CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Of all literary reputations ever maligned by critics because of their close proximity to the author, Waugh's has perhaps suffered the most. It has been alleged that his novels are circumscribed in their scope by the effete upper-class Mayfair world of London. It has also been suggested that he is a minor author offering only a minor interest in the dated value of his works. To cap it all, it is alleged that his novels are light-weight comic works. My study of Waugh runs against this kind of argument. True, Waugh's works do centre around gentleman-characters. But they do not, at the same time, preclude from their artistic focus, the other sections of society. More than that, the profoundly philosophical attitude towards change and progress, that shapes Waugh's comic vision of life, lends the works a unique universal appeal and profundity.

Although attempts have been made, in the past, to draw attention towards the comic bent of Waugh's genius, these have scarcely succeeded in plumbing the philosophical depth of his comic vision of life. Besides, most of these draw no line of distinction between satire and comedy. As
a result, they fail to comprehend the sublime comic view of life unfolded in the greater comedies of Waugh. They invariably end up with regarding Waugh as a satirist and his greater comedies, an aberration in his artistic career. It is in the context of these dismal attempts that my study of Waugh makes a humble attempt to attract attention towards the philosophical ideas that inform and enrich Waugh's comic vision of life.

I have contended that Waugh's singular attitude to change and progress moulds his comic vision of life. Secular change, due to its circular character, makes a mockery of all efforts aimed at progress. Man returns to his original state of existence, no matter how much he may try to get away from it. This comic vision of absurdity pervades all the lesser comedies of Waugh. Religious change, in sharp contrast, is linear in character. So, a man who thinks of surging ahead by effecting a religious change in himself succeeds in his endeavour and, in consequence, his life is meaningful. The sense of joy that accompanies this change is palpable in all the greater comedies.

The figure of speech that is central to an adequate comprehension of this comic stance is the symbolic image of the wheel of life. Waugh compares life to the motion of a wheel. While secular change is
represented by its circular motion, religious change is indicated by the linear motion of an imaginary person making for its stable hub. The circular motion of the wheel of life deprives man of the prospect of progress. He is, therefore, caught in the demonic circle of secular change. His only achievement is absurdity! The linear motion towards the hub of the wheel of life, in contrast, leads man from one stage of development to another. It is when he touches the hub that he experiences a thrilling transcendance. Though he lives on a temporal plane physically, yet he overcomes the limitations of his situation by poising himself in the eternal and immutable reality of the religious hub of the wheel of life. Being a Roman Catholic by volition, it invariably implies acceptance of the Roman Catholic view of life. The Roman Catholic Church, to Waugh, is the temporal reminder of an eternal truth. The realisation of its reality redeems man from the absurdity of a secular way of life.

But if the image of the wheel of life defines Waugh's comic vision of life adequately, it also endows it with an equally expressive form. While the absurdity of secular change is underlined by a circular plot in the lesser comedies, the purposefulness of religious change is conveyed by a linear plot in the greater comedies. In the lesser comedies, the comic fun
that arises is of a grim nature generally for while we laugh at the ignorance of people gullible enough to rely on secular change as a means to progress, we also sympathise with them when their illusions take the toll of their lives, physically or spiritually. The perpetual cyclical motion that the characters undergo on the revolving wheel of life defines both the comic vision of absurdity in the lesser comedies and their individual form. In Decline and Fall (1928), Waugh's first major novel, secular achievements are shown to be no more than an eye-wash. British society, despite its vigorous programme of modernisation, is shown to be seething with the corruption of moral values. Britain emerges no better than a remote barbaric society of Africa. The idea of secular progress epitomised in the modernity of Britain is ridiculed through Paul Pennyfeather, a static character, whose picaresque journey through Britain proves as futile as its history: Paul returns to the point from where he began his journey. By ending the novel with the same situation with which it began, Waugh endows it with a circular plot that immediately makes the reader recall the absurd cyclical motion of the wheel of life. Despite the comic vision of absurdity unfolded here, both at the thematic and structural level, the central character, Paul Pennyfeather is not a flat character. Waugh traces his development from the time when he was ignorant of his real identity to the time when he beams with self-knowledge.
At the beginning of the novel, Paul Pennyfeather does not know that he is a static character unfit for participating in the process of secular change. But at the end, he is fully aware of this reality. Accordingly, he retraces his steps into the static environs of an academic institution like Oxford.

In *Vile Bodies* (1930), the focus becomes more concentrated as the central character, Adam Fenwick-Symes's repeated attempts to enable himself to marry Nina Blount describe a circular pattern. Marriage here does not have any religious significance as its materialisation depends solely on such secular factors as the monetary status of the individual. Episode after episode renders Adam comic in his misplaced confidence in secular change as a means to bettering his lot. The comic vision of absurdity unfolded here is underlined by the circular plot of the novel which makes no material alteration in Adam's lot. There is, however, a hint of large-scale devastation in the outbreak of the Second World War which Waugh sees as a direct consequence of the acceleration of the rate of secular change. The movement away from the Roman Catholic hub of the wheel of life represents, in Waugh, a drift towards a state of anarchy and chaos indicated by the high degree of instability at the outermost orbits of the wheel of life. Adam does not achieve the self-knowledge that his predecessor in *Decline and Fall* does. Nevertheless,
Waugh's second major novel is a strong indictment of the progressive historiographers' reliance on secular change as a means to progress.

By the time Waugh came to write *Black Mischief* (1932), he had already got proselytized to Roman Catholicism. His conversion is a landmark in his artistic growth. Till now, Waugh had only an intellectual conception of the kind of thing that could redeem man from the vicious and absurd circle of temporal change. The evidence is irrefutably there in Otto Silemus' discourse on the nature of life in *Decline and Fall*. Waugh saw in the hub of the wheel of life a temporal indicator of eternal reality. Despite its historical existence, the hub is beyond the reach of historical change. As a consequence, it is a reminder of eternal reality. With his conversion to Roman Catholic faith, the hub of the wheel of life came to stand for him for the immutable reality of the Roman Catholic Church. Accordingly, Waugh surveys the temporal world steeped in historical change with renewed vigour and greater insight in the novels beginning with *Black Mischief*. Temporal change now signifies, in no uncertain terms, the quest for secular progress through secular change and the movement towards the hub of the wheel of life, man's willingness to conform to Divine Order and Harmony, which alone guarantees true progress.

In *Black Mischief*, Waugh shows the absurdity of
pursuing progress through the means of secular change on the large canvass of history. Azania is one of the barbaric states of Africa. Under the stewardship of two rulers, it makes an attempt to progress to the stage of civilisation through a string of secular changes. The vanity of the attempts gets reflected in their utter failure to civilise it. The ghastly end of Seth, the very epitome of this misconceived quest, points to the absurdity of seeking progress through secular change. With Seth's death, Azania returns to its original state of barbarity. The war, with which the novel opens, also concludes it. This endows the novel with a circular plot that fully conveys the thematic import of the novel.

In A Handful of Dust, the price that Tony Last, a static character, pays for persisting with his 'static' illusions is reading one by one, in a perpetual cyclical motion, the gothic novels of Dickens to a half-crazy hybrid, Mr. Todd. In his tryst with him, Tony clashes with the unabashed barbarity of savages unredeemed by religion and the worthless guile of secular Western civilisation. The absurd cyclical motion that his life is condemned to is not unlike that of Sisiphus. However, while Sisiphus mocks at his fate, Tony rues it. He is, therefore, a picture, at once, of fun and sympathy. The relationship between the formal circle and the thematic circle does not remain concealed even in this novel.
In *Scoop*, the emphasis of humanist and enlightenment historiography on secular change as a means to progress is ridiculed by the exposure of the extent of illogicity in the process of secular change. William Boot, a novice journalist, is catapulted into fame as a leading investigative newsreporter by a series of incidents that hardly show any causal sequence and the reader can scarcely repress his laughter over the gullibility of the secular world for being taken in by the apparently logical nature of secular change in William's career. The sense of absurdity that characterises Waugh's comic world of secular change is conveyed through a circular plot that first substitutes John Boot with William Boot and then, as if to make amends, substitutes William Boot with John Boot, most surreptitiously. This ensures William Boot's return to his original static world of Boot Magna. William Boot is unlike other static characters of Waugh in that he is aware of his personal limitations from the beginning. Thus, the comic vision of absurdity revealed in the circular journey of William Boot and the circular plot of the novel does not, in any way, affect Waugh's art of characterisation adversely.

In *Put Out More Flags*, Basil Seal flees from the fate of conscription in British army during World War II.
to his sister's secluded place, Malfrey. Basil detests the order imposed by the discipline of military life. Being a 'dynamic' character, he has a predilection for chaos and anarchy. These conditions aid him in carrying out ruthless exploits with impunity. One of his first war-efforts is, therefore, the exploitation of the static characters of Malfrey. It is followed by his operation-persecution against the static Ambrose. The novel returns to its original situation when Basil Seal decides, at the end of the novel, to join the war so that he may enjoy killing Germans. The circular course of Basil's life offers no redemption or even the slightest improvement in his personality. His life, thus, indicates truly Waugh's comic vision of absurdity. The theme of the novel is corroborated by its form which is encased in the cycle of seasons.

In The Loved One, just as in Decline and Fall, an entire secularised society is brought under the focus of Waugh's serio-comic vision of absurdity. The absurdity of pursuing progress through secular change is driven home through the perversion and inversion of religious values of life in the secular institutions of developed America. The fragility of these products of secular human endeavour for progress becomes clear in their inability to serve as a life-buoy to the people who repose faith in them. When
the testing time arrives these false values desert
man and he, perforce, is left in the arms of the
barbaric past. Aimee Thenatogenos's death at the end
of the novel amply testifies to the veracity of this fact.
Unable to seek support from the false religion of
Whispering Glades, Aimee turns to her barbaric ancestors
for help and eventually, commits suicide. The return of
the men and women of the secular civilisation of the West
to the ways of their ancestors, in hours of crisis, shows
the absurdity of man's quest for secular progress. Waugh's
comic vision of absurdity makes us laugh at Aimee for her
excessive and misplaced faith in the inverted values of
Whispering Glades and feel sympathetic simultaneously over
her gruesome end. Further, it is reinforced by a circular
plot which begins with Dennis's arrival in America and
ends with his departure to England, the place from where
he came.

In The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold, Waugh reveals
the absurdity of the world of secular change-in Waugh's
terminology, the dynamic world-through a circular plot
that first throws the schizophrenic Pinfold into the
dynamic world of his own hallucinations aboard the ship,
S.S. Caliban, and then brings him back, at the end, to his
native static world of Lychpole. As in Decline and Fall,
the novel ends with the protagonist gaining an insight into
his real nature. Accordingly, he rejects the dynamic world and accepts the static world. It is a regressive step and not progressive one. Hence, the comic vision of absurdity revealed in the valuelessness of the dynamic world remains central to the meaning of this novel.

The balance achieved in the lesser comedies between the vision and the form, however, does not sacrifice easy comprehension on the part of the reader. The temporal movement of the plot ensures the accessibility of the reader to its entertaining flavour. It speaks highly of Waugh's artistic genius that even when he conveys a vision of absurdity and chaos, he does not allow the form of his novels to lose their Classical perfection. He has, therefore, rightly been called a post-modernist writer.

Contrasted with the comic vision of absurdity in the lesser comedies is the comic vision of regeneration in the greater comedies. The fulfilment of one's hopes and the meaningfulness of a life lived religiously lends a note of joy and jubilation to the greater comedies. The fact that Waugh gave expression to the supreme achievement of man, self-realisation and redemption from the ennui of an absurd and sinful world, shows how he transcended the comic vision of absurdity that circumscribes the entire literary output of the Theatre of the Absurd, and
existentialist writers. In Waugh, the greater comedies are a necessary sequel to the lesser comedies. Having shown the futility of secular change as a means to progress, Waugh, as a committed Christian writer, had to show the comic vision of life implicit in the religious transformation of the individual and the society. While the circular motion of the wheel of life helped him convey the first view, the linear motion towards the stable hub of the wheel helped him in conveying his ultimate and Christian comic vision of life.

Just as the lesser comedies reveal a balance between their form and meaning, so do the greater comedies. The structure of these comic novels coheres with the vision emerging out of them. Each of these novels possesses a linear plot which adequately indicates the logical development present in religious change. The central character begins his life with 'static' notions of life, confronts the dynamic world, discovers the inadequacy of his static attitude to life and the absurdity of the dynamic mode of existence. Eventually, he rejects both and makes for the Roman Catholic hub of life which he selects as the ultimate goal of his life. The achievement of this goal redeems him from the absurdity of secular change and uplifts him to a state of existence which is most superior and abiding. He realises, so to say, the bliss of the prelapsarian state
of existence. It is most often indicated by admission to Church and elevation to sainthood. The linear course of religious change, in consequence, lends the plots of these novels a linear character. Unlike the lesser comedies, the greater comedies do not end where they began.

Accordingly, in *Brideshead Revisited*, a novel that marks Waugh's transition from the lesser to the greater comedies, two kinds of plots co-exist. While the minor thematic movement concerning the absurdity of secular change is brought out in the circular plot that begins with Charles Ryder's reminiscent mood in war-time England and ends with his stepping out of the world of his memories, in a situation scarcely altered, the major thematic movement concerning the optimism and joy of progress achieved through religious change is brought out in the linear plot of memories, that begins with Ryder's staticity, reflected in his romanticism, and ends with Ryder's conversion to Roman Catholicism, after a turbulent and self-enlightening encounter with the dynamic world in which he rejects both his romantic attitude to life and the secular attitude to progress. But for its value in providing a framework, the circular plot of this novel fades before the thematic brilliance of the linear plot encased within it. The tone of colour and gaiety set in
this comic novel continues to reverberate in the other two greater comedies of Evelyn Waugh.

In Waugh's second 'greater comedy', Helena, there is a single plot that displays the progressive nature of religious change in the linear spiritual odyssey of Helena who, born and brought up in a dynamic world, overcomes her adolescent staticity in her close touch with the dynamic world of the Roman Empire through her marriage with Constantius Chlorus, rejects the valueless and absurd secular change with which both her husband and her son, apart from the Roman gentry in general, are obsessed, and elevates herself above the run-of-the-mill society through her acceptance of and adherence to the Roman Catholic values of life. This is, in my opinion, Waugh's best novel as it achieves unparalleled comic sublimity and grandeur both in its poetic description of the 'holy quest and in its abstruse conclusion of that quest: Helena achieves saintliness through a submission of her wild human will to the pacific Will of God in the act of discovering the True Cross. Helena's character offers the best example of a spiritual elite in the entire canon of Waugh's creative work.

Waugh's third greater comedy, The Sword of Honour Trilogy, is spread over three volumes, Men At Arms, Officers
and Gentlemen, and Unconditional Surrender, each published separately and at separate points of time. Like all other greater comedies, its narrative too runs along a plot which is linear in character. Guy Crouchback, the chief protagonist of this trilogy, is a victim of the dynamic world and is, therefore, living as an exile in Italy. The outbreak of World War II offers him an opportunity of reasserting his lost self-esteem under the pretext of protecting the honour of Christendom. His knight-errantry comes to a nought when he realises that the war is being fought for no such reason. Even he has been hoodwinking his own self by thinking so. Deep in the mind of every soldier, he included, is an irrational and barbaric desire to kill and be killed. Confronted with this knowledge, Guy Crouchback sloughs off both his static mental sheath and dynamic emotional covering. He realises the inadequacy of a static attitude to life and the inferiority and absurdity of the dynamic world's obsession with secular change. Acting upon his father, Old Mr. Gervase Crouchback's advice, he submits to the Will of God so much so that he is willing to undergo worldly humiliation for the sake of other-worldly honour. The adoption of Virginia's illegitimate child by Trimmer, ennobles Guy Crouchback, thereby holding out the sublimity inherent in Waugh's ultimate comic vision of life.

The comic vision of life unfolded in the greater
comedies is, however, never allowed to touch the borderland of didacticism. Waugh was no explainer of things. He was, as a novelist should be, a describer of events. Consequently, his narratives do without the causal sequence of the traditional nineteenth century novel. In order that his comic vision of life may emerge unobtrusively, Waugh made innovative use of English language and its literary techniques. It is quite obvious from the central role played by the image of the wheel, which Waugh likens to life, in the thematic and structural cohesion of his novels. It is not without reason that the greater comedies of Waugh have an aura of poetic charm about them. His post-modernist emphasis on objectivity does not, therefore, stand in the way of his artistic achievement. Instead, it aids him in gaining a universal appeal.

Rene Wellek and Austin Warren describe a successful literary work of art as one in which 'the materials are completely assimilated into form'.

Understood as an invitation to the idea of a balance between subject and form, the statement resembles Waugh's own opinion on the matter. Waugh maintains:

Properly understood style is not a seductive decoration added to a functional structure, it is of the essence of a work of art.

The balanced inter-relationship between subject and form
achieved in Waugh's comic novels bears testimony to this assertion. And it is by virtue of this achievement that Waugh's major literary output is a luminous mass of order and aesthetic beauty.

We, thus, conclude that while there may be many useful approaches to the study of Waugh but the one approach that touches the heart of Waugh's creative works and uncovers his artistic genius is the study of his comic vision of life. It is only by placing the comic vision of life in Evelyn Waugh in the centre of our study of Waugh that we discover the common thematic concern running through the entire canon of Waugh literature; be it, the lesser or the greater comedies. The superior comic vision of life, unfolded in the greater comedies, as a way out of the absurdity of life, depicted in the lesser comedies, without seeming didactic at the same time, shows the heights of artistic perception achieved by Waugh. Again, the creative use of language and literary tools made for its artistic expression attract attention towards the artistic excellence achieved by Waugh. Waugh, thus, emerges as a major post-modernist novelist who felt and lent an abstruse artistic utterance to his perceptions and vision.