One of Evelyn Waugh's most perceptive critics, Robert Murray Davis, has commented that "like many writers more obviously committed to modernist experiment, Waugh took great care to guide his readers by means of external form" (355). It is true that Waugh was not "obviously" committed to experiment, but close readings of his early novels show that such experiment is indeed present. Pastiche and quotation, two devices much employed in the modern period, play an especially important role in his work. But in spite of Waugh's rather free use of many of the techniques of modernism, critics have been reluctant to classify even his work of the twenties and thirties as modernist, and, though it seems unusually characteristic of its period, his fiction cannot be relegated to any one contemporary artistic movement. In his youth Waugh affected a pose of ultra-modernity, but it is impossible not to believe that one of the principal pleasures he took in this role was in its power to outrage his elders, for Waugh always leaves the reader with the impression that he faced the period he did so much to define with a peculiar diffidence. Superficially the most "modern" of moderns, he is simultaneously the most mandarin.

In fact Waugh's attitude was quite pragmatic. He allowed himself the luxury of reaction by deploring all modernity, while all the time using whatever stylistic tricks modernist experiment afforded him: collage, the interior monologue, classical parody, the intrusive narrator, the camera eye, montage.

Waugh's education in modernism began in his early teens, and he attributed it to his young sister-in-law, Barbara Jacobs Waugh. "She was an agnostic, a socialist and a feminist. . . . My father always assumed (as I do now) that anything new was likely to be nasty. Barbara found a specific charm in modernity" (Little 117). For several years Waugh, too,
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was to find charm in modernity: “I halted between two opinions and thought it more showy to express the new” (122). Waugh’s involvement in the modern movement, however, shallow though it may have been, proved instrumental in forming not only the style of his novels but their content and their frame of reference. As George McCartney points out in his study of Waugh’s involvement with the modernist movement, “at every turn, [Waugh’s] writing pays parodic tribute to modernist art and literature” (6).

Though sometimes it was straightforward homage,1 in general the “tribute” was to remain both parodic and uncomfortable throughout Waugh’s career. There were several reasons for this ambivalence. First, there was the tendency of the various movements of modern art to ally themselves with one or another variety of political commitment: Waugh’s rejection of such commitment, throughout most of his career,2 was firm. Another reason for Waugh’s disaffection from modernist art evolved from his distaste for the aesthetic of Roger Fry and the other dominant theorists of Waugh’s youth, an aesthetic Waugh perceived as dry and narrow. Also, he never fully accepted the validity of nonrepresentational art. Waugh’s later railings against Picasso became something of a set piece in his old-fogey persona, but he was nonetheless sincere in his belief that “Titian might have thought Frith intolerably common but he would have recognized that he was practicing the same art as himself. He could not think this of Picasso,” and he picks out Gertrude Stein as a literary equivalent of Picasso, an example of a writer who is “outside the world-order in which words have a precise and ascertainable meaning” (Letters 215).

It is because of this disaffection from the dominant theories of modern aesthetics that Waugh’s use of modern techniques concerned itself almost exclusively with their superficial characteristics, often in an openly parodic fashion. Waugh quickly moved from an early, and quite genuine, fascination with Cubism and Futurism, to an easy and familiar utilization of their more obvious techniques. His natural ability to pick up the jargon and rhetoric of a fashionable theory soon evolved into the style already fully in evidence in his first published piece of fiction, “The Balance” (1925), the way in which he was able to exploit isolated elements of avant-garde art so as to give a conventionally romantic, rather run-of-the-mill plot an air of clever modernity. In both his literature and his graphic art of the twenties and thirties, Waugh employed techniques borrowed from Cubism, Surrealism, Futurism, Constructivism, and Dada, though the philosophies informing all these schools remained essentially repellent to him. Waugh’s presentation of
the various schools of modern art is a reductive one which mocks each “ism” by flaunting its surface elements, never acknowledging that it might have any truly valuable raison d’être in itself.

When Waugh chose to confront modernity directly in his fiction, he usually did so parodically, as a method of emphasizing his own cynical and skeptical position. The Emperor Seth in Black Mischief is the ideal mouthpiece for everything Waugh found ridiculous not only in the modern world but in the very weight that the concept of “modernity” was given in the thirties discourse of progressivism. Similarly, Surrealism is mocked in Put Out More Flags, Expressionism in “The Balance,” architectural Purism and the theories of Ozenfant and Corbusier in Decline and Fall. And in Vile Bodies Waugh parodied, though in a less direct way, both the philosophy and the mannerisms of Futurist art and rhetoric, answering its enthusiastic affirmations with his own resounding “No.”

Vile Bodies was not one of Waugh’s own favorites among his novels; it was hurriedly written during a time of considerable emotional upheaval, and to it he devoted little of his accustomed care over structural solidity. But despite his own disclaimers, this “lapse” is not to be regretted, for Waugh packed Vile Bodies with more detailed raw material than he did his other books. Frederick Stopp points out that Waugh applies the very techniques of modern art in the construction of the novel: “Everywhere pastiche keeps raising its irrepressible head, as in the constant intrusions of the language of the gossip columns, the superbly bogus conversations between middle-class matrons in a train to Aylesbury, and the stream of technical commentary overheard in the pits at the motor-race. The whole produces a patchwork impression which conceals the cunning with which the pasteboard figures have been mounted” (73). This patchwork effect is expertly employed in order to achieve the effect of an impersonal narrative that is self-perpetuating, unauthored, as though Vile Bodies were a collage made up of jagged segments of contemporary magazines, newspapers, and conversation fragments. It is significant that Waugh wrote the novel at the height of his fascination with Hemingway, the writer he admired above all other moderns: the telephone conversations between Adam and Nina are, he later admitted, direct stylistic imitations of The Sun Also Rises.

George McCartney highlights noise as an integral factor of the more hellish scenes Waugh liked to portray. He specifies the “confused roaring” of the Bollinger Club at the opening of Decline and Fall, the whining race cars in Vile Bodies, the African feasts and drums in Black Mischief, the voices in Gilbert Pinfold, the popular music on the wireless
played by the enlisted men in *Sword of Honour* (157–58), and he emphasizes “the hostility between eye and ear that recurs throughout Waugh’s work” (158). “In his fiction, savagery always manifests itself aurally” (160). In *Vile Bodies* that noise is almost exclusively talk—most of it vacuous enough to qualify as noise, pure and simple. It is a quintessentially urban book as none of Waugh’s other novels were to be, written in response to what Hugh Kenner characterizes as the “episodic” nature of city life in the twentieth century: “A city shaped by rapid transit, and later by a telephone network, delivers its experience in discrete packets” (*Mechanic* 11). *Vile Bodies*, appropriately, is an episodic book. The attention span of its characters is not long enough to justify more than episodic treatment, and in this, as in other elements, the novel marks the apex of Waugh’s concern with modernist technique.

The novel also illustrates Kenner’s thesis that “kinesis was the rhetoric of that decade [the twenties], when Americans did with pure motion what the English did about 1600 with language, and the French about 1880 with color” (*Counterfeiters* 44). With a minimum of description Waugh succeeds in reproducing the aura of the recently modernized, mechanized city almost solely through his use of accelerated dialogue and truncated conversations.

Just as *Vile Bodies* focuses specifically upon urban life, it also deals extensively with the characteristics of a modern city. Adam’s forays to Doubting Hall are meant to emphasize, by contrast, the accelerated pace of London life (though Doubting Hall, of course, is no more reassuring a place than any other in the novel). In his use of modernity itself as a protagonist, and in his treatment of it, Waugh consciously parodies the Italian Futurists, whose manifesto he “studied” in early youth.

The Futurists had made a considerable impression during Waugh’s childhood.4 Waugh was educated in the basic tenets of Futurism by Barbara Jacobs, and admits to having had an enthusiasm for C. R. W. Nevinson, the only English painter to become a Futurist after the dissemination of the *Initial Manifesto of Futurism*. In his autobiography Waugh states that his youthful admiration for the Futurists was “spurious” (*Little* 121), but his immersion in their work, brief as it was, provided him with a knowledge which was to be useful for the purposes of *Vile Bodies*. The vision behind Marinetti’s rhetoric—glorious, but already highly tarnished by 1929, the year in which Waugh wrote the novel—is an ideal backcloth against which the stale, vapid characters of *Vile Bodies* are made to act out their futile lives; Marinettian themes and motifs are continually played out in both the subject matter and the
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style of the novel. Philosophically they are found inadequate again and again; stylistically, Waugh is able to use them to considerable effect. Thus, though much of *Vile Bodies* is devoted to mocking the beliefs of the Futurists, in its style Waugh pays them a certain sidelong homage.

The Triumph of the Machine: this was a constant refrain of the Futurists, who were intoxicated by the events of their own period—the flights of Wright and Bleriot, the advent not only of the automobile but of the racing car as well. “The opening and closing of a valve creates a rhythm just as beautiful but infinitely newer than the blinking of an animal eyelid,” wrote Boccioni (Taylor 132); and Marinetti continually uses animal imagery to describe machinery, as he lays his “amorous hands” on the “torrid breasts” of “snorting beasts” (motorcars) (Selected 39). The thesis of the *Initial Manifesto* extols the beauty, specifically, of steamers, locomotives, and airplanes as well as of automobiles.

*Vile Bodies* also treats these mechanical modes of transport, but while novelty (as with the Futurists) is stressed, the emphasis is finally placed on the staleness of the vision that these so recently new inventions now evoke. Even the shiny modernity of the works of mechanical magic is unable to dispel the sourness and sameness of life, and the machines in *Vile Bodies* produce for the most part not exhilaration but nausea.

The description of the steamship ride at the beginning of the novel is typical of the book’s attitude toward modernity. “Sometimes the ship pitched and sometimes she rolled and sometimes she stood quite still and shivered all over. . . . ‘Too, too sick-making,’ said Miss Runcible, with one of her rare flashes of accuracy” (14). The captive dirigible in which the Bright Young People give their party is another case in point. There is no reason whatever for giving the party in the dirigible—which is tethered only a few feet above the ground—except insofar as it represents a novelty, a new kind of party for the bored young people. “New,” “unconventional,” and “modern” though it is, the dirigible only induces the same nausea as the steamship. “Inside, the saloons were narrow and hot. . . . There were protrusions at every corner, and Miss Runcible had made herself a mass of bruises in the first half-hour. It was the first time that a party was given in an airship” (122).

The airplane, a standard object of Futurist enthusiasm, gets no better treatment from Waugh. Marinetti had described the experience of flying in aesthetic terms: “As I looked at objects from a new point of view, no longer head on or from behind, but straight down, foreshortened, that is, I was able to break apart the old shackles of logic and the plumb lines of the ancient way of thinking” (Selected 88).
Waugh's aesthetic reaction was very different, and in 1929 he wrote: "After a very short time one tires of this aspect of scenery. I think it is significant that a tower or a high hill are all the eminence one needs for observing natural beauties" (Labels 11). Waugh's work is everywhere permeated with the idea that the only advantage "progress" can bring is the perishable one of novelty; when that has worn off, the machine is empty of any value, having added nothing in the way of real aesthetic enjoyment or spiritual life. This is the attitude conveyed in the description of Nina's honeymoon voyage on an airplane to Monte Carlo: all the ingredients of the Futurist fantasy are present, but tarnished and tawdry after twenty years of unfulfilled promise. "Nina looked down and saw inclined at an odd angle a horizon of straggling red suburbs; arterial roads dotted with little cars; factories, some of them working, others empty and decaying . . . wireless masts and overhead power cables. . . . 'I think I'm going to be sick,' said Nina" (Vile 199–200).

The car, of course, is the prototypical Futurist symbol. Wyndham Lewis spoke of Marinetti's "automobilism," and of all Marinetti's imagery it is the automobile, specifically the racing car, that has proved the most memorable. This is partly due to his sexualization of the automobile, a legacy that has remained with us; it is also due to Marinetti's persistent deification of speed, and his use of the automobile as its physical symbol. "We declare that the world's splendour has been enriched by a new beauty; the beauty of speed. A racing motor-car . . . is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace" (Selected 41). He presents the automobile not only as the greatest achievement of human art but as a god in its own right, a modern Pegasus: "Dieu vehement d'une race d'acier, / Automobile ivre d'espace / qui pietines d'angoisse, les mors aux dents stridents" (Taylor 7). In thus usurping the position formerly held by deities, the automobile not only symbolizes the apex of men's material achievements, but represents a spiritual exaltation in its own right, as Joshua Taylor points out (11). The introduction to the Initial Manifesto sets this forward in revealing terms:

But, as we listened to the old canal muttering its feeble prayers and the creaking bones of sickly palaces above their damp green beards, under the windows we suddenly heard the famished roar of automobiles.

'Let's go!' I said. 'Friends, away! Let's go! Mythology and the Mystic Ideal are defeated at last. . . .'

We went up to the three snorting beasts. . . . I stretched out on my car like a corpse on its bier, but revived at once under the
steering wheel, a guillotine blade that threatened my stomach. (Selected 40).

This theme, of course, is directly parodied in the race-track segment of *Vile Bodies* and in Agatha Runcible’s unhappy end. When Adam, Agatha, Miles, and Archie arrive at the race track the reader is treated to a disposition on the difference between cars of “being” and of “becoming.” “Some cars,” the narrator tells us in his most formal mode,

mere vehicles with no purpose above bare locomotion . . . have definite ‘being’ just as much as their occupants. . . . Not so the real cars, that become masters of men; those vital creations of metal who exist solely for their own propulsion through space. . . . These are in perpetual flux; a vortex of combining and disintegrating units. (161)

McCartney takes this, and Agatha’s subsequent hallucinations after her accident, to be parodies of Bergsonian thought; I believe it to be more indebted to Futurist rhetoric. As Taylor formulates it, the Futurists saw all objects as embodying two kinds of motion: “that which tends to move in on itself, suggesting in its centripetal force the internal mass of an object” (Waugh’s cars of “being”), and “that which moves outward in space mingling with space itself” (the cars of “becoming”—the race cars, the “real” cars). Taylor points out that the Futurists share with Bergson the idea that the consciousness only perceives moments of flux rather than motionless objects. So while Waugh may parody Bergsonian ideas indirectly, he directly addresses those of the Futurists (Taylor 12).

Waugh refers directly to the Futurist aesthetic in his description of the statuette reserved for the race’s winner, “a silver gilt figure of odious design, symbolizing Fame embracing Speed” (163). He also refers to it by making the most ruthless of the speed demons on the track an Italian, suggestively named Marino; Marino drives like “sheer murder” and is “a real artist and no mistake” (168). Agatha’s joining the race as spare driver is appropriate in that the whole novel, basically, has dealt with the theme of speed, and she is Speed’s goddess. The most feckless and novelty-hungry of the Bright Young People, she personifies the general (though futile) speeding up of modern life which is one of the principal themes of Futurism: “Accélération de la vie, qui a aujourd’hui presque toujours un rythme rapide. Equilibrisme physique, intellectuel et sentimental de l’homme sur la corde tendue de la vitesse, parmi les magnetismes contradictoires. Consciences multiples et simultanées dans un même individu” (Marinetti *Mots*).

“Already we live in the absolute, since we have already created speed, eternal and ever-present,” wrote Marinetti (Selected 41), and
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Agatha Runcible, in her fevered ramblings, also lives in an absolute of sorts. (It should be noted that Agatha’s neighbor in the nursing home has had his wits addled in another Futurist accident, a fall from an airplane). In the introduction to the Initial Manifesto Marinetti describes his own car wreck in terms of rebirth; after turning over into the ditch and drinking its muddy water he rises as a new man. Such, alas, is not the case for Agatha. She too suffers an accident, when her racing car crashes against a market cross, but far from being reborn, she staggers half senseless out of the wreckage and begins her steady decline toward death. Her delirium is a kind of Futurist nightmare in itself. “‘Darling,’ she said. ‘How too divine . . . how are you? . . . how angelic of you all to come . . . only you must be careful not to fall out at the corners . . . ooh, just missed it. There goes that nasty Italian car . . . darling, do try and drive more straight, my sweet, you were nearly into me then. . . . Faster” (191). The constant refrain of “Faster, faster” that Agatha hears is not only an ironic comment upon her own life but also a parodic reference to the principal Futurist obsession.

Another favorite subject of Futurist rhetoric was militarism, the glorification of war being one of the factors that contributed to the Futurists’ fall from fashion after World War I. In his Manifeste naturiste, an influential text for the Futurists, Saint-Georges de Bouhelier declared that “the art of the future must be heroic,” and the Futurists adopted this preoccupation in their unconventional fashion. Waugh appropriates this theme in order to make his jaundiced, disabused point; from the postwar perspective it was only too obvious that war had failed to be “the world’s only hygiene.” Vile Bodies ends on “the biggest battlefield in the history of the world.” It is an ending that might seem inappropriate in the face of the novel’s primary focus on its own self-enclosed social world, but it is actually the Futurist militaristic credo that is being invoked and mocked. The war as presented in the novel is markedly vague and unfocused; we do not even know who the combatants are. Like the Futurist ideals of Speed and Machinery, the advent of war leaves the essence of the world—its flatness and tiredness—remarkably unchanged.

While Waugh used the themes of the Futurists to invert and negate their philosophies, he also made use of certain elements of Futurist aesthetics in the actual execution of Vile Bodies. It is done in his usual manner, exploiting the principles behind the stylistic credos rather than practicing the techniques themselves. “Destroy the I in literature” Marinetti wrote: “that is, all psychology,” and he urged Futurist writers to “substitute for human psychology, now exhausted, the lyric obsession
with matter” (Selected 878). “Material has always been contemplated by a
cold, distracted I, too preoccupied with itself, full of preconceived
wisdom and human obsessions” (88).

In *Vile Bodies*, as we have seen, the role of the narrator has been
purposely suppressed, giving the reader the impression of a narrative
that is self-generating, almost mechanical. When the narrator is in
evidence he is neutral, formal, and machine-like. This antiseptic tone is
affected in contrast to the narrated events: suicide, homosexuality, war,
wife-selling, violent death, prostitution. The paucity of psychological
exposition corresponds with Marinetti’s cry for the artist to destroy the
“psychology” in literature. “The suffering of a man is of the same
interest to us as the suffering of an electric lamp, which, with spasmodic
starts, shrieks out the most heartrending expressions of colour,” wrote
the Futurists (Taylor 126); appropriately enough, when Agatha
disappears it is the car and not herself that is the subject of the driver’s
concern. Indeed, the Bright Young People’s reactions to the violent
events that befall them appear generally to be mechanical rather than
emotional, and these affectless responses only add to the characters’
alreadly impenetrable masks.

In *Vile Bodies* Waugh’s technique conforms with the Futurist
principles of Dinamismo, compenetrazione, and simultaneita. These three
principles are maintained through Waugh’s extensive use of montage:
the rapid cutting back and forth reinforces the dynamic effect, the
various scenes penetrate one another via the abrupt switches from place
to place. Simultaneity—“the synthesis of what one remembers and what one
sees” (Apollonio 47)—is achieved through the juxtaposition of scenes
and characters and the conversational non sequiturs that bridge the
gaps in space from one almost indistinguishable gathering to another.
Characters melt together; when Simon Balcairn, Adam Fenwick-Symes,
and Miles Malpractice succeed one another as Mr. Chatterbox they lose
whatever little individuality they possessed to begin with.

The Futurist artists’ aim was to put the viewer into the center of the
work of art, to make him feel at the vortex of a whirling dynamism.
They maintained, as Boccioni explained, “unlike Cézanne, that the
boundaries of the object tend to retreat towards a periphery (the
environment) of which we are the centre” (Apollonio 177). Waugh
manages to achieve a similar effect by allowing the drunken,
speeded-up gyrations of his cast of characters to encircle the reader, who
thus himself becomes the only stable center.

Waugh’s treatment of Futurist themes in *Vile Bodies* is typical of his
general attitude toward modern art and theory. He usurps individual motifs and techniques and then superimposes them onto his structure—often, of course, with the purpose of mocking or criticizing some aspect of modern life, or indeed the modern school itself. His aim is to infuse his own skepticism into the aesthetic he chooses to parody, and thus to emphasize its absurdity and even, more seriously, its philosophical error. He argues passionately against the Futurists' idealization of war and destruction as morally cleansing, and shows their pseudo-religion of speed and machinery to be not only sterile but laughable as well. Waugh's own vision of the future was already, in youth as in middle age, a bleak and hopeless one, totally unlike that of the Futurists. In Vile Bodies he focused specifically on Futurism and its ideal, whereas in his next novel, Black Mischief, he would focus more generally upon the hazier notion of "progressivism"—but in all his work the vacuity of modernity in all its guises is emphasized.

NOTES

1 For example, in the many references to Eliot in Waugh's work. James Carens has remarked upon the fact that, in Vile Bodies, Mr. Outrage is a Prufrock figure; I would add that Lord Marchmain is, even more obviously, a Gerontion one. A Handful of Dust and The Loved One are full of Eliotic material; the first manuscript page of the latter also contained much Waste Land imagery that Waugh eventually cut.

2 Except for his involvement in the Italian-Abyssinian war.

3 "I am in some perplexity about Nacktkultur. Here have I spent four weeks trying to enforce the dictum prescribing trousers for the official classes, and now I read that it is more modern not to wear any at all" (Black 197).

4 For a description of Futurist activities in London between 1910 and 1915, see Perloff 172–73.

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