the cemetery's "slumber rooms" with "traditional" sculptural representations "of an adult soul naked at the judgment seat and a body turning in corruption", pointing out that such "macaber [sic] achievements [...]"

only leads to the outrageous nonchalance Waugh has Dennis display in the book's final scene, which shows him to be perfectly undaunted by her impersonal ashes.

On the surface, Waugh's brutal *memento mori* resembles Milton's morbid attention to the body's "hideous transformation" (Teskey 2015: 173) after death. In *Lycidas*, Milton presents three separate glimpses of the dying and decaying body: the actual moment of King drowning in "the remorseless deep" (line 50), his bloated and parched body floating on the surface of the water (lines 12–13) and the scattering of his bones at the bottom of the sea (lines 154–155). Reaching beyond pastoral convention into the imaginary of metaphysical poetry instead (e.g. Sperry 2019: passim; see also Teskey 2015: 172), these striking snapshots dispute the soporific cliché that human life is vulnerable and "thin-spun" (line 76). Instead, they affirm that death is brutal, cutting short hopeful lives like "the blind Fury with th'abhorred shears" (line 75). Expressing a devastating universal truth (underlined by the definite article), this puzzlingly evocative image reveals pastoral conventions to be helpless in the face of the inconceivable. Milton's own attention to the process of decomposition, which is dispersed across the poem like King's bones at the bottom of the sea, at least lends the dead body a postmortem vividness that exposes the pastoral formula that death is present even in Arcadia as shibboleth.

In *The Loved One*, however, the stark vision of Sir Francis's body is eventually perverted by the even more grotesque beautification process aimed to mask this physical reality. Awaiting cremation in the slumber room, Sir Francis is a "painted and smirking obscene travesty" (Waugh 1951: 61) of his living self, which only draws attention to the fact that he is dead – mercilessly, and without prospect of poetic solace: there is no poetry to commemorate a painted object that appears as "as ageless as a tortoise and as inhuman" (Waugh 1951: 61) and unsurprisingly Dennis's encounter with Sir Francis marks the abandonment of his Ode and the beginning of his romance with Aimée. His creative abilities are jammed by the fantasies shored up against the fact of mortality whose recognition alone makes art possible.

IV CONCLUSION

A fruitful concept to summarise my comparative assessment of Waugh's short novel and Milton's poem is that which Paul Alpers applies to "Lycidas": Milton's poem, he notes, is symptomatic of an "exhaustion" of the pastoral mode at the

were done with a simple moral purpose – to remind a highly civilized people that beauty was skin deep and pomp was mortal" (1947: 84).

time it was written (Alpers 1996: 94) and the poet responds to this sense of exhaustion by embracing this outmoded convention and, in the process, dismantling it. Waugh, too, was inspired by the recognition that traditional literary forms had run their course, but his frustration about this ultimately reached deeper. For Milton, reality as such was never in doubt and art, for better or worse, for him still reflected upon and responded to life. It was the poet's task to find newly appropriate responses to its challenges. That is, Milton's quarrel with the pastoral is an essentially aesthetic one, which is why it can be used to draw attention to the creativity released in response to the convention's demise. Waugh's concern, by contrast, was the depletion of life itself: a loss of spiritual meaning which ultimately precludes any appropriate literary rejoinder to it – hence Dennis's creative paralysis and the deferral of his fictional response to his American experience to a place beyond the plot.⁹ Thus although it is possible to think of both Milton and Waugh as essentially "modern" authors, we also need to appreciate the fundamentally different parameters of the moments of modernity to which they responded. While Milton's poem points back to (and is grounded in) pre-modern certainties (cf. Teskey 2006: 5), Waugh's short novel points forward to an almost postmodern world consisting of a universe of simulacra untethered to concrete points of reference. As Dale puts it aptly, his view of modernity is that of "a void spinning needlessly, perversely at the center of a universe replete with meaning" (2006: 112).¹⁰

This contrast also has a bearing on the way we see another feature shared by the two texts: their episodic nature. "Lycidas" is a notoriously disjointed poem, "an accumulation of magnificent fragments", as Frank Wilson Knight puts it (qtd. in Womack 1997: 120), which generations of readers have attempted (but failed) to piece together. The poem's several verse paragraphs introduce different speakers in different settings, addressing a variety of (incongruous) thematic concerns: pastoral myth and historical reality, the arcadian landscape of the mind and the

⁹ Heath (1982: 197) speculates that the opus magnum announced at the end of *The Loved One* would finally become Waugh's only historical novel, *Helena*, which the writer himself considered his masterpiece, but this speculation strikes me as too literal-minded. In fact, *The Loved One* forestalls any speculation about its afterlife by evincing a healthy scepticism vis-à-vis literature in general. Already prior to his stay in America, Dennis's relationship to poetry is that of an "addict", who opens the anthologies "as a woman opens her familiar pack of cigarettes" (Waugh 1951: 17), while his research for his commemorative Ode leads him to recognise that Sir Francis's once popular writings have been "out of print for years now, all its pleasant phrases unhonoured and unremembered" (Waugh 1951: 53).

¹⁰ It is not too far-fetched to claim that Waugh's book foreshadows what Jean Baudrillard would call the "precession of simulacra" (1994: 1–42).

geography of the British Isles, pagan pastoralism and Christian iconography. On the face of it, *The Loved One* appears to work in a strikingly similar way: the book is a sketchy mosaic (Lodge 1971: 12) of barely connected, cross-cut scenes and its characters are at best overblown types, oddly "detached" (Barnard 1979: 181) from the equally hyperbolic incidents that make up the plot. Where the texts differ is in their role they grant the author in relation to this disarray. In "Lycidas", emphasis is placed on the creative power that authored the fragmented text in the first place and who for that reason can also contain it. The poem's theme of consolation, which manifests itself towards the end in a set of images of resurrection – Lycidas ascending from his grave at the bottom of the sea like the morning sun (lines 167–170) and subsequently metamorphosing into "the genius of the shore" (line 184) providing inspiration for other shepherd-poets – is underlined formally in the poem's general tendency towards regularising metrical imperfections or "distortions" (Rutherford 2012: 21). Already its imbalanced first 14 lines (characterised by uneven length, metrical irregularity and meaning-distorting enjambments) are harmonised at the end, in tune with the speaker's optimistic promise of "some melodious tear" (line 14) (Rutherford 2012: 22). And this is fully in line with the poem's overall progression from "a radically defamiliarizing opening [...] toward increasingly well-ordered formal designs" (Rutherford 2012: 31): an ordering artfulness that subtly invokes the author carefully orchestrating his material.

In *The Loved One*, by contrast, a comparable fragmentariness is directly linked to the lack of substance Waugh ascribes to the American way of life and ultimately remains unmediated by a quasi-divine authorial presence. While providing an apt form for the book's cinematic theme (as well as documenting the overall agnosticism of the historical moment in which it was written), its episodic nature jars with Waugh's outspoken traditionalism in matters of morality and aesthetics. It is therefore well to take *The Loved One*'s flirtation with modernity and formal experiment with a pinch of salt, even though the book never invites such scepticism in so many words. Although precisely the absence of authorial interference might be taken as an ironic modernist gesture itself – so that the book becomes the butt of its author's satire – it is one that ultimately entails a commanding twist. Writing about *Vile Bodies* and *A Handful of Dust*, Dale suggest that Waugh's refusal, in these early novels, to judge his frivolous characters in the light of his own earnestness is a narrative strategy aiming to create an "intentional miscommunication" between himself and his readers. In this way, the novels become "two way mirrors" of ironic surveillance: "the author watches as you unknowingly misread, laughing all the way to hell" (Dale 2006: 112). *The Loved One* clearly returns to this technique,

veiling the devastating worldview underpinning the book to grant the reader a considerable amount of wicked merriment. Only its metaliterary pointers evoke the author and, by extension, the author's despair about the very principles on which his fictional world is based and thus provide instructions on how the text is to be taken – even though it is ultimately impossible to predict whether readers actually notice these guidelines, let alone heed them.

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S a ž e t a k

FIKCIONALNO SAMOTEORETIZIRANJE KROZ POVIJEST KNJIŽEVNOSTI

Polazeći od pretpostavke da svaki književni tekst sadrži vlastite upute za čitanje, u ovome radu tvrdim da su dva književna djela nastala u međusobno vrlo udaljenim povijesnim razdobljima – novela *The Loved One* (1948) Evelyn Waugha i pastoralna elegija “Lycidas” (1638) Johna Milтона – “kritičke” fikcije upravo u tome smislu, odnosno da je riječ o tekstovima koji promišljaju sami sebe i (time) književno stvaralaštvo općenito. Ta naizgled nespojiva djela promatram kao svojevrzne pandane zbog načina na koji iskustvo moderniteta tih autora postaje njihovom temom te zbog odgovora na to iskustvo koji djeluju iznenađujuće slično. Moje komparativno čitanje otkriva kako se slični mentalni sklopovi očituju kroz različita povijesna razdoblja i ideološke podjele, razotkrivajući kontinuitete i kulturološki specifične razlike. Kao što pokazuju navedena djela Waugha i Milтона, modernitet je događaj koji se ponavlja i koji se u književnosti očituje na mnogostruke načine, istodobno kao pitanje kontinuiteta i kreativne različitosti.

Ključne riječi: John Milton, Evelyn Waugh, autoreferencijalnost, metafikcija, modernitet, eksperimentalizam, autorstvo