

Reading the Party: Festivity as Waste in Evelyn Waugh's 1930s Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines an approach to understanding festivity through the lens of literary texts. Studies of festivity in early twentieth-century literature center largely on the image of the party. Representations of parties in the literary texts of this period range widely, and the sheer number of parties found in this body of literature highlights the shared interest of writers of the time to explore the implications of festive sociability. Given these parameters a reader might expect the literature of the period to show parties positively: as utopian occasions for transformative jouissance leading to catharsis and (satisfying) narrative closure. Yet many texts of this time represent festivity not as pleasurable renewal but as unpleasurable waste. This is particularly the case in fiction by the English satirist Evelyn Waugh (1903–66). In Waugh's texts, celebration tends toward destructive (rather than restorative) disorder. This article will read Waugh's novel *Vile Bodies* (1930) and short story "Cruise: Letters from a Young Lady of Leisure" (1933), using Roger Caillois's theory of games, to explore the ways in which parties become sites of wasteful play. Moreover, as this article will demonstrate, literary texts are central documents for understanding the cultural history and subjective experience of parties. They evidence the felt and imagined experiences of social and moral transgression; bodily, mental and affective transformation; and class, race, gender, and sexual boundary-crossing occasioned by festivity. In that sense, the discipline of literary studies can contribute to a robust interdisciplinary approach to understanding festivity.

1. Evelyn Waugh, "Cocktail Hour," *Harper's Bazaar* (London), November 9, 1933, reprinted in *The Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh: Essays, Articles, and Reviews 1922–1934*, ed. Donat Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 532

2. See Christopher Ames, *The Life of the Party: Festive Vision in Modern Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991); and Kate McLoughlin, ed., *The Modernist Party* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

3. See, for example, Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969), and ed., *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982).

4. Dave Russell, "The Making of Modern Leisure: The British Experience c.1850 to c.1960," in *Routledge Handbook of Leisure Studies*, ed. Tony Blackshaw (London: Routledge, 2013), 17–18.

"There is no more certain way of getting oneself disliked," the English satirist Evelyn Waugh declared in an essay for *Harper's Bazaar* in 1933, "than by giving an occasional party." As a regular guest (but reluctant host), Waugh attended, observed, and satirized private festivity throughout the late twenties and early thirties in novels, short stories, and nonfictional writing, claiming "hostility," not hospitality, as the chief affect of parties. The party host makes "permanent and implacable enemies" of people not invited, risks "contempt" from acquaintances, and infuriates their friends through "oblig[ing]" them to "waste an evening": "It's bound to be hell." The social order is disturbed, and "the whole hive turns on us with buzzing and angry stings."¹

Studies of festivity in early twentieth-century literature center largely on the image of the party.² This is by no means accidental; indeed, the early twentieth century marks most decidedly the party's coming of age, its diversification as a social event, and its deployment as a literary device. Representations of parties in the literary texts of this period range widely: from dinner parties, débutante balls, cocktail parties, and bottle parties to more outrageous affairs that take place in nightclubs or require themed fancy dress. Moreover, the sheer number of parties found in this body of literature highlights the shared interest of writers of the time to explore the implications of festive sociability. Festivity is frequently parsed as an opportunity for social, cultural, or political inclusion and renewal that fosters *communitas*, cultural cohesion, and the transmission of tradition and ritual.³ The first half of the twentieth century is recognized as a historical period of increased leisure and attendance at festive events, due in part to an increase in real wages, a growing commercial leisure industry, and new opportunities for travel.⁴ Yet in spite (or perhaps because) of the promise of these historical conditions, and *contra* to theories of festivity as proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin, Victor Turner, and Émile Durkheim, fictional texts of this time frequently represent parties not as pleasurable renewal but as unpleasurable—indeed, hostile—waste events.

Bakhtin's carnivalesque is commonly used to frame readings of literary festivity, but the carnivalesque as a means toward positive transformation becomes increasingly marginal to understanding the parties seen in much fiction of the twenties and thirties. Evelyn Waugh is, perhaps, the English novelist most synonymous with parties (a parallel to F. Scott Fitzgerald in the United States) and thus a key figure for reading representations of sociability. In Waugh's thirties texts—the novel *Vile Bodies* (1930) and short story "Cruise: Letters from a Young Lady of Leisure" (1933)—celebration tends toward destructive (rather than restorative) disorder, while leisure brings boredom and despair rather than pleasure. Despite their dystopian departure from the Bakhtinian scene of carnivalesque renewal, the literary parties of this period can still be read as forms of play. The sociological approach to play that Roger Caillois outlines in the work *Man, Play, and Games* (1961), in combination with an historicized account of the spatial, temporal, and affective dimensions of sociability in the period, proffers a useful framework for reading parties and festivity in interwar literature. Importantly, literary texts document the cultural history and subjective experience of parties, providing evidence for the felt and imagined experiences of social and moral transgression; bodily, mental, and affective transformation; and class, race, gender, and sexual boundary-crossing occasioned by festivity. In that sense, literary

5. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (New York: Free Press, 1961), 14–15.

6. *Ibid.*, 17.

7. *Ibid.*, 19–21.

8. *Ibid.*, 23.

9. *Ibid.*, 74.

10. *Ibid.*, 87.

11. *Ibid.*, 75.

12. *Ibid.*, 97.

13. As Hobsbawm writes, invented traditions are those “which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically impl[y] continuity with the past.” Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Invented Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1. See also Joshua D. Esty, “Amnesia in the Fields: Late Modernism, Late Imperialism, and the English Pageant Play,” *ELH* 69, no. 1 (2002): 246.

14. Ames, *The Life of the Party*, 2.

15. Kate McLoughlin, “Introduction: A Welcome From the Host,” in *The Modernist Party*, 2.

studies contributes to a robust interdisciplinary approach to understanding festivity, as we shall demonstrate in this article.

Caillois and the Modern Party

Caillois’s theory identifies four main categories of games. *Agôn*, or competition, refers to games such as tennis or chess, in which particular skill sets gained through practice and preparation are required in order to win.⁵ *Alea*, or chance, are games in which the winners are chosen not because of skill, but because of fate, such as roulette or the lottery.⁶ *Mimicry*, or simulation, involves the subject pretending to be other than itself: actors in a play or a person in costume, for instance.⁷ Finally, *ilinx*, or vertigo, are games that aim to momentarily destroy the stability of a lucid mind, such as dancing or walking a tightrope.⁸ These categories can function separately or cooperatively, although there are some limits on which categories can successfully interact. According to Caillois, there are only two “fundamental” relationships among the categories: the pairings of *agôn* and *alea*, and of *mimicry* and *ilinx*.⁹

Mimicry and *ilinx* are useful concepts with which to theorize the party. Caillois links mimicry and *ilinx* to the idea of the festival, which he defines as “an interregnum of vertigo, effervescence, and fluidity.”¹⁰ Together, they create a world that has no rules and is full of improvisation, guided only by a “fantasy or a supreme inspiration.”¹¹ Caillois claims that the mimicry and *ilinx* combination dominates in simple societies, ushering in the feelings and behaviors of festival, such as excess and revelry. However, as societies evolve and become more complex, mimicry and *ilinx* are suppressed in favor of the *agôn* and *alea* pairing. Simulation and vertigo become intermittent and limited, serving only as an escape from the monotony of everyday life.¹² The modern party, with its signal opportunities for dressing up, drinking, and social intermingling, is one of the occasions in complex society where mimicry and *ilinx* can be released.

The early years of the twentieth century oversaw a revival of festive folk genres such as the historical pageant, led by figures such as Louis-Napoleon Parker. As Eric Hobsbawm and Jed Esty have convincingly argued, however, these genres were invented traditions, nostalgic and retrospective.¹³ The party was, as Christopher Ames argues, a truly modern cultural successor to the festival.¹⁴ The literature of the period teems with parties: from T. S. Eliot’s anxious afternoon teas in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915) to “conscious sociability” in Herbert Read’s poem “Garden Party” (1919); from the liminal intimacy occasioned by festivity in Katherine Mansfield’s short story “The Garden Party” (1923) to the endless delay of communion in Henry Green’s *Party Going* (1939), in which the characters never make it to their house party (they are stuck at Victoria Station in a terrible fog). As Kate McLoughlin argues, the most prevalent characteristic of the party in the modernist period is its diversity: there is no one model for a party, whether considered in terms of spaces, times, manners, or menus: “In life and in literature, parties of the period range from tea-parties to cocktail-parties, from lunch- and dinner-parties to extended house-parties, from breakfast-parties to parties held in venues such as nightclubs, restaurants and artists’ studios, from at-homes to dinner-dances to soirées.”¹⁵

The party’s central status in the festive imaginary of the period is due, at least in part, to its contemporaneity. Indeed, the twentieth century oversaw the development of distinctive types of sociability, not least of which was the cocktail party, invented (or so he claimed) by

16. Waugh's claim is, as many scholars have noted, apocryphal: there had been pre-dinner parties with cocktails in the United States since the mid-teens.

17. Alec Waugh, "They Laughed When I Invented the Cocktail Party," *Esquire*, July 1974, 102–3, <http://archive.esquire.com/issue/19740701>.

18. *Ibid.*, 104.

19. Tom Perrin, *The Aesthetics of Middlebrow Fiction: Popular US Novels, Modernism, and Form, 1945–75* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), Google Books, n.p.

20. *Esquire*, July 1974, <http://archive.esquire.com/issue/19740701>.

21. Waugh, "Cocktail Hour," 532.

22. D. J. Taylor, *Bright Young People: The Rise and Fall of a Generation, 1918–1940* (London: Vintage, 2008), 4–6; Humphrey Carpenter, *The Brideshead Generation: Evelyn Waugh and His Friends* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), 185.

the novelist Alec Waugh (brother of Evelyn) in 1924.¹⁶ As Alec Waugh described in an essay for *Esquire*, published in 1974, the cocktail party was invented as a means to escape the dead hours between half-past five and half-past seven, in which there was "there was nothing to do on winter evenings."¹⁷ While idleness may have been a primary motive, Waugh also suggests that his invention was at least partially inspired by narrative concerns. He was writing a novel, *Kept*, and needed a social occasion with alcohol, but no food, to "solve" his characters' "amatory problems."¹⁸ As Tom Perrin has noted, a *New York Times* review proclaimed cocktails and James Joyce as the "accessories of modern jazz life."¹⁹ Indeed, *Esquire* tagged Waugh's essay as "an exclusive report on the greatest social innovation of the twentieth century, by the innovator himself."²⁰ If Alec Waugh is to be believed, the historical cocktail party was invented in order that it could serve as a distinctly modern narrative device. Certainly it would become an important setting for fiction and poetry in this period: the opportunities afforded by alcohol's social lubrication, the in-between nature of the cocktail party (between the longer tradition of tea and the more formal sociability of dancing), and the relative newness of the forms of etiquette required of these occasions, means that writers could easily exploit the dramatic conflicts that would arise at these liminal events.

Like the festival, the party is a period of excess, liminality, and transgression, aspects shown convincingly in Evelyn Waugh's early works. As a consummate observer of sociability, Waugh set his parties in a variety of locations and times: the destructive "beano" that opens his first novel, *Decline and Fall* (1928), occurs at an Oxford college; the "riot" that overtakes a public pageant in *Black Mischief* (1932) takes place in a fictional African colony; the sexual malaise of *A Handful of Dust* (1934) is reflected in drunken scenes set in London nightclubs. In his 1933 *Harper's* essay, Waugh argued that "natural repugnance" would dissuade most people from hosting, as would the inevitability of its "failure" as a social enterprise.²¹ His fiction likewise demonstrates the ugly feelings associated with hospitality and party-going. Waugh's texts depict party-going as a frenzied experience, with characters frequently consuming too much drink, making irrational (sometimes even fatal) decisions, masquerading in fancy dress, and lurching wildly from one party location to the next. In *Vile Bodies* (1930) the Bright Young People—a group of pleasure-seeking socialites—attend parties in the usual hotels and nightclubs, but also in tethered dirigibles, train stations, nursing homes, and at No. 10 Downing Street. Almost any place or time becomes an occasion for a party. As D. J. Taylor and Humphrey Carpenter have both shown, much of Waugh's novel was inspired by real parties given by the historical Bright Young People.²² *Vile Bodies* and the closely contemporaneous short story "Cruise: Letters from a Young Lady of Leisure" (1933) illustrate the importance of Caillois's approach in understanding forms of play, and their representation, in twentieth-century parties. In particular, Caillois's categories of mimicry andilinx offer productive means with which to understand Waugh's depictions of festivity. In these two texts, simulation and vertigo are continually enacted in a number of ways—such as via disguised identities and nausea-inducing settings—creating an unstable and unpredictable festive landscape. While this essay could take many of Waugh's early fictions as its case studies, there are specific reasons for attending to these two works. *Vile Bodies*, as Waugh's definitive "party" novel, offers a veritable thesis on party-going in the late Jazz Age, while the largely unexamined "Cruise" represents a distinctive mode of interwar sociability, that of the ocean cruise. In neither story is festivity shown to be anything other than a waste: of time, of energy, and occasionally, of life.

23. Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, ed. Richard Jacobs (London: Penguin, 2000), 11.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 17.

26. Richard Jacobs, "Introduction," in *Vile Bodies*, by Evelyn Waugh (London: Penguin, 2000), xv.

27. Lisa Colletta, *Dark Humor and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 81.

28. Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 104.

29. Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, trans. Meyer Barash (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 98.

30. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 5–6.

31. Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *The Bataille Reader*, ed. by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (London: Blackwell, 1997), 169.

32. Georges Bataille, "Sacrifice, the Festival and the Principles of the Sacred World," in *The Bataille Reader*, ed. by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (London: Blackwell, 1997), 216.

33. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 51.

34. Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 111–12.

35. Evelyn Waugh to Henry Yorke, September 1929, in *The Letters*

Vile Bodies

Vile Bodies begins on a ship at sea, a setting that serves as an early indication of the vertiginous, "sick-making" qualities of the text.²³ As the boat crosses the English Channel in turbulent conditions, illness strikes the passengers, including a group of Bright Young People who compare the journey to "being inside a cocktail shaker."²⁴ One of its brightest members, Agatha Runcible, likens the experience to "one's first parties...being sick with other people singing."²⁵ Her comparison is apt: nausea (both physiological and affective) dominates the novel's party scenes. The novel revolves around aspiring author Adam Fenwick-Symes's on-off engagement to Nina Blount. As Bright Young People, Adam and Nina trust their relationship to fortune. Rich one day from a lucky bet on the races, they get engaged; broke the next (having lost the money), they break it off. While for Richard Jacobs, this quest for treasure (via games of alea) is one of the central aspects of the novel,²⁶ it is our contention that mimicry and ilinx are the dominant forms of play in *Vile Bodies*. The narrative is episodic and frantic in its structure, capturing what Lisa Colletta characterizes as the "collective cultural condition" of "the sense of busily going nowhere."²⁷ Conversations are shallow, gossip is rife, and parties are such an everyday occurrence that the most common feeling reported is of boredom. The novel's best-known passage offers a thesis on the multiplicity of parties, filled with alliteration and repetition that leaves the reader dizzy and dazzled:

Wild West parties, Russian parties, Circus parties, parties where one had to dress as somebody else [...] parties in flats and studios and houses and ships and hotels and night clubs [...] 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...²⁸

The succession and repetition of parties—that is, their everydayness—marks parties in *Vile Bodies* as sites of waste. In *Man and the Sacred* Caillois argues that "destruction and waste, as forms of excess" characterize festivity;²⁹ in *Man, Play and Games* he argues similarly that play is purely wasteful, of "time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money."³⁰ Caillois's ambivalence counterpoints other theories of festive wasting: Georges Bataille, for example, names games and festivity among various forms of "unproductive expenditure" underlaid by the "principle of loss," which seems to echo Caillois in its gloom.³¹ Yet elsewhere, Bataille also recognizes festive destruction as intrinsically limited (both in scope and duration), and its ultimate tendency toward the reconciliation of the social world.³² Here, we should also comment on the role of drugs and alcohol, which appear repeatedly in Waugh's text. Caillois reads the "intoxication and euphoria" occasioned by the stimulant that "free[s] one from the burden of memory" and "the terrors of social responsibilities," as *corrupting* play with lasting (as opposed to momentary) effects: "the organism is slowly but permanently changed. [...] This is in complete contrast to play, which is always contingent and gratuitous activity."³³ Waugh's vile bodies, constantly stimulated, are subjected to perpetual change: vacillating between a "fatal hunger for permanence" and the "radical instability" that governs their world.³⁴ Waugh's representation of festivity as a "succession and repetition"—that is, as constant, which only replicates rather than produces—both modifies Caillois's concept of play as contingent and underlines his sense of its gratuity. Caillois's gloomy take on play and festivity, a stark contrast to the Bakhtinian theory of festive renewal, or even Bataille's writing on sacrifice and reconciliation, finds a corollary in *Vile Bodies*, in which death, decay, inauthenticity, and melancholy color the narrative. Prior to publication Waugh wrote to a

of Evelyn Waugh, ed. Mark Amory
(London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 39.

36. Kevin Trumpeter has convincingly argued that waste similarly motivates F. Scott Fitzgerald's depiction of parties in *The Great Gatsby*. "Furnishing Modernist Fiction: The Aesthetics of Refuse," *Modernism/modernity* 20, no. 2 (2013): 307–26.

37. Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 42.

38. Patrick Balfour, a gossip columnist for the *Daily Sketch* during the period (and a friend of Waugh's), makes mention of several themed parties that invited guests to dress in costume, such as the Russian party, the Mozart party, the Circus party, the Baby party, and the Wild West party. Patrick Balfour, *Society Racket: A Critical Survey of Modern Social Life* (London: John Long, 1933), 170.

39. Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 45.

40. *Ibid.*, 44.

41. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 97.

42. Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 45.

43. *Ibid.*, 49.

44. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 97.

45. Waugh. *Vile Bodies*, 49.

46. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1966), 35.

friend that the novel seemed "to shrivel up & rot internally"; any effect the novel would have was a function of "cumulative futility."³⁵

Several sequences establish the novel's interest in festivity *qua* waste.³⁶ Early in the novel, for instance, a sequence of revelry takes the characters from a "savage-themed party" to a hotel lobby to late-night whisky at No. 10 Downing Street. The savage party is described as "repulsive" by a gossip columnist, and is so boring that Adam falls asleep (twice).³⁷ Themed parties were a popular form of festivity among the younger set in interwar London and involved, by their nature, participation in mimicry.³⁸ Dressing in costume assures inclusion in the festive realm: Agatha Runcible wears a Hawaiian costume and is regarded as "the life and soul of the evening," whereas a group of stuffy young aristocrats who refuse to dress up are emphatically excluded, standing together "aloof, amused but not amusing."³⁹ Those who do not dress up wish they had: Miss Mouse longs to "tear down her dazzling frock to her hips and dance like a Bacchante."⁴⁰ The party-goers' conduct is enabled by their costumes: mimicking a "savage" grants licence to behave outside of social norms and mores, suggesting the transformation occasioned by ritual.⁴¹ Yet importantly, no bacchic transfiguration occurs as a result of the savage party. Instead, the dominant feelings are "tension," "terror," and finally exhaustion caused by posing for, or avoiding, press photographers.⁴²

After the party, the Bright Young People continue to a metropolitan hotel, Shepheard's, but are greeted with a decidedly un-festive scene: a maid, knocked out after swinging on a chandelier at a private party. Later, it is revealed that she dies as a result of incident, marking the first of three party-related deaths that occur in the novel. Unsatisfied with the party prospects at the hotel, Miss Brown—a daughter of the new prime minister—invites the group to No. 10 Downing Street (though socially sophisticated, the Bright Young People are politically uninformed, and do not realize where they are). In one of the most formal settings possible, the younger set enjoy fine whisky and cigars, eat the kitchen's entire supply of eggs and bacon, all while speaking in Cockney, destabilizing the official functions of the nation-state associated with the building. Vanburgh, a gossip writer, unwittingly assumes the role of head of state when he calls through his column from the prime minister's office. His scoop, as it happens, does occasion a change in government, when the scandal of the party breaks on the front page the next day. Festivity's unstable rearrangement of social, political, and moral boundaries continues into the next morning, when Agatha—who has stayed the night at No. 10 because she has forgotten her latchkey—finds herself in an awkward position at breakfast, still dressed in her Hawaiian costume. Displaced from her usual festive realm and social set, Agatha's appearance and behavior confuse the straight-laced Brown family: the prime minister of the day describes her as a "dancing Hottentot woman."⁴³ In the real world—the realm in which Caillois believes that *agôn* and *alea* dominates and mimicry and *ilinx* are suppressed⁴⁴—Agatha's manner is taboo, "shy-making," and therefore shameful.⁴⁵ Remembering Mary Douglas's concept of dirt as matter out of place, Agatha's participation in wasteful festivity transforms her into just such social waste matter, shamefully out of place.⁴⁶

Mimicry is used for social inclusion when the *Daily Excess's* gossip writer, Mr Chatterbox (real name Simon Balcairn) is snubbed an invitation to a party given by society hostess Lady Metroland. For Simon, attending the party is a matter of life and death: "if I miss this party [...] I

47. Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 73.
48. *Ibid.*, 90.
49. *Ibid.*, 158.
50. Brian Thill, *Waste* (London: Bloomsbury Object Lessons, 2015), 8, 26.
51. Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 91.
52. Brooke Allen, "Vile Bodies: A Futurist Fantasy," *Twentieth Century Literature* 40, no. 3 (1994): 326.
53. Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 103.
54. *Ibid.*, 103–4.
55. *Ibid.*, 103.
56. *Ibid.*
57. *Ibid.*
58. *Ibid.*, 104.
59. Thill, *Waste*, 20.
60. Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 105.
61. Anthony Lane, "Waugh in Pieces," *The New Yorker*, October 4, 1999, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1999/10/04/waugh-in-pieces>.

may as well put my head into a gas-oven."⁴⁷ Unable to procure an invite, Simon disguises himself with a fake beard and gate-crashes in an attempt to get the latest scoop. Thrown out after being recognized, Simon goes home to dictate his final story—filled with enough slander to warrant dozens of libel cases—before committing suicide. Following through with his gas-oven plan, Simon suffers a queasy death: "the sniff made him cough, and coughing made him breathe, and breathing made him feel very ill; but soon he fell into a coma and presently died."⁴⁸ In a society where the attainment of pleasure, fortune, and social success is paramount, it is not surprising that the parties in *Vile Bodies* become, quite literally, life or death events. Parties, then, not only waste time and energy, but also life. But this sense of waste is barely felt by the other characters in the novel: when Adam mentions Simon's suicide to Agatha, her reaction is blasé: "Oh, *that* Simon. I thought you meant *Simon*," confusing him with another person entirely.⁴⁹ Simon is thus simply one more vile body, repeatable and replaceable. Brian Thill argues that "unwanted objects" become waste when they overwhelm and overtake the subject through overabundance.⁵⁰ Here, the human subject becomes just one more of those unwanted objects, his identity elided by his role as Mr Chatterbox. Indeed, this role is a form of mimicry in itself. The position is never permanent, and is held by several characters in the novel (Simon, Adam, Miles, and temporarily, Nina). The social editor of the *Daily Excess* says that a week or so is "about as long as anyone sticks it."⁵¹ As Brooke Allen notes, the various Mr Chatterboxes merge into one another: in taking the position, each subsumes his or her individuality into the corporate identity of the gossip columnist.⁵²

While parties by their nature proffer narrative occasions for transformation, crisis, or catharsis, Waugh shows parties to be peculiarly uneventful, even when they are nominally novel. For instance, the party held in the "captive dirigible" is said to be the first held in such a place,⁵³ but rather than being exciting and uplifting, the affects it produces are negative (descriptors used in this sequence include "unwell," "bore," "ill," "bogus," "dull").⁵⁴ While the dirigible party is clearly intended as a spectacle, it is a poor one: "all the same faces" gather, while a crowd of louts assemble below to "jeer."⁵⁵ Inside, it is not much better: the rooms are "narrow and hot" with "protrusions at every corner," connected together by "spiral staircases."⁵⁶ It takes only half an hour for Agatha to be covered in "a mass of bruises."⁵⁷ The airship also proves to be too much for the increasingly weary Adam: "Oh, Nina," he remarks, "*what a lot of parties*."⁵⁸ The dirigible's confusing, maze-like interior, coupled with its oxymoronic stasis (in the air, but going nowhere) shows festivity as a site of both confinement and waste, particularly when we consider Thill's argument that waste is the opposite and corollary of desire, producing either disgust or indifference.⁵⁹ Yet despite the nausea and fatigue experienced by the characters, they persist, leaving the airship for an illegal night club, St Christopher's Social Club. In spite of its name, and Agatha's assertion that it is "divine," St Christopher's offers no respite for these giddy social travelers: the room is hot and full of smoke, its tables "unsteady."⁶⁰ The most frequently used initial words here are demonstrative adverbs ("then," "so," "there") and the plural pronoun "they". Here we might pause on an observation of Anthony Lane's, that Waugh's "demeanor" can be registered in the word "so": "Designed to establish a causal connection, it may equally gesture toward a run of events so fluid that cause and effect can be found giggling under the table."⁶¹ The syntax of this sequence, each sentence gesturing adverbially toward its status as the next in a run, and the group pronoun eliding the individuality of its members, tends toward the sequential (rather than the consequential) and the impersonal. The passage from airship to St Christopher's

62. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 17.

63. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006).

64. Spacks, *Boredom*, 23.

65. Naomi Milthorpe, *Evelyn Waugh's Satire: Texts and Contexts* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016), 35–54.

66. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 49.

67. Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 146.

finally culminates in the group sitting in a private bedsit drinking whisky while the host is sick. Apart from the parenthetical “vile bodies” passage quoted above, which dazzles the reader with its catalogue of parties, the sequence is tonally flat (that is, *boring*)—another feature of its use of a depersonalized and sequential grammar.

Waugh's *Bright Young People* frequently express boredom, which is unsurprising given the excess of leisure/pleasure time they have at their hands. Recalling Patricia Meyer Spacks's assertion that the boredom is a uniquely modern construct, born out of the split between work and leisure,⁶² the *Bright Young People* are prone to boredom because they have little serious work to otherwise occupy them (ascribing Hannah Arendt's grander banality to these figures seems over the top, but there are similarities: a lack of individual will, a desire for distraction from the humdrum).⁶³ Most are unemployed, a historically inflected fact of the Slump economy as well as an aspect of their membership in the moneyed class. Indeed, even the few who are seen to labor throughout the novel—the multiple Mr Chatterboxes—do so in leisure spaces or arenas of pleasure, observing their subjects from restaurant tables or lounge rooms. The constant hiring and firing associated with the position, and the regular lack of effort undertaken by whoever happens to be in the role at a given time, signals a world full of play, but no real work. Spacks observes moreover that boredom registers an awareness of the inner life's inadequacies,⁶⁴ a point that seems crucial for understanding *Vile Bodies*. As Naomi Milthorpe has argued, the *Bright Young People* seem to lack any interiority at all.⁶⁵ No wonder they are bored.

In a world in which work is play and play is work, any occasion can be transformed by festivity: a day at the motor races for Adam, Agatha, Archie, and Miles turns into a celebration once Adam learns he has a fortune of thirty-five thousand pounds waiting to be collected from a drunk major. To toast Adam's newfound wealth, each person drinks a bottle of champagne. Drunk, the group returns to the pits to watch the race, wearing brassards denoting official team positions in order to gain access. Agatha is unexpectedly thrust into competing after the driver is forced to retire: her armband states that she is the team's spare driver. Her decision to participate in the race signals what Caillois describes as the corruption of mimicry: the person who is disguised comes to believe that the role they are playing is real.⁶⁶ Dialogue captures the moment of corruption:

“I'm spare driver,” said Miss Runcible. “It's on my arm.”

“She's spare driver. Look, it's on her arm.”

“Well, do you want to scratch?”

“Don't you scratch, Agatha.”

“No, I don't want to scratch.”

“All right. What's your name?”

“Agatha. I'm the spare driver. It's on my arm.”

“I can see it is—all right, start off as soon as you like.”

“Agatha,” repeated Miss Runcible firmly as she climbed into the car. “It's on my arm.”

“I say, Agatha,” said Adam. “Are you sure you're all right?”

“It's on my arm,” said Miss Runcible severely.⁶⁷

The conversation is dizzyingly repetitive and the mostly unattributed dialogue confuses the reader attempting to establish who speaks. Of these repeated phrases the most insistent is “it's on my arm” and importantly, they are the last words that Agatha says before she drives away.

68. Damon Marcel DeCoste, "(AND YOU GET FAR TOO MUCH PUBLICITY ALREADY WHOEVER YOU ARE)": Gossip, Celebrity, and Modernist Authorship in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 49, no. 1 (2013): 26.

69. Ibid.

70. Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 148.

71. Ibid., 160.

72. George McCartney, *Confused Roaring: Evelyn Waugh and the Modernist Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 157–58.

73. Allen, "Vile Bodies," 321.

74. Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 158.

75. Douglas Lane Patey, *The Life of Evelyn Waugh: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 74.

76. Evelyn Waugh, "People Who Want to Sue Me," *Daily Mail*, May 31, 1930, reprinted in *The Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh: Essays, Articles, and Reviews 1922–1934*, ed. Donat Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 243.

77. Jacobs, "Introduction," xxvii.

Damon Marcel DeCoste argues that Waugh's lack of attribution and description in sections of dialogue during several key moments in the novel restricts the reader's access to the characters' thoughts and motives.⁶⁸ The characters instead become the words they speak, stripped of subjective identity.⁶⁹ Agatha is either the spare driver—or Agatha—because it's on her arm. The implication being, were another name or role written there, she could be something (or someone) else entirely. It is significant that the only adverbs used in the dialogue tags—"firmly" and "severely"—are attached to Agatha's speech. These imply seriousness, resolution. However, her reaffirmation of control is contradicted by her actions in the racing car: after several erratic laps, the car leaves the track "proceeding south on the byeroad, apparently out of control," crashing into a nearby village market cross.⁷⁰ The contrast between Agatha's verbal resolution and chaotic driving contributes to a mounting sense that the vertiginous interregnum produced by festivity also imperils the subject.

The corruption of mimicry is confirmed when Agatha, who has fled the crash scene, is found at Euston Station the next day. When prompted for her name, she can only point to the new identity indicated on her brassard—recalling her final words at the pits. Taken to a nursing home for her recovery, Agatha regains her memory but suffers mental instability. A visit from Adam quickly turns into a spontaneous party when a host of bright young visitors arrive; there just happen to be supplies for making cocktails and a gramophone at hand. The relationship between parties and gossip becomes closer than ever in this scene, as Miles, the new Mr Chatterbox, rings his column through to the *Daily Excess* offices while the party goes on around him. The reader hears the report dictated: "...Yesterday I visited the Hon. Agatha Runcible comma Lord Chasm's lovely daughter comma at the Wimpole Street nursing-home."⁷¹ George McCartney observes that Waugh's characters are regularly engulfed by noise.⁷² Brooke Allen concurs, reading the talk in *Vile Bodies* as a type of noise, because of its mostly vacuous content.⁷³ In this scene, the noisy talk is gossip: Miles's report interjects throughout, creating a disquieting effect. Agatha's nightmares while recovering from her accident reveal her perception of the relationship between people and the press: "we were all driving round and round in a motor race and none of us could stop, and there was an enormous audience composed entirely of gossip writers and gate-crashers [...] all shouting to us at once to go faster."⁷⁴ As Douglas Lane Patey notes, the image of the cars speeding around the racetrack is central to the novel, symbolizing the way in which "events move faster and faster until a whole world crashes."⁷⁵ The nursing home party is the final moment before Agatha's world crashes: she never recovers from the excitement of the party and descends into delirium, then death, still imagining that she is behind the wheel of the race car. Importantly, the scene's talk, alternating between gossip and delirium, demonstrates Waugh's interest in waste. Verbal waste accompanies the wastefulness of Agatha's ultimately fatal encounter with festivity.

Writing in the *Daily Mail* a few months after the release of *Vile Bodies*, Waugh pronounced Agatha the heroine of the novel, describing her as "crazy," "dissolute," and "sordid."⁷⁶ Jacobs reads this as an attempt by Waugh to degrade the novel, and instead characterizes Agatha as "an emblem of the novel's need to suspend the processes of time in a paradox of glamour and innocence."⁷⁷ But if *Vile Bodies* is concerned with illustrating the wasteful emptiness of party-going, placing Agatha at the novel's center makes sense: Agatha exemplifies mimicry and ilinx, and their consequences, most clearly—from being the festive life of the party in Hawaiian costume right until her dizzying, distressing end.

“Cruise”

Three years after the publication of *Vile Bodies*, Waugh published a short story, “Cruise: Letters from a Young Lady of Leisure,” in the February 1933 issue of *Harper’s Bazaar*. The story was later collected in Waugh’s first book of short stories, *Mr Loveday’s Little Outing* (1936). This epistolary tale, its title bathetically echoing John Cleland’s 1748 erotic novel *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, describes a cruise holiday taken by the unnamed young lady of the subtitle with her family. In letters and postcards to a friend, the young lady describes her cruise to Egypt on board the SS *Glory of Greece*, detailing life on board and visits to port towns, and narrates her various romantic entanglements with multiple fellow passengers. Like most of Waugh’s short stories it has not enjoyed (or endured) ongoing critical interest; however, it is important for discussing Waugh’s representation of festive sociability as it is inflected by the suspension of time and space enjoyed while taking a cruise holiday. Waugh’s conflation of leisure with pleasure through his intertextual title suggests that we need to read the story as being as much about sociability as about travel. The operation of ilinx and mimicry upon human subjects appears in the narrator’s retelling of several onboard party events, including a costume party, cocktails in the purser’s room, and dinner on deck. In its structure, action, and metaphors, in which causality appears to recede in favor of a vertiginous lurching from event to event, the story posits both the allure of departure from everyday life through an embrace of mimicry and ilinx, and the deflation and waste that results.

The most salient characteristic of Waugh’s exploration of festivity in “Cruise” is that the departure from the everyday is doubled: parties are an aspect of the cruise liner’s enabling of escape from ordinary routine. This setting for festivity recalls Foucault’s assertion that “the ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*,” able to operate as “a floating piece of space, a place without a place.”⁷⁸ As many scholars have noted, the cruise holiday was during the twenties and thirties a byword for glamorous escape, the cruise liner a “pseudo-place” whose liminality and mobility licensed fantasy and play.⁷⁹ Escape was a common theme of thirties writing, as Paul Fussell has memorably argued, in which the greyness, dourness, and cold of England in the Slump was contrasted with the brightness and warmth of abroad. “Momentary departures from the ordinary” likewise characterized much of youth sociability, as Eivind Grip Fjær and Sébastien Tutenges have shown.⁸⁰ In Waugh’s “Cruise” the reader is flung, *in medias res*, into the action through the narrator’s letter, as though we are its addressee. We discover that the first leg of the journey was “rough” and that the young lady and her brother Bertie were denied sleeper berths on the boat train because of a mix-up with the tickets: “Goodness how Sad.”⁸¹ Once on board, the narrator says, “everything [was] a bit more alright,” including making acquaintance with a “corking [i.e., agreeable] young man.”⁸² She also meets the purser, whose compliment to her—that she is different from everyone else—is marked as “decent,” apparently using this epithet in the colloquial interwar way, to mean kind or accommodating.⁸³ “Decent” is the most explicitly positive epithet she uses; in its historical etymology, the word means to be fit or appropriate, or satisfying a general standard. That this is her highest form of praise suggests a negative affective realm. In spite, that is, of “everything” being “alright,” what we read is a litany of minor complaints: salt water makes bathing difficult, Bertie loses at the casino, seasickness cuts short the narrator’s amorous night with the young man. “Alright” thus stands in for something less than the word suggests: as she comments, “goodness how sad.”⁸⁴ Her slangy descriptions, alternating between “decent,” “alright,” and “sad,” reveals the uneven emotional terrain caused by onboard sociability.

78. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 27.

79. Paul Fussell, *Abroad: English Literary Travelling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 45. See also Gregory Votolato, *Ship* (London: Reaktion, 2011).

80. Eivind Grip Fjær and Sébastien Tutenges, “Departies: Conceptualizing Extended Youth Parties,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 20, no. 2 (2017): 201.

81. Evelyn Waugh, “Cruise: Letters from a Young Lady of Leisure,” in *The Complete Short Stories of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater (London: Everyman, 1998), 113.

82. *Ibid.*, 113.

83. *Ibid.*, 115.

84. *Ibid.*, 113.

85. Douglas Hart, "Sociability and 'Separate Spheres' on the North Atlantic: The Interior Architecture of British Atlantic Liners," *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 1 (2010): 204.

86. Waugh, "Cruise," 115.

87. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 804.

88. Waugh, "Cruise," 114.

89. *Ibid.*, 115.

90. *Ibid.*

91. *Ibid.*, 116.

92. *Ibid.*

93. *Ibid.*

94. *Ibid.*

The narrative, told in irregular sections (a long letter here, a one-line postcard there) seems both formally and thematically concerned with the problem of navigating the actual and affective bumps experienced by cruise passengers. As Douglas Hart notes, cruise ship lounges, as spaces of licensed mingling between the sexes, were in the twenties among the few public arenas in which introductions were not necessary to strike up an acquaintance.⁸⁵ This is reflected in the young lady's rapid familiarity with a succession of young men she meets in the lounge: the "corking" young man Robert, an effete fellow with a camera called Arthur, and several of the ship's employees, including the "cynical" purser, who invites her to his room for cocktails.⁸⁶ This succession of suitors also reveals the origin of the young lady's romantic interests in the enforced idleness of travel. Walter Benjamin saw idleness *qua* amusement ("the readiness to savor, on one's own, an arbitrary succession of sensations").⁸⁷ Here, the suspension of the normal patterns of work or study in favor of unbroken leisure results in an arbitrary succession of romantic sensations engendered through proximity. The young lady is dismissive of the other passengers who are unable to assist with her pursuit of entertainment. "Who else is there? Well a lot of old ones," she tells us, along with a newly married couple ("very embarrassing") and several families from the unfashionable "industrial north."⁸⁸ Her comment about the newlyweds, in combination with her praise word, "decent," indicates that the public nature of onboard sociability mediates and moderates the display of emotions, requiring a blasé attitude that refuses both the highs and lows of grand passions. A flippant, feminine flâneuse, the young lady saunters and lounges on the ship, both spatially and sexually, seeking pleasurable sensations with which to fill idle time.

As on the real cruise ships of the thirties, the company in Waugh's story organizes time between each leg of travel with social occasions: deck games, dinners, and a fancy dress ball. While the heroine calls the deck games "hell," she notes their importance in establishing community among the passengers—Bertie, who refuses to play, is "madly unpop."⁸⁹ But more crucial for the young lady is the ball. Balls present multiple opportunities for the transformations occasioned by mimicry and ilinx—special costumes, decorations, dancing, drinks, and romantic entanglements. Thus a ball in a literary text can function as both historical representation of social ritual and as a standard plot device allowing for dramatic conflict, change, and crisis. Waugh frames the cruise ship ball in this manner: the young lady plans a "clever" costume—she is to go in drag in a sailor's outfit, an idea suggested to her over cocktails by the purser—that will undercut her romantic rival, Miss P.⁹⁰ Textually positioned at the moment of narrative crisis, the reader thus expects that the young lady will triumph at the ball: her social cleverness, symbolized in her transgressive choice of costume, will be parsed as sexually superior. The young lady is also late to the ball, which is usually a narrative tool for increasing social triumph through delay and anticipation: she has been fixing her sailor's cap, which is "a corker."⁹¹ But Waugh ironically deflates any transformative potential offered by the costume. As the heroine discovers once she has entered the ballroom, about "twenty girls and some women" are all dressed identically.⁹² Her rival Miss P wears a ballet costume, achieving the individuality and spectacle the heroine desires, but fails, to garner to herself. The young lady receives only a "faint clap" instead of the exultant victory due to conventional romantic heroines.⁹³ The rest of the party follows a similarly bathetic course of minor violence (hitting Miss P in the nose with a paper streamer), sadness (Bertie, whose costume is "horribly dull," ends up crying in the purser's cabin), and sexual failure (she "bitche[s]" another young man): events summarized in her characteristic comment, "goodness how Sad."⁹⁴

In place of the renewal offered by Bakhtinian festivity, or the climax seen in conventional romantic plots, Waugh proffers a festive and narrative structure that is simply one slightly disappointing event after another. The story ignites narrative energy but then wastes it in fizzling, bathetic irony.

Like *Vile Bodies*, "Cruise" is a story that on a formal level, as well as on the level of events and characters, instates succession, sequence, or series rather than progression, growth, or effect. Like the novel, the most frequent initial words in this story are adverbs demonstrating sequence: "so," "then," "well." The young lady's letters read as though they have been dashed off suddenly, without deep thought or revision. She spells words incorrectly, forgets the rules of punctuation and grammar, and uses capitalization inconsistently. The run-on, rambling prose demands to be consumed quickly by its reader. The letters and postcards have little connection beyond being the next in the temporal series: in terms of character development, there is only a limited sense that the young lady or any of her fellow passengers changes as a result of this festive period. As a brief example, in four of thirteen letters or postcards, the young lady reports her mother having bought a shawl. This is among the only activities her mother is shown to do. Such recurrence at the level of character activity indicates this is a narrative world dominated by repetition rather than change. Likewise, the young lady's closing comment on Miss P in her final postcard, "Goodness what a bitch," suggests not generosity or community but a further, acrimonious atomization of human relations.⁹⁵ In the same way that "succession and repetition" characterizes festivity in *Vile Bodies*, "Cruise" narrates arbitrary succession rather than cathartic transformation. In place of the purifying suspension of everyday relations that refreshes the polity, Waugh presents a sociability that, in repeating endlessly, pollutes.

95. Ibid., 118.

96. Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years 1903-1939* (London: J. M. Dent, 1986), 298.

97. Waugh, "Cruise," 118.

Martin Stannard comments that "Cruise" echoes the theme of much of Waugh's thirties writing, of the cruelty and savagery that dominate apparently polite society.⁹⁶ "Cruise" certainly shows people behaving extremely poorly, and does indeed end in a chaotic, deflated unraveling of any pretensions to sophistication suggested by the idea of a cruise holiday. However, the story is so bathetic in tone—chatty, gossipy, casual—that reading it in the grand terms of cruelty seems a little overwhelming. The story ends in ironic deflation: "So now we are back," recounts the heroine on a postcard, "and sang old lang syne is that how you spell it."⁹⁷ "Cruise" imagines a festive wastefulness that ends not with a bang but a whimper: in the banality of a picture postcard finished with a casually cutting remark.

For Waugh and his characters, parties range from dull to disgusting, from sick to sad. Parties—iterative, repetitive, arbitrary, wasteful—occasion boredom, nausea, hostility, violence, and death, but rarely do they bring about social renewal, catharsis, cohesion, or even fun. The insights offered by Caillois's theories of festive play offer fruitful means to read Waugh's party fiction, pointing to further opportunities for new readings of literary texts informed by the rich interdisciplinarity of festive studies. But as our article demonstrates, literary studies has much to bring to festive studies. Literary texts document historical trends in manners and mores, deportment, slang, dress, décor and locations, food and drink, social expectations and behaviors, and a host of other sociological and economic factors implicated in parties. Through use of charged language they index the complex psychological and affective terrain of parties at different points in history and culture. By examining a text's integration of character, setting,

symbol, plot, and language, we can further understand the ways festivity has been understood and represented throughout history. Moreover, reading literary texts demonstrates the ways in which dominant theories and discourses of festivity fail to account for the complex work of parties and the different social functions they perform. In showing scenes of everyday waste and banal destruction, *Vile Bodies* and "Cruise" highlight the idealistic assumptions behind most theories of festivity: as these texts demonstrate, modern affective and social landscapes are too complex to unreflexively read festivity *qua* renewal. It follows that any expanded field of festive studies should take into account the theoretical and methodological affordances, as well as the intellectual, imaginary, and affective evidence, provided by literary studies and literary texts. We urge those working in this field to turn to literary texts in future studies of festivity.

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