

“Not his sort of story”: Evelyn Waugh and Pauline Melville in Guyana

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On December 12, 1932, Evelyn Waugh set sail from England for what was then the colony of British Guiana.¹ Recently divorced, and suffering the mortification of the cuckold, he had left London with a “heart of lead” (*Diaries* 354), driven away by the craving to put substantial distance between himself and home. South America seemed suitably “far flung... [with its] impenetrable Guiana forests” (Hastings 266). The resulting narrative, *Ninety-Two Days* (1934), suggests by its title less an excursion to lands appealingly far-flung than a tribulation or penitential act to be gotten through. Though Waugh claims in *Ninety-Two Days* to be interested in “distant and barbarous places, and particularly in the borderlands of conflicting cultures and states of development” (11), he did not pay much attention to his surroundings in Guiana. Indeed, one of his biographers, Selina Hastings, sums up his attitude as follows: “[T]here can have been few travel writers... who show less curiosity about their surroundings. Although prepared to note the architecture, go to Mass, and drink with members of the expatriate population, Evelyn rarely displays more than a superficial inquisitiveness about the country or its indigenous inhabitants” (269).²

His first sight of Georgetown harbor was not encouraging: “hope dried up in one at the sight of it” (*Ninety-Two Days* 12). Waugh’s recorded his general impression of Georgetown in his *Diaries*: “I don’t care how soon I leave it” (360). He traveled by canoe and horse through the forests and savannahs of Guiana and Brazil, suffering considerably from heat, hunger, thirst, sleeplessness, vampire bats, and especially insects. The rivers he thought “unendurably monotonous” and the Amerindians he dismissed as “unattractive, squat and dingy, with none of the grace one expects in savages” (122). Though Waugh acknowledged that the Indians could on occasion be cheerful and well-disposed, and were

chiefly fond of hunting, pets, and strong drink (which Waugh fancies as an English resemblance), he found them mostly elusive and obscure, solitary, suspicious, lazy, and without ambition, drifting by on their “unexplained and pointless errands, moving invisibly like the tides” (78). In his *Diaries*, he noted that the “negroes” on the other hand were more cheerful and “comic,” though ramshackle and “hobbledehoy” (359).

In Georgetown, he spent most of his time drinking rum swizzles at the local expatriate club; on the savannahs he sought out relative measures of comfort with ranchers and priests (Waugh was a recent Catholic convert), where he could dine on food more palatable than the unvarying “farine” (cassava) and “tasso” (dried meat) he was served up along the route. Along the way he encountered a number of eccentrics, including the descendants of the “highly romantic... Mr. Melville” (*Diaries* 24), which I will go on to address further. Upon his return from the bush Waugh summed up Guiana as a “civilization in its retreat... a place returning to solitude and desolation frivolously disturbed... a destructive and predatory civilization” (161–62). Back in England, he confided to a friend that he had just returned from “a journey of the greatest misery... Am getting rid of some of the horrors of life in the forest” (Hastings 281).

Pauline Melville, author of *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997), was born in Guyana and is part British. Her mother's family were “a tribe of Anglo-Saxons if there ever was one, blonde and blue-eyed,” and she is also part Guyanese and describes her father's family as “a genetic bouquet of African, Amerindian and European features, a family gazing out from dark, watchful eyes” (“Beyond the Pale” 739–40).³ Melville descends from the “highly romantic Mr. Melville” of whom Waugh wrote in 1933, and thus she has made an autobiographical investment in her own fiction by introducing both her forebears and Waugh as characters in *The Ventriloquist's Tale*. In fact, she has laid Waugh's travel book and diary under requisition to help provide several characters and events in her novel. Such intertextualities are at first glance unexpected and puzzling especially since Waugh's travel narrative shows so much unremitting dislike for his chosen destination. More puzzling, perhaps, given Waugh's lunatic conviction that human worth can be measured by race and ge-

nealogy is frequently on display, especially in his *Diaries*.⁴ It is amusing to speculate that Melville's agenda may be in part personal. "All stories," the narrator of *The Ventriloquist's Tale* informs us, "are told for revenge or tribute. Take your pick" (9). Melville may not have been pleased by Waugh's perfunctory and unkind observations about her ancestors. The reader might additionally presuppose the following set-up: Melville introduces Waugh as an archetypal instance of the Tory-colonial Colonel Blimp at his most rank and unweeded, racist, misogynistic, full of rum swizzles, insect-piqued irritability and harrumphing snobbery. Waugh is in short an easy target for Melville's (and the reader's) post-colonial derision. In other words, Waugh's presence in the novel offers the thematic possibility of a simple binary with a predictable outcome: against the dull ceremony of the English tea-table Melville will serve up the brisk peppery callaloo of her multifaceted Creole identity. As Melville states in "Beyond the Pale," "I am a champion of mixtures and hybrids.... I enjoy Carnival because ... it is a masquerade where disguise is the only truth.... Death comes in the guise of uniformity, mono-cultural purity, the externals of the state as opposed to the riot of the imagination" (742–43). But as I hope to show, a strictly post-colonial reading of *The Ventriloquist's Tale* and Waugh's deployment as a character in it is inadequate. Melville engages Waugh's *Ninety-Two Days* and his diary in an intertextual dialogue with an Amerindian Guyanese world, and the juxtaposition of its magic, mythic lore and very non-Western realities produces interesting and unexpected results. Her object is not to praise one culture at the expense of another, nor to oppose the magical world of the Wapisiana against the rationalist world of the Europeans—that would be too easy. Rather, she dwells on the mutual incomprehension that makes relations between cultures both necessary and extremely difficult, if not impossible.

First, let me offer a structural outline of Melville's complex novel. The novel contains three separate narratives, nested like Chinese boxes. It is framed with a short prologue and epilogue spoken by the ventriloquist narrator of the book's title, a mischievous, elusive trickster who refuses to give his name: "Ah, secrecy, camouflage and treachery. What blessings to us all. Where I come from, disguise is the only truth and desire the

only true measure of time” (7). The first narrative is the contemporary story of the adulterous love affair between Chofy McKinnon and Rosa Mendelson. The second, which constitutes two-thirds of the novel, takes place sixty or so years earlier (during Waugh’s visit) and tells of the incestuous love affair between Danny and Beatrice McKinnon. The trickster narrator is associated with Sonny, who is Danny and Beatrice’s autistic son, as well as with Macunaíma, one of the brothers in Macusi myth who loosed a flood on the world by cutting down the tree of life.

Waugh’s travel book is chronologically linear and conventional. He describes the isolated cattle savannas and the sparse eccentric ranchers who inhabit it. Among the ranchers Waugh encountered were Teddy Melville and his sister, Amy (Melville) Hart. Mr. Melville was “a government officer with a pretty Brazilian wife, [who] gave me beer” (*Diaries* 367–68). Mrs. Hart, who lived on a nearby ranch, looked after her six children and “a dotty bastard nephew [Melville’s Sonny], son of John Melville [Teddy and Amy’s brother] by his three-quarter sister” (*Diaries* 367). At the time of Waugh’s visit, “Melville’s family still h[e]ld complete predominance in the [Rapununi] district, all the key positions being held by his sons and son-in-law” (25). Waugh wrote that Mr. Melville and Mrs. Hart were the half-Indian children of

a highly romantic character named Mr. Melville. This gentleman, who died a few years back, was a parson’s son from Jamaica. His story, as told me by one of his daughters, was that after various unsuccessful attempts at gold washing he was found by some Wapishiana Indians dying of fever in the upper Essequibo. He expressed a desire to die in open country and they accordingly carried him to the Rupununi savannah where he made an immediate recovery.... He won the Indians’ confidence, married among them, and presently began keeping cattle on an increasing scale until by 1915 he was living in patriarchal authority at a large ranch named Dadanawa. (24)

In *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, the Melville family is rechristened McKinnon, whose biography follows. The resemblance between Waugh’s Melville and Melville’s McKinnon is clear:

Alexander McKinnon was a lean energetic Scotsman in his thirties who prided himself on being a free-thinker. He had arrived in the colony via Jamaica where his father was an arch-deacon.... Rejecting the church and determined to get as far away from civilization as possible, he struck off into the interior of Guiana with a group of nomadic Atorad Indians.... After traveling [sic] for several weeks through the wild rain forest...[and] having eaten nothing but cassava bread and salt-fish, he fell ill. When he could no longer keep up with them, the Indians abandoned him to lie in his hammock by the river. (*The Ventriloquist's Tale* 96)

At last, nearly dead, he crawled into a Wapisiana village, was nursed back to health, and eventually married two Wapisiana sisters, Maba and Zuna, between whom he fathered six children. This second generation of McKinnons includes Danny and Beatrice, the main actors of the novel's central narrative, set between 1919 and 1933.

One of the third generation of McKinnons, Chofoye (Chofy), is the main character in the novel's contemporary narrative. Chofy has left his wife Marietta and son Bla Bla to look for work in Georgetown after a flood and a plague of vampire bats have wiped out his cattle herd. He is also dissatisfied with his marriage and savannah life, and vaguely aspires to a life more glamorous. He has taken his aunt Wilfreda, Danny and Beatrice's sister (perhaps Waugh's Amy Melville), for treatment of her cataracts. While in Georgetown Chofy is sought out by Rosa Mendelson, a Londoner whose purpose for visiting Guyana is to conduct research on Waugh's colonial travels. She intends to write a paper entitled "Evelyn Waugh-a Post Colonial Perspective" (110), and has come to Guyana in search of those who might remember Waugh's visit.

So Evelyn Waugh not only passes through the Danny and Beatrice story, but he also serves as the reason given for Rosa's visit to Guyana fifty years later. Other individuals Waugh met and recorded in his Guiana travel account, journals, and letters also provide hints for other characters fully developed in Melville's novel. A missionary uncle of some friends of Waugh's who had retired to England from the Guiana

savannah after a “complete breakdown” (*Ninety-Two Days* 62) sketches in a sentence the fate of Melville’s Father Napier, a Jesuit missionary who goes mad on the savannah after being poisoned by a “paiai” (medicine) woman. Melville’s character Nancy Freeman, the one-time teacher of the McKinnon children whom Rosa interviewed in London about her recollections of Waugh, may recall the Hart’s “Creole governess,” who reminded Waugh in *Ninety-Two Days* of an “adolescent Josephine Baker” (71). Indeed, the intertextual connections between Melville and Waugh are more numerous and complex than I can touch upon here.⁵

Perhaps such textual links are also intended to remind us that the stories’ writers tell imply the “absent” stories and the hidden potentialities, which we do not hear. Like Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which “writes back” to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* offers a counter-discourse to Waugh’s textual accounts of the people he met during his ninety-two days in colonial Guiana. Sarah Lawson Welsh has described Melville’s novel as an intertextual response to Waugh’s “process of colonialization by textual means”:

Indeed, all of these [intruding Europeans in Melville’s novel—Waugh the travel writer, the scholar of post-colonialism Rosa Mendelson, the anthropologist Professor Wormoal, the Jesuit missionary Father Napier] construct “imposing narratives”—potentially powerful and coercive accounts of Amerindian peoples, their cultures and cosmologies which act ultimately to foreground European anxieties and to render Amerindian peoples even more marginal and “invisible.” (109)

Melville’s Waugh therefore would seem to confirm this reader’s earlier presupposition that he is intended as a baseline illustration of the myopic colonial Englishman set loose upon a field of cultural difference. He is trapped in his own preconceptions. Melville’s Waugh complains, “I now can’t wait to return to England. I find it excruciatingly dull in this part of the world. Nothing appears to happen here. What do you find to do?” (*The Ventriloquist’s Tale* 288). Blind to everything except what “appears,” Waugh’s failure of vision causes him to “miss the story,” the story that is right under his nose, the narrative of Danny and Beatrice which

constitutes two-thirds of the text of Melville's novel. According to Nancy Freeman, the one time McKinnon teacher and nanny whom Rosa has interviewed in London, Waugh "certainly knew about" Danny and Beatrice's affair (the "dotty nephew") but didn't write about it. "Perhaps it was not Evelyn Waugh's sort of story," she remarks (49). Nancy sums up Waugh's stay with the McKinnons: "We felt sorry for him. Poor man. He was so out of place. He sat in the open that first day and that was when I gave him a haircut. Nobody really knew what the hell he was doing there. Danny McKinnon, Wilfreda's brother, was obliged to sit and listen to him reading out loud for hours—Dickens, I think" (49).

But Waugh is not the only cultural outsider who misses the story. Rosa, as scholar of the post-colonial, also misses the story she is seeking, since Auntie Wilfreda, having little use for anyone outside her own family, refuses to speak about her recollections of Waugh. Rosa is unlike Waugh in many ways—in her passionate endorsement of multiculturalism for example. But Rosa shares certain attitudes and ways of seeing with Waugh and Guyana's first colonists, the Dutch. As Waugh writes in *Ninety-Two Days*, Georgetown was a place "where I did not have an hour's certainty of plan" (21). Rosa sees herself as "a complete rationalist" (*The Ventriloquist's Tale* 298). Melville describes her as "a slow thoughtful woman whose progress through life was methodical and thorough" (76). She appreciates "rationality and orderliness in her life" (43) and has little affinity for "a country of the random" (76). Rosa is warned soon after her arrival in Georgetown that Guyana is "a country where you will have to surrender to the unexpected. The ferry will break down but another will go. You are at the mercy of the random" (44). Melville also describes how the Dutch tried to impose their own regularities on the disparate and shapeless land, laying out the streets in geometrical grids, building a city of "Euclidean shapes, obtuse-angled red roofs, square-framed houses on evenly spaced stilts, delicately angled Demerara shutters, all constructed around transparency, emptiness and light" (35). But the Dutch remained gripped and maddened by "the fear of the existence of something that they could not see" (33–34). For Waugh and Rosa, like the early Dutch settler, Mynheer Nicklaus, whose eyes were set so wide apart that the fields of his vision did not overlap and so he "developed

the habit of moving his head from side to side like a scanner,” something remains unseen at the center of their vision (*The Ventriloquist's Tale* 36). The novel is really about different kinds of miscommunication, misperception, different sorts of cultural blindness, “the gap in the middle where [Mynheer Nicklaus] saw nothing” (36).

Colonial travelers were looking for gold to mine or savages to convert or, as in Waugh's case, exotic spaces in which to escape from their own lives. Melville's post-colonial travelers, scholars like Rosa, seek another El Dorado, “a new form of colonial power” (*The Ventriloquist's Tale* 80). M. J. Wormold, a Czech anthropologist studying the myths of the Guyana Indians, tells Rosa, “information is the new gold.... My knowledge of the Indians is a way of owning them—I admit it. We fight over the intellectual territory. But it's better than stealing their land, isn't it?” (80). Wormold operates on the structuralist principle (via Claude Lévi-Strauss) that what may appear to be disparate and shapeless can be organized in terms of binaries of contrastive relationships. For example, all societies have kinship systems, that is to say sets of rules about whom one may and may not marry, dietary rules about what one may and may not eat, and so forth. In this light, myths can be reduced to algebraic formulas.

Thus, Melville implies, there may be little difference between post-colonial and colonial ways of seeing and ordering. Colonial control's “most tenacious aspect...has been its capacity to bind the colonized into a binary myth...of colonizer/colonized, civilized/uncivilized, white/black” (Ashcroft 21). Westerners like Waugh and Wormold (who gives a lecture entitled “Eclipse—A Rational Analysis of Myth”) perpetuate this Western discourse of “the savage mind.” Waugh dismisses Sonny as the “dotty bastard nephew” of Wilfreda; when Nancy Freeman confides Sonny's history to Waugh, he did not seem “particularly interested, in fact, she detected a certain distaste as he listened” (*Ninety-Two Days* 74). He shuts his eyes to what he cannot or cares not to understand and surrenders to Dickens or boredom. He resembles the diplomat's wife whom Chofy and Rosa dine with, “bleating with self-pity” for finding herself in “a hardship posting” where “you can't get anything done” (*The Ventriloquist's Tale* 303). Rosa is a much more sympathetic character, but her affair Chofy is doomed finally by her “clear-headed ration-

alism" (301), in deference to which Chofy suppresses his superstitious fear of revealing his name and agrees to explain its meaning. He reluctantly tells her that his name Chofoye means "explosion of waters." She mentions the name and translation to Wormoal, and he in turn passes it on to a group of American oil geologists whose intelligence of the Wai Wai word for explosion might prove useful, since they are testing for oil deposits with dynamite. All apparently innocent enough, but when Chofy's son Bla Bla wanders near one of the blast sites, the American engineer shouts "chofoye" to warn the child off and instead draws him to his death. Reason seems powerless either to dictate or explain this chain of coincidence; disaster as a sort of agentless principle, fate perhaps, seems to be at work. Certainly the western view, that "we live in a universe governed by rational laws" (Wormold is quoting Stephen Hawking), seems hardly applicable (*The Ventriloquist's Tale* 81).

The Amerindians see mythic connections governing causes and events. Danny and Beatrice, their incest discovered, have taken to the bush. Their father, McKinnon, discovers that he is not as "freethinking" as he supposed, and enlists the fanatical Jesuit missionary, Father Napier, to track them down and save their souls from damnation. The Indians, however, while disapproving of "living close," as incest is called, acknowledge that such things do happen. As the novel's epigraph observes, "beyond the equator, everything is permitted" (179). To the Amerindians, incest is additionally explicable when placed in the context of a solar eclipse, a fearful event when distinctions are blurred and boundaries dissolve. A solar eclipse visible over British Guiana occurred in 1919. This eclipse represented to western scientists the opportunity to "weigh light," to prove some aspect of Einstein's Theory of Relativity by observing the Hyades constellation during a time of eclipse. Since Danny and Beatrice's incest coincided with these events, the eclipse offers to the Amerindians an explanatory and thus somewhat exculpatory account of their behavior. They are understood by the Indians as instruments in a myth of incest and creation, wherein a pair of siblings had risen into the sky and become the sun and the moon, whose sexual union causes eclipses. On such occasions, "monsters come out of the bush and attack people.... Even the dead rise up to see what's hap-

pening. And everything can change into something else. Animals into people. People into animals. The dead and the living all mix up” (180–81). In other words, incest in a time of eclipse is “more understandable” (208), in the self-consoling view of Maba, Danny and Beatrice’s mother.⁶ In *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, the legends are real. Everyday life is an illusion behind which lies the unchanging reality of dream and myth. “We look for the mask behind the face” (99), as one Amerindian villager explains. In other words, to the Amerindians the invisible world, the unchanging reality of dream and myth, is the world of causes; the visible world—the unreal world—is the world of events. “Which came first,’ the narrator asks [he has been listening to a story on the BBC about the “Big Bang” theory of cosmic origin], ‘the equation or the story?’ ‘The story of course,’ [his grandmother] snapped” (99).

Certainly Melville is interested in the competing claims of Western and Amerindian culture, Amerindian tradition versus Western modernity, the myths of progress versus the laws of myth. The novel’s sympathies clearly lie with Amerindians and the reader may be tempted to side with Chofy’s cousin Tenga, who deplores what old and new colonizers (including the suicidal Jonestown cult) have done to Guyana and the Amerindians:

We Amerindian people are fools, you know. We’ve been colonized twice. First by the Europeans and then by the coastlanders. I don’t know which is worse. Big companies come to mine gold or cut timber. Scholars come and worm their way into our communities, studying us and grabbing our knowledge for their own benefit. Aid agencies come and interfere with us. Tourists stare at us. Politicians crawl around us at election times. (*The Ventriloquist’s Tale* 54)

The novel poses this central question through Beatrice McKinnon: “She wondered if it was better for her own people to preserve themselves within their own traditions or to allow change” (281). To some of the Amerindian characters, the narrator’s grandmother Koko for example, “all novelty or innovation is a sign of death” (9). Even Chofy believes that “change is the beginning of disintegration” (15), though his efforts to scratch out a living on the savannah have exhausted him and

made him “restless to strike out for something new” (14). The dilemma—roots versus mixing, purity versus hybridity, tradition versus innovation—implies that to gain the one is to lose the other in equal degrees. But, as Tenga bitterly acknowledges, “what do we do? We’re destroyed if we mix. And we’re destroyed if we don’t” (55).

Melville’s views on the impact of globalism on the world’s cultures are ambivalent. “All stories are told for revenge or tribute. Take your pick” (*The Ventriloquist’s Tale* 9). However, Melville is especially mindful of the sentimentality underlying the assertion that indigenous people are ethically superior to Westerners, more innocent somehow, “a people who enjoy gentle loving, slow fucking and good company” (355–56). In other words, while Melville deconstructs and decenters Western “imposing narratives,” and by so doing “recovers a degree of agency and resistance for her Amerindian characters, [she remains] mindful of the dangers attendant on over-easy and over-simplified postcolonial literary recuperations of agency for indigenous peoples” (Welsh 109).

For example, her critiques of colonial and post-colonial Georgetown are nuanced by her awareness of the larger questions of the discourses of representation. As I noted earlier, Melville mocks Waugh, Rosa, and the early Dutch settlers for their futile Western need of plans and order in a place like Guyana. Melville’s Guyana is a place without logic or continuity, always shape-shifting, where boundaries are fluid and one should neither look for a pattern nor try to impose one. Yet half a millennium of colonization has had its inexorable and inescapable impact on post-colonial ways of self-fashioning. For example, at the town’s center, amidst the sterile geometries of its carefully laid-out Dutch colonial streets, an old plantation house still survives, built by a colonial Dutch planter. Now a hotel, it looks like a ship, or rather like “a galleon that had come to ground, beached in a city amongst a host of other craft” and thereby shifted by definition into a house, as a beached armada might turn into a city, “a wooden fleet on land” (*The Ventriloquist’s Tale* 63). In other words, an occasion presents itself to subvert this symbol of colonial conquest and subsequent neglect by reinscribing it as a site of post-colonial hybridity, plurality, the “creole” struggling to free itself from the past. But instead, in a shed in the back yard of this colonial survival a pa-

rodic “parliament” convenes. Its members are the hotel’s motley creole staff, elderly rum-soaked artisans with names like Cuthbert, Henri and Boops: “In slow time, mellowed by rum ... this prestigious and dignified assembly of parliamentarians discussed the entire range of life’s topics, from the ridiculous antics of parliament, to the efficacy of Pif-paf insect repellent and even to the nature of the supernatural.... It was that most venerable of institutions, a parliament uncorrupted by power” (66). When the parliament is in session, a “judiciary” of gossiping cooks and maids holds court in the drawing room, passing judgment on film stars, politicians, boyfriends and husbands, and Mr. Roy, slowed by age and a stroke, maintains the office of “Lord Chamberlain” (66–67). Lovers Chofy and Rosa, who sleep in the hotel attic, presumably as the king and queen of this tri-cameral assembly, thus have their affair consigned to a context of mimicry and masquerade.

Chofy hates the city, the very sight of which “darkened [his] spirits like a black crow overhead” (29). He has spent the forty years of his life on the savannah, raising cattle and tanning hides, following traditional ways despite his mixed-race parentage. However, he too has been compromised by a savor for the new, for other glamorous and exotic scenes. He keeps in his dresser a newspaper photo of über-socialite “Claus Von Bulow and his wife attending a movie premier in New York. Mrs. Von Bulow wore, a low-cut, clinging, shimmering, white evening dress” (18). Chofy instantly falls in love with Rosa because he was already in love with the exotic idea of Rosa: “it was love before first sight” (40). Rosa and Chofy are products of very different cultures, and their adulterous urban affair an endeavor at “progressive” multiculturalism. As Chofy explains to Tenga, “I think we have to mix. Otherwise we have no future” (54). But the love affair between Chofy and Rosa comes to misunderstanding and grief with the death of his son Bla Bla. Chofy returns to his Wapisiana wife on the savannah and Rosa flies back to London.

The Beatrice-Danny affair meets a worse fate, and they are at the opposite pole of Rosa and Chofy’s cultural “exogamy.” Danny and Beatrice are incestuous, their intimate relationship an extreme of “traditional” racial self-containment. Melville treats their love with great sympathy, and without any sensationalism, but Danny returns with the fervent

Father Napier and eventually surrenders to marriage, alcoholism, and sloth. As Tenga has said, apropos of both pairs of lovers, “What to do. We’re destroyed if we mix. And destroyed if we don’t” (55). The narrator acknowledges that “the desire to be with your own kind exerts a powerful attraction” (355), but this desire can have consequences beyond anything which Chofy-Rosa or Danny-Beatrice have experienced. Wormold, a Czech nationalist, exemplifies in his promotion of the myth of purity the fascist risks of ethnic retreat into nationalism, racism, religious orthodoxy, all ways after all of “living close.” To be sure, Aunt Wilfreda’s “detestation of strangers” (41) differs in degree from recent passions for ethnic cleansing, but her refusal to engage with the present, indeed with any reality other than that which she is used to, represents another form of blindness. After she arrives in the city with Chofy and undergoes an operation for her cataracts, Melville turns the metaphor literal: the result of the surgery is not greater clarity but actual blindness for which the doctors can offer no scientific explanation. Only when she returns to her familiar savannah is her sight restored. Beatrice in her shame and fury over Father Napier’s interference goes so far as to persuade a paiai woman, Koko Lupi, to poison him. The Father, though he goes spectacularly mad, survives, but an Indian boy dies from the poison. Beatrice expresses no guilt and feels no regret. She is expelled by her people not for incest but out of fear that she has become a *kanaima*, a spirit of revenge. “Vengeance attacks were more terrifying than incest” (266). So Beatrice too is “expelled into everyday life” (268). She flees to Montreal, where she marries an auditor. Years later, as she lies in bed next to her husband thinking about a native American woman she saw at a carnival entombed in an ice coffin, Beatrice wonders “if it was better for her own people to preserve themselves within their own traditions or to allow change. For a long time she stared into the darkness” (281).

To mix or not to mix is a dilemma without a solution. Neither position is an unalloyed good, as in such structural binaries that reverse the old colonial polarity and make the “traditional” pure and authentic and the modern false and corrupt. Indeed, as a character Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* reminds us, “[Y]ou go back and back and back and it’s still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person,

one pure faith, on the globe” (196) As Beatrice’s mother has told her, “Hot and bitter or cold and sweet. Everything in the world is divided up like that” (*The Ventriloquist’s Tale* 281). The truth of this novel is that Melville has a creole’s suspicion of absolute categories and conceptualizations based on opposition.⁷ Distrustful of binaries, she is more interested in blurring boundaries and unsettling assumptions, “breaking down perceptions, stirring up doubt, rattling judgements [sic], shifting boundaries and unfixing fixities” (“Beyond the Pale” 740). Her true true voice is the narrator/ventriloquist in the novel’s framing prologue and epilogue. He refuses to give his name- names are magic, but he is variously identified with Sonny, the autistic son of Danny and Beatrice, and with *Macunaíma* (1928) by the Brazilian writer and folklorist Mário de Andrade.⁸ Melville’s choice of Mário de Andrade’s novel is another interesting intertextual reference. *Macunaíma* was quite revolutionary at the time of its publication, for it refused the European ideas of cultural identity that the Brazil expected of its writers.

Macunaíma is the trickster in Macusi myth. Like all tricksters, he is an overgrown child, clever, resourceful, vain, indolent, willful, unapologetic, oversexed, selfish, disloyal and destructive. “I never apologize. We have no word for sorry. Cockroach ate my conscience in the night” (*Macunaíma* 4). Andrade’s Macunaíma is a psychological and cultural chameleon. Indian, black, and white all at once, he is the true Creole.⁹ A shape-shifter whose talents are secrecy, camouflage and treachery, he is capable of defeating or escaping his enemies through his infinite adaptability and magical power of self-transformation. He is “brilliant at divining what you would like to hear and saying it, so you can never be sure what we think” (*Macunaíma* 354). Unlike his grandmother, who “believes we Indians should keep to ourselves, retreating from the modern world like contracting stars (9),” he adapts through mimicry to survive; “monkey cut ‘e tail to be in fashion” (9). In London or New York, he favors black felt fedoras, white suits, cheroots, and Porsches; maybe he does sound after all like Waugh’s kind of chap, or Chofy’s image of the glamorous Claus Von Bulow.

The ventriloquist’s trick is to negotiate a way of being that lies between outside assimilation by the dominant and the subversive resistant

strategy of indigenization, or as Beatrice explained to her sisters when they were sent to a convent school in Georgetown, “They must merge in with their surroundings, copy the coastlanders while somehow keeping themselves intact” (*The Ventriloquist’s Tale* 138). Derek Walcott describes such a strategy as facing the world “with black skin and blue eyes” so as to avoid both “the most conservative and prejudiced redoubts of imperialism” and the reverse essentialism of “reactionaries in dashikis” (“Overture” 9, 27). Melville’s likeliest model is her fellow Guyanese writer Wilson Harris, whose cross-cultural imagination “does not erase difference between cultures;” rather it is a question of “endorsing differences yet creatively undermining biases” (Harris 20).¹⁰

At the same time Melville implies that in the recent tendency to celebrate hybridity—as Rushdie has famously written, “*mélange*, hotch-potch, a bit of this and a bit of that *is how newness enters the world*” (“In Good Faith” 394)—one might tend to overlook the fact that the most hybridized products of a colonial culture were the “mimic men” to whom control was ceded at the end of colonial rule. Moreover, the creolizing of an ethnically complex culture like Guyana may fail to estimate the contribution of all the cultures, the indigenous Amerindians, the Indians, the Chinese, for example, while privileging black/white cultural exchanges. Beatrice, who attends a convent school in the capital, lies outside the complicated color-coding of Georgetown society. “Beatrice caused confusion. She was not black and she was not white. One of the most forthright girls in the school took the opportunity to consult with her parents on the matter. She came back triumphantly and announce[d]: ‘The McKinnons are bucks [Amerindians].’ She said this firmly, as if that put an end to the matter” (*The Ventriloquist’s Tale* 139).

Melville brings to Caribbean writing voices that need to be heard in the full narrative of Caribbean culture. Indeed, according to David Dabydeen, “the Amerindians, the most invisible of the West Indian peoples, are paradoxically signposts of the future,” a future which, for Dabydeen, will bring a “recognition that West Indian peoples are not merely creatures of Britain, forged by British cultural values... [and] an emphasis on the cultural values and practices that survived British colonization” (Donnell and Welsh 455). But she enters these various lives

dispassionately, laying out the problems of culture clash without justifying or explaining and by maintaining a deliberate uncertainty about solutions to the problem of whether to mix it up or stick with one's own kind. As the narrator concludes in the novel's epilogue, "the moral of the story? Listen, before I even began, I stowed my conscience under a bush so that it could not hamper me in any way whatsoever" (*The Ventriloquist's Tale* 353).

Finally, what about Evelyn Waugh, with his "pushed-up face and hard pebble eyes" (*The Ventriloquist's Tale* 179), positioned we would think securely within the tradition of solipsistic colonial discourse? Waugh returned to England and used Guiana in *A Handful of Dust* as the heart of darkness in which he strands Tony Last, who like Waugh had left England looking for forgetfulness after his marital travails. But Melville's Waugh is granted a brief escape from the constraints of his own Englishness in a moment of shared if silent communion with Danny McKinnon:

"What brought you so far from home?" Danny asked.

Evelyn Waugh frowned a little waspishly.

"Domestic matters," he replied, after a pause. And then added, rather peevisly: "My marriage ended. I prefer not to talk about it."

"Same here," said Danny.

And for a moment, the overlapping desire not to talk brought them into intimacy, the stoic silence of the Indian grasping hands with the natural reticence of the English upper middle classes. (287–88)

And for at least the moment of this shared communion, it was Waugh's kind of story after all.

Notes

- 1 There were three Guianas in 1932, British, Dutch, and French, wedged into coastal South America between Venezuela and Brazil. After independence in 1966, (British) Guiana changed its spelling to Guyana.
- 2 Hastings observes that Wodehouse, in a critique of the South American scenes at the end of *A Handful of Dust*, wrote, "what a snare this traveling business is

- to a young writer. He goes to some blasted jungle or other and imagines that everybody will be interested in it" (269).
- 3 In addition to *The Ventriloquist's Tale*, Melville has published two collections of short stories, *Shape-Shifter* (1990) and *The Migration of Ghosts* (1998). She is perhaps better known in Britain as an actor. She has played in a number of British films and television series, including *Mona Lisa* and the BBC comedy series *The Young Ones* and *The Black Adder*. She also played alongside Armin Müller-Stahl in *Utz*, a filmed version of the novel by Bruce Chatwin.
- 4 "A skim through his journals will provide ample proof that Waugh was a racist, anti-Semitic, misogynist reactionary" (n.pag). See Lane.
- 5 For more examples of the intertextual connections between Melville and Waugh, see Welsh. Waugh's travels in Guiana provided him with material for his own fiction. The mad Mr. Christie, with his curious theories on the doctrine of the Trinity and a winning way with rum and lime, is transformed into Mr. Todd in *A Handful of Dust* (1934), to whom Tony Last, another dispirited cuckold on the run, is doomed to live out his days reading ant-eaten copies of Dickens. Tony Last's rescue from wandering delirium recalls Waugh's account of Melville's rescue by Indians in *Ninety-two Days*. See also Waugh's short story "The Man Who Liked Dickens" (1933).
- 6 In an epigraph to her novel, Melville quotes Claude Lévi-Strauss: "There is a myth which is known throughout the whole of the Americas from southern Brazil to the Bering Strait via Amazonia and Guiana and which establishes a direct equivalence between eclipses and incest" (n.pag). For an analysis of the function of this myth in the novel, see François.
- 7 "When questioned about my identity, I would wish to echo Clark Gable in *Gone with the Wind*: 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.' In my interior landscape, the South American jaguar and the English chaffinch live easily together" ("Beyond the Pale" 742).
- 8 E. A. Goodkind's translation of *Macunaíma* is dedicated to Edwina Melville.
- 9 In "Beyond the Pale," Melville discusses her mixed heritage:
"I hesitate. 'Do you think I'm black?'
'That's for you to say.'
'Well, it's an odd thing to have a choice about'" (741).
- 10 "I don't think it shows much, but Wilson Harris has influenced me a lot" (Conversation with Caryl Phillips).

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