

## EVELYN WAUGH'S *BRIDESHEAD REVISITED*: SITES OF MEMORY AND TRADITION

### *BRIDESHEAD REVISITED*, DE EVELYN WAUGH: LUGARES DE MEMORIA Y TRADICIÓN

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#### **Abstract**

In this article, it is my intention to analyse two theoretical notions related to space, namely Pierre Nora's idea of the site of memory and Gaston Bachelard's thoughts on space and the house, as applied to Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). I base my analysis on the symbolic value of the English country house with regard to the interwar English aristocracy and upper classes as depicted in this novel; that is, as a site of memory. I consider the point of view of three characters: Charles Ryder, the novel's first-person narrator, Lord Sebastian Flyte, Ryder's intimate friend, and Lord Marchmain, Sebastian's father, who triggers the novel's sudden and unexpected ending through his deathbed conversion to Roman Catholicism, his family's creed. My conclusion links the decline of aristocratic and Christian ideals with the disappearance of communities of memory and their traditions after the Second World War.

**Keywords:** *Brideshead Revisited*, sites of memory, communities of memory, tradition, English Catholicism.

#### **Resumen**

En el presente artículo, analizaré dos nociones teóricas relacionadas con el espacio, a saber, la idea de *lugar de memoria* de Pierre Nora y el pensamiento de Gaston

Bachelard sobre el espacio y la *casa*, en su aplicación a *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), de Evelyn Waugh. Basaré mi análisis en el valor simbólico de la gran mansión de campo inglesa en relación con la aristocracia y las clases altas de la Inglaterra de entreguerras según es descrita en esta novela: esto es, como un lugar de memoria. Haré esto desde la perspectiva de tres personajes: Charles Ryder, el narrador en primera persona, Lord Sebastian Flyte, amigo íntimo de Ryder, y Lord Marchmain, padre de Sebastian y causante del rápido e inesperado final de la novela mediante su conversión, en su lecho de muerte, al credo de su familia: el catolicismo. Llegaré a una conclusión que vincula el declive de los ideales aristocráticos y cristianos con la desaparición de comunidades y tradiciones de memoria tras de la Segunda Guerra Mundial.

**Palabras clave:** *Brideshead Revisited*, lugares de memoria, comunidades de memoria, tradición, catolicismo inglés.

## 1. A Brief Synopsis

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In spite of the popularity of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* since it first came out (1945), a popularity that was undoubtedly enhanced by its adaptations for both television (1981) and the cinema (2007), it may be convenient to offer a brief synopsis of the plot. Charles Ryder, a painter serving as an army captain during the Second World War, fashions a frame story about his military experiences in the Phoney War as a way into the main narrative, that of his life from his first days as an Oxford undergraduate in the early 1920s until his separation, on the brink of war, from the woman he loves, Julia Flyte. The prologue triggers the main story through Ryder's nocturnal, inadvertent arrival at Brideshead House, the ancestral home of the Flytes, in the wake of military exercises and rumours of the mobilisation of his company. After an initial flashback, taking us back twenty years to a perfect moment of youthful summer bliss in an English meadow beside his beloved friend, Lord Sebastian Flyte, Ryder's memories are presented mostly in a linear sequence, with a few instances of analepsis. The epilogue takes us back to 1943 when, after a visit to Brideshead chapel, Charles hints at his recent conversion to Roman Catholicism: after all, as the novel's subtitle indicates, these are Ryder's not merely *profane* but also *sacred* memories.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Charles Ryder: The Stately Home, Englishness, Civilisation

Ryder's conversion to Catholicism is preceded by his conversion to an aristocratic ethos which he contrasts with his bleak, middle-class, motherless childhood and

adolescence, his estrangement from his father, and the rigours of public school education. His attitude with regard to the Flytes and their ways coincides with Waugh's "romantic veneration of the aristocracy" (Hastings 1994: 482). Charles's conversion can be related to several aristocratic places of beauty: Brideshead Castle, Marchmain House —the Flytes' London home and their base during the London season— and decadent Venice, where Sebastian's father lives in exile as a social leper. Ryder experiences Brideshead as a revelation, an epiphany. Instantly, he becomes a convert to the Baroque, which substitutes for his avowed teenage "insular and mediaeval" sentiments (Waugh 1945: 82). This conveys a subtext we should not miss: beyond Brideshead being "an aesthetic education in itself" (80), an essential element in the novel's discourse, intimately related to Brideshead, is a certain social and religious ideology, a major component thereof being tradition.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Waugh's novel can be construed as an attempt to preserve and fictionally reconstitute "an aristocratic Catholic heritage in England" (Rothstein 1993: 318).<sup>3</sup> Brideshead House is a privileged embodiment of tradition in that it has been built with the stones of a castle previously existing in the valley it now commands. Ryder associates the house with "the august, masculine atmosphere of a better age" (Waugh 1945: 138).<sup>4</sup> This has an effect on Charles's moral education: Brideshead brings together the ideals of community, Englishness and civilisation, along with the values they are invested with (Coffey 2006: 60). The old, venerable place is what Pierre Nora calls a *site of memory*: the treasure house of a collective identity based on an old tradition of memory, part of the remains of an outdated civilisation. Its dwellers are "witnesses of another age" (2008: 24, my translation),<sup>5</sup> an age defined by its "illusions of eternity" (24-25, my translation).<sup>6</sup> Memory, moreover, instils "remembrance within the sacred" for the members of an ideologically cohesive community or group (21, my translation).<sup>7</sup> Thus, Charles has embarked on a pathway leading him from love of form and tradition to awareness of and convinced support for the social role of the aristocracy, and eventually to love of God as a Catholic.<sup>8</sup> This is a *Bildungsroman* with a double focus: the aesthetic and moral education of an artist, but also the spiritual pilgrimage of a human being in search for love —first human and eventually divine.

There are important hints at Charles's future development in his first visit to Brideshead, where he is shown the chapel, Lord Marchmain's art-nouveau wedding gift to his bride for bringing him back to the faith of his ancestors. Not much later, as he spends his first summer vacation alone with Sebastian at Brideshead, Ryder describes his experience as a time of "peace and *liberation*" (Waugh 1945: 78, emphasis added), where he felt himself "very near *heaven*" (79, emphasis added), both expressions being close to the language of religious experience. As the plot unravels, we witness a progressive shedding of aesthetic

concerns in favour of the moral and spiritual in both Charles and Sebastian. Brideshead is an emblem of the city, being depicted as hallowed ground at the end of the novel, when its requisition by the army is felt as the defilement of a sacred site (Berberich 2007: 108).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, for the many centuries elapsed since the building of Brideshead as a castle proper and until the disruption and destruction brought about by the army setting up camp in the palace grounds in 1943, every instance of social ritual taking place there has been “a religious repetition of that which has *always* been done” (Nora 2008: 20, my translation, emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> This idea of the stately home as the “*templum*” (39, emphasis in original) of a Catholic recusant minority shows in ritualised, pious family practices such as praying the Rosary or worshipping the Eucharist in the chapel. It was no accident that Waugh played with the idea of “Household of the Faith” as a working title before deciding on *Brideshead Revisited* (Wykes 1999: 141).

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Within Brideshead’s magical circle, “everything matters, everything symbolises, everything means” (Nora 2008: 39, my translation).<sup>11</sup> This “everything” takes place outside history because of its appertaining to “the undifferentiated time of heroes, of origins and myth” (20, my translation).<sup>12</sup> It is to that time that belong the ghosts of such atavistic leaders of men as Lady Marchmain’s brothers, fallen in the Great War and disregarded by history. In Ryder’s narration, they are described as the truly English “aborigines” (Waugh 1945: 138), “the Catholic squires of England”, men “of the woods and caves”, hunters, judges “of the tribal council, the repository of the harsh traditions of a people at war” (139). The life and work of these forgotten heroes set the boundary between the memory corresponding to a veritably primitive, archaic, agrarian society on the one hand, and history on the other. While the former is totalising and unconscious of itself, the latter is discriminating, selective and closely linked to modernity, democracy, massification and the media. If memory posits an eternal present founded on unchanging values, history’s overall design, grounded on continuous change, is one of oblivion (Nora 2008: 19-21). Indeed, “a site of memory’s fundamental reason to be is to stop time, to block the work of oblivion” (34, my translation).<sup>13</sup> Hence, in the village church, along with the bodies of Sebastian’s elders, lie nine centuries of English Catholic civilisation, a time when England was, in Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion’s words, “the island of saints, and the most devoted child of the See of Peter” (in Williams 1996: 294, n. 40). Asleep in their graves, they await resurrection and eternity, once time and change are no more.

Brideshead is also a symbol of *essential* Englishness in that the house is part and parcel of a class system Charles Ryder will eventually identify with national character, in the same way as Waugh himself saw the country seats of England as its “chief national artistic achievement” (Waugh 1962: x). Certainly, Brideshead

can be understood as a symbol of the civilising function of the class system, a fortress against social chaos and the barbarism of contemporary life, as embodied by Ryder's middle-class nemesis, Lieutenant Hooper (Coffey 2006: 63, 67).<sup>14</sup> Hooper is a young businessman under Ryder's command who speaks with "a flat, Midland accent" (Waugh 1945: 7), delights in expressions such as "rightyoh" (10) or "okeydoke" (14), advocates the gassing of psychiatric patients, and finally describes Brideshead as a "great barrack of a place" (16). According to the aristocratic discourse Brideshead House symbolises, civilisation would be "the work of aristocracies" (Cannadine 1999: 50). Brideshead represents "the authentic traditions and values upon which society should be based" (Coffey 2006: 63), which are in turn "ingrained in the specific mores and conventions of the upper classes" (63). For Waugh, civilisation can only be Christian (that is to say, Catholic), neo-feudal and aristocratic, the country house functioning as "a perfect locus 'for a mythology of the social order'" (Terentowicz-Fotyga 2015: 27) and "the site of meaningful narratives of the past" (30).<sup>15</sup>

The foundation of these narratives would be the eternal order established by God, as well as His rule through that of His temporal magistrate (Nolte 1969: 57). Any trespassing on this eternal dispensation, either by the market or the (welfare) state, would ultimately be one against *nature*, beyond the merely circumstantial and contingent.<sup>16</sup> This is why Ryder, even while still an agnostic, specialises as an architectural painter: *to eternalise* an endangered *essence*, a trace of God's work among men and nations, mourning for a world that probably never was, where "rank was not negotiable and duties were not a matter of opinion" (Berberich 2007: 96).

Nevertheless, the sites of memory that make up the world painted by Ryder exist as such only because of the disappearance of genuine "*milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory" after the end of the Second World War (Rothstein 1993: 319). Hence the openly elegiac tone of Ryder's narration, as it not only laments the lost innocent days of his idyll with Sebastian, but also reflects "his belief in a vanished way of life which had been at once grandiose and, in his wishful eyes, responsible" (Berberich 2007: 96).<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Lord Sebastian Flyte: Domains of Intimacy, Catholic Tradition

What Charles discovers at Brideshead and at Sebastian's flamboyant lodgings at exclusive Christ Church College, Oxford, is yet again not only an aesthetic paradise: he also falls madly in love with the aristocratic way of life and values. In this way, he becomes a novice in a new world where his intuition finds a promise of happiness

and wholeness. As he is becoming a man, Charles feels there may be something at Brideshead that could help him overcome his bleak boyhood, as well as the rational, restricting approach to the world he has been supplied with since his nursery days. Thus, for instance, when Sebastian takes Ryder, barely acquainted with him, to Oxford's botanical gardens, the only reason he gives to his friend's questioning is, in a nonchalant way that dismisses any rational grounding, "to see the ivy" (Waugh 1945: 34). In other words: just because, or because he says so. In 1923 and for a young aristocrat, Oxford was just what he would make of it. Sebastian chooses to see his first Oxford term with Charles as a time of Dionysian ecstasy, the ivy being a classical symbol of Dionysus, the god of green vegetation and wine. This links up with sober, bourgeois Charles's introduction to wine while at Brideshead during an Arcadian summer of splendid isolation from the rest of the world.<sup>18</sup> Brideshead is a place of initiation for Charles, and Sebastian is his personal hierophant.

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Yet, in the end things become very different for Sebastian in the seeming paradise Charles has just discovered. Overwhelmed by the expectations and demands that his mother, Lady Marchmain, puts on him, he does not feel up to the task of emulating his dead uncles or even his ineffectual elder brother, the Earl of Brideshead, all of them Oxford men. Sebastian longs for the timeless place where things are not questioned and pressures do not exist: the nursery, his one *domain of intimacy* (Bachelard 1994: 12). That is his cosmos, his first university, his own "corner of the world" (4), his "land of Motionless Childhood" (5). As Bachelard remarks, "memories are motionless, and the more securely fixed they are in space, the sounder they are" (9). For Sebastian, "a truly Peter Pan-like figure" (Słyszewska 2017: 214), "childhood is certainly greater than reality" (Bachelard 1994: 16). Reality, among other things, means those dreadful family occasions in the sitting room, when his mother very edifyingly reads Chesterton aloud to her children, or the ghastly, formal dinners when he only dreams of "refuges" such as a hut or a nest, or "nooks and corners in which he would like to hide away, like an animal in its hole" (30).

In this realm of childish indifferenciation between the self and the world, Sebastian eschews the values whose conservation and transmission are the task of a society, or community of memory. This is so because he grows more and more estranged from his family and their faith —the family being, along with the church, among the most significant agents of such a task (Nora 2008: 20). He has neither been made to follow in his uncles' footsteps as warriors, judges and leaders, nor to pray the Rosary with his mother. To him, Brideshead is neither the repository of such values nor his home, but rather "where my family live" (Waugh 1945: 35). Also, he could not care less for the art that entrances his only true friend in Oxford, Charles Ryder, or for what it may mean in axiological or religious terms. Expected to cut a gentlemanly and scholarly figure at the ancient university's most exclusive

college, to become a “bulwark of the nation” through “abnegation of the self” (Deslandes 2005: 2), and, despite his unwittingly quoting St. Augustine (“Oh God, make me good, but not yet”, Waugh 1945: 86), the only book we see this Oxford fresher glance at throughout the novel is one he picks up at random in Charles's rooms while waiting for him.<sup>19</sup>

Hence, early in the novel and of all places, Charles and Sebastian set out on a motorcar trip to see Nanny Hawkins, who dominates “the corner of [... Sebastian's] most cherished memories” (Bachelard 1994: 14). All Sebastian wants is to run away “as far and as fast” as he possibly can (Waugh 1945: 135). Described as “harmless as a Polynesian” (Waugh 1945: 127), and being a complete stranger to “that barbaric vitality which animates the upper classes even in decadence” (Kermode 1960: 283), the only memories he wants to keep are those related not to values, duties or any community, but to those rare instances of that very elusive thing, happiness, that he has felt in his life. His are “memories of protection”, “fixations of happiness” (Bachelard 1994: 6). As for his family's Catholic tradition of memory, he resists it by drinking himself to death.

And yet, at the end of his self-destructive race towards nothing and nowhere, he ends up, in the words of his sister Cordelia, a holy man, a saint. An incurable alcoholic at this point, he is accepted as “a sort of under-porter” by a monastic community in Carthage (Waugh 1945: 307). “Lost in the darkness”, he sees “a distant glimmer of light” in the faith of his elders (Bachelard 1994: 31), embodied by this “ancient community of memory” (Rothstein 1993: 323). Following the example of Augustine of Hippo, he finally drops the “not yet” from his supplication to God and accepts divine grace and its consolations, not afraid of holiness any longer. At last, if not a regular member of the order that receives him, he finds an “absolute refuge” in this “universe of meditation and prayer”, which, like the nursery at Brideshead, becomes a “universe outside the universe” (Bachelard 1994: 32).<sup>20</sup> Thus, if destitute and innerly maimed, with neither dignity nor any power of will, and awaiting an early death, he ultimately links up with the very same tradition that his mother, his younger sister Cordelia and his Jesuitical elder brother Bridey have all given their lives to: Roman Catholicism. He has transcended time and history into an “eternal present” of faith and eschatological expectation (Nora 2008: 21, my translation).<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. Lord Marchmain: Nobility and Essential Englishness

It is my contention that it is Sebastian's father, Lord Marchmain, who articulates the most poignant discourse in the novel involving Englishness, the English Catholic tradition, and the stately home with all its historical, cultural and

existential implications. Ryder meets Sebastian's father twice. The first occasion is in the summer of 1923, when Sebastian invites him to visit his father's Venetian "palace of sin" (Waugh 1945: 72). This is an ironic description prompted by the nobleman's notorious living in blatant adultery with an Italian demi-mondaine and for having abandoned Catholicism or any other form of Christianity. Charles finds him a studiously detached, Byronic character. Lord Marchmain himself speaks in no ambiguous terms about his utter indifference to his position, party (the Conservative Party) and duties. In this sense, he might be only one among many of the members of a beleaguered aristocracy who "simply lost interest" in politics in the interwar era (McKibbin 1998: 21).

Lord Marchmain has not left any personal imprint on the place he inhabits, a palazzo looking out over the Grand Canal, which is as decadent as Venice itself. This seems to be a merely temporary residence for the nobleman, despite the fact of his having lived there in exile since surviving the slaughter of the Great War. In his sloth and degeneracy, his palazzo appears to be the exact opposite of an English aristocrat's home: an utterly foreign site. Everything seems to indicate that Lord Marchmain will not go back to England before his wife dies, and even so he detests the prospect of having to face the English landscape once more. As Cara, his mistress, explains to Ryder, he is full of hatred, and has been so since the war ended. Ultimately, he is an aristocratic, profligate good-for-nothing who, if not in theory at least in practice, might even have renounced his Englishness.

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It is, however, nearly two decades later that Ryder meets Lord Marchmain again on the occasion of the latter's return to England after his wife's passing. That the latter's relationship with his abode is now completely different shows in his reception. It solemnly takes place at the palace's main entrance, presided over by his daughter Julia and her lover, Charles Ryder, along with the upper servants: the rightful lord of the manor is back. If this ritualism were not enough, the nobleman's flag waves above them all. Having been won at no less than the battle of Agincourt, where the courage of his ancestors was rewarded with a barony, the Flytes had been knights before then. Compared with this flag, an emblem of the old landed oligarchy of England, the Union Jack itself could be looked down on as a recent, plebeian symbol. The old soldier has returned to die and to lie in state in the big house as a nobleman must, when not fallen on the battlefield. Thus, he who for many years was a man without qualities, apart from his condition of social pariah, amateur sportsman, adulterous lover and heavy drinker, shows that he is the one and only sovereign ruler of the house from the very moment he steps over its threshold. This is to be seen, for example, in his eccentric, whimsical choice of the room where he is to lie till death comes (the Chinese drawing room), as well as of the almost theatrical Queen's bed that he



orders to be placed in it. Such choices also make clear that until he dies his intention is to live a nobleman's life, with gold plate, champagne and all, notwithstanding the debts incurred under Lady Marchmain's long and inept administration of his estate.

Furthermore, while Lord Marchmain discusses his inheritance with his daughter Julia, he exercises an almost feudal power as he bestows Brideshead Castle on her. What this means, going against the common practice of Europe's smallest, most exclusive and powerful aristocracy, is no less than disinheriting his eldest son, the Earl of Brideshead. It is only after performing this deed of indisputable authority that the old soldier dies. Expected to be a man of action, an aristocrat must act, and act in a decisive way which is different from the herd's, transcending it. This is another aspect of Lord Marchmain's redemption: he leaves behind him decades of anomie, alienation and purposelessness by taking measures for his bloodline to survive. He faces up to his own death in a manly way, consciously waiting for it, thus giving his life, even in retrospect, a meaning: he has been loyal to his lineage and its continuation.

This continuation has a connection with a discourse Lord Marchmain articulates throughout his stay at the stately home, one which underlines his role as a builder after the example of his ancestors: his lineage is not one of blood alone, but also of stone and memory. As we already saw early in the novel, Sebastian tells Charles how his father had Brideshead chapel built for his mother, and how he had converted to her religion, too. Thus, by adhering publicly to the faith of his ancestors (that is to say, those living before the Reformation) in his first conversion, Lord Marchmain willingly reaches for a tradition of memory such as that of England's tiny yet staunchly Catholic aristocratic minority. This he does in his deathbed soliloquy.

In fact, during his dying days, not only is Lord Marchmain associated with the traditions of memory of his lineage, but also with those of his subordinates, "unlettered men" who "had long memories" (Rothstein 1993: 327), memories he tries to orally pass on to his offspring before dying. Those were the men who, as Lord Marchmain's brothers-in-law did during the First World War, silently, almost anonymously fought the battles of medieval England by the side of their betters, the warriors lying in the church of the small village in the valley. Like these men, Lord Marchmain will die and be laid to rest, though not before playing the principal role in the novel's most symbolically important yet also most critically questioned moment, namely his second, last-minute acceptance of the Catholic faith. This is implicit in his making the sign of the cross after receiving the sacrament of the anointing of the sick.<sup>22</sup>

These are the early stages of Ryder's own conversion to Catholicism, after his breakup with Julia Flyte resulting from the rekindled religious prejudices and fears

she experiences after her father's death. She feels she was made for some greater purpose than merely human love, setting Charles up "a rival good to God's" (Waugh 1945: 340). Just as Charles had been expelled from Brideshead many years before by a disappointed and angry Lady Marchmain, who was aware that Ryder was paying for her son's drinking bouts, his dreams of possessing a place of "peace and love and beauty" such as Brideshead (31), the world that had once been Sebastian's, come to nothing in the end.

Some twenty years after being delivered this rebuke by Lady Marchmain, during his military stay at Brideshead, the novel's final scene takes place with Captain Charles Ryder kneeling in Brideshead chapel, himself having become a warrior waiting to lead his men into battle, possibly in the Middle East. Here, an explicit mention is made of his recent conversion to Catholicism —"I said a prayer, an ancient, *newly learned* form of words" (Waugh 1945: 350, emphasis added)— as he thinks of other soldiers, "far from home, farther, in heart, than Acre or Jerusalem" (351). Lord Brideshead, Julia and Cordelia Flyte could be among them, as Nanny Hawkins tells Ryder. He also thinks of those knights in the village church who saw from their tombs the same little red light which Ryder sees now, "burning anew among the old stones" (351), as a sign not only of his faith, but also of his commitment to a certain English, Catholic and aristocratic tradition and community of memory. In spite of the Flytes being scattered to the four winds, and notwithstanding the historical whirlwind of the Second World War, that community survives in spirit. That is what the red flame signifies: the spiritual presence of those who died in the faith, those who wield the arms of England now, and those who remain to worship: Ryder, Nanny Hawkins and the few more or less invisible servants who persevere in the faith. They all remain loyal to the faith that makes them a cohesive group with a common collective identity at a time when society tends to conceive of people only as "equal and identical" (Nora 2008: 25, my translation).<sup>23</sup> This all takes place in a house now desacralised by the offspring of modernity as an agent of deracination, "heirs-at-law of a century of progress" (Waugh 1945: 4), instructed in "recent industrial change" (9), the sons of equality: Hooper and his likes, who inhabit and destroy the hallowed place as they wait to be transferred to a theatre of war.<sup>24</sup>

Now, Ryder's faith is that of a man who admits to being "homeless, childless, middle-aged, loveless" (Waugh 1945: 350). Nevertheless, on finishing this confession to the infamous Lieutenant Hooper, he looks, as his second-in-command tells him, "unusually cheerful" (351). No wonder: finally, he knows that he was brought amidst the Flytes with "a unique purpose in God's design" (Heath 1982: 161), which he accepts. At last, there is meaning and sense in his life: he has been able to reconnect with "an ancient bond of identity", "enclosed and enshrined

in memory” (Rothstein 1993: 319), which he had been severed from. Up to this point, this *Bildungsroman* has had an unreliable narrator and hero who is “profoundly unaware of his own role in a drama beyond his belief or comprehension” (Slater 2016: 126). He understands now, his early life having been “annihilated by an avalanche of grace” (Heath 1982: 8). Eventually, the tiny parts of a person he was made of (artist, lover, soldier) have come together as a whole (Davis 1992: 33). Thus, he becomes the true spiritual heir of the Brideshead estate (Raven 2015: 127). Doubtless, faith works miracles, but only, Waugh seems to think, in a “context of tradition, legend, and memory” whereby it becomes “linked simultaneously to the preservation of a Catholic identity” and “a sense of historical continuity, threatened with extinction” (Rothstein 1993: 320-321).

## 5. History and the Disruption of Memory

Coming back to Lord Marchmain's second conversion, he thereby returns to the heritage of the faith he once adhered to before the Great War. After his death, Brideshead Castle will still be a major emblem of such a heritage. It is only through the Second World War, an occurrence of history rather than of memory, that the stately home's role in preserving this tradition, which is intimately connected with eternity, will be disrupted.<sup>25</sup> This disruption is inherent in the very nature of modernity as the force of history “invading a tradition of memory protected within the Catholic enclave at Brideshead” (Rothstein 1993: 320).

Like any metaphysical essence, especially if related to memory, the neo-rural and neo-feudal English ethos defended by both Ryder and Waugh is fraught with danger. To begin with, as a charismatic notion, its apprehension, its very knowledge requires a special ‘expertise’. This expertise belongs to those worthy of trust: the happy few, the elect, the insiders; that is to say, the members of a charismatic aristocracy and those co-opted by them within the upper classes, such as Charles Ryder. This is why he is the author of several series of paintings where he laments and denounces, with prophetic tones, the disappearance of both country and London houses. In so doing, he makes an inventory of the material signs of a fading aristocratic tradition representing the downfall of England itself.

Other voices in the novel, for example Rex Mottram's, Julia Flyte's husband, an MP and a man of the world of troubled origins and barbarian ways, are only allowed to provide a contrast to the legitimate, aristocratic ones. Rex is depicted precisely as someone who is totally in the dark about the sacred minutiae of the Catholic faith and the haughty conundrums and demanding ethos of essential Englishness (presumably, he is a half-breed and certainly plebeian Canadian). A fortiori, he is utterly ignorant of the reality and ultimate predicament of the English

aristocracy (which to him is only represented by details such as the 100,000 sterling debt that obliges Lord Marchmain to sell Marchmain House in London), with the result that his opinions and his entire worldview can be cavalierly ignored or waved aside. This sort of financial problem is related to the inner contradictions of a retreating and bankrupt caste living within a decadent and declining culture doomed to disappear after the Second World War. At this time, their mansions will be reduced to the category of heritage monuments open to the public under the management of the National Trust.<sup>26</sup> This is how Waugh's efforts in favour of the neo-feudal rule of a Christian and paternalistic aristocracy would ultimately and disastrously come to nought, unrealised and unrealisable.<sup>27</sup>

## 6. Epilogue: Vanity of Vanities

98 The Flytes' lifestyle should be thought of as alternative, not oppositional to the dominant social dispensation existing after the Second World War. If at that moment Brideshead House had eventually come under the authority of the National Trust (which the novel, of course, does not specify), the estate would have undergone a semiological reinterpretation, in an ideologically *diluted* way, as part of the "significant past" or the "selective tradition" of the nation (Williams 1973: 7). Thus, Lord Marchmain's flag would have ceased to be a meaningful sign, only to become yet another duly labelled exhibit shown to visitors behind a pane of glass. The Flytes' world can only inspire nostalgia, not rebellion. In letting himself be co-opted by them, Charles joins a tribe of "misfits", living "on the fringes" (Rothstein 1993: 321). They may be the last to commune with a dying tradition of memory, lost in a mass society where their values ultimately amount to nothing and where stately and country houses are no longer "formidable statement[s] [...] about wealth, authority and status" (Terentowicz-Fotyga 2015: 9).

Against such a background, what Brideshead Castle supports is a mythical image of England as a Garden of Eden that "occludes questions of class, race, and the Protestant tradition" (Su 2005: 129). It also distorts, among other instances of social unrest, the 1926 General Strike. Although this historical event is depicted in *Brideshead Revisited*, it is done so in comical and satirical terms, with Ryder being unable to refrain from acknowledging the elation he found in attacking strikers: "We charged in cheerfully" (Waugh 1945: 206).<sup>28</sup> In the end, Waugh's idealised, mythical world of chivalric martyrs of the faith seems to be a mere delusion. At a hard time for traditions of memory, that of English, aristocratic Roman Catholicism may have breathed its last after 1945. As Ryder himself, the latter-day Jeremiah of the English aristocracy, laments: "Quomodo sedet sola civitas" (220), how doth the city (that is, Jerusalem, Brideshead being a symbol thereof) sit solitary. Sites of

Catholic memory are no more in England. During the war, despite his recent conversion and considering Brideshead Castle and “the age of Hooper” (351), Captain Ryder concludes: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (351). For him, that is what England’s new, agnostic, materialistic, acquisitive, ruthlessly capitalistic ethos stands for.

## Notes

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1. As critic V.C. Clinton-Baddeley puts it, “while the story is told through the consciousness of an intelligent agnostic, this view of the world is effectively an historical re-creation by a hero who has transcended it” (1984: 238, n.1).

2. Charles’s conversion to the Baroque, the Catholic art style par excellence since the Counter-Reformation, could be interpreted as a first unwitting step on his long path towards conversion to Catholicism. In the same paragraph, Ryder compares Brideshead’s baroque fountain to “a life-giving spring” (Waugh 1945: 82). On the Baroque and Tridentine Catholicism, see Kermode (1960: 281).

3. That this is so is shown in Waugh’s preface to the 1960 edition of the novel, where, in the face of impending doom and the “decay and spoliation” at work since the Second World War or even before, he acknowledges that he has “piled it on” in defence of the grand country place in the original 1945 edition. The measures adopted by the National Trust after the war, however, made of Waugh’s novel a self-admitted “panegyric preached over an empty coffin” (Waugh 1962: x). As to aristocratic values and their survival, he states how “the advance of Hooper has been held up at several points” (x). Later on, more about Lieutenant Hooper, Ryder’s subordinate during the war, who is represented as a symbol of a modern age of business, supposed progress, crass ignorance and self-contented philistinism.

4. Regarding country houses as living emblems of a certain tradition and a social and political ideal, architectural painter Ryder confesses: “I loved buildings that *grew* silently with the centuries, catching and keeping the best of each generation” (Waugh 1945: 226, emphasis added).

5. “*De otra época*”.

6. “*Ilusiones de eternidad*”.

7. “*El recuerdo en lo sagrado*”.

8. In the end, both the English aristocracy and the Catholic Church share an alleged “historical legitimacy and a hierarchical structure” (Coffey 2006: 64).

9. In this respect, Frank Kermode is wrong, in my opinion, when he declares that “Sebastian [...] shows [Charles] that the beauty of the City can be known only to the rich, that architecture and wine, for example, are aspects of it” (1960: 285). As I see it, the element that makes ultimate sense of the novel is a little red flame flickering in “a beaten-copper lamp of *deplorable design*” (Waugh 1945: 351, emphasis added). This conflation of the sublime and the vulgar at the end of the novel would be the last step in a long process whereby Ryder, the agnostic artist, rejects beauty for beauty’s sake and as “a mode of ultimate meaning” in favour of something higher than it (White 2006: 191). This higher element consists of spirituality and awareness of the sublime beauty of God’s

creation, and its relationship with His inscrutable purposes. Therefore, “art and beauty cannot substitute for religion” (181). And religion is for everyone, even for those who do not have either good taste or money. In Jeffrey Heath’s opinion, “the chapel and the sanctuary lamp encapsulate the novel’s theme: the operation of grace through the *inauthentic*” (1982: 168, emphasis added). This is just a part of his daring depiction of Brideshead House as the “derivative and only partly finished” home of “the half-heathen family of an apostate father” (166). Besides and above all, it “does not represent the Roman Catholic Church” (166), as it belongs to the Protestant side of the family (that is, Lord Marchmain’s before his first conversion to Catholicism). Because of the divided attitudes of the members of the family regarding the Catholic faith, Brideshead would be “an emblem [...] of schism” (166). As I see it, this is all wrong. During Lord Marchmain’s notorious exile, with Lady Marchmain and the Earl of Brideshead steadfastly at the helm and in spite of all troubles, Catholicism is the law of the house; after Lord Marchmain’s deathbed conversion, even Charles Ryder ends up a convert; and Sebastian, for all his personal tragedy of incurable alcoholism, poverty and loneliness, is considered a saint of sorts.

10. “*Repetición religiosa de lo que se ha hecho desde siempre*”.

11. “*Todo cuenta, todo simboliza, todo significa*”.

12. “*Al tiempo indiferenciado de los héroes, de los orígenes y del mito*”.

13. “*La razón de ser fundamental de un lugar de memoria es detener el tiempo, bloquear el trabajo del olvido*”.

14. Ultimately, “the country house [...] both reproduces the social order and epitomises it, bringing together in one highly pertinent symbol the concepts of community, nationhood and civilisation” (Coffey 2006: 60). Furthermore, Waugh believes in an anthropological foundation for the class system, therefore rendering it *natural* (64, emphasis added). Lieutenant Hooper embodies “the new vulgarity which the war had introduced”, being the representative of a

hateful world without “learning, scholarship, intelligence and the humanities” (Berberich 2007: 125).

15. In his neo-feudal ideal, Waugh had literary forerunners: he was converted to “the medieval, traditionalist Catholicism whose feudal image had been projected by Belloc and Chesterton” (Pryce-Jones 1960: 274-275).

16. This all reveals Waugh’s sympathy with a contemporary mistrust of modern mass society, already interpreted by Nietzsche as a bridgehead of socialism, and his fear of the ever-growing modern state, powerful enough to crush the individual and hence felt to be the greatest danger to civilisation (Carey 1992: 3-4).

17. Both as a painter and a narrator, Ryder can be seen as an archivist, “absorbed in the work of recording, remembering, and meticulously reconstituting each sign and site of memory that tells of his own story and the story of the Brideshead” (Rothstein 1993: 328). In so doing, he is also indirectly propping up his new identity as a Catholic. Memory is so important for Ryder because, in his own words, “we possess certainly nothing except the past” (Waugh 1945: 225).

18. In any case, Sebastian’s was not the only instance: “at least half the undergraduates were sent to Oxford simply as a place to grow up in” (Wykes 1999: 28), regardless of their academic prospects. Waugh himself, an Oxford man during the 1920s, avows that “from the first I regarded Oxford as a place to be inhabited and enjoyed for itself, not as the preparation for anywhere else” (28).

19. “But I, wretched young man that I was —even more wretched at the beginning of my youth— had begged you for chastity and had said: ‘Make me chaste and continent, but not yet’” (Augustine of Hippo 2001: 164). This “not yet” represents, according to J. Heath, Sebastian’s “chronic immaturity” and “blighting selfishness” (1982: 176).

20. For Christine Berberich, this African monastery is “a nursery replacement” where social obligations and pressure do not exist (2007: 122).

21. "Presente eterno".

22. To cut a long story short, criticism of this scene is comprehended within a general critical tendency to accuse Waugh of merging Catholic dogmatism and snobbery in his novel (Slater 2006: 124).

23. "Iguales e idénticos".

24. Regarding the physical destruction of country houses during the war, James Raven remarks: "Wartime requisitioning had often interrupted lines of family occupation and left houses damaged beyond affordable repair" (2015: 8). As to the desacralisation of *Brideshead* by Hooper and his mates, all of them being agents of modernity and history, Pierre Nora tellingly writes: "Memory is always suspicious for history, whose true mission is to restrain and destroy it. History is the delegitimisation of the lived past. On the horizon of the societies of history, at the limits of a completely historicised world, there would be definitive and ultimate *desacralisation*" (2008: 21, my translation, emphasis added: "*La memoria siempre es sospechosa para la historia, cuya misión verdadera es destruirla y reprimirla. En el horizonte de las sociedades de historia, en los límites de un mundo completamente historicizado, habría desacralización última y definitiva*").

25. History would be a way of recording time as an objective, linear dimension that, unlike memory, does not aim at eternity. History would comprehend an event such as the Second World War, an all-out, dreadfully technified kind of conflict where the link between the individual and the sites and traditions of memory they belong to is thoroughly disrupted.

26. Waugh, among other contemporary radical right-wing intellectuals, feels this to be an "intrusion" into the places civilisation has created for "the best people" (Carey 1992: 3). According to them, such an intrusion would detach "the country house from its former status as the lynchpin of community and social values" (Coffey 2006: 61). Reified into heritage, "social, living memory is rejected, and the symbiotic relationship between past and present is denied" (62). As for "the best people" during

the interwar years, Ross McKibbin has tentatively estimated the upper classes to have been around 40,000, that is some 0.1% of Britain's total population at the time (1998: 2, n. 2).

27. Waugh seems to take for granted a supposedly benevolent, generous administration of agricultural activity by the landed aristocracy and gentry as he depicts it in the novel on the occasion of a rural fair presided over by the earl of *Brideshead*. This benevolence may be contradicted by the very existence of the stately home. This is so on the grounds of the huge accumulation of wealth that was necessary to put up such magnificent buildings all over the country. For about a century before this agricultural show, concurring evidence against a presumed patrician concern for their social inferiors would be the fact that at this period workhouses were filled to the brim, and that millions had to leave for America or the dominions. All through this century-long period, the ruling of the country corresponded to a Parliament that could be considered to be a "committee of landlords" (Moore 1973: 19), who legislated the livelihoods of their inferiors and took care of agriculture as an activity directed by private interest and economic freedom, rather than as a means of supporting the population (8). In any case, by the outbreak of the First World War this presumably benign system obtained no longer (Raven 2015: 6-7). For widespread jubilant reactions to the disappearance of the country house after the Second World War, see Raven (2015: 10).

28. Christopher Isherwood seems to describe Ryder's and his friends' reaction by calling the clashes with the strikers a "tremendous upper-middle class lark"; the "Poshocrats coming down from Oxford and Cambridge in their hundreds —out for all the fun that was going" (Ferrall and McNeill 2015: 109). The Catholic Archbishop of Westminster epitomises Waugh's attitude towards the strike: it was "a direct challenge to a lawfully constituted authority [...] a sin against the obedience which we owe to God" (McKibbin 1998: 288). It must be noted, however, that the real power in Catholic Northern England, the Archbishop of Liverpool, the head of by far the biggest congregation in the country, was of a very different opinion (288). Even Bridey, the

bigoted Stonyhurst old boy, has moral scruples about joining the strike-breakers: "he was not satisfied with the justice of the cause" (Vaugh 1945: 208). Both the 1926 strike and the Second

World War, according to David Rothstein, "represent the broader political forces that surround and threaten the insular aristocratic paradise at Brideshead" (1993: 320).

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