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Too Absurd for Satire: When Evelyn Waugh and Christopher Buckley Stopped Skewering Their Own Societies

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A Thesis in the Field of English

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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Abstract

When do satirists need to look elsewhere for creative fulfillment? Is there ever a time when they need to turn away, at least temporarily, from ridiculing the societies in which they live? For two highly regarded satirists from two different eras, the answer is yes. Both British satirist Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966), and American satirist Christopher Buckley (b. 1952) took breaks from the genre and devoted themselves to other works. Buckley found America too absurd for satire when it elected Donald Trump as president in 2016, and Waugh went so far as to state that his satires were not really satires at all, but rather mimetics, so absurd was British society after the First World War. The two authors also share similar, privileged, backgrounds that provided them with opportunities others could only dream of. Yet, these rarefied circles in which they traveled were the very targets they chose for their satire. An important factor, also, is biographical: both had demanding, eccentric fathers for whom they could never quite measure up and who shaped the satire their sons wrote.

Dedication

For my mother, Mary M. Warford, who helped me get a Bachelor's Degree; for Professor Leo Damrosch , who helped me get a Master's Degree; and Catherine Warford Ballay, who helped me with both and everything in between.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Evelyn Waugh (1903-66) and Christopher Buckley (b. 1952) both wrote best-selling satires that skewered "from the inside" the elite society in which they lived. Both were featured frequently and prominently in the leading media outlets of their day, and both wrote novels that were adapted as feature films. Yet both also made the choice to step away, at least temporarily, from writing satire in part because they found their societies so absurd as to be beyond satire. Both featured protagonists who can be described as passive victims – they allow things to happen to them – who float through the story and in some cases end up right back where they started. Both novelists had powerful, dominant fathers, whose milieus come in for sharp attack in their sons' fiction. Both novelists do not just draw on their own experiences, they distort them to comedic effect to ridicule people within their own circle.

Waugh and Buckley both satirized the established institutions of their time. Waugh targeted post-war modernity, the upper-class British society, particularly the education and prison systems as well as the entrenched media moguls of Fleet Street, while Buckley, much less well known and studied, aims his work at American institutions such as all three branches of government and the burgeoning lobbying industry. The New York-Washington "Inside the Beltway" political-media establishment comes in particular comes in for scorching. By comparing six works – Waugh's *Decline and Fall, Handful of Dust* and *Scoop*; and Buckley's *The White House Mess, Little Green*

Men, and *Thank You for Smoking* -- this thesis explores the satire of Christopher Buckley in light of seminal works of satire by Evelyn Waugh, whom Buckley cites as his favorite author, "hands down."

Each of the six works I examine had its roots in the author's personal history. *Decline and Fall* is based on Waugh's brief time as a schoolmaster in Wales, *Scoop* comes out of his time as a foreign correspondent in Ethiopia. In a darker satire, *Handful of Dust*, Waugh strikes back at his betrayal by the "Bright Young Things" with whom he consorted and betrayal specifically by his wife's adultery. Buckley's *The White House Mess* is a parody of White House memoirs, based on his time as chief speechwriter for then Vice President George H. W. Bush. *Little Green Men* jabs the "Inside the Beltway" society of Washington, D.C. His time in government also provides fodder for *Thank You for Smoking* – about the tobacco, gun, and liquor lobbyists and their undue influence on government.

Both writers were raised in wealth and privilege, both lived in the shadows of famous family members, both were essentially conservative in the sense that they respected tradition, but neither showed any qualms about attacking their own class and milieu. Both writers were given opportunities – attending schools such as Oxford or Yale, working in the White House, traveling to distant lands as a foreign correspondent – that many would long to experience. Yet it is these experiences that Waugh and Buckley turn into targets for withering ridicule. I argue that each writer's background of privilege and growing up under a father for whom he could never quite measure up led him to attack the very worlds that privilege helped him to enter. Moreover, already predisposed

to having a critical eye toward society, each saw that the world not only failed to improve but got worse as the years went by, leading each to see satire as futile. I further argue that each author -- while exposing the façade between what the general public sees and what really goes on in the institutions they wrote about – wrote more for himself than to bring about any great societal change.

To support the argument, I compare and contrast the biographies, autobiographies, memoirs of the authors, as well as works on satire and the notion that it is rooted in anger. These works, as well as interviews with the authors, shed light on why they turned away from satire. I compare and contrast the authors' novels, focusing on the six mentioned above, to see how their work shifts over time. I will show that both writers welcomed the chance to skewer their own kind, and ultimately became so critical of society they no longer saw it is as worthy of attack, causing their satire to break down and causing them to look for more fertile ground. After satirizing the arenas their privileged backgrounds helped them enter, both Waugh and Buckley found satire, at least temporarily, to be parched land. Not only had their satire failed to bring about social improvement, things got worse; progressively more ridiculous.

While never abandoning the genre all together, Waugh took frequent breaks from satire to write travel books, or to write about loftier matters, such as his historical novel on the life of St. Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine. He even went so far to suggest that his comic novels were not satire at all, since satire requires a stable society capable of feeling shame (see full quote below). After writing satires for thirty years, Buckley swore off the genre following the election of Donald Trump as president of the

United States in 2016, saying that this put the country so absurd as to be beyond the reach of satire. He gave into his satirical urges after three years, though, returning to the genre in late 2019.

In trying to define satire, and to see how such a definition aligns with the work of Waugh and Buckley, we quickly discover that scholars do not agree on any one clearly delineated standard for defining the term or for determining what is and what is not satire. Definitions vary widely, but we do find several identifying traits common to most scholarly definitions of satire and common to the six novels under discussion in my thesis: Waugh's *Decline and Fall*, *Handful of Dust*, and *Scoop*; and Buckley's *The White House Mess, Little Green Men,* and *Thank You for Smoking*. Scott asserts that whether in the form of a Roman poem from 2,000 years ago or a political cartoon from this morning's newspaper, satire's "purpose is always to ridicule" (Scott 5). Day and Thompson define satire as including "aggression and critique, focusing not just on personalities but also on institutionalized policies, norms, and beliefs." Ogburn and Buckroyd argue that the satirist has a "moral purpose…the desire to 'mend the world'" (Day and Thompson 11). The satirist, they say, "has a view of how society should behave morally, and contrasts this with what he or she sees as the vices or follies of the time" (11). Similarly, Quintero describes satirists as indignant, compelled by the corruption and decadence they see all about them to speak out. And, Quintero writes, "…they write not merely out of personal indignation, but with a sense of moral vocation and with a concern for the public interest" (Quintero 1).

Among the many identified by scholars, the above characteristics and traits of satire are the most helpful in this thesis. Waugh is clearly indignant and compelled by the corruption and decadence he sees around him. In *Scoop*, the eccentric Uncle Theodore makes a habit of singing, "Change and decay in all around I see" while awaiting the morning papers. This is Waugh himself, looking at post-World War I England. A traditionalist, he ridicules the post-war British school system – including, pointedly, his own Oxford University -- prison reform, modern architecture, and modern mores in *Decline and Fall*. In *Scoop,* he targets modern (1930s) journalism, mocking lazy foreign correspondents, obsequious editors, and the bumbling, blustering barons of Fleet Street. *In Handful of Dust*, he targets the fashionable and trendy 1930s British set known as the "Bright Young Things," (also known as the "Bright Young People") and zeroes in on his ex-wife, who crushed him by engaging in an extramarital affair. Buckley in *The White House Mess* ridicules the early 1980s working environs of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, indignant at the backbiting, access-seeking White House staffers whose main goal seems not to be to work for the American people but to garner credit or avoid blame for whatever happens in the Executive Branch. The Washington "Inside the Beltway Punditocracy" and wide-eyed conspiracy theorists come in for ridicule in *Little Green Men*. Buckley is indignant in *Thank You for Smoking*; indignant at how lobbyists for "Merchants of Death" – the tobacco, gun, and liquor industries – are the ones running the country rather than the elected representatives. At the same time, Buckley sees the pendulum having swung too far the other way, mocking the new anti-gun, anti-liquor,

anti-smoking activists as the "Neo-Puritans." From both writers, there is plenty of scorn to go around. They spare almost no one.

Waugh, considered by many the greatest satirical novelist of the 20th Century, was most likely employing irony himself when, writing in *Life* magazine, he denied that his own works were satirical:

No. Satire is a matter of Period. It flourishes in a stable society and presupposes homogeneous moral standards--the early Roman Empire and 18th Century Europe. It is aimed at inconsistency and hypocrisy. It exposes polite cruelty and folly by exaggerating them. It seeks to produce shame. All this has no place in the Century of the Common Man where vice no longer pays lip service to virtue (Milthorpe 2).

This suggests that Waugh believed 20th Century society – he made the above statement in 1946 – incapable of shame and thereby beyond satire. Waugh claimed his works were not satire but "simply mimesis: it is reality that is farcical." Waugh frequently veered away from satire – or mimesis, as he would have it – writing his historical novels, travel works, even a biography of Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion. Half a century after Waugh's death in 1966, another critically-acclaimed satirical novelist would reach a similar conclusion about his own epoch. Christopher Buckley, after writing nine satirical novels, switched to historical fiction, opting to mine the humor of the past rather than the present. "I think you need about 90 percent truth to make sturdy satire," he told this writer in a 2018 interview. "That's why I've (for the time being) resigned from satire, there being zero

truth in the circus that is now Washington D.C. That's a bit glib, but I think the more realistic, generally, the better."

In a 2017 interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, in promotion of his historical fiction novel, *The Relic Master*, about a 16th Century plot to forge the Shroud of Turin, Buckley explained: "The trouble with trying political satire anymore is American politics have reached the point of being self-satirized. (Satire is) "everywhere, especially on TV, and is being brilliantly done" (Wolfe).

Buckley looks to Swift for his favored definition of satire. Paraphrasing the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, he refers to satire as "The mirror held up to reality in which everyone recognizes everything except their own reflection" (Buckley interview). *In Tale of the Tub*, Swift wrote, "Satire is a sort of glass in which the beholder sees every face but his own" (Loveridge, 214). Not just "reality," but the one thing each of us does see in a mirror – our *own* face.

Buckley's move away from satire -- away from making fun of contemporary society and switching to the absurdities found in the distant past -- came about because his most recent satire, *They Eat Puppies, Don't They?* (2012), "did so-so at the box office and then America elected a buffoon as president, making satire seem not only pointless but also trivializing" (Buckley).

Waugh's *Life* magazine article and interviews with Buckley are important because they show the similar arc of their careers and their identical conclusion that they must

break away from satire. Similarly, their biographies show the common aspects that I argue made them satirists in the first place.

In the chapters ahead, we will see how those biographies shaped the satire of these two authors.

Chapter II

Critical Biographies

The notion that their societies had grown so absurd as to be beyond satire is just one aspect common to Evelyn Waugh and Christopher Buckley. Both were born to well off, famous fathers, both were educated at the finest universities, both wrote a nonfiction work before turning to satire, both tapped real-life experiences for their early satires, and both had a relationship with the Catholic Church – Waugh as a convert, Buckley as a dropout.

If, as Freud argued, humor in the form of tendentious jokes is a form of aggression, a way of letting off steam, it is worth examining the upbringing of the two satirists, through their biographies, diaries, letters, and memoirs, to see that they indeed had plenty about which they needed to let off steam. The 2016 biography by Philip Eade, *Evelyn Waugh: A Life Revisited*; Waugh's memoir of his early years, *A Little Learning*; and published volumes of Waugh diaries and letters will help us to see that an upbringing such as Waugh's could lead an author to ridicule the worlds to which that upbringing helped open doors. These works are important in showing that Waugh's insider status allowed him to critique British institutions with an intimacy that others lacked.

Arthur Evelyn St. John Waugh came from a long line of British writers, lawyers, and clergymen, according to the "Professional Antecedents" family tree published in his autobiography, *A Little Learning* (5). The very presence of a tree of Professional

Antecedents illustrates the high regard with which the author viewed his ancestry. Waugh devotes the entire first chapter of the autobiography, twenty-six pages, to "Heredity."

Alexander Waugh – the son of Evelyn's son Auberon Waugh – published in 2004 "Fathers and Sons: A Family Autobiography." He, too, examines the extensive Waugh family tree and notes the extraordinary literary contributions of the clan. When Evelyn's father, Arthur, was at Oxford, he won the prestigious Newdigate Prize for poetry with "a long, flowery epic about General Gordon, the empire hero decapitated at Khartoum three years earlier" (Alexander Waugh 41). This put him in good company: John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, and Oscar Wilde were previous winners of the Newdigate. The publication of the winning poem in 1888 "marked the birth of a remarkable literary dynasty. Works by Waughs have been in continuous print ever since: nine of Arthur's descendants have produced 180 books between them" (Alexander Waugh 41).

After Oxford, Arthur Waugh went on to a successful career as an editor and publisher; and Evelyn's only sibling, Alec, five years older, wrote a bestselling novel at just seventeen. Remarkably, Alec wrote this work while serving in the trenches in World War I. This would affect Evelyn in two ways. Not only did it set up Alec as the literary star of the new generation of Waughs, it ended up derailing his plans for school, as we will see. Waugh felt "less than" brother Alec, who was the first and always favored son. "Arthur was never entirely at ease with his younger son, and Evelyn could hardly fail to notice that he preferred Alec" (Eade 23). The elder Waugh even wrote to Alec's son on his christening: "'The three greatest things in my life have been my Mother, my Wife & my son – your father.' It was as if Evelyn had never existed" (Eade 23). Alexander

Waugh goes into the family dynamic in "Fathers and Sons" and makes clear that the relationship between Arthur and Alec seemed to go way beyond the typical "favored son" status. "Arthur and Evelyn were a two-man gang from which Evelyn was excluded" (Alexander Waugh 79). It is difficult to imagine how such slights could not lead to resentment in a young man; a resentment that could be unleashed on the educators, the prison reformers, the architects and the Fleet Streeters of the 1920s and '30s.

Alec was the golden boy, the fair-haired boy, and Evelyn knew it and outwardly accepted it as the way things were. Alexander Waugh suggests the father's letters to Alec were more like love letters between lovesick teen-agers than a father writing to his son. "Arthur was desperate that Alec treat him not as a parent but as an equal, as a friend, and tell him everything that was going on in his life" (Alexander Waugh 58).

As mentioned earlier, his brother's early literary success would end up affecting Evelyn's education as well as his ego. Both Arthur and Alec attended the Sherborne School, and it was Evelyn's dream to follow their footsteps. As Evelyn wrote in *A Little Learning*, his father fully expected him to follow those footsteps. "His interest in Sherborne remained obsessive. The names of all my brother's contemporaries and their peculiarities were as familiar to me as the boys at [my school]" (Waugh 95). Then, while away fighting in World War I in France, Alec, just 18, scribbled away each night on a novel about his own school days at Sherborne. Tepid by today's standards, its intimations of homosexual relations among the boys proved scandalous. *The Loom of Youth* proved to be Evelyn's undoing, making the Waughs *persona non grata* with school officials fiercely protective of Sherborne's reputation. Worse, as Alexander Waugh explains,

Arthur knew beforehand that if the book were published, Sherborne would not allow Evelyn to attend the school. Before the book came out, "Arthur arranged a lunch with the headmaster, explaining to him that Alec's book might be seen, in places, to take a highly critical view of the old school. 'Suppose it is published,' he asked the chief. 'can I possibly send Evelyn to Sherborne?' In his autobiography Arthur says, 'We both agreed I could not,' (Alexander Waugh 81). With that, Evelyn's fate was sealed, and he was sent to Lancing, a school he considered inferior and where he felt "lonely" and "bored" according to numerous entries in his diaries.

The decision to send Evelyn to Lancing, once Sherborne was out, was made by Arthur on the spur of the moment, without even an inspection of the school (Alexander Waugh 95). Evelyn was, in effect, sacrificed on the altar of Alec that Arthur so carefully constructed. Alexander Waugh describes Evelyn as "unforgiving" that his father played a part in his losing out on Sherborne just so Alec could publish his book (95), but Waugh himself, in what we will see is a pattern, played down the hurt. *In A Little Learning,* Waugh says simply: "There were controversies in some papers and for my father many broken friendships. Its effect on me was that Sherborne was now barred to me" (96). So off he went, not to his prestigious dream school like his father and brother, but to a sad and lonely experience at Lancing.

How could these slights not leave lasting scars on an obviously brilliant young man? In looking for motivations into why satirists – despite what they may assert publicly – target the institutions they do, experiences such as these cannot be discounted. As Alec wrote late in life, "I believe that my brother Evelyn will be an object of public

interest for many years, and the compiler of a thesis will surely be aided by an insight into his father's character" (Alexander Waugh 98). Thus, the second-choice school his father sent him to comes in for attack in *Decline and Fall*, and so does Oxford, where he did not finish his degree in part because of his father's unwillingness to pay for it. Wilson writes that as Waugh prepared to enter Lancing:

"His first thirteen years had been hard, he thought, but the next five would be even harder, strengthening sense of himself as victim of neglect and discrimination. Once he had gone to Lancing childhood started to look good, but by then he resented his father's choice of the school too much to feel any gratitude for past favors" (Wilson 41-2).

Oxford appears in many of Waugh's novels, and despite repeated intimations in his autobiography, *A Little Learning*, that he was happy there, the university is ridiculed in his fiction. Wilson argues that Waugh indulged in all the freedoms he had to access for the first time, including alcohol and sex, and failed to make the most of the opportunities for success at one of the finest universities in the world. Instead of blaming himself for his failure to earn his degree at Oxford, Waugh blames Oxford. As we will see in the analysis of the novels section, Waugh mocks the upper-class students as lazy, drunk, and stupid, and the Oxford dons as weak, foolish, and more interested in port wine than scholarship. "Instead of drawing directly on experience, Waugh distorts it, emphasizes dons; snobbery as an explanation of why he had not done better at Oxford, blaming them for his failure to take a degree" (Wilson 153).

This is common to Waugh's satire, Wilson avers: "Fiction gave him an opportunity for vengeance… Fiction also gave him an opportunity to blame others for his own failures by attributing it to the faults of others" (153).

This could explain why characters like Paul Pennyfeather and William Boot and Tony Last are passive victims. Things happen to them. It is not their fault. Things happened to Waugh. They were not his fault. It could also explain why Waugh, despite many breaks to write nonfiction, always returns to satire. Vengeance would be his.

Christopher Buckley, too, enjoyed insider status and opportunities few Americans will ever know. Buckley's memoir about his parents, as well various interviews, help us to see that, like Waugh, Buckley had reason to want to blow off steam and found that outlet in satire that criticized the institutions he was privileged to access. Christopher Taylor Buckley was born into a family of privilege and extraordinary achievement. He was the only child of William F. Buckley, Jr. (1925-2008), a major figure in the conservative movement in America in the latter half of the 20th Century, founder of National Review, author of more than fifty books, nationally-syndicated columnist, and host of "Firing Line," a talk show that ran on PBS for thirty-three years. Christopher's mother, Patricia Aldyen Austin Taylor Buckley (1926-2007) came from a wealthy Canadian family and became a leading member of New York society after her marriage to William Buckley.

In the obituary he wrote for his mother and published in his memoir *Losing Mum and Pup*, Christopher Buckley said, "Pat Buckley moved easily amidst notables from the

worlds of politics, literature, the arts, philanthropy, fashion, and society. Her friends included Henry and Nancy Kissinger, Ronald and Nancy Reagan… [and two dozen other prominent names]" (Buckley 18). As detailed in his memoir, Buckley loved his parents but found these two famous and influential characters at times to be difficult. "Larger than life characters create larger than life dramas" (9). He battled with his father over, among other things, the elder Buckley's insistence on adherence to strict Catholic orthodoxy while the son drifted away from the Church to agnosticism. "Pup never really, ever, yielded an inch of ground" (Buckley 62). Buckley guessed that of the approximately 7,000 letters and emails he and his father exchanged, roughly half were contentious (63). The younger Buckley realized early on that there was no changing his father's mind on the religious question, no real value in even trying. "It's only now, after his death, that I'm able to write about this, without fear of initiating another cannonade volley of (all too intelligible) emails on the subject of my eternal damnation" (38). Christopher Buckley did, however, while his father was still living, write an "affectionate farce" about corrupt winemaking monks that his devout relatives chuckled over, with the exception of his father, who "did not find the humor in it" (38).

Chris Buckley battled with his mother over her tendency to tell preposterous lies in front of guests, such as the time she told a Kennedy relative that she had served as an alternate juror in the murder trial of Kennedy cousin Michael Skakel (Buckley 52). There was not a hint of truth in that, and the son wondered why his mother felt compelled even to bring up the murder trial and embarrass the young woman. Buckley wrote, "When Mum was in full prevarication, Pup would assume an expression somewhere between a

Jack Benny stare and the stoic grimace of a thirteenth-century saint being burned alive at the stake" (55). For years, Christopher tried to talk his mother out of creating these excruciating scenes, at times not speaking to her and writing her letters to denounce her for her latest prevarication. "And they never – ever – did a bit of good, these pastoral letters of mine…Just as I had exhausted myself in religious warfare with Pup, so had I given up lobbing feckless, well-worded catapult balls over Mum's parapets" (50).

Just as with Waugh's pain at being the forgotten son, it easy to see how the pain of these dead-end arguments with his parents could cause Buckley to lash out at "their people" – the high society, the New York-Washington establishment. Just as Waugh had done, Buckley draws on his experiences in these elite circles and distorts them to subject the inhabitants of those circles to ridicule. Thus, we see in his fiction right-wingers eager to start World War III with the Soviet Union, journalists of enormous pomposity and miniscule ethics, socialites who claim to be someone's friend but scatter the moment that "friend" does something to warrant bad press. Even the monk book, *God is My Broker*, a parody of self-help books, could be a dig at his father's devout Catholicism.

Another revealing anecdote of Buckley's in the memoir of life with his parents explains how difficult it could be living with two such "larger than life" people. As related by a family friend on the older Buckleys' fortieth anniversary, it illustrates how Patricia Buckley was a magnificent entertainer – the envy of all their friends – and nothing was ever good enough for William Buckley. The scene was on a Christmas cruise. Patricia had arranged everything – a tree with twinkly lights, drinks, carefully wrapped presents – but her husband insisted with the ship anchor in the most beautiful,

protected cove in the Caribbean (118). At this point, William Buckley decided it would be better to pull up anchor and cross the bay. Others said no, but he insisted, and the ship was hit by a sudden squall as it crossed the bay, shorting out the Christmas lights and knocking over the perfect tree and losing the presents overboard. "All because Pup had insisted it would be 'much nicer over on the other side.' Great men are not content to leave well enough alone" (119). Things always, always, went the father's way. At the keyboard, the son could make them go any way he wanted.

The elder Buckley was notorious for impatience. On Christopher's graduation day from Yale, his father became bored ten minutes into the ceremony, so he got up, collected friends and family members and went off to lunch. The son was left to wander the Yale campus after the ceremony, looking for his family, and he ended up having lunch alone. "When I confronted him back home, grinding my back molars, he merely said airily, 'I just assumed you had other plans'" (155). These and other anecdotes of bizarre parental behavior fill the memoir Buckley wrote about his parents. "In addition to making me fiercely proud of him over the years, Pup provided a number of Beam me up, Scotty moments…" (164). The son's ready willingness to share these embarrassing stories in a nonfiction work so soon after his parents' death makes it all the easier to believe he was, like Waugh, gaining vengeance in his fiction as well.

Family expectations ran high for both writers. After the debacle of Evelyn being shunned at Sherborne, he at least went on to follow his father to Oxford – though, as his father could not resist pointing out, not to the same college within the university. Evelyn, ironically, did not follow his father to New College, Oxford, not because he was not

bright enough, but because there were more scholarships available at Hertford, thus saving his father money. Arthur nonetheless found it necessary to point out that he had gone to New College.. Evelyn enjoyed his time at Oxford and used it as the inspiration for his novels *Decline and Fall* and *Brideshead Revisited* (Eade 67). Buckley's parents sent him to the Portsmouth Abbey boarding school in Rhode Island, run by Benedictine monks, and then on to his father's alma mater, Yale. Buckley told this writer in a 2018 interview that his first inspiration for writing was the newspaper columnist H.L. Mencken, but "I definitely did not want to try to follow my father's footsteps (as an opinion columnist) because that would have been absurd" as there was only one William F. Buckley Jr. (Buckley). In his memoir, Buckley wrote that his father had "always been encouraging and complimentary about my writing – and just as often critical" (Buckley 33). In his final years, however, the elder Buckley found it increasingly difficult to compliment anything Christopher wrote, "unless it was about him." When reviewers were praising what they called Christopher Buckley's best work yet – 2007's *Boomsday* – his father confined his comments to a postscript to an email, writing: "This one didn't work for me. Sorry" (Buckley 34). Like the elder Waugh's letter giving the impression that Evelyn never existed, this email from the elder Buckley must have stung.

Both writers debuted with a nonfiction work, then stumbled on to their niche: satire. Waugh's first book was a biography of the 19th Century artist Gabriel Dante Rosetti, and then, after a stint as a schoolteacher, he turned the experience into his first satire, *Decline and Fall,* which is analyzed in this thesis. I pair the novel with another autobiographical Waugh satire, *Scoop*, which has its foundations in Waugh's brief

experience as a foreign correspondent in Abyssinia (now known as Ethiopia) in 1935-6. Likewise, Buckley, in looking for his path to a writing career after graduation from Yale, spent a year sailing the world at work on a steam freighter, turning that experience into a work of nonfiction describing life on the sea. It was not the hard-working, blue-collar sailors whom he chose to satirize, but rather the people he worked with in his next job. Back on land, Buckley landed a post at the White House, as the main speechwriter for Vice President George H.W. Bush. Working at the White House, with all the ever-present staff infighting, the striving for access to the president, and the efforts to make bad news look good, made Buckley saw the job as a target-rich environment for satire. This would be his path. He realized the White House was the perfect place for satire "from day one" (Buckley), and upon leaving penned his first satirical novel, *The White House Mess*, the first of nine satires. It premiered at No. 14 on *The New York Times* Bestseller List, and, as the Times reported on April 16, 1986, Christopher would not enjoy the sole share of the family spotlight: "Being on the best-seller list is nothing new for William F. Buckley Jr. -- but being on the list with his son is. And that is what will happen this Sunday, when the 60-year-old Mr. Buckley, who has written nine best sellers in the past 10 years, is joined on *The New York Times* fiction best-seller list by his 33-year-old son, Christopher" (McDowell). Even in that most rare pinnacle of success – a first novel premiering on the best-seller list – the younger Buckley takes second billing to his famous father.

While we have noted similarities in the backgrounds and career tracks of Evelyn Waugh and Christopher Buckley, it must be said that only one of the two comes in for mention as the greatest writer of his generation or one of the greatest writers of his

century, and that is Waugh. Waugh is the subject of more than a dozen books, including a collection of letters, ed. by M. Amory (1980); correspondence with Nancy Mitford (1997), ed. by C. Mosley; biographies by his brother Alec (1968), M. Stannard (2 vol., 1987–92), S. Hastings (1995), J. H. Wilson (1996), D. W. Patey (1998), D. Wykes (1999), P. Byrne (2010), and P. Eade (2016); studies by J. F. Carens (1966), P. A. Doyle (1969), W. J. Cook (1971), D. Lodge (1971), D. Price-Jones (1973), and H. Carpenter (1990). Waugh wrote an autobiography, *A Little Learning*, his diaries were published, and countless scholarly articles, dissertations, and general interest articles and reviews of his work have appeared and continue to appear more than half a century after his death in 1966. Buckley, while featured often and highly praised in reviews and general interest publications – Tom Wolfe called him "one of the funniest writers in the English language" – scholars have not delved into his work with nearly the depth or breadth they have with Waugh.

There is even an Evelyn Waugh Society, which promotes interest in the life and works of Waugh. Its founder, John Howard Wilson, in his book, *Evelyn Waugh: A Literary Biography, 1903-1924,* asserts that while life experiences and fiction are not one and the same, the latter is most certainly shaped by the former. "Different sides [of his complicated personality] animated many characters in Waugh's early work, as he began to discover and project conflicts within himself. Inner conflicts generated fiction throughout Waugh's life, and his mature work reached remarkable depth largely because initial descents had started so early and had gone so far, years before he finished his first novel" (Wilson 12).

In a review of a 1943 re-release of that first novel, *Decline and Fall*, Beatrice Sherman calls the rereading of the book "even more fun than the first," and also notes another seeming conflict in the Waugh persona: "The author of these capricious beings [the characters] is now with the British commando unit. To be a faithful reader of his books it is hard to imagine Waugh as a rough and tough fighter, bashing in the enemy's head with his bare hands or brass knuckles. His attack in fiction is so definitely on the airy, nonchalant side. But there is sting and bite to it.

Chapter III

Waugh's *Decline and Fall* and Buckley's *White House Mess*

In comparing the works of Evelyn Waugh and Christopher Buckley, we can see how each writer's biography influenced his works. After a successful debut work of nonfiction, his biography of the artist Dante Rosetti, Waugh turned his attention to satire, with his time as a schoolmaster at a third-rate public school making the perfect target. Likewise, Buckley, having debuted with *Steaming to Bamboola,* an account of his adventures, and hard work, sailing the seas on a freighter, found a wealth of material for satire in his years in the White House as a speechwriter for then Vice President George H.W. Bush. *Decline and Fall* was published in 1928, when Waugh was 25; *The White House Mess* came out in 1986, when the author was 34. Both novels are based on personal experience, both takes shots at the worlds the authors came from, both involve more of a series of episodes strung together than a traditional plot, and both feature main characters who passively float along through a series of misfortunes that besets them and each main character ultimately end up back where he started.

After his Oxford days, in 1925 Waugh was low on money and in need of a steady job. He took a job at Arnold House School, a school in Wales that was not held in high regard. "It is the most curiously-run school I have ever heard," he wrote to his mother. "No timetables nor syllabuses nor nothing. [The headmaster] just wanders into the common room and says, 'There are some boys in that classroom…Will someone go and

teach them Maths or Latin or something" (Waugh Letters 21). Waugh did not succeed as a teacher. He admitted in his memoir, *A Little Learning*, that he did not have an affinity for working with young boys, and he relished making their Latin drills as tedious as possible for them. Not surprisingly, then, "I never fully succeeded in keeping them quiet. One of my major defeats was when I cried wrathfully to a moon-faced vacuous creature: 'Are you deaf, boy?' to which all his fellows replied, 'Yes, sir, he is.' And he was" (Waugh 224).

It is also not surprising then that from this "most curiously-run school" Waugh would gain material for *Decline and Fall*. The main character, Paul Pennyfeather – the name denotes the man's lightness – drifts from Scone College (symbolizing Oxford) to a job at a third-rate public school in Wales, to prison and back to Scone, coming full circle. Like Waugh's missing out on Sherborne, Paul's removal from Scone is associated with scandal and is no fault of the victim. As we have seen, Waugh was denied a place at Sherborne because of brother Alec's writing about the school's homosexual culture, and he failed to get a degree from Oxford because he did not apply himself and lost his scholarship and his father neglected to pay for his final term. Paul is booted from Scone because a mob of drunken aristocratic students encounters him on the quad and strips him naked, leaving him exposed, as it were, to a charge of indecency. Drunken mobs of aristocratic students did indeed wreak havoc on others during Waugh's Oxford days, such as in this entry from his Diaries: "Saturday was a grisly evening. Never have I seen so many men being sick together or being so infernally dangerous. They threw about chairs

and soda-water siphons and lavatory seats. Only one man was seriously injured (Waugh 188)

After his humiliating ejection from Scone, Paul goes on to a series of misfortunes, most entirely out of his control. These series of unfortunate events represent a sane man's efforts to get by in a world gone mad. He goes to prison after falling in love with a woman who, unbeknownst to him, became wealthy by overseeing a chain of white slave trade brothels, and things go wrong (how could they not? when she asks Paul to help her transport what he thinks are dancers for the stage. According to Meckier, the most important scene in the novel is when Paul sees a newspaper photo of his former love, "The Honourable Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde," and realizes the sharp contrast between his prison life and her life of luxury on the outside after he took the fall for her crimes. Paul realizes that he lives in a world where everything is out of proper place: innocents are jailed, the homicidal given weapons, the college-educated marked down as mentally defective, and the government of prisons left to idiots" Meckier (1979). As we have seen, Waugh had reason to feel the same. and that is the message of his satire in *Decline and Fall.* The difference, as Miecker notes, is "Unlike Waugh, however, Paul seems to be accepting the fundamental wrongness that characterizes the modern world in *Decline and Fall*" (Meckier 61). Innocent Paul must take the fall for the guilty Mrs. Beste-Chetwynde. As her son Peter asks, "You can't imagine Mamma in prison can you" (223)? No, Paul cannot.

In *The White House Mess* Buckley satirizes the office politics of perhaps the world's most famous office – the Oval Office and its environs. Buckley brings to light the

backstabbing and access-grabbing that he witnessed during his year and half (1981-82) as the sole speechwriter for the vice president. He retained the utmost respect for George H.W. Bush, even after his, Buckley's, political views veered sharply to the left of where they were in his Reagan White House years. Buckley endorsed Barack Obama in 2008, but nonetheless wrote a glowing tribute of the elder Bush following his death in 2018. Like Waugh, Buckley exaggerates his experiences for comic effect, but also like Waugh, is unsparing in his portrayals of the elite class from which he came.

Buckley found the satire of a White House memoir to be the perfect way to reflect on his government work – especially since he had agreed to Bush's request not to write about his experiences working for the vice president. He had so much good comic material, though.

"I read a lot of White House memoirs and they all struck me as kind of chimerically scurrilous. They all have two themes. The first is, 'It isn't my fault,' and the second is, 'It would have been much worse if I hadn't been there.' So all the classic light bulbs went off and I thought, 'I'll write a parody of a White House memoir' " (Romano).

Unlike Buckley, with his Stamford, Connecticut, upbringing and Yale pedigree, the main character of his White House memoir, Herb Wadlough – former accountant for new President Thomas N. Tucker whose loyal service lands him in the job of White House deputy chief of staff -- hails from Idaho and is a product of its public schools. "Herb is a kind of (Reagan White House Deputy Chief of Staff) Mike Deaver-type character," Buckley told the *Washington Post* upon the book's publication in 1986. "Not

a substance guy but fancies he is . . . He's sort of balding, wears glasses that tend to fog up a bit and he's a little overweight . . . He drinks steaming hot water because he thinks it's good for his digestion. He's a schnook" (Romano). Like Paul Pennyfeather, Herb rides along like a cork on the sea, enduring a series of misfortunes beyond his control that end up sending him right back where he started. While Pennyfeather starts and ends at Scone, Wadlough starts and ends up in obscurity back in Boise.

The opening scenes of both novels are absurd. Paul gets stripped naked by the drunken Bollinger Club while the college dons delight in anticipation of the bottles of sherry they will buy with the fines the boys must pay for each act of destruction. We first meet Herb waiting in a limo with new administration officials as outgoing President Ronald Reagan refuses to leave the White House on Inauguration Day because it is too cold out and he does not feel like changing out of his pajamas.

Rather than care about the students of Scone College, rather than care about the education at Scone College, rather than care about the buildings and furnishings of Scone College, Waugh opens by showing us college dons most concerned with sherry. "'The fines!' said Mr. Sniggs, gently rubbing his pipe alongside his nose and the thought of what the dons will buy with the fines levied for tonight's mischief. 'Oh my! The fines there will be this evening!" (Waugh 4). The dons fetch the finest port up from the cellar whenever the fines hit fifty pounds. "'We shall have a week of it at least,' said Mr. Postlethwaite, 'a week of Founder's port'" (4). This would come as a surprise to readers who believe that Scone (Oxford) is a place where the emphasis is on education, a place where students crack the books ceaselessly and their leaders do all they can to facilitate

their learning. These Bollinger Club brutes are not the dedicated scholars imagined by the uninitiated, but rather "…uncouth peers from crumbling country seats; smooth young men of uncertain tastes from embassies and legations; illiterate lairds from wet granite hovels in the Highlands…" (4). The non-Oxbridge populace would be surprised to learn such a drunken lot was on the loose, smashing everything in sight, wreaking havoc with whomever is unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sniggs and Posthelwaite, meanwhile, speculate on which of the young underclassmen will be the victims of the Bollinger Club this time, all the while hoping the gang hits the chapel: "'It'll be more if they attack the Chapel,' said Mr. Sniggs [adding without the least irony:]. 'Oh, please, God, make them attack the Chapel'" (5). The ruffians settle on poor Paul Pennyfeather, stripping him of his clothes. Despite his nakedness being no fault of his own, Paul is expelled, while the Bollinger boys pay their fines and continue their "education." We see the unfairness – the absurdity -- of the British education system doing things in the way they have always been done. The characters remain clueless to the irony of what comes next. Paul must do what one "usually does" after getting sent down from Scone for indecent behavior: become a schoolmaster (11).

Similarly, anyone expecting the finest motives from dedicated government officials putting aside partisan differences on the day the nation transfers power with the inauguration of a new president would be sadly disappointed reading Buckley's opening scene. Less concerned with the good of the nation, the incoming Tucker team and outgoing Reaganites are more concerned with how their man looks in the eyes of the public. They are most concerned about who gets the credit for solving the dilemma that

delays the new president's inauguration (Reagan's refusal to leave). The sniping and the backbiting begin before the new president is even sworn in. Herb Wadlough, our trusty narrator, presents himself as above all of that. As the Tucker team waits in their motorcade for President Reagan to depart the White House, the television networks begin to question what is going on, and the president-elect summons Herb to the Roosevelt Room, where leaders of the Tucker and Reagan team stand about with grave looks on their faces.

Buckley shows Herb as awestruck at the situation, but the author also has Herb comment in a way that shows maybe the gatherings of the powerful are not so awesome as other memoirists would portray them. This is a pattern throughout the book. In this case, he has Herb tell us: "As I approached, I was conscious of entering a scene charged with drama, though that may have just been the inset spot lighting." Thus Buckley, through Herb, subtly, digs the memoirists who portray every White House moment as critical, grave, historic, and the memoirists themselves as walking among the gods. Maybe it was the inset spot lighting.

President-elect Tucker reveals the big secret to Herb: "We seem to have a problem here. The president won't leave" (xiv). Herb, proud of his ability to come up with ways to serve his boss, is, for once, speechless. "'Oh,' I said. 'For I could think of nothing else to say" (xiv). Just as Reagan's deputy chief of staff Mike Deaver was famous for thinking of everything, Herb had thought of every conceivable contingency

for the new president's inauguration – "including the disposal of 1,800 pounds of horse manure that would be 'processed' during the parade. I had not anticipated this' (xiv).

The tensions flare between the Reagan and Tucker teams, and naturally Herb portrays the other side as unreasonable. They convene to the White House Situation Room – even more important than the Roosevelt Room in the lofty altitude of White House accommodations – and there Herb spots "seven phones in front of us, six white and one red. *Steady Wadlough,* I said to myself. I confess that red phones make me nervous." We get the sense, already on the first day and in the first pages of the novel, that Herb is in over his head. But, as we soon see, so is everyone else who works in the White House, and that is one of the points Buckley wants to make. These "powerful men" are all too human, with the same flaws that people in every other workplace exhibit. And one of those flawed humans, the hoary Secretary of Defense Hannibal Bowditch, declares that the thing to do is immediately "Go to DefCon Three" (xv). This heightened worldwide American nuclear alert, he argues, is needed because the Soviet Union may try to take advantage of the delayed inauguration by launching a nuclear strike on the United States. Herb comments, "The secretary's suggestion was…well, surprising" xv).

The suggestion ignites bickering between the two sides, and President-elect Tucker does not want to start World War III, so they go around the table for other ideas. Reagan's physician suggests a shot of adrenaline might work, but "at his age it might provoke an 'undesirable reaction" (xvii). Tucker asks what sort of undesirable reaction.

"Death," comes the reply, leaving Herb to envision the headlines the next day: "REAGAN KILLED BY INJECTION GIVEN ON TUCKER'S ORDERS" (xvii).

By now it is 12:25 – the inauguration is seriously late – and the nation is aware that something is seriously wrong. The 25th Amendment is discussed, declaring Reagan unfit for office and removing him, but Tucker graciously says he does not want to see Reagan go out that way' again narrator Herb showing his side as reasonable, just as in the real White House memoirists unfailingly do. Defense Secretary Bowditch takes a phone call and announces, "Mr. President-elect, we have just received word of a squadron of blackjack (long range bombers) has just passed out of Soviet airspace" (xvii). Herb shows Bowditch as itching for war with the Soviets.

The president-elect whispers to Herb that they must look at the situation rationally and figure out how to get Reagan, who was, according to the first lady, still in his pajamas, out of the White House. "We've got a doctor who may kill him, an Attorney General who wants to declare him bananas, and a defense secretary who wants to start World War III" (xix). Herb admits, in his typical understatement, that, "the options were not encouraging. First, we ruled out starting World War III. We were down to killing the president or having him carted off by the men in white when the phone rang. An aide handed it to me" (xix).

Despite all the great minds in the situation room – the best and brightest of the Reagan and Tucker teams – no one had a solution until the phone call from Mike Feeley, the Tucker team's chain-smoking, foulmouthed, blue-collar type press secretary.

Typically prissy, Herb constantly scolds Feeley about his smoking and about his language, fearing how it will look if reported in the press. It is Feeley, though, who solves the Inauguration Day crisis. He tells Herb the networks are going crazy wondering about the delay. "'What the fuck is going on in there?' In a hushed voice I quickly explained the situation" (xix).

Feeley does not hesitate. "For Chrissake…Tell him the Soviets are attacking and he's gotta get the hell out of there (xix)." Herb whispers the idea to the president-elect, and they put it into action, though Tucker must make Bowditch rescind an order to launch an attack on the USSR before it all works out. They decide that Reagan can head for a secure location and aides can pretend to carry out any orders he may give about counterattacks. The president-elect will explain to the public that Reagan was overcome by emotion at ending his eight years of service to the nation and could not face the crowd this last time. He opens his inaugural address with, "Mr. Chief Justice, Senator Hastings, distinguished members of Congress. I guess I have some explaining to do" (xxii). This obviously contrasts starkly with the opening of every other inaugural address in history and allows Buckley to set the tone for the hapless Tucker Administration. Of the new president's phrase, Herb notes, "Alas, those words would become a leitmotif of the Tucker presidency" (xxii).

In the closing of the prologue, Buckley again uses the technique of having Herb comment on the awesome power of a moment, only to admit that it might be something much less. As Tucker explains the emotion that overwhelmed Reagan, the helicopter carrying the former president and Mrs. Reagan flies overhead. Tucker says Reagan asked

him to say goodbye for him and suggests that the nation's thanks and prayers are with him as he departs the capital for the last time. Herb suggests the crowd was brought to tears: "I heard sniffing around me as the noise of the [helicopter's rotor] blades receded in the southeast and the stunned, almost reverential silence set in. I remember thinking, *How moving*. But possibly it was the beginning of the flu that so many people got on that historic day" (xxii).

The leitmotif of the Tucker presidency – "I guess I have some explaining to do." – is portrayed throughout the novel. Among the disasters that the Harvard-Yale grads working in the White House try to pin on hapless Herb include the "Operation Open Door" program that involved have everyday citizens escorted into the Oval Office each day for a brief chat with the president (25). Herb delegates the task of finding these everyday Americans to an aide, who sets up an Office of Human Background (OHB) to screen candidates. It works fine until one day the president gets the wrong two-page "backgrounder" on his visitor and feels "an imbecilic" (29) after the woman tells him her daughter does not need help getting into the Betty Ford rehabilitation center, her husband is not disabled and no one cut his disability benefits. The woman "subsequently sold her story to the Ladies Home Journal and of the course the president became the butt of many jibes" (29). That was not the end of the program, though, as the president "was not a quitter, and he got right back on the horse. Three days later he buzzed for another ordinary American." The president was not happy with Herb over the first incident, but things died down and the program went on. "But one month later the unfortunate incident with Mr. Leverett occurred. Somehow the fact that he was under a psychiatrist's care for

exhibitionist tendencies had eluded OHB. I was mortified" (29). With that, Open Door was closed. It was the president's own idea, but since nothing can be the president's fault, the blame fell on Herb.

In addition to the blame game, the "Open Door" episode satirizes politicians for their constant effort to appear to be a man or woman "of the people." The fictional president wanted ordinary Americans in his office so that he would not lose touch with the real world outside the Washington Beltway bubble. He wanted to appear as one of them. Buckley's old boss, George H.W. Bush, a Yale grad and wealthy son of a former Senator from Connecticut, made it clear during his campaign that he enjoyed listening to country music and eating pork rinds.

Blame fell on Herb for the "serious incident" involving the West German chancellor (30). Targeting the government's penchant for secrets and paranoia about the Soviet Union, Buckley has the White House equipped with an Oval Office that descends forty-five below ground – an underground bunker for the president, who needs not even to leave the White House in the event of a nuclear attack. It had been built "during one of Reagan's three-month summer holidays" (31), and "only a few of us knew about it," explains Herb, reminding the reader, as all White House memoirists must, of his importance. When nuclear missiles were within one minute of impact, Citadel, as the structure was known, would automatically kick in and the Oval Office would plummet forty-five feet. The problem came one day during a visit by the West German chancellor when a computer at the Pentagon "wrongly interpreted an ionospheric disturbance as a massive Soviet missile attack. Citadel was automatically activated. Without warning, the

entire Oval Office began whirring and clicking and started to sink beneath the ground" (32).

Concerned they were under attack, the president quickly learns it was a false alarm, but that was not the end of the problem. Nothing seems to work when the president tries to raise the Oval back to ground level. It gets worse, as it always does in the Tucker White House. The West German foreign minister explains to Herb that, "it would be best if we do not linger" (33). Herb agrees, since lunch was to be in ten minutes, but that is not the reason to quickly return to the surface. "The chancellor has ---' he gestured – '*Platzangst*'" (33). It takes a moment but Herb figures out that *platzangst* is claustrophobia. The chancellor ultimately loses control and physically tries to claw his way out, not the best treatment of an important ally.

That was the end of Citadel. No one could reasonably blame Herb for an ionospheric disturbance, but blame does not have to be reasonable in a White House. "Though the fault was hardly my own, the president seemed to associate me with the whole unfortunate episode. He did not buzz me for several days" (36).

Though his father was a columnist and Buckley himself went on to a career writing for magazine and newspapers as well as his novels, he nonetheless takes on the media in *The White House Mess.* Journalists are portrayed as unfair, always putting the worst spin on everything, and completely unaware of the "real story" the insiders are privy too. He sometimes mentions real journalists, such as George Will (who is still writing his syndicated column for the *Washington Post*). Herb Wadlough begins each

chapter with a journal entry. For Jan. 28, 1990, he writes: "State of the Union Address last night. In my view, both historic and an unqualified success, though early newspaper reactions disappointing in the extreme. George Will said President's call to the nation 'more of a parking ticket than a summons'" (23).

Buckley also spoofs White House insiders who produce conflicting versions of events and take potshots at each other in memoirs after their time in service to the country. Harvard grad Bamford "Bam" Leland IV, the chief of staff, "a congeries of Eastern affectations" (11), according to Herb, writes one of these books that irks Herb. After the president slips free of his Secret Service detail to take a walk in Lafayette Park, across from the White House, he is wounded by a bullet through the bicep in an assassination attempt (151). "Our approval rating, which had shot up so sharply in the weeks following the incident, giving us critical lift during the New Hampshire primary, dropped back to their previous level. I might add that it is untrue, as Leland says in his 'memoir,' that I urged the president to conduct the campaign in a wheelchair" (152).

Herb's other Ivy League *bete noire* in White House, National Security Council Director Martin Edelstein, also writes a memoir at variance with Herb's version of events, particularly involving the war with Bermuda that occurred just before the 1992 election. "Marvin devoted one-third of Power, Principle, and Pitfall to the Bermuda crisis. I found it as interesting as some other novels I have read" (195).

Lastly, Buckley also satirizes the political memoirists' habit of putting the best possible spin on everything. As things continue to go badly, Herb loses out to Leland and

Edelstein and loses access to the president. He is demoted to working in East Wing, for the first lady, and his biggest responsibility is the White House Mess, or cafeteria, thus the name of the novel. After Tucker loses in a landslide to George H.W. Bush, Herb heads back to Idaho. On election night, "of course we were immensely pleased when we squeaked over the top in Idaho. It is gratifying to carry your home state" (219). Always wanting to set the record straight, Herb explains that when he kept saying "It's not over until it's over," he was not "oblivious to reality" as other claimed, but merely "trying to keep up morale" (219).

He explains that he wrote his memoir for his wife because of all she went through with so many false things said about her husband in the press and in other staffers' memoirs. "I couldn't ask her just to turn a blind eye as all these mendacious tomes climbed the best-seller lists and tongues wagged at the checkout line" (224)

When the book came out in 1988, Buckley was not sure what sort of reception he would get from people about whom he wrote (Romano). The portrayal of President Reagan as befuddled and refusing to leave the White House because it was cold and he did not feel like changing out of his pajamas cut to the heart of criticism of the then 77-year-old Reagan, as did the portrayal of trigger-happy right-wingers on his team. The Reagan Administration had hired Buckley, and Ronald and Nancy Reagan were friends of his parents, so this was the author taking shots at his own kind. Humor, though, can do what straightforward criticism cannot. It can deflect the hurt that harsh and angry tones

often inflict. Thus, the Reagans took the book in stride. According to the *Washington Post:*

> Nancy Reagan said through a spokesman that the book was "very amusing, well written and I enjoyed it."
>
> "Mrs. Reagan said she had been with the Buckleys recently and they discussed their sons, the writers," said Elaine Crispen, the first lady's press secretary. "She read the book right after that."
>
> Buckley says he also received word from the president. "I sent him a book, and he wrote back, 'I'm especially delighted to share in your new endeavor'" (Romano)

Chapter IV

Waugh's *Scoop* and Buckley's *Little Green Men*

Both Evelyn Waugh and Christopher Buckley worked as journalists for at least part of their careers. Waugh signed on with the *London Daily Mail* in 1935 to cover Fascist Italy's invasion of Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia). Buckley has served as an editor at *Esquire* and *Forbes* magazines, and for decades has written for national publications such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Vanity Fair*, *Smithsonian*, the *New Yorker*, and many more. As Waugh depicts through the character Bateson in *Scoop*, young journalists covet a foreign correspondent position (230), and Waugh was among the anointed who landed the prize. How did he respond? By lacerating foreign correspondents and their bosses alike in *Scoop.* Likewise, Buckley, with his Yale degree and famous last name, landed a job as editor of Esquire barely out of college, another enviable position with plenty of responsibility and prestige. He has remained a New York-Washington journalism insider ever since (C-SPAN). Yet he shows no mercy to the journalistic elites -- beginning with a television talk show host/syndicated opinion columnist who shares circumstance and characteristics with his own father – in *Little Green Men*. Both Waugh and Buckley take on the journalistic establishment that took them in, and both again feature hapless characters who float along on the tide and end up back where they started.

While Waugh's *Scoop* could rightly be called a journalism novel – indeed, the subtitle is "A Novel About Journalists" – Buckley's *Little Green Men* is more a broadside against wild-eyed conspiracy theorists, with journalists who report on them serving as

collateral damage. *Scoop*, like plenty of good humor, is based on a misunderstanding. A shallow socialite (another favorite Waugh target) wants to help her friend John Courteney Boot, a novelist, land the job of covering the pending war in Ishmaelia (a fictional country that is a cross between Abyssinia/Ethiopia and Liberia). The socialite, Mrs. Algernon Stich, plants a seed in the mind of press baron Lord Copper of the *Daily Beast*, who dispatches his foreign editor to send Boot to Ishmaelia. The editor, confused but knowing the folly of questioning Lord Copper, generally acknowledged to be a spoof on press baron Lord Beaverbrook (Manley), sends for William Boot, the mild-mannered and obscure nature columnist for the newspaper. The story then focuses on William Boot's reluctance to go and on the appalling lack of journalistic ethics displayed by the foreign correspondents and their bosses once Boot finally arrives in the East African nation. Unable to find real stories, the correspondents make them up. As Alexander Nasaryan wrote on npr.com, "Waugh's scathing wit is largely reserved for the scribblers who have come to Ishmaelia and, having found no discernible war, simply go about concocting a conflict to please their editorial masters back home" (Nasaryan).

In his 1999 novel, *Little Green Men,* Buckley's journalists are pompous insiders who care less about truth in reporting and more about prestige, the admiration of their colleagues, and scoring big lecture fees. The title of this thesis includes the phrase "too absurd for satire," and already in 1999 a reviewer noted the biggest challenge for Buckley was making up sillier anecdotes and characters than already existed in Washington. Mordecai Richler, writing in *The New York Times* during the Clinton impeachment saga, noted this problem and compared it to Waugh's: "The good news is that Buckley pulls it

off very nicely too, at breakneck speed, but he is also stymied now and then by obstacles that even an Evelyn Waugh would find it difficult to overcome -- namely, the very richness of the pudding to hand" (Richler).

Little Green Men opens with columnist and Sunday television talk show host John O. Bannion (the initials gives us a Biblical clue that he will suffer like Job) humiliating the president of the United States on live television over what Bannion considers outlandish spending ($21 billion) for an orbital space station. This causes the journalist to run afoul of a covert agency that is so covert even the president does not know of its existence. This agency, called Majestic 12, periodically stages "alien abductions" to keep the unidentified flying object question in the news and thereby justify government spending on space programs. "… a country convinced that little green men were hovering over the rooftops was inclined to vote yea for big weapons and space programs" (30) Mordecai Richler, reviewing the book for *The New York Times* called this a "reasonable deduction when you consider that 50 years later, even as we tiptoe into the millennium, a full 80 percent of Americans believe that the Government knows more about aliens than it is letting on, and one-third are convinced that aliens did indeed land at Roswell" (Richler). A disgruntled Majestic 12 employee, in a moment of pique, orders a team to "abduct" Bannion (twice) and soon the staid conservative rock of righteous stability is touring the country, warning people about the dangers of UFOs The reader can imagine a William F. Buckley Jr. or a George F. Will character ranting about being probed by little green men from outer space. Ever concerned about what others might think of them, his Washington-insider friends quickly edge away from Bannion, rival pundits have a field

day at his expense, and his sponsors drop him one by one. Ultimately, Bannion, with help from well-placed accomplices, learns and exposes the truth about the covert operation and resumes at least a semblance of his former life. His friends no longer look the other way when he approaches, and no one talks about staging an intervention to have him committed to a psychiatric hospital.

Waugh portrays foreign correspondents as most interested in padding the expense counts and keeping the bosses back home happy, while his press baron, Lord Copper, is most interested in what sells papers. Neither seems particularly interested in gathering news and reporting it honestly. In explaining the policy of the Daily Beast (the fictional newspaper's title lives on in the real life online news site founded by British journalist Tina Brown, a tribute to Waugh's lasting legacy), Lord Copper says:

"Remember that the Patriots are in the right and are going to win [the supposed pending war in Ishmaelia. The *Beast* stands by them four square. But they must win quickly. The British public has no interest in a war that drags on indecisively. A few sharp victories, some conspicuous acts of person bravery on the Patriot side, and a colorful entry into the capital. That is the *Beast* policy for the war" (48).

Thus, the fighting of the war, which everyone assumes is coming, should be based not on sound strategies that minimizes military and civilian casualties, but rather on what will gain and keep the interest of the British readers. An arrogant, colonial attitude displayed by the bombastc, domineering Lord Copper. The humor lies not just in Lord Copper's outlandish behavior, though. Waugh gives us Mr. Salter, the foreign editor, who

typifies the mid-level Fleet Street editor who just wants to hold onto his job. The book's most famous catch phrase, "Up to a point, Lord Copper," is Salter's. When he agrees with Lord Copper, he enthusiastically ingratiates himself to the boss with, "Definitely, Lord Copper." But when his boss says something that is wrong or off the wall, Salter cannot possibly correct him or point out the folly of his words. So he says, "Up to a point, Lord Copper." It is that keep-the-job-at-any-cost attitude that drives the central conceit of the entire book – the mistaken identity that sends the nature columnist William Boot rather than novelist John Courteney Boot to Africa. Salter is unable to ask Lord Copper for an explanation. So when Lord Copper asks for Boot, Salter is bewildered but sends the nature columnist to Ishmaelia.

Just as in *Decline and Fall* and in *The White House Mess*, Waugh in *Scoop* and Buckley in *Little Green Men* feature protagonists who float along and allow things to happen to them rather than taking control of their own lives. These protagonists thus serve as victims of the absurd society in which they live. In *Scoop*, William Boot is perfectly happy living at the run-down family home in the country, Boot Magna, and writing his nature column. Only because his last name happens to be Boot, the same as a semi-famous novelist, does he get wrapped up in the folly of Daily Beast foreign coverage. Unlike most journalists, he does not want to go. Mr. Salter must wine and dine, cajole, and finally threaten Boot to persuade him to follow Lord Copper's request and make the trip. "You mean if I don't go to Ishmaelia I get the sack" (39)? "..Yes, in so many words. That is exactly what I – what Lord Copper means…" (39). So Boot goes to Ishmaelia. Once there, he docilely goes along with what other correspondents are doing,

though he does not seem to find the "news" they are finding, so he sends nothing to the Daily Beast. One of the correspondents, Corker, explains to Boot how it all works. "News is what a chap who doesn't care about much of anything wants to read. And it's only news until he's read it. After that it's dead. If someone else has sent a story before us, our story isn't news" (80). Boot is curious about the workings of the foreign correspondents, and asks Corker a series of questions about journalism, but never questions the ethics of star correspondents who make up wars, complete with descriptions of carnage, as we see in Corker's anecdote about the award-winning correspondent Wenlock Jakes:

> Why, once Jakes went out to cover a revolution in one of the Balkan capitals. He overslept in his carriage, woke up at the wrong station, didn't know any different, got out, went straight to a hotel, and cabled off a thousand-word story about barricades in the streets, flaming churches, machine guns answering the rattle of his typewriter as he wrote, a dead child, like a broken doll, spread-eagled in the deserted roadway beneath his window…(82)

After this remarkable dispatch, Corker tells Boot, all the newspapers sent their to the country where Jakes found the phony war. Finding no war, but knowing they were sent all this way to describe a war, they wrote stories describing one. Stocks dropped and financial panic and depression ensued. "They gave Jakes the Nobel Peace Prize for his harrowing descriptions of the carnage" (82). Waugh shows absurdity of the journalistic

world – writers making things up – but also of the overall society. Jakes made things up and rather than ostracism he earns a prestigious prize.

While Buckley's Bannion outwardly is a powerful pundit and connected Washington insider, he nonetheless turns docile – as perhaps anyone would – after his second "abduction" by "aliens." It certainly is never his desire to launch a wild conspiracy crusade, and up until the moment it happens, no one would have expected it of him. That is what makes the humor, the "stuffed-shirt" Ivy Leaguer in the bow-tie who dines with presidents reduced to status normally reserved for "trailer trash" abductees from Arkansas featured in supermarket tabloids. Buckley shows the elites as not so special after all.

Chapter V

Waugh's *Handful of Dust* and Buckley's *Thank You for Smoking*

Buckley's *Thank You for Smoking* and Waugh's *Handful of Dust* stand in contrast to their earlier, lighter, farcical satires. These works are darker, yet like the other novels examined in this paper, both authors satirize their own milieu and both novels feature passive characters who allow themselves to be buffeted by events.

In *Thank You for Smoking*, Buckley again takes on the Washington "Beltway" establishment. In *The White House Mess*, he focused on administrative staffers; in *Little Green Men*, he targeted the punditry and the people who follow them; in *Thank You for Smoking*, lobbyists come in for mockery. The main character, Nick Naylor, is the chief spokesman for the tobacco industry. He meets regularly with two friends, lobbyists for the gun and liquor industries who privately refer to themselves as the MOD Squad – Merchants of Death. They boast over whose industry is most deadly, commiserate over particularly damaging news stories, and celebrate rhetorical flourishes that twist the truth to make their industry look good. People always ask Nick how he can live with himself, and Nick says he does the job to "pay the mortgage." Buckley shows that even while boosting his bank account by deliberately working to hide the devastating damage done by tobacco, Nick deep down knows how morally bankrupt he is. The "it pays the mortgage" defense, Buckley writes, "was starting to take on the ring of a Nuremburg defense*: I vas only paying ze mortgage."*

When Nick seems at the pinnacle of his career following a stellar performance on "Oprah," he is kidnapped and nearly killed. His abductors cover him in nicotine patches that almost kill him before they leave him for dead on the National Mall in Washington, where he sure to be found. Suspicion lands on Nick, though, as the FBI begins to believe he staged the kidnapping to create sympathy for himself and his cause. He ultimately proves his innocence and turns on the tobacco industry, putting his rhetorical skills to work for the anti-smoking cause.

In *Handful of Dust*, Waugh satirizes the "Bright Young Things" of Post-World War I British society; a circle of which he was a member. He slams their lightness, their loose morals, their hypocrisy in telling the story of Tony Last, who loses his wife Brenda to a banal n'er-do-well named John Beaver. Brenda does not know why she finds Beaver attractive, but women in this circle commonly step out on their husbands, so she thinks she should as well. As we will see, the bitterness Waugh felt toward his own "Bright Young Thing," his cheating wife, Evelyn Gardner, comes through in this novel. Tony is the last to know about Brenda's cheating; his friends know but say nothing to Tony. The book turns particularly dark when Tony and Brenda's young son, John Andrew, is killed in a riding accident, and – when she hears the news – Brenda is relieved that it is John Andrew and not John Beaver who died. The idea of a mother being so shallow as to express relief that her son died and her lover lived is a devastating commentary on the circles in which Waugh traveled. Tony goes off on an expedition to the Amazon – escaping one jungle for another -- and ends up the permanent captive of an eccentric illiterate man who insists Tony read Dickens stories to him over and over. The Dickens

angle is yet another example of Waugh's subtle and sometimes not so subtle digs at his father. Arthur Waugh was fond of reading Dickens to the family, and, though he liked Dickens, young Evelyn often felt himself a prisoner of these readings. Milthorpe argues, "If these facts weren't enough, Evelyn once set fire to Arthur's library, which of course held multiple Dickenses. A Freudian reduction easily made" (Milthorpe 91).

Buckley attacks the smooth-talking shameless spinmeisters of Washington, making Nick at once likeable and appalling. From the opening line we understand that Nick is hated: "Nick Naylor had been called many things since becoming chief spokesman for the Academy of Tobacco Studies, but until now no one had compared him to Satan" (3). His appearance on a panel before a convention of 2,500 medical professionals is scarcely a challenge. Against the waves of "Neo-Puritan" haters in the room, he argues that we must ask ourselves if our nation's founding documents mean anything to us, and if they do, we must allow companies to produce and sell tobacco and smokers to buy and smoke it. To a woman whose uncle died of lung cancer, Nick says:

And I think your uncle. who I am sure was a very fine man, were he here today might just

> agree that if we go tampering with the bedrock principles that our Founding Fathers laid down, many of whom, you'll recall, were themselves tobacco farmers, just for the sake of indulging a lot of frankly unscientific speculation, then we're placing at risk not only our own freedoms but those of our children and our children's children.(5)

This typifies Nick's habit of distracting from the main issue, which, as Buckley points out, is that 1,200 people die every day from smoking, the equivalent of two jumbo jetliners going down each day. But Nick is so smooth, so charismatic, he gets away with it. After the above remarks about the Founding Fathers, Buckley expands on Nick's methods: "It was crucial not to pause here and allow the stunning non sequitur to embed itself in their neural processors" (5), and Nick promptly reminds his audience that the demonization of tobacco is "not new." He goes on to give a history of Puritans and 17th Century Turks who suffered ostracization for their love of smoking. Buckley highlights the Washington tactic of making oneself a victim. The tobacco companies are not the villains here, Nick argues, they are the victims.

Buckley also shows Washington insiders as playing their roles, suggesting that what the rest of the country sees in the media is all an act, a performance, a game. After bedazzling the medical professionals, Nick takes a call from Bill Albright, a reporter at *USA Today*, who wants Nick's reaction to the latest studies on the dangers of smoking. Nick again plays the victim, going on about how tobacco gets blamed for everything, even widening the hole in the ozone layer. Buckley writes: "Actually, Nick had not read that cigarettes were widening the ozone hole, but since Bill was a friend, he felt he could in good conscience lie to him. He heard the soft clicking of the keyboard at the other end. Bill was taking it down. They were each playing their assigned roles" (11). Like Waugh with the Dickens scene, Buckley's including the media-lobbyist-politician drama as being a façade, all for show, could be seen as a dig at his father – William F. Buckley spent his

entire adult life on that stage. Indeed, Christopher Buckley himself, to a lesser extent, has spent his entire life on that stage as well, as a White House staffer and journalist.

Buckley further skewers journalism with digs at the Washington Post and then television talk show host Larry King. After Nick receives a death threat while appearing on CNN's "Larry King Live," the "Reliable Source" column in the *Washington Sun* (clearly representing the *Washington Post*, which has a column by that name) runs an item headlined, "Caller to King Show Threatens to Stub Out Tobacco Spokesman" (81). Nick, accustomed to death threats and not particularly concerned, feels slighted by the newspaper. He – ironically for someone who jokes about being a merchant of death – believes it is no laughing matter. He decides to call the newspaper to lodge a complaint. He hears a recording:

> You have reached the Washington Sun's ombudsman's desk. If you feel you have been inaccurately quoted, press one. If you spoke to a reporter off the record but were identified in an article, press two. If you spoke on deep background, but were identified, press three. If you were quoted accurately but feel the reporter missed the larger point, press four. If you are a confidential White House source and are calling to alert your reporter that the president is furious over leaks and has ordered a review of all outgoing calls in the White House phone logs, press five. To speak to an editor, press six." (81)

In that one paragraph, Buckley captures all the problems with the Inside the Beltway media, as perceived by those who are not a part of it: Incompetence, arrogance,

untrustworthiness. Larry King, on the other hand, represents a different problem – gullibility and politeness that lead to softball questions with no real follow-up. Consequently, while Nick's usual tactics are obfuscation and red herrings, he is emboldened on the King show, resorting to flat-out lies. He states that ninety-six percent of smokers never get sick. Even Larry King finds that dubious and asks where the statistic comes from. "From the National Institutes of Health, right here in Bethesda, Maryland," Nick replies with confidence, thinking, "Let NIH deny it tomorrow; tomorrow, people will be on to the next thing: Bosnia, tax increases, Sharon Stone's new movie, Patti Davis's new book about what a bitch her mother was…" (76). Having already told one preposterous lie, Nick adds that the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta confirmed the findings. King does not press him. "Larry was basically too polite to accuse his guests of being shameless liars. It was probably why Ross Perot liked him so much" (76). The scene not only spoofs King's gullibility, it is another jab at Buckley the elder. Of all the news stories to mention that people might be concerned with the next day, Buckley mentions Patti Davis's book about her mother – Nancy Reagan, wife of the former president (in whose White House the author worked) and close family friend of William and Patricia Buckley.

Early in the novel, Nick tries to do the right thing – tell the truth – though not for the right reason; and gets shot down by his boss, proving Buckley's case that on this stage, truth is not an option. Nick writes a memo suggesting that, since no one is buying their preposterous "smoking is not harmful" line, the tobacco lobbyists should admit that smoking can be bad for some people, just like driving a car, flying, even crossing the

street, can be dangerous. Life is filled with risks, Nick argues; admitting that smoking can be a risk would boost their credibility. His boss, BR, is furious: "Stupidest idea I ever heard. Stupid and expensive. I had to have every copy of that memo burned. Can you imagine what would happen if it turned up in one of those goddamned liability trials? An internal document admitting we know that smoking is bad for you" (16)? The lobbyists know smoking kills – they cannot admit it and must go on saying the opposite to act out their role in the play.

Truth is not an option for the "Bright Young Things" portrayed in Waugh's work, either. It is all about appearances. They, too, are playing roles on a stage. Waugh illustrates this early in the novel when John Beaver takes the train to spend a weekend at Hetton Abbey, the home of Tony and Brenda Last. We see that he does not really want to go – Tony invited him offhandedly at a party – and the Lasts do not really want any guests that weekend. Yet Beaver arrives and goes through the motions of enjoying their hospitality, and they go through the motions of enjoying having him as their guest. No one enjoys the weekend. Finally, Tony, the character most like Waugh, shows a bit of sincerity and says what he means – but only after going through the expected motions first – and feeling guilty about it afterward. Tony enjoys going to church by himself on Sunday mornings, but Beaver is their guest, so he says, "Well, I'm off to church, I don't suppose you'd care to come" (34)? Beaver does not want to go to church, yet "Beaver always did what was expected of him when staying away, even on a visit as unsatisfactory as the present one, 'Oh yes, I should like to very much.'" Not receiving the answer that he hoped for, Tony explains that Beaver really would not enjoy it, that he,

Tony, only goes because he must, and that Beaver should stay at the house and have the servants bring him a drink. Beaver, never wanting to go in the first place, readily agrees, and Tony leaves. Rather than feeling happy with his longed-for solitude as he heads to church, however, he feels pangs of guilt at having spoken truth: "Now I have behaved inhospitably to that young man again" (34). Later, when Tony encounters Beaver's mother, she tells him, "…John has been telling me about a delightful weekend he had with you" (47). The façade remains, and Tony replies, "It was quiet."

Both Tony Last and Nick Naylor can remain remarkably quiet, or at least acquiescent, when others are acting in a way that adversely affects their lives. We have already seen this trait in Waugh's Paul Pennyfeather and William Boot, and in Buckley's Herb Wadlough and John Bannion. In *Thank You for Smoking*, Nick Naylor readily faces down anti-smoking advocates, members of Congress, journalists, and even cancer victims dying from the effects of tobacco – but when not in full lobbyist mode, he is an easy target for those who seek to manipulate him. On an airplane trip, for example, coming back from his appearance on "Oprah," Nick is seated next to a woman who confuses him for a gossip show host. His fellow passenger goes on and on about her own love life and various personal problems, and Nick just sits and takes it. "After an hour of sympathetic listening, his neck muscles had hypercontracted into steely knots of tension. He would need a session with (chiropractor) Dr. Wheat when he got back. He found himself yearning for a terrorist incident" (52). Only a severe thunderstorm, causing tremendous turbulence, stops the woman's harangue.

Likewise, when Nick runs afoul of the new boss, BR, he does nothing to stand up for himself. It would not be the first time he faced getting fired from his job. Before becoming a tobacco spokesman, he had been a television reporter for a Washington station. He reported on live television that the president had "choked on a piece of meat at a military base and died, causing the stock market to drop 180 points [a considerable amount in those days] and lose $3 billion worth of value before the White House produced the president, alive" (57). Nick's reporting career ended because he heard that "Rover" choked on a piece of meat, and, knowing the president's Secret Service Code name was Rover, he rushed his major scoop onto the air. How was he supposed to know the general at the base had a dog named Rover? Nobody names their dog Rover, do they? It cost Nick his job and gave Buckley another opportunity to hit the media for not nailing down facts before reporting a story. At the tobacco job, Nick stands by as BR pushes him aside in favor of the younger – and attractive, and female – Jeannette. When the tobacco magnate known as "The Captain" – who bankrolls the tobacco institute – likes the idea of paying Hollywood to feature actors smoking onscreen, Nick says nothing to disabuse him of the notion that it was BR's idea. It was Nick's idea. "That was your idea," BR admits afterward, "he must have gotten it mixed up" (65). Nick replies, "Of course. With all he has on his mind" (65).

Fortunately for Nick, The Captain was so impressed with the spokesman's appearance on "Oprah," that he orders BR not just to keep him on staff, but to double his salary. We ultimately learn that it was BR and Jeannette, inspired by the threats against Nick by the caller on "Larry King Live," who arrange Nick's kidnapping. They figure

they can get him out of the way and create sympathy for the cause of tobacco at the same time. Jeannette seduces Nick, and she insists on keeping the lights off (147). Nick once again just goes along, and Jeannette plants the evidence that causes the FBI to conclude that Nick staged the kidnapping himself. He was, however, kidnapped – in broad daylight in front of hundreds of people in a shopping mall while getting coffee. A man posing as a bum suddenly accosts him from behind, saying, "Don't turn around. Don't move. Don't speak. That's the muzzle of a nine-millimeter, and if you don't do everything I tell you to, when I tell you to, you'll be at the morgue with a slab on your toe by the time that coffee cools" (103). In typical understatement, Buckley has Nick thinking, "As introductions went, it was attention-getting" (107). When the kidnappers cover his body with nicotine patches, he recognizes it is probably a lethal dose, "Not that there was any scientific proof that nicotine was bad for you" (106). Nick passes out and wakes up the next morning on the mall in Washington – the kidnappers expected the dose to be lethal, but Nick – this time enjoying good fortune – is found just in time and survives the ordeal (113).

Nick is again wafted by the winds of fortune when the FBI finds his story highly suspicious, and tightens a ring of investigation around him, ultimately charging him with staging his own kidnapping. This finally brings his passivity – and his shilling for Big Tobacco – to an end. Nick engineers an investigation of his own, which leads to BR and Jeannette as the plotters in the kidnapping scheme. The novel ends with Nick back where he started – on the Larry King show. But this time things have changed. This time, Larry

King says, Nick "is *not* going to tell us that there is no link before smoking and lung cancer" (269).

"That's right, Larry," Nick replies.

"This book you've written, *Thank You for Smoking.* Curious title. What does it mean?"

"It's meant to be ironic, Larry. Though my former employers, the tobacco lobby, for whom I used to lie to on shows like this, actually have signs printed that say that" (269).

In this final book-within-a-book irony, Buckley brings Nick full circle. But unlike Paul Pennyfeather or Herb Wadlough, he is not exactly back where he started. He is in the same place physically, but in a very different position. Like a satirist who finds society too absurd to satire, Nick finally finds tobacco too devastating to lie about.

In the same way, Tony Last does little to prevent the downfall that causes him to lose his wife and spend, seemingly, the rest of his life in the Brazilian jungle reading Dickens to a lunatic. In his critical biography of Waugh, Wilson tells the story of two stories the future novelist wrote in 1914, when he was eleven years old. Both, complete with drawings, feature heroes who are captured and ultimately rescued. "[One of the character's] imprisonment in the Amazon anticipates Tony Last's imprisonment in *Handful of Dust* (1934). Both juvenile stories seem to show, if anything, fascination with vulnerability, characteristic of Waugh's novels" (Wilson 33).

Tony's vulnerability is clear in his devotion to Brenda while she cheats on him. He worries that John Andrew's death will be "so much worse for Brenda. You see she'd got nothing else, much, except John [Andrew]. I've got her, and I love the house…but with Brenda John always came first…naturally" (132). He has no idea that she was relieved it was their son who died instead of her lover John Beaver, yet Tony says, "But, you see, I know Brenda so well" (132). The husband as clueless victim vulnerable to devastating heartache has its roots in Waugh's own life. "…Waugh had married Evelyn Gardner. Her infidelity in 1929 and their divorce embittered Waugh, affecting, apparently, his representation of love in *Handful of Dust*" (Wilson 176). The abandonment comes across as well in Waugh's description of the Brat's Club, where the lonely Tony goes. He has become essentially a bachelor, with Brenda taking the flat in London and spending so much time there. But Tony allows it to happen, ending up alone at the club. Waugh describes men in coats and tails, dining alone, in low spirits. "They are those who have been abandoned at the last minute by their women. For twenty minutes or so they have sat in the foyer of some restaurant, gazing expectantly towards the revolving doors and alternately taking out their watches and ordering cocktails, until, at length, at telephone message has been brought them that their guests are unable to come.

When Brenda informs Tony – by letter – that she is in love with John Beaver and wanted a divorce, he is again inert. He at first thinks Brenda must have lost her reason over the shock of John Andrew's death, but when he shows the letter to his friend Jock, Jock confirms it is true and everyone had known for some time. "But it was several days

before Tony realized what it meant. He had got into a habit of loving and trusting Brenda" (152). When the time for divorce proceedings, Waugh writes in the passive tense: "It was thought convenient that Brenda appear as the plaintiff" (156), meaning Tony was once again allowing events to come to him rather than taking initiative and standing up for himself. Absurdly, he needs to find a woman to spend a weekend with him, albeit platonically, to authenticate that he is the one at fault in the divorce and Brenda will prevail as plaintiff (159). Just like Paul allowing Margot to get away with her perfidy, innocent Tony dutifully commits "adultery" so the divorce blame falls on him rather than on the guilty Brenda.

It is again vulnerability and blind trust that lead to Tony's fate in the Amazon. Looking to get away after the heartache of his divorce, he heads for South America, falling under the spell of the unreliable Dr. Messinger. It is with him that Tony goes on the expedition, and it is he who gets them hopelessly lost, abandoned by their guides. When Messinger dies after his canoe capsizes (242), Tony is completely alone and sick. He is rescued, but the rescue by the mysterious Mr. Todd comes with a heavy price – Tony must stay with him and read Dickens forever. Mr. Todd will not allow him to leave, and he cannot escape the jungle on his own. He must read and listen over and over to Mr. Todd's banal, numbingly obvious comments: "Mrs. Jellyby does not take enough care of her children" (259). Mrs. Jellyby, from Dickens' *Bleak House*, is a horrible mother. Back home, Tony is presumed dead, and Brenda marries his best friend. Like other characters examined here, he is used and discarded by others, but unlike the other characters examined here, he ends up very far indeed from where he started.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

Evelyn Waugh remains one of the most highly regarded novelists of the 20th Century, best known for one of his novels – *Brideshead Revisited* – that did not follow the pattern of his earlier biting comedies such as those examined here. Christopher Buckley, we have seen, never reached the pinnacle of artistic success or acclaim that Waugh did, but is as well-regarded as a satirical novelist in this age some would call a post-literary era.

Both these novelists were at their best figuratively biting the hand that fed them, taking on their own social circles and the worlds in which their own fathers played prominent roles. But both reached points in their careers where they had enough and needed to turn away from satire for a time, but each time they came back, because satire was something they did not to change the world, but to get back at others and make themselves feel better.

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