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YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN:  
THE MISUNDERSTOOD MEMORIES OF CAPTAIN CHARLES RYDER

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May 2014

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Cleveland State University

May 2019

We hereby approve this thesis  
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For the department of  
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YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN:  
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MONICA M. KRASON

**ABSTRACT**

Critics have frequently commented on the nostalgic tone of *Brideshead Revisited*. Their assessment has been largely negative, with most considering *Brideshead* too sentimental about England's aristocratic past. This current characterization fails to recognize Waugh's critiques of such thinking in *Brideshead*, wherein he upends the nostalgic tropes of popular Oxford novels, illustrates the dangers of both insulated upper class living and thoughtless presentism through his depictions of various characters, and proposes a greater metaphysical drama through memory is at play in the novel. *Brideshead* offers nostalgia as an enlivening force which allows Charles Ryder to maintain a vibrant understanding for who he was and who he is now as a result, and consequently empowers him to move forward into an uncertain future. Waugh sees the past as a method for making sense of the present with memory bridging the gap between the two, while simultaneously rejecting any pretensions to preserve the past in its entirety. This theory is built into the narration of the novel itself, which is presented as an extended remembrance. Decoding the nuances of this narration reveals a shift in the narrator's consciousness after interacting with his memories. By the epilogue, Charles as narrator has become inexplicably hopeful, which Waugh suggests is due to remembering, even that which must give Charles pain. Ultimately, I propose that Waugh's nostalgia manages to be both melancholic and realistic, and as a result the elegy of *Brideshead* is more complex than critics have previously allowed.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“I felt I was leaving part of myself behind, and that wherever I went afterwards I should feel the lack of it, and search for it hopelessly, as ghosts are said to do, frequenting the spots where they buried material treasures without which they cannot pay their way to the nether world.”

We all possess memories, such as this one described by Charles Ryder, that seem to possess us. Uttered upon departing Brideshead Castle for presumably the last time, his words capture the poignancy of endings, a human experience in which this novel is especially interested. Indeed, many critics have commented on the nostalgic tone of *Brideshead Revisited*. Published near the conclusion of World War II, it has frequently been called Evelyn Waugh’s elegy to a time swept away by modernity. Such nostalgic sentiments are common throughout modernist literature, as is their censure by scholars of the period, who have typically derided nostalgia as a “self-indulgent flight of fancy at best, or, far worse, an effort to preserve history’s hegemonies” (Clewel, “Introduction,” 7). *Modernism and Nostalgia*, an important recent anthology on this topic, seeks to reclaim our understanding of nostalgia in modernist literature from an unfair stereotype.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The exact dates for when literary modernism ends is a much debated topic. Generally, the 1920s and 1930s are seen as modernism’s zenith, but authors like Waugh who published into the 1940s and 1950s are also referred to as modernists (sometimes “late modernists”). Waugh is included, for instance, in Stephen Ellis’s book *British Writers and the Approach of World War II* (2015), where his earlier work is examined alongside modernist luminaries like T.S. Eliot, E.M. Forster, and George Orwell as important for understanding England in the years immediately preceding World War II. As Waugh scholars have not

In her insightful introduction to this volume, Tammy Clewell contends that for the modernists nostalgia brought “the past into conversation with the present” (1), and should therefore “no longer simply be understood as an escapist fantasy or indulgent sentiment” (20). Still, Clewell mostly confines her findings to the “aesthetic practices and political aspirations” (20) of the modernists, and provides few recommendations as to the influence of nostalgia on the modern individual (about whom, as discussed momentarily, *Brideshead* has much to say). In any case, *Modernism and Nostalgia* opens up a new critical discourse surrounding modernist nostalgia, giving us the space to investigate its precepts, potentialities, and problems. *Brideshead*, with its emphasis on remembrance as a central theme (and, indeed, with it built into the structure of the book itself), is a particularly apt vehicle for investigating these questions.

Past critics, however, have usually dismissed *Brideshead*'s nostalgia as elitist in nature, arguing that the novel bemoans Britain's dawning democratization rather than seeking to consider the experience of nostalgia itself. Despite the positive developments in the study of literature and nostalgia outlined above, and an essay examining his work being included in this new collection, much must still be done if Evelyn Waugh's corpus, and especially *Brideshead*, is to be vindicated from its current characterization as a saccharine tribute to the disappearing upper class. The general consensus is that Waugh's later work, including *Brideshead*, is tinged with snobbery, colored by Waugh's own burning desire to enter the British aristocracy as a middle class man and his increasing resentment of industrialized society. Christine Berberich states that “in *Brideshead*, notions of gentlemanliness are clearly marked by a class divide” (120), arguing that

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contested his designation as a modernist, I shall follow their example and refer to him as such throughout this thesis.



Charles and Sebastian are at odds because of the former's admiration of the high-born Flytes and the latter's ardent desire to escape the same. Berberich concludes that Waugh, as culminated in his *Sword of Honour* trilogy, "does the ideal of the gentleman in literature no favours" (134); although "he uses the gentlemanly trope to beautiful and very evocative effects" (134), he ultimately crafts an ideal that is completely unattainable for the middle class and thus "endangered the survival of what he had hoped to celebrate" (134). Berberich, like many Waugh scholars, focuses on the class concerns presented by *Brideshead*. While these Marxist critiques have given us many illuminating insights, in *Brideshead* Waugh also offers a moral and ethical interrogation into how individual persons, rather than society as a whole, should respond to the experience of nostalgia, and it is this aspect of the novel with which I am primarily concerned.

Similar to Berberich, John Su, in his comparison of *Brideshead* with Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, argues that Waugh's depiction of the country house anticipates a Thatcherian nostalgia<sup>2</sup> which is necessarily essentialist, drawing upon the reestablishment of Catholicism, with its rich history of tradition, to regain a sense of Englishness in the face of modernity's disorientation. On the other hand, for Su, Ishiguro's nostalgia redefines the dignity and greatness of the past, and ultimately concludes that the English estate can no longer exist in elitist isolation if England is to effectively move into the third millennium. Though they arrive at their conclusions by different means, both Berberich and Su define nostalgia in *Brideshead* as inherently

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<sup>2</sup> In the introduction of *Modernism and Nostalgia*, Clewell argues that the dismissal of modernist nostalgia is due to two factors, one of which fits with Su's analysis. First, critics in the 1980s saw the "rise of the heritage industry" as commensurate with a "Thatcherite political agenda" (Clewell 7), ideas with which Su at least somewhat concurs; second, according to Clewell, some theorists purposely downplayed the aesthetic practices of the modernists because they were interested in promoting post-modernism, and cited their use of nostalgia as a weakness in their work.

backward looking, and thus implicitly reinforce the novel's elitist reputation. As we shall see, however, *Brideshead* is instead interested in how the past informs the individual's present, both positively and negatively, and, through memory, lays the groundwork for self-understanding.

Clewell herself, in a book published four years before she edited *Modernism and Nostalgia*, avers that Waugh creates characters who "reject projects of restoration and recognize decay as an end in itself" (*Mourning* 95). She asserts that Waugh creates an "aesthetics of decay" (94) wherein we see a nostalgia that does not seek to resurrect the past but wishes to simply grieve over it. For Clewell, Waugh's nostalgia is not dripping with sentimentality, but is rather intentionally pessimistic, and in being so "transforms nostalgia from a sentimental disposition to a performance of mourning that makes the past newly available for a culturally conservative politics" (95). Clewell, while freeing Waugh's nostalgia from some of its previous restrictions and thus anticipating the arguments she would make in *Modernism and Nostalgia*, is still convinced there can be no progressive aspect to his work--or, to put it another way, there is no future orientation toward his understanding of an individual's nostalgia. Perhaps this neglect is due to a misconception of "progress" according to Waugh; rather than referring to the political ideology of progressivism with which we are mainly familiar, *Brideshead* is concerned with how an individual moves forward, especially in a time of great social disorder, as Britain was faced with at the end of World War II.

It is therefore here that I diverge from the current critical assessment of Waugh and *Brideshead*. In line with the arguments espoused in *Modernism and Nostalgia* about modernist literature more broadly, I contend that, for Waugh, nostalgia forms an

emotional link between what was, is, and will be, for, as Charles Ryder pointedly asserts, we “possess nothing certainly except the past” (260). *Brideshead* depicts nostalgia as an enlivening force, which allows Charles to maintain a vibrant understanding for who he was and who he is now as a result, and consequently empowers him to move forward into an uncertain future. Waugh sees the past as a method for making sense of the present with memory bridging the gap between the two. I propose that Waugh’s nostalgia manages to be both melancholic and realistic, and as a result the elegy of *Brideshead* is more complex than critics have previously allowed.

An incomplete understanding of nostalgia in *Brideshead* is partially due to how the novel is usually categorized. Many critics have situated it in the Oxford novel tradition, a genre which was popular from the mid-1860s into the twentieth century. In the Oxford novel, the university is depicted as an almost dreamlike paradise of perpetual childhood, not a center of serious learning where men are prepared for the rigors of adulthood and professional life. This is probably why John Dougill places *Brideshead* in this same category. The first section portrays an irresponsible existence for all the principal characters, where they get drunk on champagne before luncheon, rarely attend lectures, the enigmatic Sebastian Flyte carries a teddy bear named Aloysius with him wherever he goes, and the entire atmosphere is one of idleness and dissipation. While there is little doubt that *Brideshead* shares some characteristics with the Oxford novel, Dougill neglects to recognize Waugh’s parody of these same tropes. Although *Brideshead* dances in the paradise of “*et in Arcadia ego*” for a time, Waugh ultimately rejects the idealized nostalgia found in the Oxford novel and consequently an Edenic view of the past.

Furthermore, as alluded to above, Waugh's personal attachment to the upper class has been cited as evidence that *Brideshead's* nostalgia promotes an inherently elitist agenda. That the middle class Waugh desired acceptance by the aristocracy is not under dispute. As Waugh's own letters make clear, and Berberich elucidates further for us, he was insecure about his social status and, as he aged, longed for aristocratic approval. Berberich argues that *Brideshead* demonstrates Waugh's changing attitudes, showing his shift from early satirist (as seen in *A Handful of Dust*) to aristocratic apologist. Such a characterization of *Brideshead* ignores Waugh's suggestion that Brideshead's decline is necessary to force its occupants out into relationship with the world. The Flytes' insulated existence, buoyed by the exclusivity of aristocratic living, for the most part made them selfish and individualistic. It is only when Brideshead is empty, and thus the aristocratic ideal destroyed, that they manage to conquer their own self-centered tendencies. At the same time, the conspicuously unreflective characters, such as Rex Mottram and Mr. Samgrass, are, to varying degrees, portrayed as unfeeling, ridiculous, and, at least in Rex's case, not even fully human. They are completely disconnected from the past, something *Brideshead* most definitely condemns. Ultimately, a thorough examination of these characters' fates both rescues *Brideshead* from charges of elitism and illustrates Waugh's concerns about thoughtless presentism.

Finally, we must grapple with *Brideshead's* narration, the linear voice of which is sharply distinct from Waugh's experimental contemporaries and yet maintains hidden complexity. As we shall see, decoding the nuances of this narration--and especially the narrator--has profound implications for the consensus belief in *Brideshead's* nostalgia. When we closely examine *Brideshead's* central flashback sequence, we may see that,

instead of constituting an escape for the war-weary Capt. Ryder, this sequence actually explains the inexplicable hopefulness of the narrator, who we finally meet in the epilogue. It is the act of remembering--and remembering with fondness--that revitalizes the narrator and gives him a better understanding of himself. Waugh's structuring of *Brideshead* as the memories of one man, but shown through three separate moments of consciousness (as identified by David G. Brailow, and explained further later on), demonstrates nostalgia's ability to transform Charles' understanding of the present and therefore his understanding of himself. Waugh offers memory as a method for grounding the people of his war-torn homeland, while simultaneously rejecting any pretensions to preserve the past in its entirety.

It is certainly true that, when a good and formative experience ends, the usual human response is to endow upon that time special significance and remember it with wistful longing. The challenge for our memories is to extrapolate the truth from the myth, and thus reconstruct an accurate, rather than idealized, version of past events. Nostalgia and truth would therefore appear perpetual antagonists, their varying perspectives irreconcilable, as one pulls us toward the dream and the other toward wakefulness. Nonetheless, in *Brideshead* Waugh suggests they are instead essential components of the same process; and, in doing so, he demonstrates an important truth: for the individual, at any rate, nostalgia and progress are not mutually exclusive.

## CHAPTER II

### A BOOK NEVER OPENED

Nearly forty years after its publication, interest in *Brideshead* was renewed by a lush 1981 television adaptation of the novel. The British Film Institute considers this serial one of the greatest television productions ever made; and, in 2015, *The Telegraph* declared that “*Brideshead Revisited* is television’s greatest literary adaptation, bar none. It’s utterly faithful to Evelyn Waugh’s novel yet it’s somehow more than that too.”<sup>3</sup> The success of this serial heralded a new heyday for British costume dramas, leading to many Merchant-Ivory productions, the endless permutations of Jane Austen’s work we are treated to every few years, and eventually the worldwide sensation *Downton Abbey*. Though it constitutes only a quarter of *Brideshead*, the serial focused predominantly on the Oxford section, thus permanently affecting, at least within the popular imagination, our perception of the novel. Indeed, its association with Oxford is so profound that, when several anti-establishment firebrands published an anthology critiquing the institution in 1988, a quote from *Brideshead* was used as the epigram.<sup>4</sup> As it turns out, the television

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<sup>3</sup> The acclaim for this miniseries has been consistent throughout the twenty-first century, with profiles in various “best of” lists from 2000-2015. See the “BFI TV 100” (2000), *Time*’s “100 Best TV Shows of All Time” (2007), *The Guardian*’s “50 Top TV Dramas” (2010), and *The Telegraph*’s “20 Greatest TV Adaptations” (2015).

<sup>4</sup> See *The Oxford Myth* edited by Rachel Johnson.

series might simply have been following the critical perception of *Brideshead*, which has likewise allowed this unequivocal association to continue. In her analysis of place in *Brideshead*, Ruth Breeze sees some problems with this trend, hinting that our understanding of *Brideshead* has been too informed by the Oxford section, and follows suit by barely touching on Oxford as a location in her article. She stops short, however, of challenging the designation itself. While Waugh is not currently enjoying particularly robust critical interest, those scholars focusing on his work have not contested *Brideshead's* placement in the genre, a decision with more significant implications than may be initially clear.

Although this term has been applied to *Brideshead* almost since its publication, John Dougill claims that he, writing in 1998, is the first scholar to define what actually constitutes an Oxford novel. Dougill lays out five primary characteristics of the Oxford novel: a romanticized image of Oxford; a journey of self-discovery (or *Bildungsroman*) that is intertwined with a discovery of the university itself; the student hero, fashioned in the image of the author and maintaining an artistic or literary disposition; the importance of forming male friendships (and making some adversaries along the way); and a celebration of childhood, especially after the publication of *Alice in Wonderland*, which Dougill, rather surprisingly, also places within this genre. In sum, contrary to what has been assumed, simply being set in Oxford during a character's university years does not make something an Oxford novel. The characteristics are more nuanced than that--and, as we shall see, do not apply to *Brideshead*. Dougill thinks otherwise, even though he simultaneously acknowledges it as a "work of far wider canvas" (87). Nevertheless, upon closer examination, we discover that *Brideshead* does not actually adhere to Dougill's

criteria, and consequently such a designation, with its attendant connotations, has distorted our image of the book and the sentimental wistfulness associated with the genre.

While Oxford has fascinated writers since its founding (Dougill's survey begins in the Middle Ages), the romanticized view described above became especially entrenched during the Industrial Revolution. Dougill suggests that, amidst "rising materialism and utilitarianism" Oxford became a "defender of humane and classical ideals" (89), an image solidified by the "dreaming spires" of Matthew Arnold's "Thrysis" (Dougill). Thus established as a place where "higher truths and eternal verities" (89) were still valued, we see the dreaminess of fictional Oxford take shape. Practicality was an anathema; such pragmatic minds could go to Cambridge. Dougill calls the beauty of novelistic Oxford "fragile and ethereal" (89), a curious designation; it implies something which is too beautiful to last. In *Brideshead*, the Oxford of Charles' memory bears some resemblance to this depiction. In his lone descriptive passage of the university, he details a quixotic time full of laughter, merriment, and fine claret. The image he paints has a distinct sacredness: he remembers the buildings' cupolas, a feature commonly used in religious architecture, the ringing of bells, something likewise associated with churches, and a "cloistral hush" (Waugh, *Brideshead*, 21). Charles compares his university years with the days of John Henry Newman, the Anglican clergyman and intellectual giant who, after a storied career, converted to Catholicism, was banned from Oxford, and eventually became a cardinal. Charles thus associates real intellectualism with a man of the cloth. According to Dougill, the university is almost sanctified in the Oxford novel, and Charles' recollections seem to corroborate that statement.



We must remember, however, that these same recollections are inextricably intertwined with Charles' affection for Sebastian. They are not the doe-eyed impressions of a besotted freshman, in love with the center of his studies for its own sake. Charles "date[s] [his] Oxford life from...first meeting with Sebastian" (25); the description above, with all its fondness, occurs afterward and is thus somewhat unreliable, colored as it is by this dear (romantic) friendship. Indeed, before Sebastian, Oxford life for Charles has a "meager and commonplace" (28) quality, emphasized by the average or "middle course" (28) friends with whom he initially surrounds himself, and he has an intuitive sense that "this was not all Oxford had to offer" (29). Matthew Arnold's dreaming spires do not impress Charles on their own; he wants something more tangible, something more real, and finds it only after meeting Sebastian.

In stark contrast to his delayed admiration for Oxford, Charles is immediately captivated by Brideshead Castle, suggesting that Waugh finds Oxford, at best, second in beauty and importance, challenging the assertion that he sentimentally depicts Oxford. Charles is "rapt in the vision" (36) of Brideshead and, at the mere remembrance of his "first brief visit" (42) is moved to tears. He feels a "sense of liberation and peace" (86) at Brideshead which he compares, rather remarkably, to surviving "a night of unrest" (86) on the battlefield. For Charles, the Flyte's aristocratic home is "very near heaven" (87). Charles never describes Oxford in such exaggerated terms. All together, Charles expounds on Brideshead's beauty at least nine times in long descriptive passages (36-37, 38-39, 40, 40-41, 85, 88-90, 91, 92) while Oxford receives only a single mention. Charles may recall Oxford with some fondness, but it is hardly the idealized haven Dougill identifies as integral to Oxford novels.

Neither do we see Charles' self-discovery happen at Oxford, another convention of the Oxford novel not seen in *Brideshead*. At its core, the Oxford novel is a *Bildungsroman* which depends on the university for its hero to come of age. Dougill states that the "university is exploited as background to the character formation of a young adult" (91), reiterating the remarkable sameness of the plots of this genre. In doing so he echoes Mortimer Proctor, who, in his 1957 study of English university novels of which the Oxford novel is a sub-genre (a study which, it should be noted, has not been repeated in the ensuing sixty years), declares that no reader of university novels can "fail to note the remarkable sameness of their plots, and even individual fragments of action, exhibit" (qtd. in Dougill 91). For Dougill, in the Oxford novel an innocent student arrives on campus with "great expectations" (92), makes friends and enemies, is challenged by the newness of his environment, and ultimately receives his real education by overcoming these trials and thus arriving at adulthood. Examinations are not a major concern; if anything, they inhibit the primary project--that is, the "passage of the student...from adolescence to adulthood" (92). The most casual reader must wonder at such a description being applied to *Brideshead*. It has far more in common with J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series than Evelyn Waugh's classic. Charles, although pleased with the relative freedom Oxford provides, never exhibits the starry-eyed enthusiasm nor the adjustment issues outlined by Dougill. Indeed, even before he arrives at Oxford, Charles is given a lecture on the most grounding of topics, one likely to depress even the most devoted aesthete: money. Charles' father, who rarely takes an interest in his affairs, discusses his allowance in detail and his rationale for the amount (almost twice what Charles' warden recommended). Furthermore, during his early days at Oxford, Charles'

cousin Jasper liberally dispenses advice, which all concerns how best to manipulate Oxford for his future advantage. There is no dreamy phase of intellectual idealism that experience slowly crushes; instead, Charles is indoctrinated with practicality before he even sets foot on campus. Similarly, while Charles certainly makes friends at Oxford (something we shall discuss in a moment), there are no real enemies to be seen. The only possible exception is Anthony Blanche, and, although the latter has his faults and Charles comes to the conclusion that he “‘doesn’t particularly like him’” (Waugh 44), to characterize them as enemies is still extreme.

It could be argued that, in discovering his calling as an artist, Charles does engage in a *Bildungsroman* at Oxford. Upon further investigation, however, we will note that this awakening occurs because of Brideshead Castle; Oxford has very little to do with Charles’ discovery of his vocation. Indeed, after deciding to pursue painting, he leaves Oxford to complete his studies in Paris. It is at Brideshead where he muses “it was an aesthetic education to live within those walls” (88), and it is “under those coffered ceilings” (90) that he “felt a whole new system of nerves alive within [him], as though water that spurting and bubbled among its stones, was indeed a life-giving spring” (90). There he experiences his first rush of true inspiration as an artist, enlivening a barely used office with a “romantic landscape” (91), one created with a brush which “seemed somehow to do what was wanted of it” (91). It is no coincidence that Charles makes his career as an architectural artist. He never depicts Oxford, but his life’s work is in preserving for posterity the great, old houses which everyone in 1945 (including Waugh himself) believed would soon pass away. If Charles undergoes any self-discovery, it is because of the Flytes’ ancestral seat, which further distances *Brideshead* from the Oxford

novel tradition. For Waugh, Oxford is at most a tool for Waugh's vocational awakening, not the impetus.

In acknowledging Charles' vocation as an artist, it appears he fits at least some aspects of Dougill's criteria for the Oxford novel: he is a student with an artistic temperament. As noted above, Charles is certainly much struck by beauty and an encounter with it, as personified in Brideshead, redirects his life. *Brideshead* also includes some biographical elements. In describing Charles in *Brideshead*, Dougill avers that Charles' university days are a mirror of Waugh's own, and reflect the author's obsession with the aesthete set: "Charles Ryder lives in an unfashionable college, drinks heavily, and makes up to the aristocratic aesthetes of Christ Church--not unlike his author in fact, whose autobiography *A Little Learning* (1964) tells a similar story" (101). If these characteristics qualify Charles to be a student hero according to the Oxford novel, then we must acknowledge their existence.

Still, additional details make such a concession less impactful. Although Charles might admire the aesthetes, Waugh does not, something confirmed by his treatment of the aesthetic characters themselves. This is particularly true of Anthony Blanche, the quintessential aesthete and probably one of the most memorable personalities in all of *Brideshead*. Anthony, though well-liked and, from the reader's perspective, excessively entertaining, is jealous, petty, and, as Charles puts it, "cruel, too, in the wanton, insect-maiming manner of the very young" (Waugh 50). Charles' account is subject to bias, particularly as both share a paramour for Sebastian, but his description is born out by Anthony's own words about the Flytes, most of whom, at this point, Charles has not met. Anthony rather mysteriously calls them "'a very sinister family'" and "'quite gruesome'"

(57). Brideshead is ““something archaic, out of a cave that’s been sealed for centuries...a learned bigot, a ceremonious barbarian, a snow-bound lama”” (57). Julia, a reputed beauty, is reduced to a simple coquette with a power hungry streak, for whom, according to Anthony, ““there ought to be an Inquisition especially set up to burn”” (57). While Julia is vain and somewhat self-absorbed, we soon learn that she is far more loving and complex than Anthony allows her to be, and, as *Brideshead* progresses, becomes almost a dual protagonist. The youngest, Cordelia, is barely discussed other than for Anthony to tell a rather bizarre story concerning a governess who became insane and drowned herself. This story is never alluded to again or corroborated by anyone else, suggesting that it is merely gossip. Anthony’s dismissal of Cordelia is also quite noteworthy. We eventually learn that she is one of the most admirable figures in the Flyte family. Waugh depicts the Flytes as a flawed, complicated family, but Anthony’s extreme negativism proves untrue.

Furthermore, Charles himself, though choosing an artistic career, never becomes an aesthete, and indeed eventually submits to the practicalities of everyday life. After overspending his allowance, to his great consternation, makes him a prisoner at home during the long vacation, Charles firmly resolves never to do so again, however prosaic that decision may make him. He also somewhat regularizes his college activities, and stays on “easy terms with his tutor” (119). *Brideshead* thus acknowledges that some conformation of behavior is advisable if we are to move forward--that is, if we are to grow up. Beauty is an important pursuit, but we must support ourselves in some fashion, even if that requires us to worship with less fervency at its altar. In this way Waugh indicts the childishness typically found in the Oxford novel, which is only reinforced by

the charming but pitiable Sebastian, who, in striving for perpetual Arcadia, ends up friendless, alone, and hopelessly drunk.

Indeed, childishness is an important aspect of the Oxford novel's idyllic nostalgia. In this genre, a desire to prolong childhood is present throughout, and the halcyon university days represent an irresponsible existence that should be maintained as long as possible. Growing up is a regret, and we are nostalgic for our school days because they kept us in the sacred realm of childhood. Dougill claims this feature of the Oxford novel is drawn from *Alice in Wonderland*, which he says "steer[ed] it in the direction of youthful enchantment and golden afternoons" (133). Moreover, "it is in the student Wonderland of *Brideshead Revisited* that the influence of *Alice* is most striking" (133), and, according to Dougill, in Sebastian we see reflected the "arrested emotional development" (133) of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (also known as Lewis Carroll) which inspired him to write *Alice* in the first place. Sebastian does everything he can to stymie the slow creep of adulthood, and "wishes for nothing more than to linger in that golden gleam" (134) of childhood. The Oxford novel's sentimentalized nostalgia is influenced by this wish to resurrect childhood, and *Brideshead's* highlighting of this childishness has greatly influenced how we view nostalgia in the novel.

There is certainly no denying Sebastian's childishness. Indeed, when Charles first meets Sebastian, although acknowledging "his beauty, which was arresting" (Waugh 29), he "was struck less by his looks than by the fact that he was carrying a large teddy-bear" (29). This teddy-bear, named Aloysius, is one of the most memorable motifs of *Brideshead*, indelibly associated with the charming, irresponsible Sebastian. The latter even buys a hairbrush for which to "spank" Aloysius when he is naughty, and goes so far

as to engrave his name on the back. According to Anthony Blanche, all of Sebastian's friends are fascinated by Aloysius, which perhaps indicates a general propensity for childishness amongst the set. Similarly, Sebastian has a close affection for his nanny, a woman who is likewise a fixture from his childhood. His affections for the rest of his family are mixed and complicated, especially his own mother, but Nanny Hawkins remains a perpetual favorite. Indeed, Sebastian takes Charles to Brideshead Castle initially to introduce the two, and upon his departure declares that, "I've a good mind to bring [Nanny Hawkins] to Oxford to live with me" (39). Sebastian is very much a child playing at being an adult, which strongly supports Dougill's claims that, in this manner at least, *Brideshead* is an Oxford novel.

Nonetheless, this argument neglects key aspects of Sebastian's characterization: that is, with Sebastian's depiction, Waugh demonstrates the downfall of the childish disposition rather than glorifying it as Lewis Carroll does in *Alice* (and as Oxford novels do as a whole). When Charles and Cara discuss Sebastian, she states that "Sebastian is in love with his own childhood" (114) and predicts that being so "will make him very unhappy" (114). She draws a sharp distinction between Charles' and Sebastian's affinity for alcohol, prophesying that the latter will end up a drunkard: "I see it in the way Sebastian drinks. It is not your way" (115). Cara laments Sebastian's unwillingness to grow up; she believes it will ultimately ruin him, which is exactly what happens. Sebastian is never able to conquer his alcoholism, and is eventually alienated and isolated from his family, suggesting that Waugh is also of Cara's opinion. As Randall Stevenson notes, "the Arcadian Oxford Ryder remembers, perhaps cloudless enough in itself, also clearly anticipates the drunkenness and dissipation that will eventually overtake

Sebastian” (135). The beauty of childhood is something to be treasured, but it is a transient period, and one which, for Waugh, it is dangerous to continuously grasp after.

We see this reality further reflected in Sebastian’s behavior during his second year at Oxford. In recalling these days, Charles acknowledges that “there was a change in both of us” (Waugh 119) and attributes it to a “lost sense of discovery which had infused the anarchy of our first year” (119). Charles responds by, to use his own phrase, settling down, normalizing his occupations at Oxford (as discussed previously) and revisiting painting as a serious pursuit--in short, after the usual bout of rebellious irresponsibility common to youth, he grows up. For Sebastian, on the other hand, “it was different” (120); in the face of impending adulthood, he becomes “listless and morose” (120). Charles muses that Sebastian had a “deep, interior need...[to] escape reality” (120), something that only becomes more pronounced as the book continues. Indeed, his sullenness leads him to take refuge in alcohol, and as Charles and Sebastian “grow older and more serious” Charles drinks “less, [Sebastian] more” (145). Encountering reality spurs on Sebastian’s drunkenness. By contrast, Charles drinks for the “love of the moment, and the wish to prolong and enhance it” (145); in other words, to *stay* connected to the present. With this comparison and the subsequent futures of the respective parties, Waugh suggests that the problematic consumption of alcohol is directly tied to our desire for escape, and consequently illustrates the foolishness of dwelling in idealized spaces.

These points are only made stronger by the mode in which Sebastian finally finds some peace: he becomes a parent (of sorts), almost the most “grown up” act any of us will ever perform. After becoming estranged from his family, Sebastian leaves England and lives abroad in various locations. When his mother falls ill, Charles travels to



Morocco to retrieve Sebastian. The latter has been living there with Kurt, who we soon discover is a rather tiresome leech, attaching himself to Sebastian for financial rather than affectionate reasons. Sebastian is well aware of this fact, but he delights in having someone to care for, someone to think about other than himself. As he tells Charles, ““it’s rather a pleasant change when all your life you’ve had people looking after you, to have someone to look after yourself. Only of course it has to be someone pretty hopeless to need looking after by *me*”” (248). Sebastian organizes his life around Kurt, a selfish, undeserving former German infantryman who shot himself in the foot to avoid further action, because he gives him a sense of purpose, a sense of purpose only obtained by shedding much of his feckless childishness. Christine Berberich concludes that “for the first time in his life, he feels needed” (122). Sebastian’s last line of dialogue in the entire novel is to claim his new responsibility. Kurt requests someone fetch him his cigarettes, and Charles, to spare the ailing Sebastian, offers to retrieve them, but Sebastian stops him, saying, ““No, that’s my job”” (Waugh 249). Sebastian’s transition from languid, careless aesthete to devoted parent, and the resulting peace this change brings to him, indicates a condemnation of childishness on Waugh’s part rather than a celebration of it as found in the Oxford novel.

There now remains only one final aspect of the Oxford novel, as defined by Dougill, to apply to *Brideshead*. Dougill identifies exclusively male societies as especially integral for the genre. He states that these friendships “tend to be formed early in the book” (110) and play a vital part in furthering the student hero’s sense of self” (110). That Charles exists in an almost entirely male society is undebatable. While at Oxford, women visit rarely, and this section of *Brideshead*, in comparison to the others,

is notable for its female absence and plethora of male characters. Sebastian certainly has a profound effect on Charles, emotionally, spiritually, and vocationally. Still, though Charles and Sebastian meet at Oxford, their friendship only really blossoms at Brideshead. Oxford is the scene of frivolous romps and parades, but any real intimacy, and consequently personal growth through friendship, occurs during their visits to Brideshead. Thus, similar to the awakening of Charles' vocation, Brideshead is the actual vehicle for self maturation, and therefore the novel at best participates weakly in this aspect of the Oxford novel.

After examining *Brideshead* through Dougill's definition of the Oxford novel, we conclude that the book has long been miscategorized. *Brideshead* uses Oxford as a setting, but it is not an Oxford novel, and its association with the genre has impaired our understanding of Waugh's nostalgia. Rather than celebrating sentimentalized, idealistic nostalgia, Waugh illustrates its failings through the Oxford section of *Brideshead*, and does so by inverting the conventions of a genre which strongly promotes the reverse. Without recognizing this reality and establishing its falsity, we cannot move forward in determining Waugh's actual theory of nostalgia, which powerfully rejects idealized Oxford (and consequently idealized nostalgia), and is best summed up in *Brideshead*'s most memorable image: the skull on which is born the legend "*Et in Arcadia ego*" (even in Arcadia, there am I). Generally, the "I" in this phrase has been interpreted to mean death, something confirmed in *Brideshead* by its appearing on a skull. From this we can easily extrapolate Waugh's meaning: Arcadia is a fiction, a facade, a dream; death, devastation, and decay exist within all places, and anyone who thinks otherwise lives in a fairytale. Charles purchases this item during the height of his paradisiacal days in Oxford

and does so with cash rather than credit, a fact pointedly noted in the novel and which reinforces the permanence of the object. No creditor will ever reclaim it, just as no idealist ever escapes time's relentless march forward. Arcadia cannot last--and, Waugh suggests, nor should it.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE ROOTS THAT CLUTCH

Some novels have the misfortune of being too closely associated with the lives of their authors. *Brideshead Revisited* is just such a book, and this tendency has likely contributed to the critical misinterpretation of Waugh's nostalgia. Instead of perceiving nostalgia in *Brideshead* as a method for bridging the three phases of an individual's life (past, present, and future), scholars see latent elitism based on Waugh's personal proclivities. This propensity is probably due to *Brideshead's* autobiographical elements (Charles, for instance, like Waugh, attends Oxford, chooses an artistic career, and converts to Catholicism) and the prolific historical record Waugh left behind. Besides his own autobiography *A Little Learning*, published shortly before his unexpected death and intended to be a three volume work, Waugh kept almost fifty years of diaries and letters, which were published posthumously throughout the late twentieth century. Waugh's biting wit and colorful, if often irreverent, portraits of early twentieth century Britain have proven too interesting and entertaining for scholars to resist, and the result is a body of criticism that resists looking at *Brideshead*, and especially its apparent celebration of nostalgia, from outside of Waugh's shadow.

As this is the case, *Brideshead's* elitist reputation, considering its emphasis on the aristocracy, was almost inevitable. Waugh's social insecurities are well documented, revealed by both his own sentiments and investigations by his biographers.<sup>5</sup> These long standing feelings--Christine Berberich claims Waugh's "class consciousness started at a tender age" (100)--were likely only exacerbated by his first marriage to Evelyn Gardner (called "Shevelyn" to distinguish husband and wife). This marriage was an unmitigated disaster for several reasons and ended in an ugly divorce, but her aristocratic family's opposition almost prevented its commencement in the first place. Writing to his friend Nancy Mitford in 1952, twenty-four years afterward, Waugh recalled a particularly stinging comment by Shevelyn's mother: "It never occurred to me that I wasn't a gentleman until Lady Burghclere pointed it out" (*Letters* 364). Berberich notes that, although Waugh "treated the matter jokingly in this letter, Lady Burghclere's snub had hurt in 1928, and had dealt a serious blow to his self-esteem, from which he tried to recover unsuccessfully" (99). Philip Eade, while positing that "how much snobbery there was on her part and how much subsequent embroidery by Evelyn is anyone's guess" (120-121), likewise confirms Lady Burghclere considered him unsuitable and wanted her daughter to break off the match. These slights rankled, and, according to many scholars, Charles' fascination with the Flytes echoes Waugh's own thirst for acceptance.

This emphasis on biographical criticism has led to enlightening discoveries about Waugh and the circle of "Bright Young Things" within which he moved. It has also, however, colored our perception of *Brideshead*, and made it difficult to regard the novel as anything but an ode to the dying aristocracy Waugh wanted to join. In the process, we

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<sup>5</sup> See biographies written by Christopher Sykes (1977) and Selina Hastings (1995), both entitled *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography*, as well as Philip Eade's more recent book, *Evelyn Waugh: A Life Revisited* (2016).

have misread Waugh's depiction of the Flytes, which, rather than treating them uncritically, epitomizes the famous opening line of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." The Flytes, despite their wealth and prestige, do not strike us as pleased or content with their lives. Their domestic space is characterized by an uneasy truce, held together by Lady Marchmain, which slowly fractures further as the novel continues. Sebastian is reluctant to even introduce Charles to his family, certain he will choose them over him if he does so. Brideshead Castle is not "home" for Sebastian; it is "where my family live" (Waugh 36). When we first meet the Flytes, they display many stereotypically negative aristocratic attributes: a mixture of self-absorption and superficiality, they are mostly a very insular family, focused on themselves and their own concerns, far removed from any larger participation in humanity. Indeed, even if we approach *Brideshead* from a biographical angle, the Flytes' treatment suggests Waugh sought vengeance upon those who rejected him rather than constituting an apology for their existence.

This exclusivity and lofty unconcern amongst the upper classes is hardly notable on its own. It actually has profound implications, however, for understanding Waugh's nostalgia. Perpetually critiqued as an elitist wishing to resurrect England's aristocratic past, upon closer examination we discover Waugh is immensely critical of this lifestyle, finding it prone to selfishness and a dangerous individualism, things he likely experienced first hand. According to *Brideshead*, this malady can only be overcome by a dissolution of aristocratic life--at least, aristocratic life as it was generally lived at the time. Concurrently, characters such as Rex Mottram and Mr. Samgrass illustrate the dangers of studied forgetfulness, allowing *Brideshead* to also condemn those who have

no regard for the past at all. By the novel's conclusion, the unreflective individuals are rejected by Waugh, and the Flytes have become far more outwardly focused, even as their circumstances are less enviable. Brideshead remains, but is deserted; and yet, the novel suggests, its family is more alive. In deconstructing the aristocratic ideal while simultaneously encouraging its remembrance, Waugh shows that, though the past should be preserved and revered, it cannot be the sole means by which we dictate the future. *Brideshead* is thus vindicated from its stereotypical elitism, and reading the novel's nostalgia in a more nuanced manner becomes possible.

Although this aspect of *Brideshead* has been neglected by scholars in the past, Berberich notices that Sebastian is dissatisfied with the aristocratic ideal, and argues that both his initial "retreat into childhood" (122) and later alcoholism are his attempts to escape it. In a largely negative assessment of Charles' character, Berberich further avers that "Brideshead and all it stands for enchants Ryder, while it traps Sebastian" (121), and concludes that the end of their friendship--or relationship, depending on one's interpretation--is due to their differing opinions on the aristocratic lifestyle. According to Berberich, Charles wants in, while Sebastian wants out, and when that fact becomes evident Sebastian breaks off the connection, determined not to be governed by his family's social obligations. Sebastian, descending relentlessly into drunkenness, only finds some peace, as we discussed earlier, after becoming caregiver to the erstwhile Kurt. Berberich's analysis reinforces my assertion that a rejection of Brideshead is necessary for a simultaneous rejection of selfishness: Sebastian never returns to his childhood home, and every subsequent "home" he makes for himself--first with Kurt, then at the Tunisian monastery--forces him to engage more meaningfully with other persons. While

we have little hope that Sebastian ever fully conquers his alcoholism, his exile allows him to become much less concerned with only his own pleasures. Cordelia, in the final mention made of Sebastian in *Brideshead*, predicts that he will be a sort of handyman at the monastery--“a familiar figure pottering round with his broom and his bunch of keys” (Waugh, *Brideshead*, 354)--who is both gently mocked and extremely beloved by the community. In any case, Sebastian will no longer be characterized by the idle indolence of his Brideshead days, and thus effectively escapes the social milieu in which he was brought up.

Although Berberich accurately identifies the changes that occur in Sebastian after leaving Brideshead, she paints his sentiments as an aberration within the Flyte family, consequently indicating that Waugh’s sympathies are not with him. While it is true that none of the other Flytes flee Brideshead in his dramatic fashion, those who remain are depicted far less admirably than those who voluntarily leave. Indeed, as I have been arguing, it is only in the shuttering of Brideshead and the removal of its overpowering influence that selflessness occurs, suggesting that for Waugh these events are interrelated. Nostalgia for Waugh, then, cannot simply be about reinforcing the goodness of aristocratic living; with his portrayal of the Flytes, Waugh recommends that the aristocracy, as currently understood, be extinguished. At the same time, Brideshead itself remains, a testament to the past, and yet altered to accommodate the future.

While the obvious place to begin is with Julia, the stereotypical British socialite, the significance of her portrayal is only fully felt when contrasted against that of Cordelia. Unlike Julia, Cordelia is not beautiful, a fact that Charles comments on almost every time he sees her, and which the retrospective narrator does not correct. Charles



observes that “she had the unmistakable family characteristics, but had them all ill-arranged in a frank and chubby plainness” (99); then, at fifteen, she has “not the promise of Julia’s full *quattrocento* loveliness” (252). After she grows up, Julia calls her ““quite plain”” (345) and Charles (initially, at least) thinks her “an ugly woman” (345).

Cordelia’s physical unattractiveness is thus frequently reinforced, suggesting that for Waugh it is a defining feature of her character. Considering that beauty is a valuable asset for a debutante, the likelihood that Cordelia should make a “successful” launch into society as her sister does is unlikely. But indeed, in another important difference between the sisters, her “coming out” never appears to occur at all. While we are never explicitly told one way or another, it is strongly implied that this is so, especially when Marchmain House (or “Marchers”), the Flytes’ London residence, is sold to pay off debts, pulled down, and replaced by apartments. Julia bemoans the loss, mentioning particularly that ““Poor Cordelia...won’t have her coming-out ball there after all”” (255), these words, in the face of their family difficulties, underscoring her own superficiality. Waugh portrays Cordelia as unsuited for the socialite lifestyle of an aristocrat, both by nature and the changing world about her.

More importantly for our purposes, however, Waugh depicts these differences positively. Cordelia, who spends very little of her adult life at Brideshead, is not afflicted by self-centeredness like the rest of her family. There is no process she must undergo to care about others in a profound way. Free from an obsession with aristocratic norms and practices, Cordelia volunteers for the ambulance services during the Spanish Civil War, long before war came to England, thus illustrating a selflessness that Julia, even after her own growth, never displays. Even as ““the other girls...came back when the war was

over” (345), Cordelia remained, ““getting people back to their homes, helping in the prison camps”” (345). Julia claims Cordelia has had ““an odd life”” (345), but she ends up mirroring it, which suggests that for Waugh this is the more proper way to live. By eschewing Brideshead and its exclusionary lifestyle even before such a decision is necessary, Cordelia illustrates the necessity of leaving behind the ancient, bucolic paradise of her ancestors in order to create meaningful relationships with others. Cordelia’s depiction likewise reinforces her life decisions as the ones to be emulated, decisions that are quite unusual for an aristocrat. Indeed, even her unusual name, as a subtle reference to the ethically principled Shakespearean heroine of *King Lear*, is a hint that for Waugh Cordelia epitomizes right action.

In a stark contrast to her sister, Julia, while beautiful, charming, and popular, is also consistently thoughtless and self-absorbed. When Charles hurries to Brideshead believing Sebastian gravely ill, Julia waves away his concerns, calls Sebastian ““maddeningly pathetic”” (83), and is primarily relieved that Charles’ arrival has spared her from canceling her own plans of pleasure. At the same time, Charles identifies a “tiny note of contempt in her voice” (83) that he should be “so readily available” (83), indicating she values popularity more than sincerity of friendship. Julia departs the next day “without a backward glance” (86), happy to be freed once more from any obligations. Charles concludes that she regards the world “with mild disdain” and “an air of possession” (125), sentiments Sebastian corroborates by identifying Rex Mottram as ““just someone of Julia’s”” (125). Julia, used to a life of privilege, is characterized by ownership and an unwillingness to be inconvenienced. Indeed, Rex’s grotesque gift of a turtle whose shell has been encrusted with diamonds seems peculiarly fitting: living

creatures are adorned for her amusement, whatever the consequences. (Cordelia, on the other hand, is horrified by the gift.) Unkindness and snobbery are not Julia's besetting sins--she is generally affable to Charles, for instance, and affectionate toward her family--but rather pleasant indifference and consistent selfishness. She simply wants to be kept entertained by all around her with as few obligations as possible. Sebastian says of Julia, "I don't think she cares for anyone much. I love her. She's so like me" (86). His quippy assessment encompasses all her faults, as well as confirming he possesses some of the same: she cannot be bothered with the feelings of others. Waugh shows in *Brideshead* that such failings, so common amongst the aristocracy (and found in each of the Flytes, including Lady Marchmain, except Cordelia), prevent empathy and promote hard-heartedness.

When we meet Julia again ten years later, she has noticeably softened. Now unhappily married to the unfaithful Rex Mottram, her girlish coquetry has been replaced by a mature reflectiveness, born of hardship and disappointment, things she was unacquainted with as the dashing Lady Julia Flyte. After her mother's death and the subsequent breakup of the Brideshead household, Julia has suffered and learned a great deal in the process. Still, she is still plagued by self-centeredness, as she grasps almost piteously at any little happiness she can obtain. She enters into an affair with Charles, despite his own marriage and children (one of whom he has not even met when their affair commences). Indeed, two years afterward, they glory in the realization that they have spent no more than one hundred days apart. Their love, like so much of the aristocratic lifestyle at Brideshead, is centered around themselves. The ultimate dissolution of their engagement following Julia's reversion to Catholicism is not enough

to force her into selfless, relational action, something Waugh depicts throughout *Brideshead* as essential. When Charles asks Julia what she will do now, she anticipates a life spent alone, not in service to others, and predicts she ““shall be bad again, punished again”” (392). Instead, she volunteers for the ambulance services during World War II, a fate almost as far from the world of the debutante as we can imagine, and yet her first opportunity to suffer and serve others. In order to conquer the indolence encouraged by aristocratic living, Julia must leave Brideshead entirely and follow Cordelia into the mission field. In her absence, Brideshead, before being requisitioned by the Army, becomes a haven for the helpless and dispossessed (as personified by Nanny Hawkins and ““the blitzed R.C. padre,”” the only remaining residents who are not servants, and both of whom have no other home) (396). In this manner, Brideshead follows the example of its new chatelaine, and is transformed into a place of refuge. Our last image of Brideshead and the Flyte family is thus one of openness and self-sacrifice rather than exclusivity. Furthermore, the hopefulness present within this declining country house (as we shall discuss more fully in the next chapter) suggests that, for Waugh, the alteration in Brideshead’s circumstances has been a profound improvement.

Finally, the lone remaining Flyte sibling is the eldest and heir, referred to as Brideshead or “Bridey.” Of the four, he appears in the fewest scenes; in those scenes, he is generally genial, but forgettable. As the heir apparent to the title and all the responsibilities that come with it, if anyone should be spared a crisis of purpose, it is Bridey. We learn, nevertheless, that he has never satisfactorily filled the role nor embraced the duties of a marquis. Indeed, he almost eschews his inheritance altogether and enters the Catholic priesthood, with Sebastian theorizing that he never stopped

wishing to do so. Sebastian also describes him as “twisted inside” and “much the craziest of us, only it doesn’t come out at all” (97). Although never deficient in his duty, Bridey takes little pleasure in the process, performing “all unavoidable local duties, bringing with him to platform and fete and committee room his own thin mist of clumsiness and aloofness” (321). Similar to Cordelia, following his mother’s death he spends very little time at Brideshead, making it over almost entirely to first Rex and Julia and then Julia and Charles. Unlike Cordelia, however, he does not use his exile from Brideshead profitably; according to the narrator, “he had been completely without action in all his years of adult life” (321), with his most notable accomplishment being a collection of matchboxes. In another twist, it is this very eccentric hobby which leads him to his eventual wife. Beryl is as unfitted to be a marchioness as Bridey is to be a marquis, quickly earning the disdain of the present Lord Marchmain, and reinforcing Bridey’s alienation from the title. In the ultimate divorce from his heritage, upon his death Lord Marchmain bequeaths Brideshead to Julia rather than Bridey and his new wife. Ironically, Bridey, whose actual first name is never given, thus loses all claim to his namesake, even as he finally becomes the new Lord Marchmain. He cannot choose the alternative paths of his siblings, which culminate in opportunities for more selfless relationality, without severe repercussions (his initial interest in the priesthood, for example, generated “a frightful to do,” even meeting with the disapproval of his devoutly Catholic mother) (96). There is no evidence that Bridey ever finds the purpose he seeks, and Waugh suggests this is because his position ties him indelibly to the aristocracy, despite his own dislike for the office, and prevents Bridey from pursuing the more meaningful life he desires. We thus see a rejection by Waugh of the stagnation which characterizes

aristocratic living. *Brideshead* shows that “doing things as they have always been done”-- passing properties from father to son, insulating wealthy families and their homes from the wider populace, etc.--is never a sufficient rationale on its own. In the process, Waugh dismisses a nostalgia which aims to resurrect that which is already gone; perhaps, he suggests, it has passed away for a good reason.

Instead of wishing to resurrect the past, *Brideshead*'s nostalgia is concerned with memorializing it for the individual's betterment. As a result, even as the novel critiques the problematic upper class, it also censures those who are conspicuously unreflective. Just as members of the aristocracy are too preoccupied with themselves and their position, those only interested in the “here-and-now” are criticized for their presentism. Each section of the flashback sequence includes at least one character who fits this description. Rex Mottram is probably the best example. The voice of pragmatic modern man throughout the narrative, he is depicted as containing little substance, with self-interest being his guiding principle. The narrator concludes that “one quickly learned all that he wished to know about him” (125), indicating a lack of internal depth. Rex is the personification of man unmoored, untied to any past as its utility is not immediately evident. We see the negative results of such thinking, according to Waugh, in his inability to be a man of his word, especially in his relationship with Julia. Rex, married once before, never even thinks to mention the divorce; that this past event should be a point of importance, particularly for a Catholic like Julia but indeed for any woman considering marriage, never entered his head, “his sincerity...so plain that they had to sit down and talk about it calmly” (225). We see such behavior repeated when he resumes his affair with Brenda Champion, unable to ““imagine why it hurt [Julia] so much to find...that he

was still keeping up with” (294) her, and in his opportunistic reversal from German ally to Nazi critic. In one of *Brideshead*’s most memorable passages, Julia sums up Rex’s character (and consequently the presentist individual he represents) in the following manner: ““Rex has never been unkind to me intentionally...It’s just that he isn’t a real person at all; he’s just a few faculties of a man highly developed; the rest simply isn’t there”” (294) Waugh shows that Rex is unconcerned with consistency, thus exhibiting his obsession with the current moment rather than a cohesive whole. Rex’s ultimate political success, despite these failings, illustrates Waugh’s concerns about the emerging elite, as the aristocracy’s influence wanes: if the latter are too obsessed with the past, the former have a propensity to erase it.

This propensity, Waugh suggests, is not, however, limited to such stereotypical moderns as Rex Mottram. Mr. Samgrass, a perpetual annoyance to Charles and Sebastian, for instance, is a well-regarded scholar (pointedly described as belonging to All Souls College, Oxford); and, as a scholar, should epitomize reflection and thoughtfulness. In a truly Waughian twist, Samgrass is instead portrayed as lacking any real interest in the past, regarding the “splendid company, living or dead, with whom he associated [as] slightly absurd; it was Mr. Samgrass who was real, the rest were an insubstantial pageant” (124). Charles describes Samgrass as knowing much, but being merely a “Victorian tourist, solid and patronizing” (124) in the past he studies. There is a coldness associated with Samgrass’s depiction that resembles Rex’s, and arises from the same source--an unreflective attitude--but displays different manifestations. Samgrass’s deficiencies remind us of Edward Casaubon from *Middlemarch*, as he uses the past solely to gain knowledge and is forgetful (or even derisive) of the individual human actors

themselves; there is no humanity to his study of what was, and for *Brideshead* that is an essential aspect of nostalgia. Samgrass's subsequent abandonment of Sebastian abroad and attempt to conceal this fact are, for Waugh, thus to be expected, as insensitivity toward others is a logical trait for such a person as him.

Waugh rounds out his critique with a smattering of depictions reminiscent of the "Bright Young Things" he knew so well. These characters are by turns hysterically entertaining (Anthony Blanche), inoffensively ridiculous (Boy Mulcaster), and sweetly menacing (Celia Ryder), but all remain notably stagnant, content to relish that which is and forget what was--behaviors *Brideshead* considers problematic. And what of Charles, the man Berberich pillories particularly for his snobbery and aristocratic aspirations, and who belonged, if only briefly, to just such a sparkling set, and thoroughly enjoyed his leisurely foray into their world? It is my wish to vindicate *Brideshead* as a whole from charges of elitism rather than Charles individually, and don't believe establishing the former requires the latter. Still, in assessing Charles' relationship with the Flytes, we should remember a point made by Ruth Breeze: Charles is a man without either real home or family, and experiences both for the first time at Brideshead. This fact adds complexity to his affections, and suggests that for Waugh (who likewise had a troubled relationship with his father) Charles' attachment is not mere sycophancy.



## CHAPTER IV

### BUILDING THE BEGINNING AND THE END

Any examination of *Brideshead* and nostalgia would be incomplete without considering its narration. This is for many reasons, not the least of which is *Brideshead*'s departure from the more popular model of its time. As other British authors like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf (both 1882-1941) popularized stream-of-consciousness narration, joined by American luminaries such as William Faulkner (1897-1962), Waugh rejected these narratological innovations from only a few decades earlier. Even as his concerns mirrored those of earlier modernists--as discussed by Tammy Clewell, many modernists display anxiety about the changing world--Waugh's chosen form in *Brideshead* is decidedly different from his peers, and furthermore from the ultimate trajectory of literary taste in the twentieth century, which openly embraced the stream-of-consciousness style. While *Brideshead* does not follow a strictly chronological pattern, the narration is generally linear, clear, and, although introspective, remains interested in the world outside Charles' head. Unlike many other works from this period, *Brideshead* features a narrator who is concerned with what has *happened*, rather than what is *happening*, and the result is a structure which assesses events more than it relates them. Throughout *Brideshead*, the narrative structure never lets us forget we are in a memory,

and this reality is fundamental to understanding the novel's overall impact, and especially its ideas about nostalgia.

Indeed, in the first line of the final section, Charles Ryder, as first-person narrator, says as much himself: "My theme is memory, that winged host that soared about me one gray morning of war-time" (259). In spite of this statement, only a few critics have addressed this theme in their scholarship, and only one brief article treats it in the context of *Brideshead's* narration. David Rothstein argues that *Brideshead* is concerned with how "sites of memory"--meaning specific places where formative experiences occurred--allow individuals disconnected by modernity to form a "sense of historical identity" (319). According to Rothstein, characters in *Brideshead*, following the "decline of a family tradition of memory" (319), are profoundly aware of "having been severed from an ancient bond of identity" (319). Laura Coffey builds on Rothstein's argument, applying it to the decline of the country house lifestyle in Britain: "Waugh's interest in the reconstruction of a specifically Catholic aristocracy is motivated by the changing identity and function of the country house in England after the war" (60). Coffey concludes that Waugh "seeks to re-imagine through memory the social history of Brideshead and to reaffirm this tradition against the ruptures of modernity" (60). For both critics, memory in *Brideshead* is about preserving something which has been lost; the focus is always backward, reinforcing the perception of *Brideshead* as having little to do with the future.

While Rothstein and Coffey make interesting points, neither discusses the fact that the narration itself is one long memory--a point of particular importance given that any information we have is received through this extended remembrance. Waugh's choice to make *Brideshead* primarily a flashback, and one with a surprisingly complex

and yet linear narrative structure, has profound implications for how we view any of the novel's themes, but especially its relationship to nostalgia. David G. Brailow, writing almost forty years ago in 1980, is the only critic to follow this line of inquiry. Brailow identifies "Waugh's artistic aim" as "to accept Charles Ryder's story as Ryder's view of his own life, so that we can understand what he has become in the Prologue" (1). Brailow further points out that, within the first person narrative, we have two "and implicitly three consciousnesses at work, all belonging to the same character, but at a different stage of awareness" (1): the Charles from the prologue, the Charles from the flashback, and the Charles who is now choosing to write his story at an unspecified time.<sup>6</sup> Brailow further contends that this multi-awareness structure makes Charles' ultimate conversion to Catholicism believable. Despite multiple critics who argue otherwise, Brailow concludes that "[w]hether the story is consistent or logical is, finally, beside the point: this is how Charles Ryder remembers it in 1944" (4). Brailow, however, does not address the possibility of dynamism within the mode of narration itself. When looked at closely, we discover the epilogue's narration deviates significantly from the pattern set in the earlier sections, and allows for the surprising possibility, given the bleakness of the prologue, that Capt. Ryder has actually arrived at internal healing through his memories. Furthermore, the third Charles (or "the memoirist") that Brailow identifies must have an object, since he is constructing this narrative in a logical pattern which he freely alters as needed. Although we are made to assume that the present is 1944, it must actually be some point further in the future, because, as we see from the prologue, Capt. Ryder

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<sup>6</sup> Rothstein distinguishes these first two consciousnesses by referring to them as "Capt. Ryder" and "Charles" respectively. For the purposes of clarification, I will follow his example, while also referring to the third as "the memoirist," as it is he who writes down his history.

hardly had the time to write such a developed story while currently serving in the Army. We thus realize that the narrator's decisions are extremely deliberate, suggesting that there is a climax toward which he is purposely heading, wherein he will arrive at an inner resolution. The narrator is not interested in who he is, but who he becomes through his memories.

Brailow's article, though rather brief and primarily focused on vindicating *Brideshead* as a proper conversion story, is a useful starting point for my own contention: *Brideshead* depicts nostalgia as a method for both memorializing the past, understanding the present, and preparing for the future. As Brailow avers, any distaste we have for *how* Capt. Ryder recalls these events is immaterial because they are, in fact, his memories--*The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder*. Even this subtitle--the inclusion of which is notable on its own--indicates our focus should always be on memory and Capt. Ryder. We must thus consider what Waugh is suggesting through the narratological presentation of these events rather than simply dismissing them as overly sentimental. When we closely examine the narration of *Brideshead*, we discover that, while profoundly interested in recollection of the past, Waugh also suggests that an ability to reflect *and* move forward is an essential attribute for every person. Despite many contentions to the contrary, Capt. Ryder's memories, worked out in the form of story, move him toward a place of peacefulness and security. His conversion to Catholicism becomes instead the culmination of this process rather than solely a religious experience. The surprising choice of a linear narrative voice is thus also explained, as it allows Waugh to best depict an individual who has profitably used his memories to

understand himself and create a path forward for his future--or, in the simplest of terms, by the end of *Brideshead* Capt. Ryder has learned to hope.

Throughout *Brideshead*, we see innumerable instances where the memoirist comments on events from his past, using these events to construct a narrative for his life. He constantly assesses and evaluates both those he meets and himself without coming to definite conclusions. This tendency occurs in every section except the epilogue, which we shall see is an important distinction. Such a structure is perhaps not surprising for the middle sections; they are, after all, flashbacks told in first person voice, and thus inevitably invite commentary by the memoirist. The prologue, however, which occurs in the present, opens with lengthy reflective passages as well. No dialogue is included until several pages in, with the memoirist's solitary voice setting the morose mood as he muses over his life in the military. We have no other voices challenging or corroborating the memoirist's account, not even Charles himself as a character. The prologue, then, despite being written in the supposed present, bears many narratological similarities to the middle sections. In other words, Capt. Ryder is depicted by Waugh as still mulling over something.

As Brailow notes, Capt. Ryder is despondent. After over three years serving in the military, he has been reduced to an observer, unable to engage (or be engaged) with the world around him, his apathy emphasized repeatedly. His fellow soldiers are disheartened, and he is unable to provide them consolation for "how could I help them, who could so little help myself?" (Waugh 5) Capt. Ryder is "stiff and weary" (5), always tired while perpetually aware, fundamentally unable to care: "I would go on with my job, but I could bring to it nothing more than acquiescence" (7). Waugh portrays Capt. Ryder

as profoundly isolated, living alone in his head instead of with the other soldiers. Waugh hints that Capt. Ryder's retreat into himself, and his current depression, resulted at least partially from a reduction of fellowship, for "there were few left in the mess now of the batch of volunteers who trained together at the outbreak of the war...it was not as it had been" (5). The narration reflects and reinforces this reality, remaining, as mentioned, an internal monologue rather than engaging in any conversation. It is in this state that Capt. Ryder comes upon Brideshead and is swept back into his past, almost as if he has stepped into a time warp. The abrupt transition is jarring for the reader, but also indicates a deeper connection between the two events. The flashback is thus not random; the novel's structure shows there is a causal relationship between Brideshead's sudden appearance and this flood of memories. Waugh suggests that Capt. Ryder can only reorient himself through the act of recollection.

Although uniquely prominent in the prologue, this self-referential narration exists in almost every other chapter. Victoria Stewart, in her fascinating survey of memory narratives from the 1940s, disagrees with this observation, asserting that "only occasionally is the reader reminded that Ryder is relating events with the benefit of hindsight" (116). And yet, despite Stewart's contention, the action is frequently broken up by the memoirist's lengthy monologues, as well as brisk, quick comments connecting past and present. At the end of Charles' first evening staying at Brideshead, for instance, the memoirist says he "felt a sense of liberation and peace such as I was to know years later when, after a night of unrest, the sirens sounded the 'All Clear'" (Waugh 86). Similarly, as Charles becomes better acquainted with the Flytes, he begins "to realize how little I really knew of Sebastian, and to understand why he had always sought to

keep me apart from the rest of his life” (104). Throughout the narration, the memoirist constantly revises his relationship with the past and its memories, reinforcing this process as integral for the novel.

Furthermore, while the narrative style is linear, the structure of the action is not. Although the sections proceed in chronological order, the chapters themselves are not always so neat. The first chapter, for example, begins as Charles and Sebastian are on their way to Brideshead, and then moves backward to explain how they became friends. The story of Julia’s marriage occurs shortly after Lady Marchmain’s death, even though the memoirist states it was ten years before he actually heard it himself. Moreover, the time in which he heard it--on board a ship back to London--features prominently in the final section, but he chooses to relate it out-of-order. The memoirist also admits to editing and compressing certain conversations, indicating that realistic depiction of memory, not rigid chronological accuracy, is his aim. At the same time, he also includes the full text of seemingly superfluous letters, which adds legitimacy to an otherwise rather one-sided account. *Brideshead* is thus not a history of Charles Ryder’s life, but rather the felt experience of one man’s memories. Whenever Charles speaks, it is either as a narrator or as a character, and no one else is able to interpret any of the events. *Brideshead* is therefore an individualized experience of memory, with all of its disjunctures and mysteriously poignant digressions.

As the flashback draws to a close, we have a very obvious mirroring of the prologue’s narration. The opening of the third and final section features another long monologue unbroken by dialogue, and the memoirist describes himself as feeling similarly lost: “For nearly ten dead years...I was borne along a road outwardly full of

change and incident, but never during that time...did I come alive" (259). This opening also covers a long period of time: in a few pages, the narrator details the ten years which have passed since the previous chapter, just as he does earlier for the three-and-a-half years he has spent in the military. Charles is likewise isolated and living a nomadic existence, one characterized by a profound emptiness. The memoirist describes himself as a successful painter with ample interest in his chosen profession: "My work upheld me, for I had chosen to do what I could do well, did better daily, and liked doing" (259). But, in the next breath, he details his aimless wanderings through Mexico and Central America, and the resulting paintings which even Celia realizes are "perfectly brilliant" (263) and yet hardly reflective of Charles' personality. Waugh shows Charles running away from his painful experiences in England. He does not want to face the divorce from Sebastian and the Flytes as a whole; he seeks to suppress the pain of his memories and the nostalgia he feels for Brideshead rather than understand how these experiences formed him. He admits as much when he states that he "was in no great pains to keep in touch with England" (261); these associations are to be left behind, not dealt with or reflected upon. The memoirist (and simultaneously Waugh) thus illustrates how lost Charles is before coming to terms with his own memories, before choosing to accept his past and using it to understand himself. The contrast is quite clear: the memoirist, who has consciously chosen to create this history, is necessarily a man of memory, a man who is engaged with his past; his younger self, on the other hand, has not yet achieved that designation, and therefore he lives, like Rex Mottram, an unmoored, unexamined existence. It is no wonder that the Charles who returns to his wife cannot own his children (he calls them "her son" and "her daughter") for he cannot even own himself.



In contrast to these sections of heavily internalized narration, the epilogue has almost no commentary by the memoirist. The first person narration continues, but the reflective commentary that we have seen throughout the novel is absent. When the memoirist speaks, he does so to merely relay action that is occurring rather than to assess and evaluate himself or his situation. Almost any reflections come from the character rather than the memoirist and are expressed through quoted dialogue. We get the impression that Capt. Ryder's memories have excised his despondency, despite his situation being essentially the same. Instead of burying his fragile emotional state, Capt. Ryder admits to it, showing that he is able to face his present reality more fully. Capt. Ryder frankly acknowledges to Hooper that, "I never built anything, and I forfeited the right to watch my son grow up. I'm homeless, childless, middle-aged, love-less" (401). After walking with Capt. Ryder through his memories, we acknowledge that this bleak description of his life is quite accurate. It is notable, however, that he can now admit that fact (to the much disliked Hooper, no less) and blames no one but himself for that reality. Waugh demonstrates that Capt. Ryder's encounter with the past has allowed him to see the present more clearly, even as many of his memories were saturated with nostalgia. Capt. Ryder's contentment has increased after interacting with the past, a past where he is undeniably happier than at this present moment. If *Brideshead's* nostalgia has no productive element for the present, we should not see this change in Capt. Ryder's mentality.

This change only becomes more evident in the final page of *Brideshead* when Capt. Ryder visits the chapel, albeit only after we conduct some close examination. Generally, criticism of this scene has focused on how it confirms Capt. Ryder is now a

convert to Catholicism. While that reality seems unquestionable, we have neglected some of the scene's unusual features in our eagerness to discuss this development. The most obvious example is, perhaps, its extreme subtlety, especially considering Waugh stated *Brideshead* is about "the operation of divine grace" ("Preface"). If *Brideshead* is primarily a conversion narrative, this scene should serve as the climax; and yet, avidly Catholic readers might find themselves disappointed, as evidence for Capt. Ryder's conversion is limited to a few choice images (a lamp, the tabernacle, and a flame) and one phrase ("I said a prayer, an ancient, newly-learned form of words") (402). The understatement of this portrayal suggests that for Waugh Catholicism provides Capt. Ryder with more than just a path to God, even though Waugh believes that of paramount importance. Rothstein argues that, by converting, Charles unites himself with a lively historical tradition, and thus shows that for Waugh "faith needs to be linked simultaneously to the preservation of a Catholic identity, a sense of historical continuity" (321). When combined with our consideration of narrated memory throughout *Brideshead*, however, we can push this line of argument even further: Capt. Ryder's conversion to Catholicism is, according to Waugh, a foregone conclusion for the man of memory because it assists him in communing with time itself.

We see this theory confirmed in Charles' final monologue, where Waugh hints that Charles, having finally understood his past through the act of memory, has made peace with the present and has hope for the future. Charles' characterization of Brideshead as "a new house [built] with the stones of the old castle" and added to "year by year, generation after generation" (Waugh 402) sounds suspiciously similar to the process he has just completed: it was brought into being by a continuous process of

death and regeneration, just as Charles' recent sojourn to the past has enabled him to achieve his current inner understanding. While he, like Brideshead, may be "in the age of Hooper" (402)--or the age of disconnected modernism--his fond remembrances of past years at Brideshead have blown away the winds of depression. He closes with oblique references to "a small red flame" (402), referring to the sanctuary lamp which hangs in any Catholic chapel, which unites him through time to other suffering soldiers and further emphasizes the interconnected nature of past, present, and future. Waugh thus suggests that Catholicism, something focused on frequently within the flashback frame, is also a means by which to interpret the past. Waugh's decision to make this final monologue dialogical rather than narratological is also significant. It signals that Charles has finished, not only this story, but his lengthy self-assessment. These words are a creed rather than a meditation, and constitute a willingness to boldly face the future. The war may continue, but Charles is at peace.

Charles' newfound tranquility results from more than just a religious encounter; it is wrought by a reconciliation with his past. Indeed, the depiction of Catholicism throughout *Brideshead* does not lead us to believe the faithful will be rewarded with peace. Catholicism in *Brideshead* is generally a *discomforting* experience, one which multiple characters reject (at least temporarily) because of its demands. For Waugh, Catholicism is most definitely not therapeutic. Therefore, Charles' peace, one so potent that the generally glum Hooper says "You're looking unusually cheerful today" (402), must result from more than this single moment in the Brideshead chapel. Indeed it is remembering, *Brideshead's* structure suggests, that has instead prompted his renewal.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION: TIME PRESENT AND TIME PAST

As is often true for mistaken impressions, the inaccurate interpretations of *Brideshead's* nostalgia arise from simple misunderstanding. Our vantage point as twenty-first century readers is an inevitable liability, as we try to judge a book which, even at its time of publication, affectionately describes a way of life that is trite and out-of-touch with the modern world. What is there to regret, we ask, about the loss of aristocratic living and tightly defined social structures, which, by their mere existence (not to mention excesses), promote exclusivity and discourage social mobility? Perhaps there is nothing. Yet, while this perspective may make us more democratic, it does not illuminate the nostalgia of *Brideshead*, and, as seen by the cracks in the critical conversation, has inhibited us from fully comprehending it.

Even so, our skepticism has not been totally unmerited--and, indeed, as the years passed, Waugh himself came to share in it. For the second edition in 1959, he wrote a new preface wherein he addresses these supposed faults of *Brideshead*. Many of his expressions are surprisingly negative for an author discussing his own book, particularly one which had brought him fame and fortune. Waugh describes the writing of *Brideshead* as "a bleak period of present privation and threatening disaster," and regretfully admits

that the novel is “infused with a kind of gluttony, for food and wine, for the splendors of the recent past...which now with a full stomach I find distasteful” (“Preface”). He acknowledges what he calls “glaring defects” in *Brideshead*’s composition, and attributes them to the “circumstances in which it was written.” This preface reads almost like an excuse, even an apology, and reminds us of a mature author looking back with amusement on his first efforts. With the lapse of just fourteen years, Waugh finds *Brideshead* dated.

Still, rather than being evidence of snobbery, it should surprise no one that Waugh turns to the English country house as a method for grounding post-war England. Such an action follows a pattern that predates *Brideshead* by centuries. These old, storied estates have a unique grip on the British imagination, and authors have long used them to define and illustrate the concerns of their age. Indeed, this practice continues into the present day, and the books included within this genre, unlike the Oxford novel, are extremely varied. For instance, Jane Austen uses the country house to study and ultimately endorse the gentry’s existence; E.M. Forster examines inheritance concerns and codes of conduct in *Howard’s End*; Ian McEwan surveys class divide and the biased nature of our own impressions in *Atonement*; and the list continues on. There is just an irresistible fascination with these grand houses, relicts of a time few would wish to return to and yet absolutely refuse to forget.

Indeed, if Matthew Kelsall is to be believed, democratization has only made the country house more beloved, however contradictory that notion may seem. In *The Great Good Place*, the most extensive history to date of country house literature, Kelsall declares that, “country house visiting is a national pastime” (4). He acknowledges how

odd this display must appear, this filing of visitors “in a ritual line through state rooms” (4), but argues that it arises from more than just idle amusement. The estates feed some need to inform the national consciousness, especially after England herself became a much less potent force on the world’s stage. The popularity of the 1981 *Brideshead* miniseries, filmed on location at Castle Howard upon which Waugh based the Flytes’ estate, speaks to this same phenomenon. When our future prospects become obsolete, the past suddenly has exceptional value.

In his preface to *Brideshead* Waugh confirms something like what Kelsall describes was already occurring in 1959. He calls the English country house Britain’s “chief national artistic achievement,” and attributes *Brideshead*’s excesses to fears that these estates “were doomed to decay and spoliation like the monasteries in the sixteenth century.” This alteration in national sentiment, unforeseen by Waugh, made *Brideshead* a “panegyric preached over an empty coffin.” By this we infer that it is the preservation of the country house that Waugh believes imperative (not the reinstatement of the aristocratic lifestyle) and which he incorrectly predicted would pass away, and thus “piled it on rather, with passionate sincerity.” Indeed, Waugh hints that these grand artistic achievements which have largely passed out of their original owners’ possession are probably better off for it: “Brideshead today would be open to trippers [tourists], its treasures rearranged by expert hands and the fabric better maintained than it was by Lord Marchmain.” These are astounding statements for a committed elitist. They indicate Waugh was certainly aware that, to whom much is given, much is not always well preserved.

Waugh's changed sentiments about *Brideshead* show the necessity of understanding the whole before judging a part. His opinion arises from reflection and distance, and constitutes an admirably honest reassessment of his inaccurate predictions. Nevertheless, the Waugh of 1959 has the luxury of time and security, neither of which can be said for his younger self in 1945 nor England herself, as the entire nation, bloody and bruised from six years of conflict, anticipated the future with a brooding pessimism. Waugh himself, despite his self-deprecating remarks, seems to realize this fact, inviting "a younger generation of readers" to regard *Brideshead* "as a souvenir of the Second War rather than of the twenties and thirties, with which it ostensibly deals." It is from this position that we should always approach *Brideshead*--that is, as a novel born of war, anxiety, and confusion, and one which seeks to interpret these difficult emotions and the impact they will have on the future. In response to this internal disquietude, *Brideshead* urges its readers to remember the past, but not bemoan its passing. According to Waugh, nostalgia, as an emotional experience through memory, can ground us, but sentimentalized reminiscences have few useful attributes. As the English face, in the post-Brexit world, another moment of self-reflection, they would do well to remember his suggestions.

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