



“A Twitch Upon the Thread”: Grace in *Brideshead Revisited*

In Evelyn Waugh’s novel, *Brideshead Revisited*, nearly all of the characters spend their lives wrestling with Catholicism in some form or another. Cordelia, the youngest daughter and the most pious of them all, remarks to Charles that “the family haven’t been very constant, have they?”. But, surprisingly, her family’s impiety does not seem to trouble her. She assures a disbelieving Charles that “God won’t let them go for long, you know”. Then she goes on to quote a passage from a G. K. Chesterton Father Brown story which Lady Marchmain had read aloud to the family years before. In the story, the detective says that he had “caught [the thief] with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread”. The significance of this intertextual reference to Father Brown’s “unseen hook” is apparent from the fact that Waugh titled the second section of the novel: “A Twitch Upon the Thread”. This image of God’s grace as an invisible, inescapable line sheds light on the spiritual conflicts within several of the main characters—especially Sebastian, Julia, and Charles—and their roles as runaway thieves on the thread of God’s grace. I would argue that, as thieves, they have all attempted to steal their own lives, to place their own happiness above the goodness of God. Sebastian and Julia, knowing they are hooked on the thread, still attempt to escape, whereas Charles does not understand and does not notice, not until the very end, that he has also been caught. They all find, eventually, that no one on this

thread is ever far from God, or from each other, and that God’s grace is what surrounds and makes sense of the whole world.

The first half of the novel, titled, “Et in Arcadia Ego”, follows Sebastian and Charles in their tumultuous youth. Sebastian has a very firm understanding that Catholicism is true, and yet lives in complete irreverence to this belief. Charles

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understands neither Sebastian’s belief, nor why it gives him so much grief. One evening, Sebastian bemoans the tension his religion creates: “Oh dear, it’s very difficult being a Catholic”. Charles asks if it really makes such a difference to him, as he hasn’t noticed it having much of an impact, and Sebastian replies, “Of course. All the time . . . I’m very, very much wicked [than you]”. Charles asks him if they try and make him believe “an awful lot of nonsense”.

“Is it nonsense?” Sebastian responds

unhappily. “I wish it were. It sometimes sounds terribly sensible to me.” Sebastian is already upon the thread, in that he cannot deny the truth of Catholicism, no matter how much he wishes that he could. It is an undeniable, irrevocable, part of his understanding of the world. Sebastian feels wickeder than Charles because he knows how far he is from God, and yet continues to travel further away. He can see clearly the incongruity between his beliefs and his choices. This dissonance arises because he only wants to be happy, but Catholicism doesn’t seem to have anything to do with happiness. As Sebastian notes:

Brideshead and Cordelia are both fervent Catholics; he’s miserable, she’s bird-happy; Julia and I are half-heathen; I am happy, I rather think Julia isn’t . . . Anyway, however you look at it, happiness doesn’t seem to have much to do with it, and that’s all I want.

Sebastian, in his pursuit of personal happiness, is attempting to steal his own life, which he knows belongs to God, and it is his very pursuit of happiness that, rather quickly, brings his misery to a head. As he attempts to escape the clutches of his family’s Catholicism, he turns again and again to drink in order to assuage his sorrow and soon becomes an alcoholic. But what Sebastian does not realize is that, though his choices are far from faith-centered, his soul is closer to God than he knows. After all, a “twitch” implies that wherever you are on the thread, you are near to God.

Referring to Sebastian's drunkenness in a conversation with Charles, Brideshead remarks that he believes that "God prefers drunkards to a lot of respectable people". Perhaps this is because it is often the drunkards, like Sebastian, who know their great need for Christ. Not only do they need him more, but they are able to share in a more profound understanding of the Crucifixion. As Cordelia says later, speaking of Sebastian and her love for him, "No one is ever holy without suffering." Sebastian's sin and suffering bring him, in the end, to his knees and then to God.

Similarly to Sebastian, Julia spends a good part of her life running from her faith. When her priest tells her she mustn't sleep with Rex before their marriage, even in order to keep him from sinning with other women, she storms out of the church without confessing, and from "that moment she shut her mind against her religion". Yet it remains there, in the back of her mind, informing her sense of the world. When Charles suggests that the Catholic Faith is all "bosh", she replies, "How I wish it was!" And when she becomes pregnant she decides to raise the child as a Catholic, which reveals a much deeper connection to the faith than she usually cares to admit. But again, like Sebastian, she places her own happiness first (with Rex and then with Charles), even though she knows it goes against God's will. When Charles says it feels as though God and the world are in conspiracy against their happiness, she says, "They are, they are." Julia, like Sebastian, experiences a constant tension between what she desires and what her conscience tells her is right and good, even if she doesn't always acknowledge it to herself or others. She feels herself on the thread, unable to escape. When Brideshead reminds her that she is living in sin, he serves as God's twitch upon the thread. From then on, the trajectory of her life changes. "I was merely stating a fact well known to her", Brideshead comments. No matter how vehemently she denies it, Julia is a Catholic, and as Brideshead correctly

points out, she knows deep within her soul that she is living in opposition to God's will. Brideshead says what she has always known to be true—recalling her to herself.

After Bridey's comment, she breaks down. "Living in sin, with sin, by sin, for sin, every hour, every day, year in, year out." But her pain comes, not primarily from the unhappiness her sin has brought her, but from the pain it has caused those who care about her. "Mummy dying with my sin eating at her, more cruelly than her own deadly illness. Mummy dying with it; Christ dying with it, nailed hand and foot. . . ." Those who love Julia feel the pain of her separation from Christ more acutely than she feels it herself, and in this moment of epiphany, this twitch upon the thread, she begins to understand what she must do, informing Charles that she must end their relationship:

The worse I am, the more I need God. I can't shut myself out from His mercy. That is what it would mean; starting a life with you, without him. One can only hope to see one step ahead. But I saw today there was one thing unforgivable . . . the bad thing I was on the point of doing, that I'm not quite bad enough to do; to set up a rival good to God's.

As with Sebastian, Julia's struggle with sin leads her to recognize her need for God.

A vision Charles has about a man being swept away in an avalanche seems to mirror the image of the twitch upon the thread, and to function as another metaphor for grace:

An arctic hut and a man trapped alone with his furs . . . the last blizzard of winter raging and the snow piling up against the door. Quite silently a great weight forming against the timber; the bolt straining in its socket . . . till the whole hillside seemed to be falling, and the little lighted place would crash open and splinter and disappear, rolling with the avalanche into the ravine.

This vision reveals the avalanche and its destructive power, which sweeps everything away, but it also suggests the necessity of rebuilding afterward. Grace calls us to get rid of our old lives and our sin and our loneliness and our isolation—a very painful process—and then to build something new.

While Julia wrestles with this inner turmoil, Charles stands helplessly by. "I could do nothing; I was adrift in a strange sea." He does not understand Julia's deep feeling of moral responsibility for her sin. He cannot understand how deeply she knows her faith to be true, because he thinks it still just "bosh". But when Lord Marchmain is on his deathbed, Charles prays for a sign, not for himself but for Julia, an act of love which is answered with an outpouring of grace:

Lord Marchmain made the sign of the cross. Then I knew that the sign I had asked for was not a little thing, not a passing nod of recognition, and a phrase came back to me from my childhood of the veil of the temple being rent from top to bottom.

This moment seems to have been Lord Marchmain's "twitch". In extremis, he affirms his faith and his need for God. Like Sebastian and Julia, it took immense suffering to reach this point. It was not a small thing, but is likened to the rending of the veil in the temple, another metaphor for suffering, akin to the avalanche and the twitch upon the thread. God's grace is given but it is given catastrophically. It sweeps everything away. It makes a bonfire of our vanities. It kills the death within us that we might have life.

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