

## EVELYN WAUGH NEWSLETTER AND STUDIES

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***Brideshead Remodernized***

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"I have left behind illusion," I said to myself. "Henceforth I live in a world of three dimensions--with the aid of my five senses."

I have since learned that there is no such world, but then, as the car turned out of sight of the house, I thought it took no finding, but lay all about me at the end of the avenue.

Charles Ryder in *Brideshead Revisited* (154)

In the case of the past it is harder for us to get the shock . . . . Everything that is strange can be interpreted in a familiar way, or at least ignored.

C. J. F. Martin in *An Introduction to Medieval Philosophy*

(13)

Even the briefest of glimpses at any recent bibliography's suggested list of secondary texts regarding *Brideshead* indicates just how belabored our postmodern *née* modern theoretical equipment has become. In the wake of Marx, Nietzsche, or Freud, and heeding the doctrine of their poststructuralist acolytes, we are either bound to quest after some hitherto obscured, prelapsarian origin, now stripped of epistemology and thus facilely manifested in the criticism of the present, morphing into a presumably natural, revolutionary cause, or at the very least to find some evidence of semiotic play that debunks language's inherent mendacity. Given the continuing attractions of this novel, the fact that its televised version has proved popular with even the most marginalized sections of the public (sections postmodern theory ostensibly strives to represent), and the imminent production of a feature film, commentary is doubtless deemed necessary. In a tale of the dog days of an oppressed British aristocracy and the erosion of a nonhegemonic Catholicism, surely there lies the hope of some previously latent, radical point of departure. Whilst this point would claim heterogeneity as its stomping ground, however, *Brideshead* itself consistently outstrips the apparent sophistication of our demystifying *modus operandi*, rendering modernity as univocal, a critical myopia.

For the difficulties in imposing any modern approach on this novel, in discerning some non-epistemological "truth," see, along with many others, David Leon Higdon's "Gay Sebastian and Cheerful Charles: Homoeroticism in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*." Higdon argues that "there seems no doubt that the characters' tie is homosocial, that Charles is homoerotically attracted to Sebastian, and that their relationship is homosexual, though perhaps not sexually active" (83), only to conclude, more appropriately, that the exact status of their association is of little consequence, for it ultimately belongs, along with several heterosexual relationships, within Waugh's general riposte to paganism, and hence *Brideshead* is not "a novel gay liberationists will eagerly embrace" (86). In other words, even if the revision of the friendship is viable, and Higdon deemed successful in unearthing some clandestine intimacy with which to debunk a superficial, exclusionary norm, it is at best a pyrrhic victory, and at worst entirely self-annulling. By Higdon's own admission, the novel itself has always already rendered his nuances, the bulk of his essay, futile, and his critical apparatus extraneous. Indeed, this apparatus necessarily precludes contact with its object, for hypothetically, if it were not for Higdon's *a priori*, attitudinal reliance on the ur-narrative of modernity (ultimately proving to be an *exclusive* methodology), a different essay might begin where this one ends, with Waugh's riposte to paganism, and thereby confront its dissent from *Brideshead*'s broadest, evidently

orthodox principle of intelligibility out in the open.

Instead, the different essay, Tison Pugh's "Romantic Friendship, Homosexuality, and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*," begins, in the thick of Higdon's fray, with "A central debate in recent considerations of *Brideshead Revisited* concerns whether Charles Ryder and Sebastian Flyte's relationship should be interpreted as merely homosocial or as decidedly homosexual . . ." (64), and proceeds to centralize this same debate still further. Higdon's version is re-aired, now as "a refined and nuanced reading" (64), although Pugh's aim is to question the adequacy of the terminology via which we categorize sexuality, suggesting that the hetero-/homo-dichotomy is false, "anachronistic" (68), "too reductive a formula to fit the subtleties and shades of meaning in the text" (64-65). In lieu of such limits, Pugh re-contextualizes the liaison against the backdrop of "the sex-segregated societies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in such institutions as all-male and all-female colleges and boarding houses" (65), and posits an intermediate term for same-sex intimacy, "romantic friendship," a phrase borrowed from one of Cyril Connolly's romantic friends, Noel Blakiston, and from Cara's description of the two boys' relationship in *Brideshead*. Romantic friendship is not always consummated, but is rather a cozier, cuddlier affair, an apprenticeship, "seen as part of a young man's maturation and development" (Pugh 66) even towards heterosexuality, to which the subsequent marriages of Connolly, Blakiston and Charles Ryder attest. As further corroboration for such a friendship, Pugh reels off the usual passages for this kind of assertion, "Foremost, Charles' confession that they indulged in 'naughtiness high in the catalogue of grave sins'" (69), and in fairness concludes with an attempt to rein in his field's more visceral element:

The goal of queer readers to claim the past which has often been denied and bowdlerized from us stands as an admirable goal, but such a process of reclamation must be undertaken with full awareness of the nuances of identity in various historical eras and geographies. (71)

Despite the measured tone and content, although Pugh is no doubt versed in queer theory and the intricacies of re-categorization, does *Brideshead* offer any form of reclamation, whether nuanced or not? Assuming Charles and Sebastian's intrigue is defined as a romantic friendship rather than as simply homosexual, there remains the question of whether this act of nomenclature, indeed this relatively accessible intrigue itself, is one of the *novel's* central debates. If, instead of same-sex sexuality, Charles' earlier acts of transgression were those of pedophilia, or bestiality, would they be any more or less central? Pugh's own critical context dictates our point of entry, and whilst this may be the path of least resistance, a point with which both Pugh and any modern audience are entirely familiar, in the context of *Brideshead* it would seem to warrant a footnote at most. There is always the sense that such meaning-shading, however industrious, may be misplaced, that its schema may ultimately prove no less formulaic or reductive than those it purports to supersede, and towards the end of the article, as if out of nowhere in the latter's context but only too predictably here, Pugh evacuates his own building:

The sexual component of the relationships does not determine his [Charles'] identity as heterosexual or homosexual; it only stresses the failings of the sexual in the face of the divine. Both the same-sex and the heterosexual relationships prove meaningless to Charles as he finds himself without a sexual partner but with God. (70)

This afterthought, of course, is a repetition of Higdon's conclusion, a secondary status which means that even if we were once prepared to countenance Pugh's romantic friendship over homosexuality, such differentiation is elided in the same end. Indeed, even a hetero-/homo-distinction is voided in these lines, both now "meaningless" (70), lost in the frivolity of Waugh's Arcadian prelude to the novel's eventual claim to meaning. Pugh, like Higdon, has now admittedly been pre-thwarted by methodology, yet continues to insist that "The romantic friendship . . . offers great explanatory force in understanding how Waugh and other authors,

including Walt Whitman, Virginia Woolf (Mrs. Dalloway), and E. M. Forster (Maurice), saw their protagonists' (and perhaps their own) relationships with members of the same sex" (71). Without digressing at length into the work of others here, any of the three would feasibly provide safer, less arcane ground on which the debate might be centralized, whereas in the case of *Brideshead* it is not greatly explanatory of anything other than its own inadequacies and by implication those of the modernity from whence it sprang.

As may be obvious, my meta-reading is of a *non multa sed multum* nature, not limited to definitions of Charles and Sebastian's mutual affection, but only by the number of discourses modernity is capable of concocting around the novel. For example, on a similarly auto-invalidating note, though in relation to semiotic play, see Frederick Beaty's *The Ironic World of Evelyn Waugh: A Study of Eight Novels*, which, in the conclusion to the chapter on *Brideshead*, has to concede the relative insignificance of its own primary thesis:

Although his [Waugh's] later serious novels may contribute to his stature as a literary artist, critic of society, and Catholic apologist, they do little to advance his reputation as an ironist. Since their more direct approach, increasingly solemn tone, and preoccupation with religious themes diminish the possibilities even for technical irony, these works are not within the scope of this study. (165)

Whether the irony in even the earlier work confirms a proto-Derridean Waugh, an exposé of superstructural meaning, is similarly suspect, but any interaction between the two worlds (the admission that Waugh's world was ultimately not quite so ironic after all might perhaps prompt revision of Beaty's preceding pages), is pre-prohibited. The title's initial grandiosity, *The Ironic World of Evelyn Waugh*, now seems hyperbolic, for it only functions if stress is unnaturally placed on *Ironic* instead of *World*, thus indicating a less significant, more partial study, which would span only seven novels at most and thereby evade its present incongruity. The same incongruity may be viewed more succinctly at the website *totalwaugh*, which opens with an apparently benign characterization of itself, in bold type, as "A group devoted to the British writer Evelyn Waugh" (1). Just a little below, however, the characterization is less boldly repeated, *almost* identically, as "A group devoted to the *satirical* British writer Evelyn Waugh (1903-66)" (1) [my emphasis], and the addition of the adjective already implies a certain critical proclivity, narrowing the opening definition's embrace. Furthermore, immediately after the second, adjectivally enhanced version, in case we have missed the implication, the site confirms its inclusive/exclusive schizophrenia with "All points of view are welcome, but please note that TotalWaugh is intended to promote Waugh's writing, not his faith" (1). This censures all but suspicious commentary on the second half of *Brideshead*, if indeed any exposition of Catholicism (even the mild disclaimers of the likes of Higdon, Pugh and Beaty) is still possible, and yet to the right of "All points of view . . .," close enough to be read simultaneously, amidst a more general description of the site listing the date of its inception and other *pragmata*, appears the word "Unmoderated" (1) which, while knowing otherwise, I can only hope is itself satirical.

In his authorized biography of Waugh, Christopher Sykes suggests that one potential flaw in the novel is "the Roman Catholic religion and its power over unlikely subjects of its discipline," that although he has "no difficulty in following Evelyn's religious theme," the less indoctrinated "general reader" may view it as "institutionalized fantasy" and "is rather left in the cold" (256). More recently, in *Evelyn Waugh: A Literary Life*, David Wykes echoes this thought more bluntly, reading *Brideshead*'s romanticized, secular side as so inevitably alluring that it obscures any other purpose:

In a comic letter to Dorothy Lygon while he [Waugh] was writing the book, he set down the nightmare version of it.

I am writing a very beautiful book, to bring tears, about very rich, beautiful, high born people who live in palaces and have no troubles

except what they make themselves and those are mainly the demons sex and drink which after all are easy to bear as troubles go nowadays.

No eschatology at all; Lady Dorothy was not a Catholic and neither were the masses of readers who bought *Brideshead Revisited* and read it wrong. The nightmare came true. (141)

The masses of general readers are now apparently the critics, and the novel modernity's Rorschach test, an experiment in analysis that uses haphazard splashes of ink in order to manifest the patient's more latent desires. For C. J. F. Martin, cited here as one of my epigraphs, the past has become another country, only seemingly accessible, and this is the discovery of the Higdon and Pugh in their eventual disclaimers, in their moments, however flippant, of defamiliarization. Instead of perceiving Waugh's nightmare, they unwittingly form part of it. Perhaps becoming the whipping boy for modernity's flailings, its prejudices, and thereby revealing their solipsism, is in itself enough. The danger is that the flailings themselves, as opposed to their revelation as solipsistic, may be assumed to possess "explanatory force" (Pugh 71).

As a comparison to the above, in "The Permanent Adolescent," Christopher Hitchens reads Waugh through George Orwell's unfinished notes on *Brideshead*. Orwell's context for the study is that of the "orthodoxy" (107) of the contemporary literati and Waugh's paradoxical rogue status as a traditionalist. The notes continue, however, to stress "That one cannot judge the value of an opinion simply by the amount of courage that is required in holding it," and that "One cannot really be Catholic and grown-up" (107). Hitchens revels in this detachment, in the sardonic wit of Waugh's earlier, pre-*Brideshead* "entertainments" (111), venturing that he "wrote as brilliantly as he did precisely *because* he loathed the modern world" (107) while simultaneously questioning the sources of such detachment. At times this questioning is glibly tendentious, even hostile, arguing that Waugh "felt and transmitted some of the mobilizing energy of fascism" (108) and that in *Brideshead* "the narrative is made ridiculous by a sentimental and credulous approach to miracles and the supernatural" (109). The difference here, however, is that neither Orwell nor Hitchens, despite their agenda, is attempting to convert the texts, to modernize them, preferring instead to counter the perceived superstition or ignorance of their ideology and to recognize certain elements as rightfully lost in the ruins of history. The debate between Waugh's brand of conservatism and Hitchens' neo-socialism is indeed central, one which Waugh himself envisioned, relevant to now, then, and the novel. In contrast, and as an example of the danger to which I referred earlier, see Sylvia Koleva's "The Audience is Part of the Story Backstage: An Appreciation of *Brideshead Revisited*" in a previous volume of the *Newsletter*. Here, the novel supposedly offers nothing but "a negative image of religion, mocking every kind" (10), with the one exception of Rex Mottram, surely a contender for the most modern character in all of English literature and a man who believes that "if you put in a pound note with someone's name on it, they get sent to hell" (Waugh 176):

'There are some Catholics with much chic in Europe,' says Rex during his celebrated dinner in Paris with Charles, so abundant with eating and talking (plenty of comments on the past and plans for the future). That's the only thing positive [*sic*] Waugh writes on the subject, except for Cordelia's acts of heroism in Spain. (10)

I shall not dwell on either Mottram or fashion. Suffice it to say that neither is a reliable criterion for approving of *Brideshead*'s Catholicism, and that "Waugh never pretended that religious belief should make one happy" (Kermode, xxiii). Rather than dogmatically assuming the position of one current theory or another, only to discover that the primary text disowns such positions, thus forcing the criticism into perpetual self-annulment, re- and then de-modernizing (or in Koleva's case never de-modernizing) itself *ad infinitum*, perhaps the novel should be permitted to dictate its own critical context from the off.

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**Impressions of Logroño**  
**International Symposium: One Hundred Years of Evelyn Waugh**  
**University of La Rioja, 15-17 May 2003**

The Evelyn Waugh Symposium in Logroño, La Rioja, was a very welcome and eagerly anticipated event for me. I have now been working on Waugh for over four years and have had to cope with a lot of negative reactions regarding my research 'object'--being labeled reactionary myself merely for my choice of author among them. The Symposium consequently offered a welcome break from that kind of criticism and a chance to meet like-minded researchers and scholars from all over the world. It proved to be a well-organised event in a beautiful setting, dominated by the enthusiasm of all delegates that fuelled debate and discussion. I am already looking forward to the next Waugh event in Oxford this September.

*Christine Berberich, University of Derby*

The faultless organisation (weather included) by Carlos Villar Flor and his team of the Waugh Centenary Symposium allowed me to renew contact with old friends after two decades' separation but not silence.

That led me to the conclusion (prompted by Christine Berberich's paper) that 'all gentlemen are very old' . . . except us! Indeed R. M. (Bob) Davis was at his best (stentorian and erudite) as a kind of avuncular M.C., Donat Gallagher proved his courteous but passionate, knowledgeable but modest guardian of the Waugh canon, George McCartney kept his keen insight into all subtleties of Waugh's art and thought. We all resumed acquaintances interrupted by the vagaries of life with enormous pleasure and profit.

On top of these personal recollections, I also realised the vitality of Waugh studies around the world and the new blood, Spanish et alia, infused into the society. Not John Sutro's 'Railway Club', not a gathering of old friends, but a living, expanding group ready to further Waugh studies and embark on new adventures. I, for one, do think that the time has come for example to study Waugh in the light of the more modern schools of criticism.

To conclude, I was impressed by the UniRioja meeting. It played the part once held by the