



Waugh Mistaken and Brideshead Unvisited

Reading Evelyn Waugh's collected journalism more than fifty years after he wrote it, one realizes how accurately he prophesied the long-range consequences of radical egalitarianism in all the departments of life.

Consider the disappearance of the word "gentleman". A fight breaks out between two young men in their late twenties in the parking lot of a neighborhood bar in a depressed city. The police arrive, restore order, and ask questions. One of the combatants says, "I don't know why the gentleman approached me. I don't know him."

As used in this imaginary incident, "gentleman" is no more than a fancy synonym for "man", differing only from "dude" or "guy" in providing a hint of formality to an otherwise excessively informal occasion. Apart from uses like this, one never hears the word in general use at all in contemporary America, and no doubt the same is true of Britain.

In short, a remarkable social change whose beginnings Waugh detected has taken place. Until about 1965, the now-missing word "gentleman" described a standard of behavior that every young man of a certain background and upbringing was expected to learn and, his family and teachers hoped, embody. A fascinating aspect of the gentleman-standard in its heyday, too, was the role played by women in its maintenance. It might have been taught by fathers, schoolmasters, and superior officers, but the women sat in judgment on it, as the novels of Jane Austen show us. Mr. Darcy, the hero of *Pride and Prejudice*, misbehaves with impunity until Elizabeth Bennet tells him that he is not a gentleman. He then suffers a kind of off-stage psychic collapse, and



disappears from the novel. When he reappears he is contrite and reformed—and a gentleman.

Things changed for everyone circa 1965, when overnight the likes of John Lennon and Mick Jagger became the role models for the young men whom people had formerly expected to grow up into some variety of gentlemanliness. Shortly afterwards, the women began to deprive gentlemen of their habitat by attending their schools and colleges and joining their clubs. Fifty years on, we can see that the changes in male style are irreversible. A minor sign is the persistence of the pony-tail, but a major public sign is the daily spectacle of respectable elderly men in public wearing shorts, tee-shirts, flip-flops, and back-to-front baseball caps. As long as the gentleman-standard held, to wear an outfit like that in public would have been taken as a sign of insanity.

Let us assume, then, that the gentleman disappeared from western society along with the steamer trunk and rolled umbrella, and at about the same time. As long as gentlemen were still all about us there was a good deal of discussion and argument about the subject. What was a gentleman? Was he born or made? What were the defining marks of the species? Could he forfeit his status by bad behavior? Everyone had views on these questions, and everyone had a wealth of examples at hand to deploy in argument. With the gentleman's disappearance that kind of discussion disappeared with him, and the subject has become quite literally academic. A large speculative literature has begun to appear from those well-funded hothouses, the universities, written by people who have no first-hand knowledge. After all, it's unlikely that anyone forty or under in a contemporary university

has ever seen a gentleman, let alone actually talked to one. Consequently, although these writings (with titles like *Theorizing Masculinities* and *Manful Assertions*) have little to tell about gentlemen, they tell a lot about the mentality that has developed in the space left by their disappearance.

Take a book that came out a few years ago: *The Image of the English Gentleman in Twentieth-Century Literature*. This book, by Christine Berberich, professes to offer a short history of the word, of the role itself, and of its use in literature. Suspicion grows as one reads that neither the author nor the many theorists—as I suppose we should call them—of the phenomenon whom she quotes have any personal knowledge of the thing itself. The now lost world of men's formation and sociability is infinitely exotic to these ladies:

In the masculine environments of the public school, the university, the army or the gentleman's club, men felt at ease and at home with each other.

To explain this peculiar fact of former male life, Ms. Berberich borrows an "important" neologism from Ms. Emily Eells: *Anglosexuality*, which means "fus[ing] and confus[ing] the eroticism and aestheticization of same-sex desire . . . a form of sex and sensitivity which is closer to psychological androgyny than biological hermaphroditism." [Reader: do not ask what those square brackets are for.] She then uses this uncouth term to explain those inexplicable "male-male relationships" in clubs, schools, and regiments as well as those equally inexplicable literary pairings—Holmes and Watson, for instance.

Given this degree of humorless credulity, not to say balminess, it is a short hop-skip-and-a-jump from explaining, say, an old boys' dinner as a "site" of repression and psychological confusion to the proposition that the ideal of the gentleman was really an underhanded way of controlling men's natural effeminacy and outright homosexuality—though of course without suppressing it entirely. Consider, for instance, the case



of the gentleman on horseback at the local hunt. "Hunting pinks", Ms. Berberich writes, ". . . may also function to highlight the homoerotic side of a man." In contexts like that, it follows as the night the day that "the famous English stiff upper lip could . . . be described as a prominent example of repression discourse".

The second part of this book considers the fortunes of the gentleman in some twentieth-century authors, Evelyn Waugh being one of them, and this is where one finds out just how completely off the rails the reading and teaching of literature is these days, and how prophetically accurate Mr. Waugh was in foreseeing the long-range consequences of egalitarianism.

Evelyn Waugh was a very funny man who wrote novels and made jokes. He also made a lot of money writing columns for the popular papers, and inevitably, given his approach and social interests, he commented from time to time on the subject of the gentleman, his current status, and the likelihood of his imminent disappearance. He would have been surprised to read that his first novel, *Decline and Fall*, is "a vitriolic attack against the aristocracy", or that its funniest character, Grimes, "viciously lampoons the idea of the gentleman". What Waugh found intensely funny at that stage of his life were the bogus gentlemen and newly invented aristocrats all around him. Re-reading his account of King's Thursday,

the charming Tudor house that Mrs. Best-Chetwynde destroys in *Decline and Fall*, one realizes how consistent his imagination was throughout his writing life. Lord Pastmaster, the brother-in-law she buys out, could have been a first cousin to Mr. Crouchback in Waugh's last work, *Sword of Honour*.

It is no use, though, expecting Ms. Berberich to perceive that sort of consistency because she is not only ignorant of what a gentleman is supposed to be, but she hasn't the least inkling of what Evelyn Waugh intended his fictions to express. She and her fellow dons are all—in theory if not quite in practice—egalitarians. They look out upon the world, and they see no essential distinctions of status anywhere. The hierarchical principle—universally accepted until about seventy years ago—on which Evelyn Waugh based his whole view of the world makes no sense to them.

According to that principle, there is a kind of naturally occurring continuum, a great chain of being in all aspects of life, social, intellectual, and aesthetic, from the highest on the one hand—the good, the true, and the beautiful—down to the lowest on the other—the bad, the false, and the ugly. Caught as we all are in the midst of things in daily life, we must continually choose between the higher and the lower, and the great test of the kind of man who considered himself a gentleman, on which

his claim to that status finally depended, was that, brought up against a defining choice, he would choose the higher over the lower. The standard, in fact, was set so high that—strictly examined—very few of us would earn even a passing grade.

That is the kind of test or choice that *Brideshead Revisited* is all about, but Ms. Berberich, committed to her peculiar musings about gentlemen, does not know that. Despite the great success of the novel and its television adaptation, she, like other academic critics, neither likes it nor understands it. Its hero-narrator Charles Ryder “is not one of Waugh’s most successful characters. He is wooden and stiff . . . weak, sentimental, snobbish”. He is a “social climber who uses every available means—first Sebastian, then Julia, then religion—to find entrance to . . . Brideshead”. Even worse, he “can be seen as Waugh’s alter-ego”, and his relationship to the Flytes and their beautiful house is a projection of Waugh’s own unseemly longing for aristocratic status. The “crux of the novel” is that while Charles is trying so hard to worm his way into Brideshead, his friend Sebastian is doing all he can to escape from it. Charles, then, is a failure, Sebastian a success.

This is willfully inaccurate misreading. Ryder is not Waugh’s alter-ego. He begins as a lonely boy of good family who has lost his mother, and lives with a withdrawn, scholarly, eccentric father sufficiently well-off to give him a generous allowance as an undergraduate, and to give him the cost of a nice house as a wedding present. As for his social standing, from details scattered through the book one learns that the head of the family (his cousin Jasper’s father) lives in a large, no doubt frumpy but grand Victorian Gothic house, and that Charles Ryder has no need to climb socially. Brideshead is not there to provide a passport into upperclass zones: it is there to bring enchantment. Nor does Charles thrust himself upon Brideshead or any of its inhabitants; Brideshead thrusts itself upon Charles when Sebastian Flyte throws up through the open window of his college room.

On the summer day that Sebastian takes Charles to Brideshead for the first time, he

has his first experience (like Alain-Fournier’s *Big Meaulnes*) of a beyond-this-world, life-changing beauty, and that is why his Brideshead experience launches him on his career as an architectural artist. He produces his first successful picture there, a romantic landscape painted in one of the rococo panels of a small room opening off the colonnade. But *Brideshead* is not merely a book about art and aristocratic houses; it is a Chestertonian, even an Augustinian book about the salvation of souls. As Waugh wrote on the book’s dust-jacket, it attempts “to trace the workings of divine purpose in a pagan world” through the lives of a “half-paganized” Catholic family. In the book, he goes out of his way to indicate his theme by naming Part II with a phrase from a famous sentence by Chesterton (“The Twitch upon the Thread”), and even quotes the source passage from a Father Brown story. He allows Charles—unknowingly—to spell out the theory behind the novel’s idea when he tells Julia that Sebastian “was the forerunner”:

Perhaps all our loves are merely hints and symbols; a hill of many crests; doors that open as in a dream to reveal only a further stretch of carpet and another door. . . .

The crux of the novel arrives when Charles’s obstreperously secular approach to life collides with the ways of a providence that he has always denied. This is the theme of the novel’s climactic last scene, Lord Marchmain’s death, when Charles finds himself on his knees, really praying for the first time in his life.

To interpret that act and Charles’s subsequent conversion as the culmination of his “efforts to emulate the Flytes” is, I repeat, willful misreading. Praying is the last thing Charles has wanted to do, with the Flytes or anyone else. Lord Marchmain’s sign and Charles’s prayer mark the moment when he and Julia know they must separate. The question for criticism is whether Waugh brings off that intersection of the secular and the divine, and the answer by no means depends entirely on the witness

of Charles. There is the whole secondary plot of Sebastian’s life to be attended to, with his sister Cordelia’s comment upon it. There are anticipatory moments, too, as when Charles, in Morocco to find Sebastian for his family, gives us both his dismissal of the monk’s description of Sebastian as “A real Samaritan”, and his later, shamed retraction: “Poor simple monk, I thought, poor booby. God forgive me!”

It may be an axiom of criticism that we should allow the novelist his fiction, but in the case of *Brideshead* and Waugh’s later *Sword of Honour*, that kind of acceptance has proved impossible for most of his academic critics. They leave the fiction alone and spend their time inventing fictions of their own which turn the books into a kind of autobiographical dossier to be used for the indictment of Evelyn Waugh and his many faults, personal and political. When Ms. Berberich tells us what she thinks the “crux” of *Brideshead* is, the crux is not in the book: it is an idea in her head.

To sum up: *Brideshead* is not about snobbery and social ambition. It is about a whole false attitude to life swept away in a moment because a dying man makes the sign of the cross. Charles Ryder meets some interesting people and has remarkable experiences, but although he is well brought-up, well educated, and superficially a gentleman, for most of the book he is not a very nice man at all. He can be selfish, unfeeling, and cruel, and even Julia has to tell him not to talk “in that damned boulderish way”. What makes him tolerable, even admirable as a narrator, is that he tells his story in the light of his later conversion, and tells it honestly, so that we become gradually aware as we read that the man who is talking to us is no longer the man he is telling us about, that the middle-aged Company Commander who treats his subordinate Hooper so generously in the Epilogue is not the man who dismissed the kindly monk looking after Sebastian as a “poor booby”.

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