

A Handful of Dust

A Handful of Dust is the bleakest book I have ever read. Gradually, inevitably, the status quo of the English leisured class crumbles through the sequential stages of disfunction, amicable disconnect, onanistic despair, bleak hopelessness, ruin and lonely death. And this irreversible self-annihilation is set in train by nothing more complex than a little bit of boredom. There's something of Edward Gibbon in this, but Evelyn Waugh doesn't seek echoes of previous epochs or to point at moral lessons not learned. Instead, he stands back and watches the tale become weirder as his protagonists find themselves irredeemably caught in the mire of social ennui and exotic travel (which turn out to be not dissimilar).

I used to think that ruins in the landscape were romantic. I saw them as nature-humbled screens onto which all of one's hopes and lusts could be projected. The fact that these edifices were themselves spent, only served to charge the implicit failure of desire (and so contrive the epitome of romance). In my heart, I hope that this possibility remains for others, that to crawl into precarious and dilapidated buildings with friends and lovers to project the thrill of being in their company onto the enshrouding architecture is still an existential glory. Though in my weariness I fear that what was once the territory of the outlier and the socially awkward has now become commonplace, overly photo-documented, prescribed and therefore redundant. As I get older, these worn structures to me merely *are*. Stuff happens, stuff gets broken, things change, nothing changes.

10 years ago, I worked in an ancient woodland inviting artists to spend time there and consider making something (a sculpture, a film, a book...) that opened up some kind of conversation with that place. One day, not long off the plane from Perth, Australia an artist burst into our foresters' hut-cum-office with an account of what he had found on his first trip to the Courtauld Institute. Greg Pryor spoke of a picture showing the violent striking-down of the Dominican friar St Peter – an axe through

the skull. And as the act was perpetrated the trees (being at that moment harvested in the background) began to bleed in sympathy. I will never forget that moment. The passionate account of a slaying and of a modest miracle. The possibility of a picture, the strangeness of paint, and what it means to conjure the sticky mess as it coagulates in the rough channels of the tree's bark. I visit this picture (currently on loan to National Gallery) whenever I can.

I have lost faith in buildings, but my faith in paintings grows stronger.

In *Tony Last (Library)* the ruin of St Peter's Seminary (built in the European Modernist style) is re-made twice, firstly as a modular bookcase (clothbound in a monoprint reminiscent of Brutalist shutter-casting), and secondly as a melon (a thing out of place; an impromptu surrogate; an architect's model). The library only contains one text – *A Handful of Dust* – but these books can be freely taken away and its shelves will continue to be re-stocked with more copies.

Tony Last's journey into the jungle and our group trek up to St Peter's Seminary are for me both impossibly distinct and indelibly entwined. To read one through the lens of the other is pure folly. And folly is the very real way by which I find myself navigating the world day-by-day. The forest north-east of Glasgow within which the ruins of St Peter's slowly rot bleeds for me in sympathy with the pathos of Tony Last's protracted demise.

Dan Howard-Birt, 2021