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Corruption and Conversion: The Artist and the Dandy in *Brideshead Revisited*

Cailin Kowalewski

In *Brideshead Revisited*, Evelyn Waugh presents the dandy as an explorer of fulfillment through the experience of transient beauty. According to Christopher Lane's article *The Drama of the Impostor: Dandyism and Its Double*, a dandy's complete sense of self relies on a comprehension of the beautiful that is derived from instantly dissolving impressions, creating a search for the fleeting, the impressionable, and the alarming. To reach "art" and beauty in the form of experience, the dandy must navigate the mundane world of cultural norms that surrounds him so that he can subvert them, while remaining necessarily separated from them. He isolates himself from the commonplace, insufficient habits of culture, and seeks out the unique.

Crucial to this process is the preservation of his sense of creative autonomy. To do this, the dandy establishes degrees of separation from reality and creates his own sub-spheres: lenses of behavior through which he can interpret social codes. In *Brideshead*, Waugh's primary dandy figure, Sebastian, struggles in a constant effort to dissociate himself from reality, whether physically or mentally. However, the dandy's establishment of *surrealities* is directly challenged by the existence of the artist, who attempts to "'fix' each occasion or 'scene'" of the art that is the dandy's behavior "before it passe[s] without recognition or judgment" (Lane 34); and by what John Edward Hardy calls "the convert-artist" (167), who moves away from secular art in service of itself, and towards art that is governed by its expression of religious traits. In this context, Waugh presents the threat to dandy figures as a re-contextualization; a re-imposition of cultural ennui that perverts the immediacy of the dandy's "life" art, that destroys the levels of mediation protecting the dandy from mainstream contextualization. Both Waugh and his protagonist Charles Ryder do this by trying to make Sebastian's life tangible and palpable to others, imposing reason and morality on chaotic beauty. Through this, Waugh exposes an interesting relationship between the passionately disengaged and the culturally captive.

Sebastian Flyte's identity as a dandy is easily identified as a search for a kind of fleeting artistic realization, uninhibited by the external "truths" of the society he principally rejects. In *The Picturesque Prison*, Jeffrey Heath characterizes Waugh's dandy, Sebastian Flyte, as

“resolutely adolescent, and his intense desire for solitude leads him into self-love... he refuses responsibility and conformity” (Heath 177). However, Sebastian’s behaviors do not necessarily reflect an urge to be alone, but rather “let alone”—that is, free to pursue happiness through art and its interpretation from a lens of the surreal. In his discussion of the dandy aesthetic, Christopher Lane stresses this importance of interpretation in art so that it is not merely seen, but “realized,” so that the dandy himself embodies transient artistic beauty via internally significant “impressions” (Lane 31). These transitory images, as Lane conveys,

...can be only fleetingly sustained before they "melt under our feet" (R 189), leaving no trace of their demise other than the demand for a repetition and intensification of their effect... This paradox tied the subject to an impossible urge for self-completion and an increasing dependence on the image to define—but not arrest—its limit and vanishing-point (33).

With this perspective in mind, Sebastian Flyte’s identity as a dandy is easily identified as a search for a kind of fleeting artistic realization, uninhibited by the external “truths” of the society he principally rejects.

To separate himself from social realities, Sebastian immerses himself in the unusual and the startling. This practice “allows the dandy to irritate, shock, and deride, yet at the same time to captivate, seduce, and thus dominate the society he rejects” (Rossbach 277). Waugh primarily displays this in Sebastian’s regression into immaturity and alcoholism, his isolation in the haven of Brideshead estate, and his relationship with the spiritual elements of Catholicism. From the first occasion that he is presented, Sebastian deliberately removes himself from the mature world. He refers to his mother as “Mummy,” claims a sole affection for his old “Nanny Hawkins,” and feigns a terrible helplessness, evident in his telegram to Charles over a sprained ankle relating, “gravely injured” (74). Sebastian’s behavior effectively separates him from his peers at his university as an outsider and an oddity. Charles notes, “he was the most conspicuous man of his year by reason of... his eccentricities of behavior which seemed to know no bounds... I was struck less by his looks than by the fact that he was carrying a large Teddy-bear” (28). Sebastian creates a realm for himself as a child in a world of adults: an immaturity only increasingly surreal when continued on the grounds of Brideshead estate.

Brideshead itself is posited as a detached oasis, a locus Waugh creates for the embodiment of past aristocratic glory that is isolated, protected, hidden. It is a “new and secret landscape” (37), with darkened halls, shuttered windows, gilt mirrors, and sheeted furniture (38).

The building's very stones are deceptive, taken and relocated from a castle that had previously borne the name. Its eclectic, lavish, and ornate style captivates Charles, who says, "This was my conversion to the baroque. Here under that high and insolent dome, under those tricky ceilings...I felt a whole new system of nerves alive within me, as though the water that spurted and bubbled among [the fountain's] stones was indeed a life-giving spring" (82). In this oasis, Sebastian and Charles are immersed in their own illusions, and the artistic grandeur that is Brideshead facilitates Sebastian's efforts to abandon the conventional. He says, "If it could only be like this always—always summer, always alone, the fruit always ripe" (79), and upon their first meeting, Sebastian is drunk and looks at Charles with "unseeing eyes" (29). By bringing Charles away from their life at Oxford, it is clear that he means to include him in his mirage of indulgence and youth—to drink wine, eat strawberries, and smoke Turkish cigarettes under the shade of an elm tree (23). Already, he seems to exist in more of a fairy world than that of a collegiate, and thrives at Brideshead where he is able to easily uphold his own fantasies.

However, it is in this realm that Waugh presents the dandy's ultimate undoing, and in a manner that argues that the dandy's embodiment of art through lifestyle is ultimately overpowered by the logic-governed culture it reinterprets. While it is rather brash foreshadowing by Waugh, the placement of a skull in Charles's room with the inscription "Et in Arcadia Ego" ("Even in Arcadia I am there") does not just foreshadow Sebastian's decline in the Arcadian world of Brideshead, but actually parallels the fact that Charles brings this destruction with him. Waugh introduces Charles as an unwittingly antagonistic force of normalcy, corrupting both Sebastian's "religion" and "art."

To understand the effect Charles has on Sebastian, it is useful to analyze Waugh's construction of the pair's religious beliefs and practices. Brideshead estate is essentially dichotomized by two different perspectives on Catholicism; a conflict that Heath describes as "between the will of man and the will of God" (161). Perhaps more accurately, we may clarify that this conflict is between the opposing means and definitions of achieving divine grace. Characteristically, Sebastian's concept of Catholicism is grounded in a belief in the unseen. He holds faith in traditions and beliefs not logically proven, and speaking of his family's practices, says, "happiness doesn't seem to have much to do with it, and that's all I want" (89). While Sebastian "always heard his mass," his emphasis on happiness and dandy aesthetic suggest that his fixation is upon the impalpable, mystical qualities of faith and the captivating image it

creates, rather than its moral consequences. Heath eloquently summarizes this as “the operation of grace through the inauthentic” –a search for that “self-completion” through the inspiring beauty of divine mystery (168). At the beginning of Chapter 4, Waugh expresses this through Charles in a discussion of what he calls “the languor of Youth,” suggesting, “perhaps the Beatific Vision itself has some remote kinship with this lowly experience; I, at any rate, found myself very near heaven, during those languid days at Brideshead” (79). Sebastian’s contrived Arcadian world is clearly paralleled with a state of grace, in which the dandy can nourish his creation of a fleetingly beautiful existence.

However, it is clear that Waugh inherently rejects this unrealistic lifestyle and utilization of religion, drowning Sebastian in his own self-indulgence and misery and proving that art cannot exist for itself or for the sake of beauty and happiness alone. “Waugh emphatically rejects Keats’ pagan heaven of art,” Heath writes. “In Waugh’s view, it is not true that ‘a thing of beauty is a joy for ever’; a thing of beauty is a joy only if it is a way-place on the road to God” (174). Without this necessary service of divine morality, Sebastian’s exploration of beauty is profane. According to Waugh’s portrayal, “Sebastian is pernicious when loved as an end in himself but valuable as an avenue to the divine” (Heath 178). Yet when he is forced into a matrix of religious consequence and made part of its system, he is forced into a common sort of reality and consequently deprived of his creative ability of dissociation.

Thus, it is not so much the existence of this kind of religion that harms Sebastian, but rather the constant imposition of morality and the mundane that shatters his carefully constructed haven of surreal beauty. Waugh primarily develops this concept in contrast to Charles’s relationship with religion. Lady Marchmain seeks to convert Charles’ alliance via Christianity, and by the end of the novel it seems that this change has been effectively completed in Charles’s melodramatic prayer for salvation on behalf of the dying Lord Marchmain. One of the final images of the novel is of “a small red flame... burning anew among the old stones” of the Brideshead chapel (351), a flame apparently lit in Charles’s saved soul. But Waugh does not present Charles as a convert-hero, a fact clarified if only in that Charles’s prayers are not at all convinced or convincing (“Oh God, if there is a God, forgive him his sins, if there is such a thing as sin,”) and that his more earnest prayer is only for an acknowledgment of ritual: “I suddenly felt the longing for a sign, if only of courtesy, if only for the sake of the woman I loved, who knelt in front of me, praying, I knew, for a sign (338). Charles is not a true Christian, because he

lacks the characteristic that Sebastian, ironically, has: a faith in the unseen. Charles feels a flame of religious passion, but his belief is unavoidably restricted by the “beaten” physicality that grounds him to reality. When Lord Brideshead lies dying, the thought of offering him final sacraments is “nonsense” (335).

In this surprisingly complex portrayal, it is apparent that Charles is *not* the religious hero/protagonist that we may wish him to be. It is tempting to ignore his essential betrayal of Sebastian’s profligate lifestyle for his family’s resolute theology, but in this shoddy “conversion,” Waugh clearly posits him as a threat to both the fragile Sebastian and precariously surviving Brideshead, indicting him as a conduit of the mundane and commonplace perspectives of the outside world.

When they first meet, Charles is as captivated by Sebastian, Brideshead, and the “divine” beauty they share; but as Charles becomes more invested in the dynamics of the Flyte family, less of a participant in Sebastian’s way of life, and more of an observer, Waugh reveals the true nature of his protagonist as a corrupter of art. Anthony Blanche introduces our first definition of the artist, saying, “Artists are not exquisite... but the Artist is an eternal type, solid, purposeful, observant— and, beneath it all, p-p-passionate, eh, Charles?” (52). But when Charles, our proclaimed “artist,” creates, his works do not seem to be the product of an intense emotional experience or even a deliberate attempt at expression. They are merely recordings of things he sees, lacking originality and creativity. He says of his sketch of the fountain that only “by some odd chance, for the thing was far beyond me, I brought it off and by judicious omissions and some stylish tricks, produced a very passable echo” (81). Blanche laments that Charles’ paintings are not the daring, passionate, “unhealthy” creations he had hoped for, but corrupted by “the great English blight” of “charm” (273). Charles’ depictions of the exotic are “simple, creamy English charm, playing tigers” (273). His landscapes are correctly romantic, but his attempt at a pastoral scene with living figures is a flop. As a passive observer and recorder of beauty, he is the antithesis to Sebastian, whose styles of art, worship, and being are evaluated in terms of a divine happiness— that “beatific vision” of beauty through the inauthentic, the crafted, and the passionately surreal.

Charles’s very presence then serves as a deliberate threat to the Flyte tradition and the dandy aesthetic. He is a constant reminder to Sebastian of the common world he is trying to flee, and it is in this context that his skeptical, uninspired view of life and the divine is most

significant. Waugh plainly associates his quaint “charm” with his lack of true faith, in that both are characterized by his emotional dispassion and his preoccupation with placing the exotic in the realm of the familiar: ““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’” (169). His relationship with Sebastian is a temporary exploration of the surreal, which eventually emerges as a fixation upon something to be contextualized, normalized, and rationalized: a dispassion that is equally as profane as Sebastian’s amorality.

This dispassion makes *Brideshead* an autobiographically suggestive exploration of the “convert-artist” through Charles, and of Waugh’s similar role himself as a writer. In the novel, the artist’s job is to capture the fleeting and the impressionable that so vivifies the nature of true art itself. Because of this, we see Brideshead, the Flytes, and Sebastian all in the brilliant color of Charles’ memories. Yet by the end of the novel, this noble, aristocratic beauty and all its embodiments (Sebastian, Julia, and the estate) have been effectively destroyed, and the artist is clearly to blame. Charles is the partner to his art, and the force that tethers it to reality, sobering up as Sebastian downs a drink, presenting marriage to Julia as she grapples with her state of “sin,” and returning to the crumbling oasis of Brideshead as part of a modern military force. Waugh’s message seems to be that this kind of otherworldly beauty is divine in its transience, though it may not be wholly moral, and that the artist’s attempts to capture it are ironically its destruction.

It is clear that Waugh does not intend Charles to progress in the novel, despite Waugh’s confirmation of religion as “the most important of all the agents that form a man’s character” (Phillips 55), Charles’s misleading “conversion,” and the faintly flickering light of his faith housed in its deplorable lantern. As an artist without inspiration, he is doomed to perpetuate that which should not be clung to, effectively destroying all that he captures. The text is impressive in that Waugh conveys this sentiment via a multitude of plot lines, and reflects it again in the novel’s very style and narration.

William J. Cook, Jr., argues that “Even though [*Brideshead Revisited*] possesses both comic and tragic potential, its loss of ironic perspective through the use of first person causes it to drift inevitably into melodrama” (208). But what Cook overlooks is Waugh’s use of Charles’ voice to convey irony in itself, in that by eliminating the narrative distance the third person introduces, Waugh involves his readers in the violation of Brideshead and its art on the most

basic, essential level of the text. Waugh does not directly jab at Charles for his tragically foolish attempts to cling to art in a barbaric and modern world. Yet the text is still highly ironic in that we as readers share in Charles' "sacred" memories before we realize that they are "profane." The narrative structure of the novel is also satirical, in the sense that Charles's mental revisit of Brideshead's decline is framed by its physical revisit by Captain Charles Ryder, and in a manner that blurs the lines between present and past quite unsettlingly. Charles' recollections are strange in their ambiguous shifts from the Charles of the past, of *that* moment, to the Captain Charles Ryder of *this* moment. Cook sees this as a fatal error:

The flaw is not with the "then I" or the "intermediate I," but in the proximity of the "now I" with the past... There is no emotional separation of personae... All the events are filtered through a unique consciousness, which though seeing them in the past, colors them with present emotion; this is detrimental, for the "now I" is a romantic (216).

Instead of such a seeming "flaw," this "emotional separation of personae" is deliberate, and exactly what qualifies *Brideshead* as satiric— even tragic.

Charles's downfall as an artist is his failure to accept the intangible, and the "inauthentic" that necessarily serves as inspiration to counter bland and common "charm." In his world of crass soldiery, regurgitated art, and uninspired religious motions, the isolated oasis of Brideshead is doomed to destruction. Through these plot devices and his narrative choices, Waugh also expresses his own comparable guilt as a writer, in his nostalgic preservation of that which is worthy only of its own age. Waugh's activity as an author, recording stories based on his own mundane reality *outside* the novel, comes into question as a similar condemnation of the beautiful that exists *within* the novel. And if Charles's flaw is his compulsion to recollect, then are not Waugh and his readers, recording and interpreting stories based on their own mundane realities, equally to blame? While Waugh is sure to indict Sebastian's "languid" lifestyle and rejection of Catholic morality, there is also an inevitable tenderness reserved for this delicate, eccentric youth and the "beatific vision" that he is incapable of realizing. So although the dandy may be dissolute, detached, and even deluded, Waugh presents him not as the culprit of a destruction of beauty through "languor," but rather a victim of the artist and the culture in which that artist forces him to exist.

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